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Optimization of Heritage Management Mechanisms through the Prism of Historic Urban Landscape: A Case Study of the Xidi and Hongcun World Heritage Sites

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Abstract: Historic urban landscape (HUL) are essential for preserving the cultural continuity of traditional Chinese villages. Utilizing heritage management approaches to manage historic urban landscapes has significant implications for innovating the governance of these villages. This study used traditional Southern Anhui villages as empirical case studies to determine the key heritage management principles of HUL governance. This underscores the public policy nature of urban heritage conservation and highlights the importance of balancing heritage conservation with sustainable development through the involvement of diverse stakeholders and interdisciplinary institutional instruments. This study examined the development history of heritage management in traditional villages in Southern Anhui, revealing the characteristics and challenges of four aspects: public participation, planning and guidance, legislation and regulation, and fiscal financing mechanisms. Furthermore, it proposed strategies for optimizing the heritage management mechanisms within the HUL framework.

Keywords: historic urban landscape; traditional villages; heritage management; Southern Anhui



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1. Introduction

Since 2000, in response to the new challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, and modernization in the context of urban and rural heritage conservation, two major international heritage conservation organizations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), have engaged in discussions regarding a new paradigm for protecting heritage. Accordingly, the concept of the historic urban landscape (HUL) has emerged as a novel perspective on urban heritage and an approach to managing the conservation and development of urban heritage. Its principles and practices have advanced vigorously through theoretical and practical research in various historical urban contexts [1].

Urban and rural heritage sites are closely linked to economic development, social cohesion, cultural diversity, and livability. As a valuable resource, they necessitate effective management. Urban and rural heritage management aims to coordinate the relationship between heritage conservation and sustainable development. Conservation strategies have become an essential component of international public policies. Key international policies, such as the Venice Charter, World Heritage Convention, Nairobi Recommendation, Charter on Built Vernacular Heritage, and Recommendations on Historic Urban Landscape, issued by ICOMOS and UNESCO, have introduced concepts and methodologies for heritage conservation, encompassing terms such as ‘historic monuments’, ‘architectural ensembles’, ‘historic areas’, ‘built vernacular heritage’, and ‘historic urban landscape’ [2–6].

Examining the evolution of conservation methodologies from the 1930s to the 2010s reveals two fundamental transitions: a shift from the passive conservation of architectural heritage entities toward a comprehensive recognition of the importance of societal, cultural, and economic processes in safeguarding heritage value and a shift from a singular focus on the material authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage entities to an emphasis on

diverse public policy development and implementation mechanisms for urban heritage conservation [7–9]. These transitions provide a new perspective for the development of the theoretical framework of heritage conservation of Chinese traditional village, which have important reference significance.

Since the 1980s, traditional villages in Southern Anhui, such as Xidi and Hongcun, have been recognized by various national and international registries dedicated to legal and administrative heritage conservation. These designations include ‘World Cultural Heritage’, ‘Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level’, ‘National Historic and Cultural Villages’, and ‘National Traditional Villages’. The complex heritage management mechanisms within these villages, shaped by the convergence of diverse systems, necessitate a comprehensive assessment and contemplation. Examining the issues in the heritage management of traditional villages in Southern Anhui through the prism of the HUL and proposing optimization strategies serve to further advance the methodology of the HUL while offering valuable recommendations for the management of traditional village heritage in China.

2. Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) Approach and Its Research in China

Recommendations on historic urban landscape propose that the HUL can be regarded as a comprehensive and integrated approach for comprehending, assessing, safeguarding, and managing heritage within the framework of sustainable development.

UNESCO and some scholars interpret the historic urban landscape approach in different cultural contexts. The book *Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century* proposed that the historic urban landscape approach is constructed for the concept of ‘urban conservation’ (the integration of urban heritage conservation and sustainable development), based on the value judgment and mechanism background, and with management ‘change’ as the core [8]. As a new perspective on urban and rural heritage, the HUL focuses on all the tangible spatial elements currently present in historic areas, along with the social, cultural, and economic mechanisms that shape their landscape. This underscores the positive significance of variations brought about by various development mechanisms during different periods [8].

New life for historic cities: The historic urban landscape approach explained [10], *Shanghai Agenda for the Implementation of UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) in China* [11] and *The HUL guidebook: Managing heritage in dynamic and constantly changing urban environments* [1] proposed the background, target, expected benefits, implementation steps, path suggestions, and policy tools of the historic urban landscape approach (Table 1).

As a novel approach to managing heritage conservation and development, the HUL has been elaborated upon in various documents, including *Revitalizing Historic Cities*, the *Shanghai Agenda for the Implementation of the Recommendations on Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) in China*, and the *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Historic Urban Landscape Approach*. The objective of the HUL is to establish mechanisms that achieve a balance between urban heritage conservation and sustainable development in both the short and the long term. It particularly focuses on achieving a sustainable equilibrium between urban and natural environments as well as between the needs of current and future generations and historical heritage (conservation). This approach leverages policy tools, such as knowledge and planning instruments, public participation mechanisms, financial resources, and regulatory systems, to effectively manage ‘changes’, improve the living conditions of local residents, and foster a positive cycle of urban conservation [10–14].

Heritage management of HUL requires the application of a range of institutional tools, including public participation mechanisms, knowledge and planning instruments, regulatory frameworks, and financial mechanisms: 1. Public participation [heritage management necessitates the active involvement and empowerment of various stakeholders, including decision-makers at the national and local government levels, urban and rural planners, developers, architects, heritage conservation professionals, property owners, investors, and local communities]; 2. Knowledge and planning instruments [aim to preserve the

authenticity, integrity, and sustainability of urban and rural heritage while also considering cultural diversity to provide a technical foundation and policy guidance for monitoring and managing ongoing ‘changes’ related to the functional uses, social structure, political environment, and economic development associated with urban and rural heritage]; 3. Regulatory frameworks [refer to legislation and regulatory measures customized for each locality that address both tangible and intangible elements associated with the maintenance and management of urban and rural heritage]; and 4. Financial mechanisms [aim to bolster stakeholder capabilities, explore innovative development models deeply rooted in tradition, and create sustainable revenue] [8].

Table 1. Overview of the historic urban landscape approach.

Background	Historic urban landscapes are facing the pressure of climate change, urbanization, market development and mass tourism
Target	By coordinating heritage conservation, economic development, and urban functionality and livability, urban heritage can promote social and economic development through tourism, commercial use, and land and real estate appreciation
Expected benefits	Greater place awareness; more high-end service merchants; higher land and property values; higher income for maintenance, restoration and renovation; better planning and design; tourism.
Implementation steps	(1) A comprehensive assessment of the natural, cultural and human resources of historic urban landscapes. (2) Consensus on values through participatory planning and stakeholder consultation and which values are to be transmitted to future generations. (3) Assessment of the vulnerability of these characteristics to socioeconomic pressures and climate change. (4) The inclusion of urban heritage values and their vulnerability to urban development in a broader framework for urban development. (5) Policies and measures to prioritize protection and development. (6) The establishment of appropriate (public–private) partnerships and local management frameworks to coordinate activities among different parties.
Path suggestions	The management of ‘change’, the improvement of local people’s living conditions and urban conservation virtuous circle
Policy tools	Knowledge and planning tools, public participation tools, financial instruments, regulatory systems

Source: Self-drawn by the author.

As early as 2011, when the UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape Proposal Draft was released, Chinese scholar Zhang Song introduced the historic urban landscape approach and discussed its reference significance for the protection of famous historical and cultural cities in China [12]. In recent years, under the case of Chinese cities faced with the dual crisis of the natural ecological environment and the historical environment, the guiding significance of the historic urban landscape approach is more important for the sustainable conservation of the urban historical environment in China [15]. Layering cognition and holistic conservation can be regarded as the two main research points of the historic urban landscape approach in China. The research on holistic conservation is given priority with empirical research, often on the basis of revealing the spatial layered heritage value and putting forward a conservation strategy, the research object involves historical blocks (Lhasa Eight Profile Street), historical town (Macau, Taiyuan, north canal settlement in Jiaying, southwest mountain town), etc. [16–20]. Previous studies of the historic urban landscape usually focused on the qualitative analysis of conservation and development with the social, economic, and political context [21]. It is more appropriate to introduce the historic urban landscape approach into the field of traditional villages’ conservation, because the traditional villages have significant common characteristics that fit with the heritage type targeted by the historic urban landscape approach. Most of the traditional villages have a long history and the historical relics of different periods and different types

highly overlap with the current development space. In the past conservation practice, the contradiction between heritage conservation and sustainable development has always been prominent, and the common social, economic and cultural mechanisms behind their continuous changes need to be understood, which is the problem that the historic urban landscape approach tries to solve.

Based on the heritage management theory of HUL, this study developed a theoretical framework for empirical studies of traditional villages in Southern Anhui (Figure 1) comprising four key components: management objectives, management stakeholders, aspects of management content, and management mechanisms.

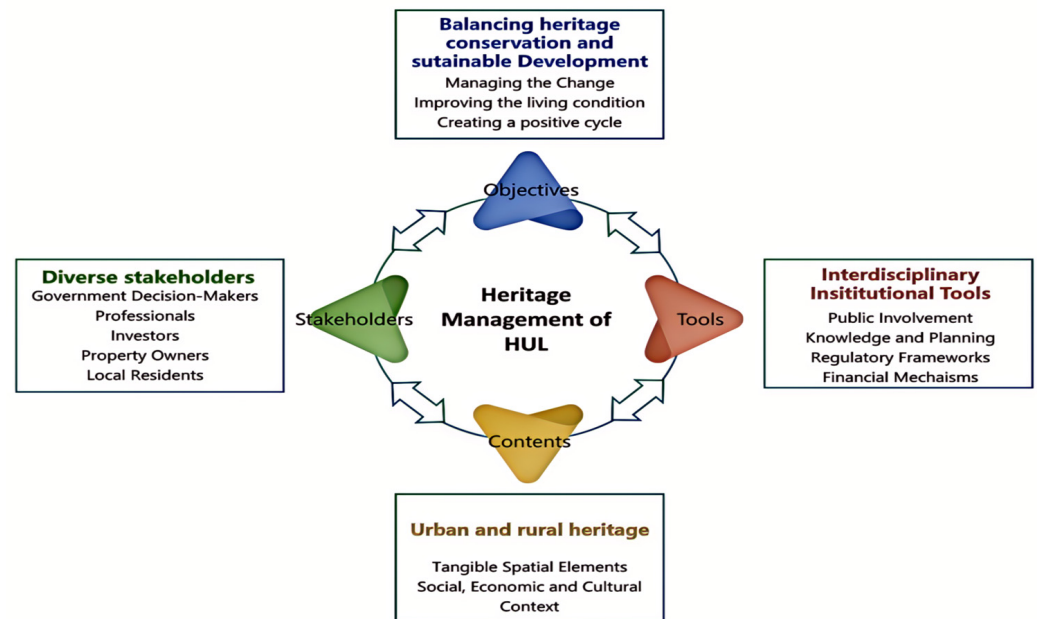


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for the heritage management of historic urban landscape. Source: Self-drawn by the author.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Case Introduction

The heritage management of traditional villages in Southern Anhui can be broadly divided into three stages: 1. Traditional architectural conservation under the ‘Historical and Cultural Sites’ (1982–2001) [From 1982, following the establishment of the aforementioned system in China, local governments at various levels successively established departments dedicated to the conservation of historical and cultural sites. A comprehensive survey of historical and cultural sites, including ancient residences, ancestral halls, tombs, bridges, trees, and stone and brick carvings, was conducted. Numerous traditional buildings have been designated as historical and cultural sites and protected at various levels. Furthermore, urgent repair work was conducted on severely damaged major historical and cultural sites]; 2. Traditional village conservation under the ‘Historical and Cultural Villages’ system (2002–2011) [Since the establishment of the ‘Historical and Cultural Villages’ system [11], 15 ‘China Historical and Cultural Villages’ and 16 ‘Anhui Province Historical and Cultural Villages’ were declared in Southern Anhui. Local governments have enforced strict approval procedures for construction activities within protected areas based on conservation plans while seeking various sources of funding for traditional building restoration, infrastructure improvement, and village environmental enhancement. This led to greater coverage and standardization of conservation efforts]; and 3. Traditional village conservation under the ‘Traditional Villages’ system (2012–present) [China has entered a dual-track conservation phase, featuring both ‘Historical and Cultural Villages’ and ‘Traditional Villages’] [22,23].

Southern Anhui's traditional villages currently include several 'Chinese Traditional Villages' (including Xidi and Hongcun) and 'Traditional Villages of Anhui Province'. Large-scale conservation practices have been implemented, including developing integrated conservation and development plans, utilizing special funds along with other funding sources, such as those allocated for historical and cultural site protection, beautiful countryside construction, and dilapidated house renovation, as well as contributions from social capital, to restore traditional buildings, improve infrastructure, and enhance the village environment.

The villages of Xidi and Hongcun are located in Yixian County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, China. Recognized as outstanding representatives of the 'Ancient Villages of Southern Anhui', they were inscribed as World Cultural Heritage sites in 2000. In 2001, they were further designated as Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level under the category of 'Ancient Architectural Ensembles'. In 2003, they were listed as 'National Historical and Cultural Villages'. The Xidi and Hongcun villages have a history dating back a thousand years and gradually took shape during the prosperous economic and cultural development of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1300–1800). Conservation initiatives for the Xidi and Hongcun villages commenced in the 1980s with a survey and the rescue of cultural relics. They were subsequently included in a tentative list provided by the Ministry of Construction for World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Upon their inscription on the World Heritage List, a comprehensive set of protective measures and systems was established. Xidi and Hongcun, typical representatives of traditional village conservation in Southern Anhui, have played crucial roles in setting an example of over 30 years of conservation practices. However, the existing conservation mechanisms still warrant reflection, evaluation, and improvement, offering valuable experiential insights into the practice of traditional villages' conservation in China.

3.2. Research Methodology

This study conducted an empirical analysis of the traditional villages of Xidi and Hongcun through a combination of participant observations and in-depth interviews. Several in-depth interviews with local officials in various departments of the Yixian County Government and local residents in Xidi and Hongcun were conducted to reveal the conservation mechanisms and their effectiveness in Xidi and Hongcun. The authors conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 local officials. The 12 local officials are in charge of heritage conservation, housing and construction, urban and rural planning and tourism in Yixian County and the township government. These interviewees were asked about the conservation and development of Xidi and Hongcun—that is, how to use planning, regulations, public participation, supervision and other institutional tools in heritage management. Each interview lasted 30 min to 2 hours. Some questions to the interviewees were open.

4. Results: Evaluation of Heritage Management Mechanisms for Traditional Villages in Southern Anhui

4.1. Mechanisms for Public Participation

Xidi and Hongcun established a multi-stakeholder participation model for heritage management, involving government decision-makers, professionals, property owners, investors, and other stakeholders (Figure 2). As indicated in the figure, the public participation mechanism in the heritage management of Xidi and Hongcun still predominantly follows a 'top-down' approach led by the government. The government plays a central role through the allocation of public finances and the exercise of administrative control, whereas the participation of non-governmental stakeholders remains limited, both in scope and in depth. More precisely, in various aspects of heritage management for traditional villages in Southern Anhui, such as the application and assessment processes, planning development, and project implementation, the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders is confined to a mere 'cooperation' level. They are not granted the 'authority' to actively participate

in decision-making and execution. This situation makes it difficult for them to voice their opinions, express their demands, and actively participate in various aspects, including the recognition of heritage values, decision-making related to conservation and development, application and execution of conservation projects, and distribution of interests among stakeholders. Furthermore, local governments may lack awareness of the rights that other stakeholders should possess in traditional village conservation and their significant role in achieving conservation objectives.

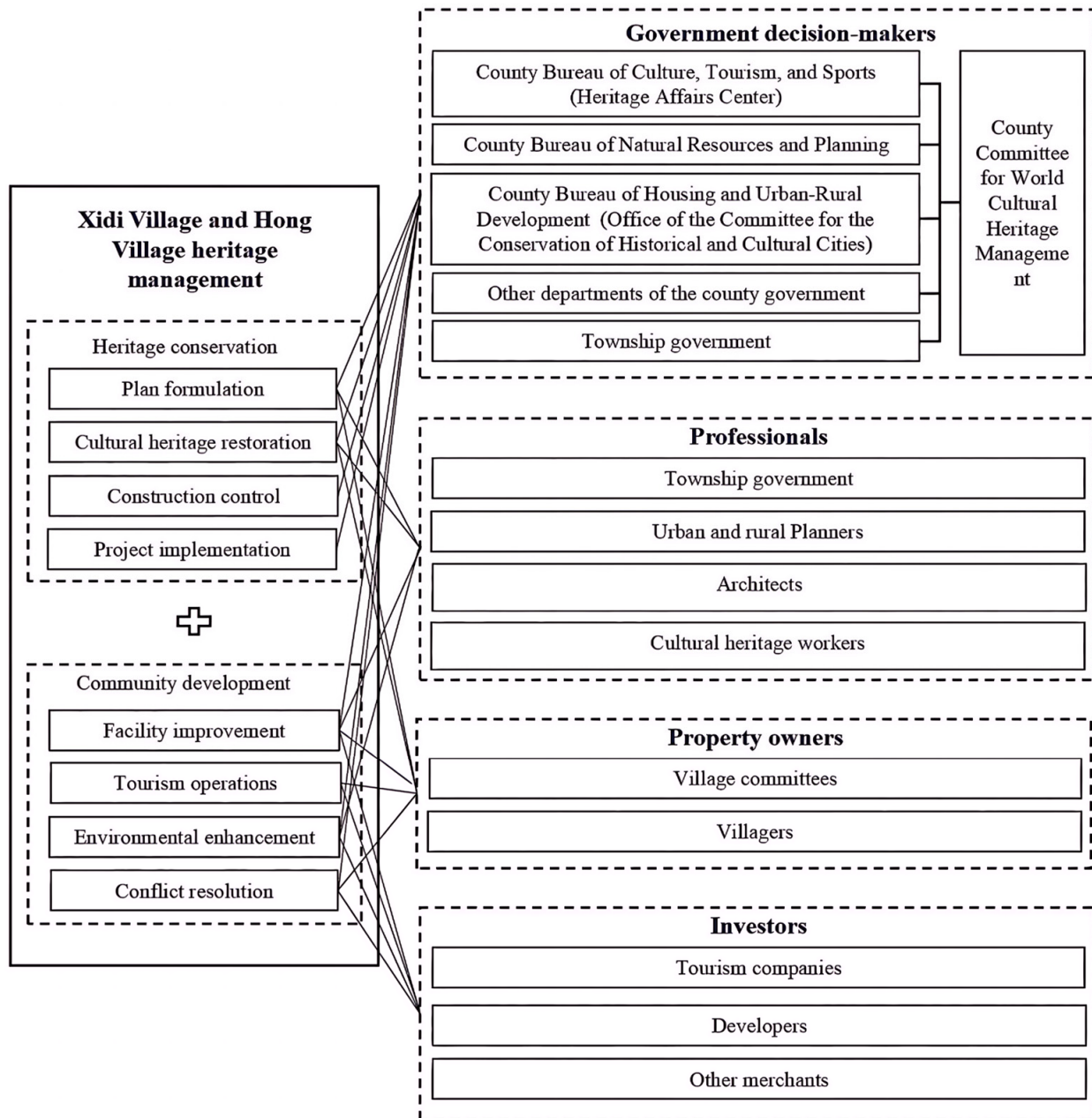


Figure 2. Xidi Village and Hong Village heritage management multi-stakeholders and main participation affairs. Source: Self-drawn by the author.

Interview 1: The conservation of traditional villages requires the strong management of the government, which should be planned first and managed according to the conservation plan. At first, the villagers had neither awareness nor ability of the protection of traditional villages, and they may have destroyed the traditional villages in their blind use.

Interview 2: At the beginning, the government's heritage management of traditional villages caused conflicts between the government and the villagers, and the villagers resisted the conservation. They all thought that the broken house could not make a little money for a year, and there were so many rules. However, the government has always adhered to the conservation and management, and then guided the development of tourism, so that the conservation and development of traditional villages are combined, so that villagers can benefit from heritage conservation, so as to consciously protect them.

Interview 3: During the implementation of the 'Chinese Traditional Village Conservation Project', I had more contact with the villagers. At present, the villagers have a strong sense of conservation, and the implementation of the conservation projects is also very supportive. For example, when the implementation of the sewage pipe network project, the villagers will take the initiative to ask the construction unit to provide pipes, and the villagers themselves to assist the sewage pipe into the household. Because the sewage treatment is not in place, the whole village environment will be affected. Villagers generally believe that these protection projects are very good, but the coverage is still too narrow.

4.2. Planning and Guidance Mechanisms

After their inclusion in the lists of World Cultural Heritage Sites, Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level, and National Historical and Cultural Villages in 2000, Xidi and Hongcun were designated conservation, construction control, and environmental coordination areas for protection planning. Accordingly, stringent construction control was implemented, leading to well-maintained core conservation areas and intact street and lane layouts in both villages.

Although the natural environment surrounding these villages has experienced a certain degree of degradation due to tourism development, the construction and expansion activities within their core conservation areas have been effectively restricted. Specifically, only a minimal number of villagers are granted permission to build new houses or reconstruct existing ones, primarily for essential living needs or when their current housing is at risk.

Furthermore, measures are taken within the villages to preserve traditional architecture in its original state, adjust architectural elements that deviate from the traditional style in specific areas, and remove buildings that contradict traditional aesthetics. Consequently, both villages have preserved a cohesive and harmonious traditional appearance with minimal new construction that significantly deviates from traditional aesthetics. To address the essential requirements of villagers in terms of production and daily life, substantial efforts have been dedicated to enhancing the infrastructure, including roadways and parking facilities, waste collection systems, stormwater and wastewater management, and safety facilities for fire, disaster, and flood prevention. Access to electricity and telecommunications has also been improved.

Interview 4: Since its application for World Heritage sites in 2000, there have been few new houses in the core protection areas of Xidi and Hongcun, which are basically repaired and utilized under the management of the government. Since its application for World Heritage sites in 2000, there have been few new houses in the core protection areas of Xidi and Hongcun, which are basically repaired and utilized under the management of the government.

Interview 5: In order to coordinate the traditional style of the whole village, the original pigsty sheds and grocery sheds in Xidi and Hongcun have been transformed into Hui-style low-rise buildings. Some flat-roofed houses, Roman columns and tile facades built in the 1980s and 1990s, which are not compatible with the traditional style, have also been transformed. The road surface and walls on both sides of the road have been transformed to repair as old as old.

For example, the cement pavement made in the 1990s has been transformed into traditional stone roads, and the air telephone poles have been turned into underground pipelines.

These various technical specifications, such as 'Historical and Cultural Sites', 'Historical and Cultural Villages', 'Traditional Villages', and 'Basic Requirements for Formulating Plans for Traditional Village Conservation and Development (Trial)', propose the following contents of conservation planning for traditional villages: 1. Protection zoning, including delineation of the core protection scope, construction control zone and environmental coordination area, propose protection and management measures, and restrict and control the construction activities in different regions; 2. The classified protection and renovation requirements of traditional buildings and controls the repair behaviors; 3. The protection measures of intangible cultural heritage. However, the 'Basic Requirements for Formulating Plans for Traditional Village Conservation and Development (Trial)' is the only document that explicitly calls for improving living conditions, enhancing roadway infrastructure, and upgrading the living environment, in addition to providing the development goals and strategies for traditional villages.

Therefore, planning and guidance for the conservation and development of traditional villages in Southern Anhui must comply with the principles of maintaining their authenticity and integrity. This places a strong emphasis on conserving and perpetuating the natural environment, spatial layout, and traditional aesthetics. This is primarily achieved through zoning and regulating construction activities and employing planning strategies for categorically preserving and renovating traditional buildings and historical contextual elements to manage changes in tangible spatial elements, such as the spatial environments and functional purposes of traditional villages. Nevertheless, this approach has also been characterized by a lack of technical foundations and policy guidance for managing ongoing 'changes' in social integration and economic development within traditional villages in Southern Anhui.

Interview 6: At present, the tourism development of Xidi and Hongcun is good, the surrounding land price has become expensive, and the surrounding environment and land use form will naturally be affected. The protection planning requires that the development intensity of the construction control area and the environmental coordination area should be strictly controlled, for example, the height of the building should not be more than three floors, and the building volume is similar to that of traditional buildings, which has some contradictions with the real development.

4.3. Legislative and Regulatory Mechanisms

In traditional villages in Southern Anhui, most traditional buildings are brick-and-wood structures that have endured for several decades, or even for over a century. These buildings are characterized by wooden frames, wooden partitions, small rooms, and poor lighting, which makes them unsuitable for modern living requirements. Because of their desire to improve their living conditions or economic interests, villagers frequently engage in the destructive practice of demolishing old buildings and constructing new ones under the pretext of renovating traditional private buildings. This has led to an increase in the construction-related disappearance and damage of traditional building.

Interview 7: From the perspective of cultural heritage conservation, the heritage value of traditional villages and traditional buildings is very high. The facilities of traditional buildings are indeed relatively simple, which do not conform to the modern way of life. For an ordinary villager, it is normal to change the function, structure and appearance of traditional buildings to meet the simple needs of life. But to repair the complete protection of the traditional building requires a large cost (perhaps more than 1 million yuan). It's not that the villagers do not want to protect the traditional buildings, but the new homes are cheaper.

In response, local governments have enforced stringent approval and supervision for certain traditional villages listed in the statutory protection records, in accordance with the 'Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics' and the 'Regulations on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages'. Individuals responsible for considerable damage may even face criminal liability.

For instance, the Yixian County government introduced a 'Nine-Step Procedure for the Restoration of Ancient Residences' (Figure 3) for Xidi and Hongcun, incorporating standardized approval procedures and subsidy incentives to control the renovation of traditional private buildings. The primary measures are summarized as follows: 1. Renovation plans [must be formulated and approved by the technical staff of the Bureau of Culture, Tourism, and Sports]; 2. Renovation work [must be budgeted by a historic building construction company with professional qualifications and carried out following the principle of 'restoring as it was']; 3. During the renovation period [a 70% deposit of the total renovation cost is collected]; 4. After onsite inspection [the deposit is refunded and subsidies are provided] [24].

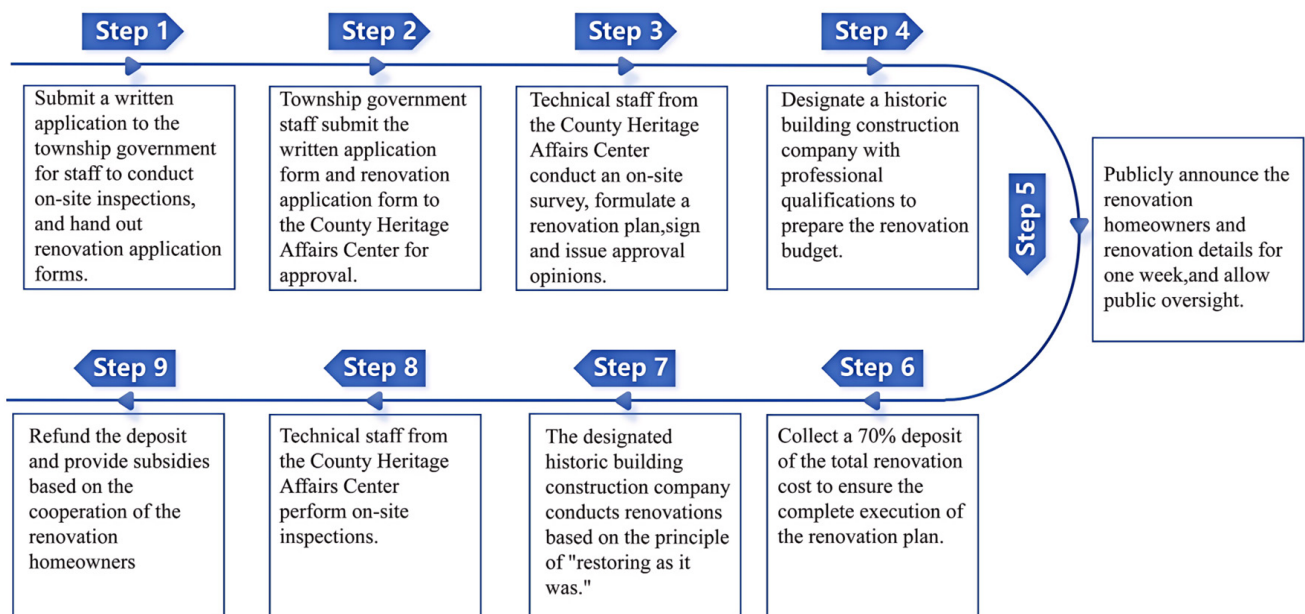


Figure 3. Nine procedures for repairing ancient dwellings in Xidi Village and Hongcun Village. Source: Adapted and illustrated based on [24].

Interview 8: Governments at all levels will allocate heritage conservation funds for the repair of cultural relics buildings in Xidi and Hongcun every year. After the completion of the repair construction, if the Yixian county heritage office and the relevant departments of the town meet the requirements, the repair funds shall be allocated. If the cultural relic building belongs to the private property rights of the villagers, the villagers will pay 60% and 40% of the repair expenses will be funded by the government heritage protection fund; if the public property right (the state or collective village property right), all the repair expenses will be funded by the heritage protection fund.

At present, the primary legal regulations governing heritage management in traditional villages in Southern Anhui include national-level laws such as the 'Law for the Protection of Cultural Relics' and the 'Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages', as well as local-level regulations such as the 'Conservation Regulations of Ancient Dwellings in South Anhui Province', the 'Measures for the Protection of Ancient Villages in Huangshan City', and the 'Interim Measures for the Protection and Utilization of Ancient Hui-style Architecture in Huangshan City'.

Most traditional villages in Southern Anhui, along with traditional buildings that are not designated as historical and cultural sites or villages, do not fall under the protection provided by the aforementioned legal regulations. Nevertheless, current heritage management practices are primarily modeled following the regulations for historical and cultural villages. However, applying these regulations effectively can be challenging because of the substantial differences in the protection objectives, scope, content, and methods. On the other hand, regulations at the local level primarily focus on refining the implementation of the 'Historical and Cultural Sites' and 'Historical and Cultural Village' systems and often lack specificity. Moreover, they tend to have relatively weak legal force, which hinders their ability to achieve the desired level of protection.

Interview 9: According to the Regulations on Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages, there should not be any new buildings in the core protection areas of famous historical and cultural villages, so the government will generally not allow new buildings in them. Traditional buildings that do not harmonize with the traditional style can be demolished, and will not be built again. So when discovering illegal demolition and construction behavior, we all go to stop in time. We can't wait until the villagers build their houses, and the losses will be even greater. It should be controlled according to the protection plan. If everyone demolished and builds indiscriminately, this historical and cultural village will no longer exist in a few years.

4.4. Financial Financing Mechanisms

Southern Anhui's traditional villages, classified under a wider range of conservation types and higher protection tiers, tend to receive more extensive financial support for their conservation endeavors. In contrast, most villages outside the scope of the aforementioned categories receive extremely limited financial support. The Xidi and Hongcun villages were designated as 'World Cultural Heritage', 'Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level', and 'National Historical and Cultural Villages', and they have concurrently received various funds established by heritage authorities, such as the national heritage fire safety 'Hundred Projects', concentrated heritage conservation projects for nationally protected and provincially protected traditional village clusters, and national special subsidies for key heritage conservation projects. The two villages have also benefited from funds established by the National Development and Reform Commission at various levels, including projects for the construction of protection facilities in historical and cultural cities, towns, and villages, and special funds for block-level incentives in historical and cultural cities, towns, and villages. Moreover, they have received financial support from the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development in the form of special funding for national traditional village conservation projects.

Between 2006 and 2021, the government cumulatively invested approximately CNY one billion in the heritage conservation of Xidi and Hongcun villages. As the tourism industry in traditional Southern Anhui villages continues to mature, its reciprocal impact on heritage conservation is becoming increasingly evident. Simultaneously, effective heritage conservation is fueling the sustainable development of the tourism industry. For instance, according to the 'Management Measures for the Protection of Xidi and Hongcun World Cultural Heritage in Yixian County', 20% of the annual ticket revenue from the Xidi and Hongcun villages is allocated to heritage conservation funds for Yixian County. From 2010 to 2021, Xidi and Hongcun collectively hosted 30.87 million tourists, generating CNY 1679.58 million in ticket revenue. A total of CNY 335.92 million was allocated to the heritage conservation fund (Figure 4).

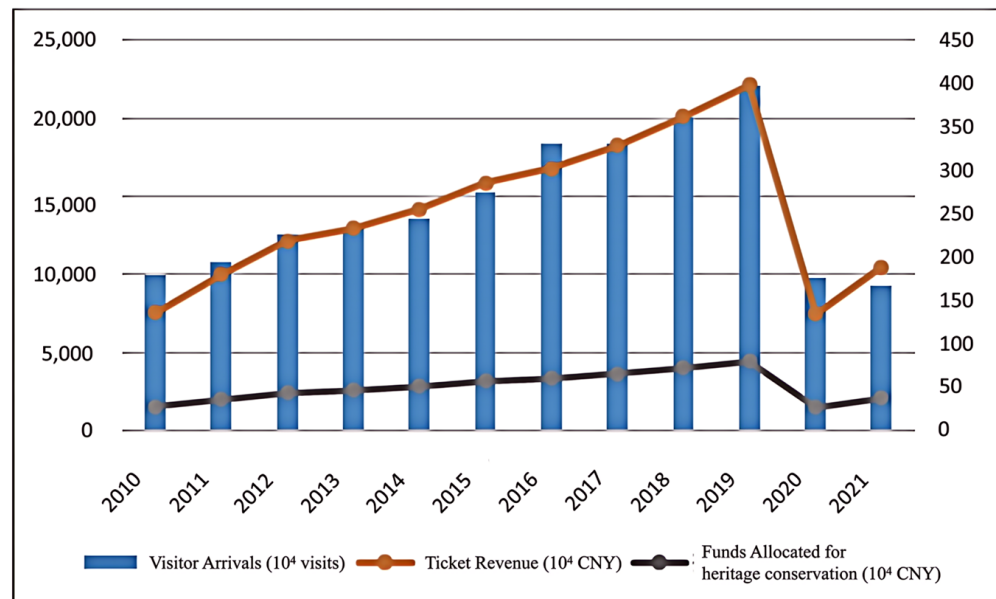


Figure 4. Visitor arrivals, ticket revenues, and heritage conservation funds allocated to Xidi and Hongcun, 2010–2021. Source: Compiled based on data provided by the Yixian County Bureau of Culture, Tourism, and Sports.

Interview 10: Since it became a World Cultural Heritage in 2000, the biggest change in Xidi and Hongcun is the increase of visitors and rich business forms. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were no agritainment resort and tourist commodity shops. Now there are many. Some people think that there is a problem of excessive commercialization, which I think is the inevitable result of social development and the manifestation of social progress. There is no right or wrong. With the social and economic development of traditional villages, villagers also have the right to participate in and share the benefits brought by the development.

Current government financial allocations for the conservation of traditional villages in Southern Anhui predominantly target historical and cultural sites protected at the national or provincial levels, along with historical and cultural villages. In contrast, other traditional villages receive a limited allocation of CNY three million per village through the ‘National Traditional Village’ conservation program. This allocation supports projects in five categories: exemplary protection and utilization of traditional buildings, disaster prevention and safety measures, restoration of historical contextual elements, improvement of infrastructure and the environment, and conservation and utilization of cultural and intangible heritage. Furthermore, only historical and cultural sites protected at the national or provincial level, or publicly or collectively owned traditional buildings, have a substantial likelihood of being granted fiscal appropriations for restoration. In contrast, numerous privately owned traditional buildings can only access limited subsidies, even in financially well-supported villages such as Xidi and Hongcun. Consequently, the restoration of most privately owned traditional buildings in these villages cannot secure financial support. In summary, the current fiscal allocations and tourism revenues in most traditional villages in Southern Anhui still lag considerably behind the funding required for the restoration of traditional buildings, conservation of historical aesthetics, and enhancement of infrastructure and public service facilities within these villages.

Interview 11: In theory, the maintenance of cultural relics listed in the national and provincial protection list can apply for the protection funds allocated by the central government and the provincial government. However, in fact, the government’s protection funds are limited, and it cannot pay for the renovation of all cultural relics. For example, some traditional villages have many state-level

cultural relics protected buildings, and a house needs one million yuan. It is impossible for the government to allocate so many funds, the villagers have no economic ability to repair, and many traditional buildings in the villages are facing collapse and damage. Why did Yixian County try to circulate the ancient dwellings? Just want to sell property rights to foreign investors, foreign investors can invest a large amount of protection funds for maintenance after getting property rights.

Interview 12: The coordination of the heritage protection and the sustainable development of traditional villages requires the government to actively improve the infrastructure and guide the development of tourism while carrying out the protection and management. At the same time, the government actively encourages the villagers to participate in the protection and activation and utilization, and uses private traditional buildings to do farmhouses, sell handicrafts and other benefits. Only in this way can the villagers further respond to and participate in the protection and management of the traditional villages.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

5.1. Public Participation Mechanisms: Establishing Collaborative Partnerships and Long-Term Negotiation Mechanisms

Although the government always play a dominant role in top-level institutional design, public financial investments, and law-based administrative control, establishing a long-term negotiation mechanism that encourages the active involvement of other stakeholders is essential. Guiding and empowering various stakeholders involved in traditional villages, including government decision-makers, village committees, villagers, tourism companies, experts, and investors, to establish collaborative partnerships is an essential step in the heritage management process. This process involves identifying heritage values, forming consensus, creating multiple visions, establishing shared goals, and aligning actions for heritage conservation and sustainable development. These efforts could ensure that stakeholders understand and support the implementation of HUL approaches [23]. Stakeholders could express their intentions, engage in in-depth discussions, and mediate conflict throughout the heritage conservation process.

For instance, when applying for inclusion in legal or administrative protection listings, traditional villages must forge a consensus among stakeholders on the heritage value of their villages. During the formulation of protection plans, shared visions and goals for heritage conservation and development should be formulated through stakeholder negotiations. When implementing protection plans, consensus among stakeholders concerning actions related to heritage conservation and community development is necessary. Protection measures that address disputes among stakeholders should be scrutinized. Moreover, it is essential to explain how opinions and suggestions are considered, and whether they are incorporated. This approach aims to foster mutual understanding and inspiration as well as to provide oversight while avoiding conflicts.

5.2. Planning and Guidance Mechanisms: Managing the Ongoing Changes in the Spatial Environment, Social Integration, and Economic Development of Traditional Villages

Aiming to preserve the authenticity, integrity, and sustainable development of traditional villages, and also considering the inheritance of diverse culture, these plans offer technical foundations and policy guidance for supervising and managing the continuous changes in the spatial environment, social integration, and economic development of traditional villages [24]. They need to involve analyzing historically significant cultural elements in various types of traditional village spaces across different periods (formation, development, prosperity, decline, and regeneration). This analysis includes elements such as the topography, river systems, cultural heritage sites, traditional buildings, historical contextual features, open spaces, and roadway infrastructure, as well as the determination of the social, economic, and cultural contextual mechanisms in which they have emerged [25].

Following this analysis, adjustments are made to contemporary urban development policies and mechanisms to effectively manage the continuous changes in the spatial environment, social integration, and economic development of traditional villages. This includes efforts to enhance residents' living conditions, guide community development, and establish a new equilibrium between contemporary interventions in traditional village spaces and their historical contexts. The ultimate goal is to create a symbiotic relationship between the conservation of traditional village heritage and sustainable development.

5.3. Legislative and Regulatory Mechanisms: Establishing Specialized Village Conservation Regulations and Implementing Various Measures to Enhance Regulatory Effectiveness

These mechanisms involve drawing on China's existing national and local legal frameworks for historical and cultural heritage conservation to develop and implement specialized laws and regulations for the conservation of traditional villages. The objective is to further improve the legal framework required for preserving traditional villages, including explicitly defining the responsibilities and roles of various entities involved in the protection and management efforts, establishing the standards for traditional village conservation planning, as well as formulating technical guidelines for the renovation and restoration of traditional buildings and funding assistance institutions [24,25].

Furthermore, certain measures can be implemented to enhance regulatory efficiency, including establishing a database for the conservation of traditional villages, implementing a dynamic monitoring system, and deploying dedicated inspectors to ensure rigorous construction management.

This process involves several key steps. First, it is essential to establish, based on the application materials for national and provincial traditional villages, a database for traditional villages in Southern Anhui that incorporates both tangible and intangible elements through various formats, such as text, drawings, photographs, and models, and serves as a foundation for heritage management.

Second, it is necessary to implement dynamic monitoring of traditional villages incorporated into legal and administrative conservation systems. A professional organization with a long history of dedication to research on traditional village conservation and development should be appointed as a third-party monitoring entity to monitor real-time changes in the conservation status of historical heritage elements across various protection levels and track the implementation progress of conservation plans. Superior departments responsible for urban–rural housing and development, planning, and cultural heritage should appoint conservation inspectors to be stationed in counties and towns where traditional villages are located. These inspectors should have well-defined responsibilities and roles, including evaluating applications, crafting and executing conservation plans, designating endangered heritage sites, assessing the status of protection efforts, conducting outreach, and providing training. They should also serve as direct deterrents against any action that may compromise the conservation of heritage sites in traditional villages.

5.4. Financing Mechanism: Exploring Innovative Development Models for Cultural Tourism Resources and Expanding Financing and Cooperation Channels

It is crucial to establish specialized funds for the conservation of traditional villages at various government levels and to consistently increase government public financial investments. Simultaneously, there is a need to diversify the funding sources through private investments, micro-loans, and other flexible partnership channels [23,24]. The primary objective is to enhance the capacity of stakeholders, such as village committees, villagers, and tourism companies, while exploring innovative cultural and tourism resource development models deeply rooted in the local culture to sustain revenue generation.

This approach involves several key measures. First, to facilitate the further transformation and utilization of local cultural resources and leverage the unique characteristics of different villages, it is essential to introduce social capital through cooperative operations, tourism operating rights transfers, and other means. This will lead to the creation of various cultural tourism formats, including experiences of local customs and traditions,

the exploration of folk crafts, leisure vacations in scenic landscapes, participation in tea farming and processing, and rural sketching and photography. All these initiatives aim to improve the infrastructure and public service facilities of traditional villages.

Second, subsidies should be provided to villagers who independently renovate privately owned traditional buildings, based on the proportion of renovation expenses. Additionally, encouraging villagers to participate in village tourism development through initiatives, such as establishing rural inns and sharing heritage conservation benefits, will boost their enthusiasm for heritage conservation. Third, offering traditional building leases and acquisition options is essential for attracting private capital to invest in the renovation and revitalization of privately owned traditional buildings, converting them into versatile cultural spaces such as art galleries, creative bookstores, rural inns, and rural libraries.

6. Conclusions

The concept of the historic urban landscape (HUL), as a novel perspective for understanding urban heritage and a fresh approach to reconciling heritage conservation and sustainable development, continues to be explored for its theoretical extensions and practical applications on an international scale. This study tries to explore the problems of the public participation, planning, legislation and financial mechanism under the guidance of the normative HUL theory. Facts have proved that the historical town landscape theory and real world still reveal a gap: the public participation mechanism, XiDi, a macro village protection practice, although multiple interests to participate in, but overall is a still government-led 'top-down' participation mechanism, non-governmental interests in depth and breadth is still limited. The planning guidance mechanism, the existing technical specification file still lacks traditional village economic development and social integration to guide the relevant content, legislative supervision mechanism, most of the traditional villages and traditional buildings in the south of Anhui are not listed as 'cultural relics protection units' on the 'historical and cultural village' list, which is not within the scope of the current laws and regulations, so it is difficult to achieve the desired security effect. In terms of the financial financing mechanism, there is still a large gap between the existing financial allocation and tourism income support of most traditional villages in Southern Anhui and the protection funds needed for the renovation of traditional buildings, preservation of historical features and improvement of infrastructure and public service facilities in traditional villages.

Therefore, although this paper proposes a series of optimization strategies based on the discovery of problems, these optimization strategies are not necessarily applicable to a larger range of traditional villages. How to guide the stakeholders of traditional village protection to establish cooperative partnership and long-term consultation mechanism? How to manage the continuous changes in the spatial environment, social integration and economic development of traditional villages? What should we pay attention to in formulating special regulations on the protection of traditional villages? How to explore the innovative development mode of cultural and tourism resources in traditional villages? In the future, the establishment of the universality theory of traditional village protection research based on the historical town landscape method and the summary of the practical experience are still worth further discussion in the following aspects.

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