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Beyond visual preservation: The conditions of living heritage continuity in rural cultural landscapes

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Abstract

Rural cultural landscape research increasingly treats heritage as living and relational, yet it remains unclear how far this shift has changed the analytical core of conservation research and management. This review examines how the continuity of living heritage has been conceptualised in rural cultural landscape research from 2010 to 2025. A hybrid design combined bibliometric mapping of 233 English-language journal articles indexed in Web of Science and Scopus with comparative thematic synthesis of a focused analytical subset of 80 studies; 20 anchor studies supported closer interpretation of mechanisms and contextual variation. The literature expanded rapidly after 2020, and China accounted for the largest share of studies. The reviewed studies show that formal conservation practices continue to favour values that can be more easily bounded, documented and administered, leaving everyday use and local knowledge less visible in assessment. Participation often produces responsibility asymmetry: communities undertake much of the work needed to sustain heritage while retaining limited influence over interpretation and priority setting. Tourism and rural revitalisation generate selective continuity by directing visibility and resources towards some heritage forms while weakening the everyday conditions on which others depend. Together, these processes shape the reproductive capacity of rural cultural landscapes: the ability of communities to keep inherited places in use, adapt them and carry their meanings forward. The review therefore reframes living heritage continuity as an outcome of interactions among formal recognition, community influence and everyday practice.

Keywords: Rural landscapes; Heritage conservation; Heritage assessment; Community participation; Selective continuity; Sustainable development

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1. Introduction

Rural cultural landscapes combine inherited spatial forms with continuing patterns of everyday use. Their character has developed as communities have shaped their environments through everyday life and adapted them over time. The *Principles Concerning Rural Landscapes as Heritage* describe them as continuing cultural landscapes shaped by social organisation, functional relationships, and interactions

between people and nature (ICOMOS–IFLA, 2017). These landscapes remain subject to change as livelihoods develop, populations shift, and land uses are reorganised. Antrop (2005) therefore understands them as historically layered environments whose forms and meanings continue to evolve over time. The relationship between inherited form and continuing rural life has consequently become a central concern in their conservation.

Existing scholarship has examined this relationship from several perspectives. Cultural landscape studies connect inherited form with land use, ecological processes and the historical development of place (Scazzosi, 2018; Taylor & Lennon, 2011). Research on place attachment has shown how landscape meaning develops through identity and lived engagement (Taylor, 2012), while work on living and continuing heritage has considered how use and transmission sustain heritage as environments change (Khalaf, 2020). Within this literature, ICCROM's people-centred guidance places communities at the centre of conservation and management (Court & Wijesuriya, 2015). Poulios (2014) similarly treats the continuing relationship between a heritage place and its core community as central to the living heritage approach. More recent reviews have examined how overtourism, outmigration and displacement affect shared traditions, memories and emotional connections to place (Y. Chen & Wang, 2024). Critical heritage research has also drawn attention to differences within communities, showing that local actors may hold distinct interests, interpret heritage differently and exercise different levels of influence over conservation decisions (Waterton & Smith, 2010).

These perspectives have generated substantial knowledge about rural cultural landscapes, but they have often developed along separate analytical lines. Conservation studies commonly examine buildings, settlement patterns and recognised landscape attributes, while other studies focus on participation, governance, tourism development or the continuation of local practices. The resulting literature offers detailed accounts of each area, yet provides a less coherent explanation of how these areas interact. In particular, few syntheses have examined how decisions about what should be conserved affect who can shape conservation and whether rural landscapes can continue to support everyday use.

This gap is especially relevant in rural areas undergoing tourism development and revitalisation. Planning interventions, new economic activities and changing livelihoods may affect how landscapes are used, represented and managed while residents continue to live and work within them. These processes have been studied from different disciplinary perspectives, but their implications for conservation and the continuity of living heritage have not been consistently considered together. Community participation and governance require particular attention because participation may take different forms and confer varying levels of influence over conservation and management. The central problem is therefore whether the growing attention to living heritage, participation and continuity has changed how conservation defines heritage value, distributes decision-making authority and supports the conditions under which everyday practices continue.

This review examines how rural cultural landscape research published between 2010 and 2025 has addressed this problem. It considers how studies define the objects and values of conservation, how they position community participation and governance, and how they relate tourism, revitalisation and everyday practice to the continuation of rural heritage. To address these questions, the study adopts a theory-informed hybrid review design combining bibliometric mapping with comparative thematic synthesis. The complete corpus comprises 233 English-language journal articles indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. At the corpus level, the analysis examines annual publication output, the geographical distribution of study cases, the distribution of research designs, keyword relationships and changes in keyword prominence over time. A focused analytical subset of 80 studies provides the main evidence base for full-text comparison and thematic synthesis. Within this subset, 20 anchor studies are examined more closely to clarify important mechanisms, contrasts and contextual variations. These studies provide illustrative evidence for detailed interpretation, while the thematic conclusions remain grounded in the wider 80-study subset. This combination of corpus-level mapping and qualitative synthesis follows methodological guidance showing how bibliometric-systematic reviews can support interpretation and theory development beyond descriptive mapping alone (Marzi et al., 2025). Together, these analytical stages connect broad patterns across the field with the processes and contextual differences identified through closer examination of the literature.

The review contributes an integrative explanation of living heritage continuity by showing how formal recognition, decision-making authority and everyday use affect one another. It uses the concepts of administrative legibility, responsibility asymmetry and selective continuity to explain how conservation and rural transformation shape the reproductive capacity of rural cultural landscapes. This framework clarifies why broader recognition of living heritage does not necessarily secure the conditions for its continued existence.

2. Methods

2.1. Review design and search strategy

This study adopted a theory-informed, problem-driven hybrid review design that combined systematic database searching and screening with bibliometric mapping and comparative thematic synthesis. The review corpus was constructed through an explicit, documented process, consistent with Gough et al.'s (2017) understanding of research synthesis as an accountable, methodologically structured form of inquiry. The review examined how studies defined what should be conserved, how communities and institutions shaped conservation decisions, and how tourism and revitalisation affected the continuation of everyday practices. Accordingly, the search strategy was designed to locate literature relevant to these connected questions, while the analytical themes were developed through comparative synthesis of the eligible studies.

The formal search covered English-language journal articles published between 2010 and 2025 and indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus. Only records classified as journal articles were retained. Reviews, conference papers, book chapters, editorials, notes and other non-article document types were excluded. The initial searches were conducted in April 2026 and updated in July 2026 during manuscript revision. The update applied the same publication period, language restriction and document-type criteria. Articles first published online within the review period were retained where they were subsequently assigned to a 2026 journal issue; their final bibliographic details were updated accordingly. In both databases, these limits were applied through the database interface. Records retrieved from both databases were subsequently reconciled before the final review corpus was established.

The search strategy combined three conceptual blocks. The first identified rural heritage contexts; the second captured conservation, planning and governance-related concerns; and the third targeted literature engaging with living heritage, participation, tourism-related change and everyday practices.

The Web of Science search was:

TS = ("cultural landscape" OR "rural heritage" OR "traditional village" OR "historic village") AND (conservation OR preservation OR governance OR "heritage management" OR planning) AND ("living heritage" OR "community participation" OR "heritage tourism" OR "everyday practice")

The corresponding Scopus search was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("cultural landscape" OR "rural heritage" OR "traditional village" OR "historic village") AND (conservation OR preservation OR governance OR "heritage management" OR planning) AND ("living heritage" OR "community participation" OR "heritage tourism" OR "everyday practice"))

Minor syntactic adjustments were made to accommodate differences between database search fields and indexing structures while maintaining the same conceptual scope. In particular, Web of Science Topic searches may retrieve records via Keywords Plus, so some retrieved terms may not reflect the article's central analytical focus. Database retrieval was therefore followed by manual relevance screening based on each study's substantive focus. The third search block functioned as a scoping mechanism to identify rural cultural landscape research that engages with living heritage, participation, tourism-related change and everyday practice. These terms defined the substantive boundary of the review. Subsequent bibliometric analysis examined the relationships and clustering of concepts within the eligible corpus, while the analytical themes were developed through comparative full-text synthesis of the 80-study subset. Keyword frequencies were interpreted within this defined scope and alongside the relational positions of terms in the network.

A sensitivity check was conducted to assess the breadth of the primary search strategy. The same publication-year, language and document-type limits were retained, while the third search block was broadened to:

(resident OR community OR livelihood OR value OR management)

The broader search yielded 1,093 records from Web of Science and 1,762 from Scopus prior to relevance screening. The expanded results covered a substantially more heterogeneous body of literature, including technical, ecological, spatial and tourism-marketing studies with only indirect relevance to the review problem. The sensitivity check was recorded separately as an assessment of retrieval breadth and did not enter the formal screening process or alter the final corpus.

2.2. Eligibility screening and corpus construction

Records were screened manually based on titles, abstracts and author keywords. Full texts were consulted when available metadata did not provide sufficient information for a reliable eligibility decision. Inclusion was determined from the dominant analytical focus of each article and its substantive engagement with the review problem.

A study was retained if its principal empirical or conceptual focus concerned a rural heritage setting and if

conservation, management or cultural continuity formed a substantive part of the analysis. Tourism, technical, spatial and environmental studies were retained when they explained consequences for heritage values, community practices or governance. Studies centred on tourism consumption, technical assessment or environmental change were excluded when they offered no substantive analysis of rural heritage conservation. Table 1 summarises the eligibility criteria, with more detailed operational guidance for difficult cases provided in **Section S1**.

Screening was conducted by the first author using the predefined criteria. Borderline cases were assessed based on the article's research question, analytical focus, methods, findings and implications. The final decision reflected the article's substantive contribution to rural cultural landscape conservation.

After applying publication year, language, and document type filters, the searches returned 302 records from Web of Science and 263 from Scopus. Title, abstract and keyword screening retained 148 Web of Science records and 111 Scopus records. The two datasets were merged, producing 259 records before deduplication. After removing 26 duplicate records, the final review corpus comprised 233 unique articles.

The corpus was subsequently analysed through three connected levels. All 233 articles supported the descriptive and bibliometric analysis of publication patterns, geographical distribution, research designs and keyword relationships. From this corpus, 80 studies were purposively selected for a structured full-text comparison according to the criteria described in **Section 2.4** and served as the basis for the thematic conclusions. Within this subset, 20 anchor studies were selected for closer examination of mechanisms, contrasts and contextual variation, allowing the analysis to deepen the interpretation of patterns identified across the wider subset. Figure 1 presents the construction of the corpus and the relationship among the three analytical levels.

2.3. Descriptive and bibliometric analysis of the complete corpus

All 233 articles were included in the descriptive and bibliometric analyses. The descriptive analysis examined publication year, study location and overall research design. Publication year was extracted from the reconciled bibliographic records and aggregated to examine changes in publication output between 2010 and 2025. The study location was coded according to the country or countries substantively examined in each article rather than the authors' institutional affiliations. Where a study examined more than one country, each country included in the empirical analysis was recorded; therefore, country counts were treated as non-exclusive. Articles without an identifiable empirical location were classified separately as conceptual or non-country-specific studies.

Research design was classified into four mutually exclusive categories: qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and conceptual/non-empirical. Classification was initially based on titles and abstracts, with the methods sections consulted when the overall research design remained unclear. Qualitative studies relied primarily on interviews, observation, ethnography, document analysis or other interpretive forms of evidence. Quantitative studies relied primarily on surveys, statistical analysis, numerical measurement, modelling, GIS, remote sensing or other quantitative forms of evaluation. Studies were classified

Table 1. Summary of eligibility criteria for screening and full-text assessment

Dimension	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Publication scope	English-language journal articles published between 2010 and 2025	Reviews, conference papers, book chapters, editorials, notes and other non-article documents
Research context	Rural cultural landscapes, rural heritage, traditional or historic villages, vernacular settlements, agricultural heritage systems and comparable non-urban heritage settings	Predominantly urban heritage, historic cities, urban villages, archaeological attractions or unrelated non-rural contexts
Conservation relevance	Conservation, heritage value, management, planning, governance, participation, tourism-related change or continuity formed a substantive concern	Heritage, landscape or tourism occurred only as contextual background
Analytical orientation	Material, spatial, social, cultural, institutional or ecological processes were examined in relation to rural heritage conservation	Visitor behaviour, destination marketing, tourism consumption or unrelated regional development as the primary focus
Technical and environmental relevance	Technical, spatial or ecological analysis was linked to heritage continuity, planning, community management or conservation consequences	Purely technical, ecological, biological or spatial analysis without substantive heritage or governance relevance

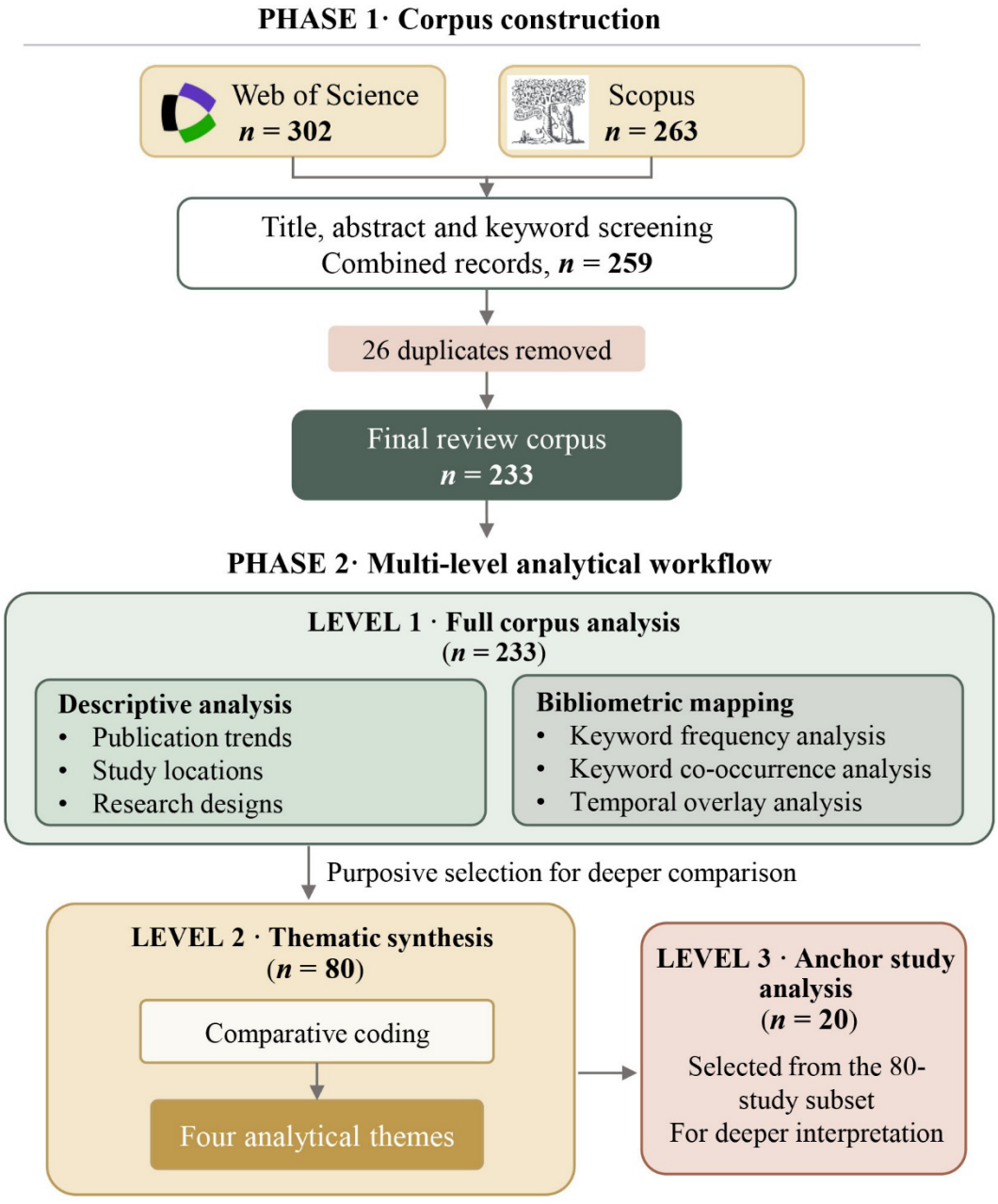


Figure 1. Corpus construction and multi-level analytical workflow of the review
Note: The 80-study analytical subset was selected from the 233-article corpus, and the 20 anchor studies were selected from within the 80-study subset.
Source: Diagram by the authors

as mixed-methods when qualitative and quantitative evidence were both substantively analysed and integrated to address the research question. Where an article used several techniques, classification followed the design that generated the main evidence used to answer its research question. Conceptual/non-empirical studies developed theoretical, historical, policy or institutional arguments without reporting a primary empirical research design. Study location and research design were coded manually. All 233 records were then reviewed for missing entries and inconsistent classifications before the final distributions were calculated.

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer version 1.6.20 (https://www.vosviewer.com/) based on the reconciled bibliographic records of all 233 articles. Keyword co-occurrence analysis was performed using Co-occurrence as the analysis type, All keywords as the unit of analysis and Full counting as the counting method. Both author keywords and database-indexed keywords were included. A minimum occurrence threshold of three was applied, meaning that a keyword had to appear in at least three articles to be included in the network. A thesaurus file was applied during map construction to standardise spelling variants, singular and plural forms, abbreviations and expressions with equivalent meanings. Terms were merged only where the differences were linguistic, while conceptually distinct terms were retained separately. General indexing terms that did not contribute to interpretation of the corpus were removed through the same cleaning process. Following threshold application and thesaurus-based cleaning, 42 keywords were retained in the final map.

As the search strategy was constructed around key concepts defining the review scope, the frequency of occurrence of some core terms reflects both their prevalence in the retrieved literature and their relevance to the conceptual boundaries of the retrieval process. Keyword interpretation therefore emphasised associations, cluster structure and temporal position within the defined corpus, while occurrence counts were used as descriptive measures of prominence. The keyword network was generated using association-strength normalisation. In the VOSviewer visualisation, node size represented the number of articles in which a keyword occurred, links indicated co-occurrence relationships between keywords within the same article, and link strength represented the frequency of these co-occurrences across the corpus. Following the VOSviewer analysis, the exported node and edge data were redrawn in Python (version 3.10.11; https://www.python.org/) using the original VOSviewer node coordinates, cluster assignments, occurrence values and link strengths. Python was used to refine typography, label display and overall visual legibility, while the original node positions, links and cluster assignments were retained.

The keyword analysis generated several complementary outputs. The VOSviewer-derived cluster structure was used to examine broad patterns of conceptual association within the field, while the overlay visualisation was used to explore temporal variation in keyword attention based on average publication year. Keyword labels and occurrence values were extracted from the final VOSviewer map file. The retained keywords were ranked by occurrence, and the 15 most frequent terms were visualised to show their occurrence frequencies within the corpus.

2.4. Analytical subset selection and thematic synthesis

The corpus-level analysis established the overall composition and keyword structure of the 233 eligible articles. Because the eligible studies varied in the depth of their engagement with conservation processes and cultural continuity, a focused analytical subset was developed for full-text comparison and thematic synthesis. The purpose of this subset was not to estimate the prevalence of particular research themes within the corpus, but to provide sufficient analytical depth for cross-study comparison and interpretation of underlying mechanisms. Selection was guided by four related considerations: analytical centrality, explanatory depth, evidence richness and contribution to cross-study synthesis.

Analytical centrality concerned the extent to which conservation value, participation, governance, tourism-related change or everyday continuity shaped the article's research question, analysis or findings. Explanatory depth concerned whether the study explained how a process developed, why it produced a particular outcome or which conditions shaped that outcome. Evidence richness concerned whether the article provided sufficient empirical or conceptual detail to support comparison across studies. Contribution to synthesis concerned whether a study clarified a recurrent pattern, provided a contrasting case, identified a boundary condition or extended the geographical, institutional or conceptual range of the analysis.

These considerations were applied through an initial review of titles and abstracts followed by full-text assessment of potentially suitable studies. Eighty articles were retained in the focused analytical subset and formed the main evidence base for the thematic synthesis. The remaining eligible articles continued to contribute to the descriptive and bibliometric profile of the complete corpus. The thematic synthesis followed the staged procedure described by Thomas and Harden (2008). The analysis moved from close coding of study findings to the development of descriptive themes that remained closely grounded in the reviewed studies, and then to the construction of analytical themes that addressed the review questions more directly. Coding concentrated primarily on the findings and discussion sections of each article. Methods, policy context and case descriptions were consulted when necessary to interpret the evidence or compare studies conducted in different geographical and institutional settings.

Initial coding recorded what each study treated

as heritage value, which actors shaped conservation decisions, how interventions altered local conditions, and what consequences followed for everyday use and cultural continuity. It also captured the relationships through which communities, institutions and other actors enabled, constrained or redirected these processes. The coded material was then compared across studies to identify recurring relationships, differences among stakeholder positions and variation in reported outcomes. Descriptive themes were developed from the language and findings of the reviewed articles and subsequently refined in relation to the review questions. This process produced four analytical themes: visible-object bias and heritage value definition; participation, power and governance mechanisms; tourism/revitalisation and selective continuity; and living heritage and everyday reproduction. The review problem informed the broad areas of inquiry, while comparison across the 80 studies shaped the boundaries, terminology and explanatory content of the final themes.

For coding purposes, living heritage referred to heritage that remained active because communities continued to use, maintain, transmit or adapt it in present-day life. The analysis examined how these activities continued and which social, institutional or material conditions shaped them.

Twenty anchor studies were selected from the analytical subset for closer examination of particularly informative mechanisms, contrasts and contextual conditions. Selection considered explanatory clarity, specificity of supporting evidence, conceptual contribution and contextual variation. A close reading of these studies deepened the interpretation of patterns identified across the broader subset and showed how similar conservation concerns developed under different geographical and institutional conditions. The thematic conclusions remained grounded in the 80-study subset. **Section 4** also drew on other studies from the complete corpus and relevant external literature to provide comparative context and theoretical positioning, without altering the thematic structure derived from the subset.

Screening, full-text assessment and thematic coding were undertaken by the first author using the stated selection criteria and coding framework. Ambiguous cases were revisited in full and compared with studies addressing similar processes. Once the analytical themes and their boundaries had been finalised, the coding records for all 80 studies were checked against the final framework and revised where necessary. **Section S2** documents how the 80-study subset and the 20 anchor studies were selected and identifies the primary analytical relevance of each study. It also illustrates how the initial codes evolved into the final themes and defines the boundaries of each theme.

3. Review findings

3.1. Conceptual structure and temporal patterns in rural cultural landscape research

The bibliometric analysis of the complete corpus (n = 233) examined the conceptual structure and temporal patterns of rural cultural landscape research. Keyword analysis identified the principal associations among concepts and their distribution across publication years. Several high-frequency terms, including cultural landscape, rural heritage and traditional village, also contributed to defining the search scope. Their occurrence counts were therefore treated as descriptive measures within the eligible corpus, while interpretation focused on their network relationships and temporal positions.

After applying the minimum occurrence threshold and thesaurus-based cleaning procedures, 42 keywords were retained for network analysis. VOSviewer identified four interconnected clusters from their co-occurrence relationships (Figure 2). These algorithmically derived groupings show how related concepts were organised within the eligible corpus. The original VOSviewer co-occurrence network and density visualisation are provided in **Section S3**.

The network reveals four connected areas of research attention. The first cluster links cultural landscape with cultural heritage, conservation, heritage management and sustainability-related concepts. Cultural landscape occupies a central position, connecting conservation-related terms with concepts associated with environmental and social change, thereby serving as a shared term across several lines of inquiry. The second cluster connects world heritage, heritage tourism, sustainable tourism, tourism development and community participation. Within this grouping, participation is frequently discussed in relation to heritage designation and the management of tourism-related change.

The third cluster links rural heritage, rural tourism, vernacular architecture, landscape and intangible cultural heritage. These associations reflect place-based research that connects settlement form and cultural practice with the surrounding landscape. The fourth cluster brings together traditional village, local community, living heritage, authenticity and spatial distribution, forming a smaller continuity-oriented strand within the network. Together, the four clusters show that conservation, tourism-related development, place-based interpretation and living heritage form distinguishable yet connected lines of inquiry within the corpus.

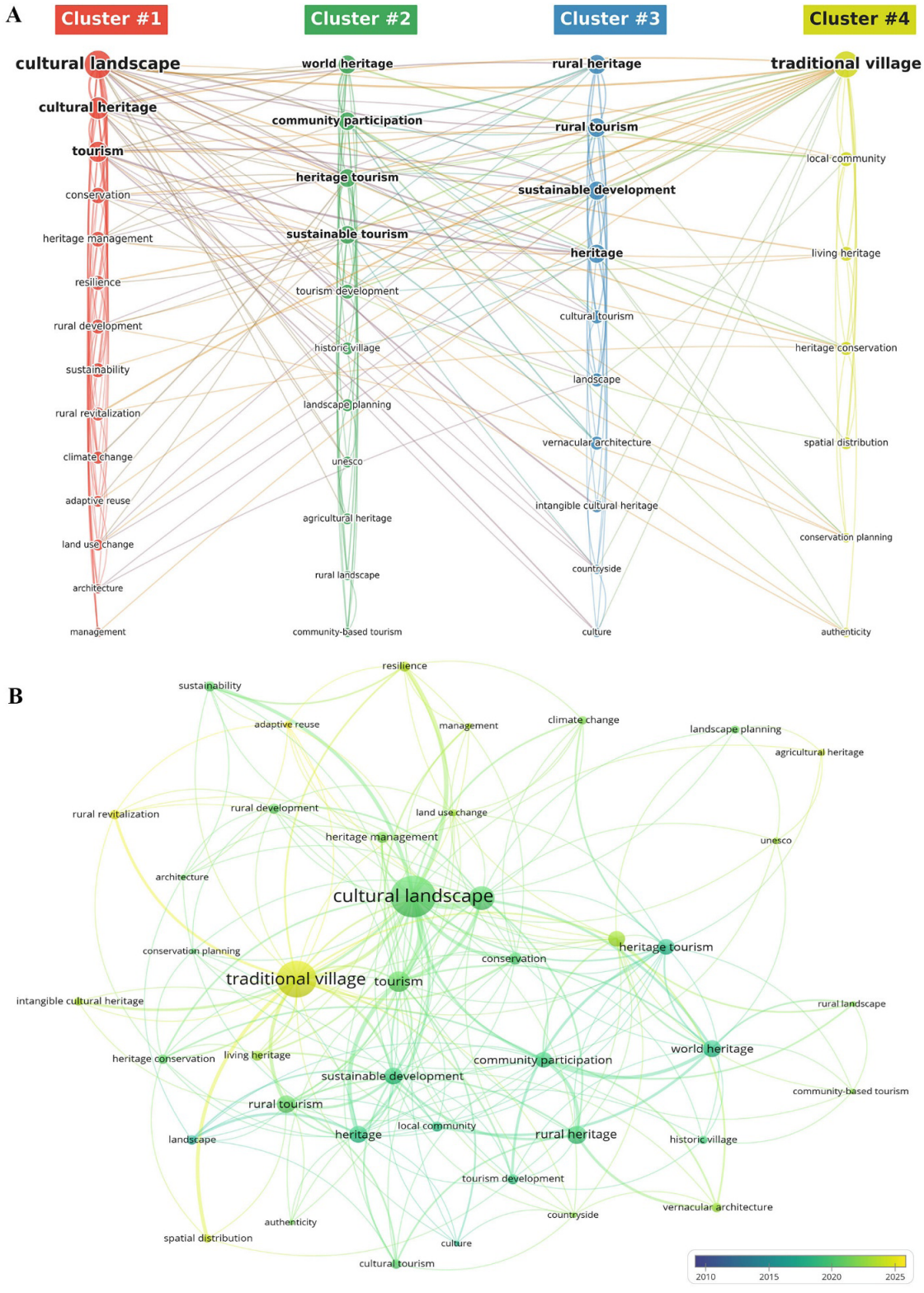


Figure 2. Keyword co-occurrence structure and temporal patterns in rural cultural landscape research. (A) Cluster-based keyword co-occurrence map. (B) Temporal overlay visualisation of keyword occurrence. Source: Diagrams by the authors

The frequency distribution shows the vocabulary most frequently represented within the eligible corpus. As shown in Figure 3, cultural landscape (53 occurrences) and traditional village (44 occurrences) were the most frequent keywords, followed by cultural heritage (23), tourism (19), rural heritage (16) and rural tourism (15).

The two leading terms also occupy different relational positions within the network. The cultural landscape is more closely associated with conservation, heritage management, living heritage, and resilience, while the traditional village is more closely associated with spatial distribution, rural revitalisation, and heritage tourism. Their positions distinguish a broader landscape-conservation vocabulary from a settlement-transformation vocabulary within the corpus.

Figure 2B provides a temporal profile of keyword use based on the average publication year associated with each term. Keywords with higher average publication years appeared more frequently in recent articles, indicating their temporal position within the reviewed corpus. The overlay shows established and more recent vocabularies appearing together. Cultural landscape, heritage, cultural heritage, tourism and sustainable development remain prominent across the review period, while traditional village (2023.93), rural revitalisation (2024.33), spatial distribution (2023.60), resilience (2023.00) and sustainable tourism (2022.38) have relatively high average publication years.

These temporal positions show that recent studies have given greater attention to rural transformation and adaptive responses to change. Rural revitalisation connects heritage conservation with contemporary rural development agendas, while resilience is examined in studies of how rural cultural landscapes respond to changing social and environmental conditions. Overall, the keyword analysis shows a process of conceptual layering in which established conservation, heritage management, and tourism vocabularies remain prominent, while transformation, adaptation, and continuity gain greater visibility.

3.2. Publication, geographical, and methodological profile of the corpus

Beyond keyword relationships, the corpus shows how publication output, study locations and research designs were distributed across the review period. Publication output remained limited during the early years, increased after 2020 and accelerated markedly between 2023 and 2025 (Figure 4). This growth shows rising academic attention to rural cultural landscapes within heritage and rural transformation research.

Study locations were geographically concentrated. China was the most frequently represented country, appearing in 106 articles, followed by Italy (15), Indonesia (12), Türkiye (10), Spain (9) and Japan (6) (Figure 5). The prominence of Chinese cases may partly reflect sustained academic attention to rural revitalisation programmes

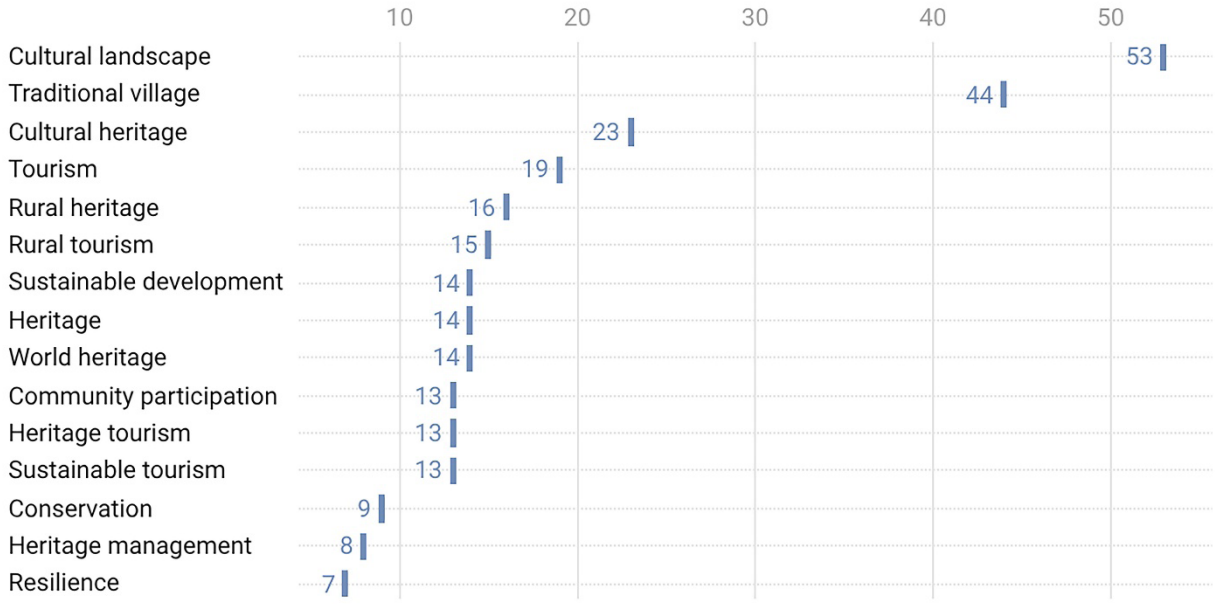


Figure 3. Most frequent keywords in the reviewed corpus. Source: Graph by the authors

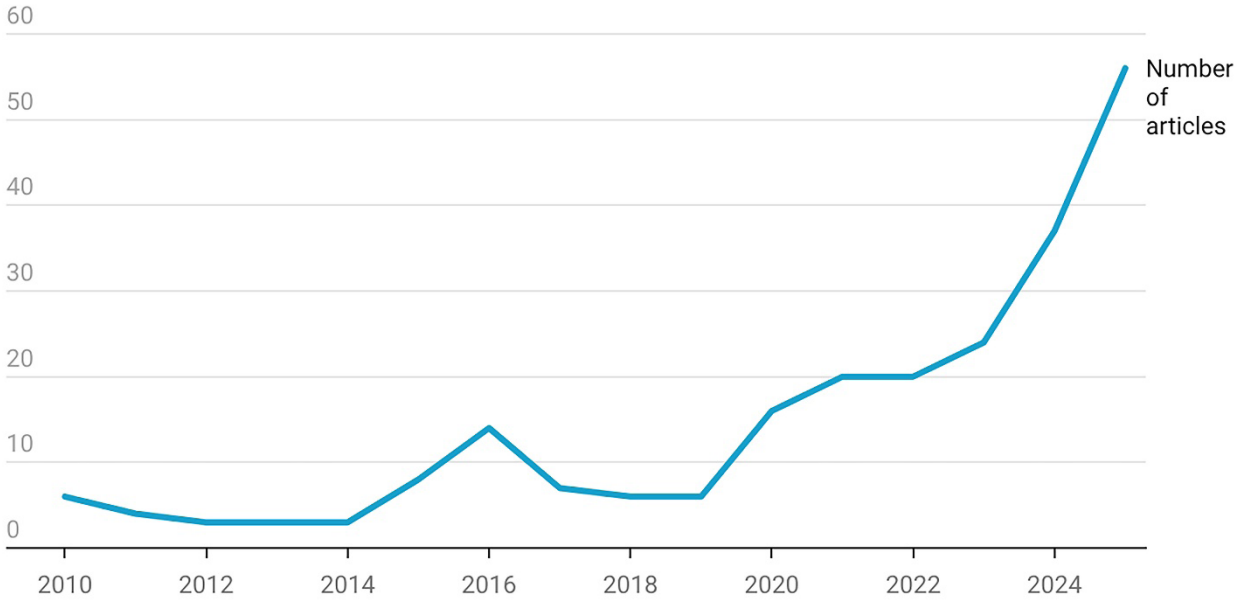


Figure 4. Annual publication output in the review corpus, 2010–2025. Source: Graph by the authors

and heritage conservation initiatives in China during the review period. This uneven distribution gives particular weight to Chinese cases and limits the extent to which the corpus captures variation across different heritage governance and land-tenure contexts. The implications of this concentration for the interpretation and transferability of the findings are considered in the concluding limitations.

The methodological profile of the corpus further demonstrates the diversity of approaches used to investigate rural cultural landscapes. The corpus included 90 qualitative, 72 quantitative, 36 conceptual/non-empirical and 35 mixed-methods studies (Figure 6). Qualitative research formed the largest category, while quantitative approaches also accounted for a substantial share of the corpus.

Taken together, these results show a rapidly expanding, yet geographically concentrated field that draws on a broad range of research designs. Qualitative studies constitute the largest methodological group, while quantitative research also accounts for a substantial share of the corpus. These corpus-level patterns provide the wider context for the thematic synthesis of the 80-study subset.

3.3. Thematic synthesis of heritage value, governance and continuity in rural cultural landscapes

The thematic synthesis of the 80-study subset identified four recurring tensions in rural cultural landscape research. The review questions guided the initial coding, while iterative comparison across the full texts refined the boundaries and explanatory content of each theme. The themes concerned the continuing influence of materially legible heritage values, the relationship between participation and decision-making authority, the selective reorganisation of continuity through tourism and revitalisation, and the everyday reproduction of living heritage. The 20 anchor studies provided illustrative evidence of the mechanisms, contrasts and contextual variation within these broader patterns.

3.3.1. Visible heritage objects and plural heritage values

The first theme concerns the relationship between expanding interpretations of cultural heritage and the continuing influence of materially legible conservation approaches. Across the 80-study subset, many studies examined traditional settlements and other visible landscape features as the primary objects of conservation. A growing body of work also examined how residents created and sustained heritage value through everyday use, memory and local knowledge.

Brumann and Gfeller (2022) showed that the cultural landscape category broadened the scope of World Heritage recognition, while institutional evaluation continued to favour landscapes that were clearly bounded and compatible with established aesthetic and expert criteria.

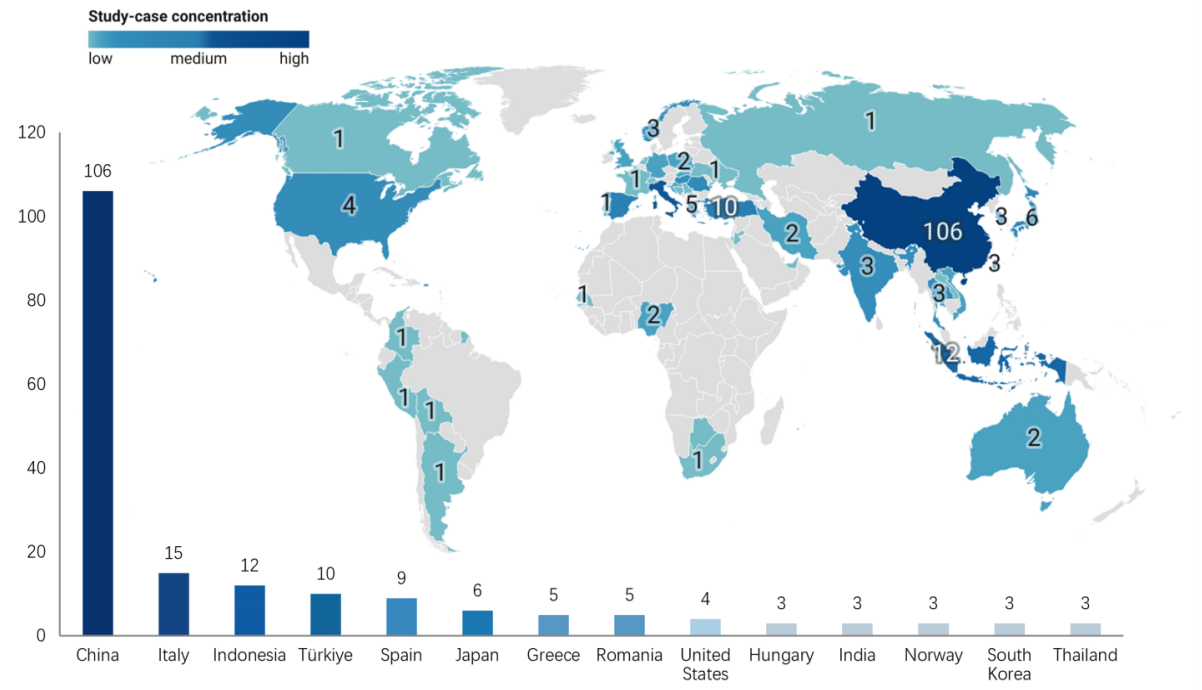


Figure 5. Countries represented in the reviewed studies

Note: Country coding was non-exclusive. Articles examining more than one country were counted once for each country substantively included in the study. Source: Diagram by the authors.

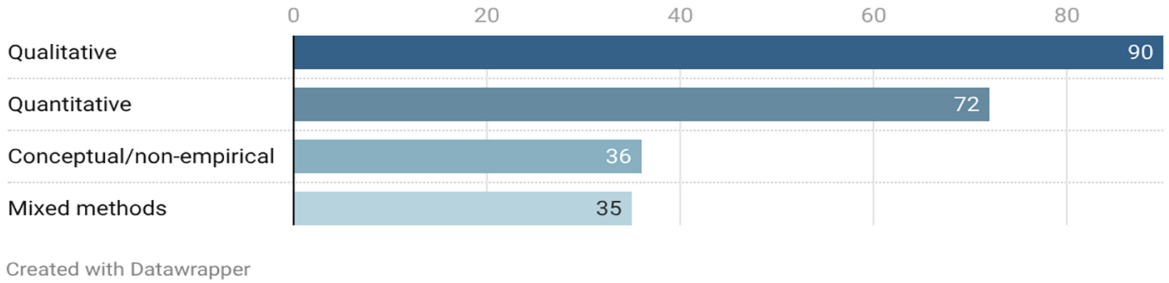


Figure 6. Distribution of research designs in the reviewed corpus. Note: Research-design categories were mutually exclusive. Source: Graph by the authors

Their analysis illustrates how broader heritage categories can continue to operate through familiar standards of legitimacy.

Similar tensions appeared at the local level. Katapidi (2021, 2023) found that policy frameworks in traditional Greek villages gave strong recognition to architectural and historical features, while residents understood heritage through their ongoing relationships with place. Settimini (2021) similarly traced heritage meanings through local practice and collective memory, and Shi et al. (2024) documented differences between expert and resident assessments of heritage value and integrity.

Meneghin et al. (2023) extended this pattern by showing how social use and local function contributed to the value of non-urban heritage. Santoro et al. (2021) found that residents and land users valued agricultural practice and human–environment relationships alongside the scenic qualities of the Cinque Terre and Porto Venere landscape. Together, these studies identify the main tension in the criteria for recognising heritage value and show how physical form acquires meaning through continuing relationships with place.

3.3.2. Procedural participation and decision-making authority

The second theme concerns the positioning of participation within heritage governance. Across the 80-study subset, participation appeared frequently in policy and management, with local influence ranging from consultation and implementation to direct involvement in heritage decisions.

Many studies described arrangements in which communities contributed information or implementation work while experts and institutions retained control over key decisions. J. Li et al. (2020) found that participation across Chinese cultural World Heritage properties centred largely on consultation and implementation. These arrangements recognised communities as stakeholders while formal institutions retained authority over heritage definition and management.

The studies by Katapidi (2021, 2023) further showed that local contributions entered heritage discussions through categories already established by experts and policy institutions. Gao et al. (2021) identified a related imbalance at the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces, where local communities were responsible for maintenance and tourism management while broader planning authority remained concentrated elsewhere.

Other studies documented arrangements that gave communities greater influence. Zhao (2019) showed how intermediary actors connected institutional stakeholders with local practices. Dragouni and Lekakis (2023) traced the contribution of community deliberation to heritage futures, while Paulino et al. (2023) demonstrated how participatory governance supported the continuation of an intangible heritage practice within tourism development. Across these studies, the effect of participation depended on its structure and on the authority available to community actors. Greater influence emerged where residents contributed to heritage interpretation, priority setting and future planning.

3.3.3. Tourism, revitalisation, and selective continuity

The third theme concerns how tourism and rural revitalisation redistribute attention and support across different forms of heritage. Across the 80-study subset, these processes frequently produced selective transformation. Investment and public representation often concentrated on heritage that could be readily displayed and managed, while changes in access and routine use altered the everyday relationships through which rural landscapes were maintained.

Jimura (2011) showed that World Heritage designation in Ogimachi supported conservation and tourism development while creating new pressures on local lifestyles and community identity. Gao et al. (2023) similarly found that multi-scalar revitalisation agendas transformed villages into visible "model" landscapes and reshaped the meanings and practices associated with them. Law et al. (2025) traced how top-down revitalisation reorganised cultural practices as standardised performances and tourism resources, while Yuan et al. (2026) found that visitor-facing placemaking created tensions with residents' identities and everyday experiences.

Other studies identified conditions under which tourism supported continuity. Paulino et al. (2023) showed that an intangible heritage practice gained support when local practitioners participated in governance and retained influence over its development. Gao et al. (2021) similarly connected conservation and tourism outcomes with the local distribution of rights and responsibilities. Across the subset, the effects of tourism and revitalisation depended on which practices received support and how development changed the conditions under which other practices continued.

3.3.4. Living heritage as everyday reproduction

The fourth theme concerns living heritage as an everyday process of continuation and adaptation. Across the 80-study subset, studies increasingly connected continuity with what communities continued to do in and with inherited places. A recurring finding was that physical persistence alone does not necessarily indicate heritage continuity. Wang (2016) introduced the concept of "lived-in cultural heritage" to show how ongoing habitation and adaptation give heritage places their continuing meaning. This view connects continuity with the social relationships and everyday practices through which historic structures remain in use.

Subsequent studies further developed this relational understanding. Wang et al. (2025) showed how place identity in Dali Dong village was sustained through ritual settings that remained connected to everyday spatial practice and collective meaning. These connections changed when tourism development and social transformation altered patterns of use and attachment. R. Li et al. (2024) treated traditional village landscapes as systems in which ecological conditions, productive activity and residential life supported one another. Sun and Ou (2021) likewise showed that continuity depended on the relationships people had with how they produced, lived in, and managed the landscape. Together, these studies define continuity through communities' capacity to keep heritage meaningful as conditions change. The theme directs

attention to the social and practical processes through which rural landscapes remain in use over time.

Across the four themes, the literature expands the scope of rural cultural landscape conservation by connecting inherited forms with the ways heritage is valued, governed and sustained in everyday life. The strength of these connections varies across institutional and geographical contexts. **Section 4** considers the implications of these patterns for living heritage theory and conservation practice.

4. Discussion

The bibliometric and thematic findings point to a field that has widened its conceptual vocabulary faster than it has changed its governing logic. Cultural landscape, community participation and living heritage are now widely present in rural heritage research, yet formal conservation continues to operate most easily through features that can be bounded, recorded and administered. The resulting difficulty extends beyond the continued preference for physical heritage. It concerns the institutional processes through which some values become recognisable, some actors gain authority, and some forms of continuity receive support.

The contribution of this review lies in connecting four problems that are often discussed separately. Administrative legibility shapes what can enter formal heritage systems. Responsibility asymmetry shapes who carries the work of continuity and who determines its direction. Tourism and revitalisation redirect attention, space and investment across heritage practices. These processes together influence the reproductive capacity of a rural cultural landscape: the ability of communities to keep inherited places meaningful and in use while responding to changing conditions. Living heritage continuity therefore emerges through the interaction of recognition, authority and the practical conditions of everyday life.

4.1. Objectification and administrative legibility

The persistence of visible-object bias can be understood as a problem of administrative legibility. Heritage administration involves inventories, plans, designated boundaries and condition assessments. These instruments favour elements that can be located and compared, while practices and social relationships are harder to record because their significance develops through use and changes with local circumstances.

The cultural landscape category has widened what can be recognised as heritage, yet the process of formalisation still converts a living environment into a manageable object. Brumann and Gfeller (2022) show that institutional recognition continues to favour landscapes compatible with established evaluative expectations. Research on documentation reaches a similar conclusion: records dominated by physical information make emotional, experiential and knowledge-based values less visible (Nancarrow et al., 2021; A. Smith et al., 2019). Formal conservation therefore selects and reorganises value at the same time as it records it.

L. Smith's (2006) concept of authorised heritage discourse helps explain why this translation has lasting consequences. Once heritage significance is framed through professional standards, local knowledge enters the process from a weaker position. Yan's (2015) analysis of Fujian Tulou shows how a discourse of harmony between community and environment can still operate through a single-value narrative that privileges expert interpretation and extends conservation to the regulation of everyday conduct. Yodsurang et al. (2022) likewise show how inhabited environments can be recast as aesthetic objects, leaving contemporary use to appear secondary or disruptive.

The tension also concerns the unit through which heritage is assessed. Formal conservation often begins with identifiable elements, designated areas or measurable attributes, while the landscape itself functions through relationships among use, maintenance, memory and place. Shi et al. (2024) document differences in how heritage value, composition and integrity are understood across assessment perspectives, while Settimini (2021) shows how formal representation can omit everyday memories and forms of belonging. A landscape may consequently appear coherent within an inventory while becoming less complete as a living environment. Heritage assessment needs to examine whether protected forms remain connected to use, maintenance and local meaning, and whether conservation decisions leave room for those connections to continue.

4.2. Participation, responsibility asymmetry, and limited influence

Participation can expand procedurally while authority remains concentrated. Communities may attend meetings, provide local information, undertake maintenance and support implementation after institutions have already defined heritage significance and the range of acceptable change. This review describes the resulting arrangement as responsibility asymmetry: residents carry much of the work through which heritage continuity is maintained, while influence over interpretation, priority setting and future development remains elsewhere.

This pattern appears clearly where local communities

contribute substantial labour and cooperation to conservation. Participation across many Chinese cultural World Heritage properties has often centred on consultation and implementation, reflecting broader governance arrangements in which heritage interpretation and planning authority remain closely connected with institutional actors, while communities at the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces assumed significant responsibility for maintenance and tourism management within a planning structure that retained authority at higher institutional levels (Gao et al., 2021; J. Li et al., 2020). These cases reveal a distinction between being involved in heritage work and having influence over the decisions that organise that work. Responsibility can shift to communities without a comparable movement of authority.

Community support is equally difficult to interpret as evidence of influence. Support may reflect perceived benefits, strategic cooperation or dependence on tourism income, while revealing little about who framed the available choices (Hanafiah et al., 2021). F. Chen (2022) makes a related distinction between the degree and the substance of participation. A project may involve frequent meetings or extensive community activity while giving residents limited scope to redefine its aims. Measures based on attendance, expressed support or willingness to cooperate can therefore make participation appear more influential than it is.

Responsibility asymmetry also helps explain some forms of informal adaptation and non-compliance. Residents alter buildings, reorganise space or bypass formal procedures for various reasons, many of which stem from practical needs. Their recurrence nevertheless indicates situations in which formal governance provides limited room for negotiating continued use. An unauthorised alteration may represent an attempt to accommodate changing household needs or restore habitability within a landscape increasingly organised around conservation objectives. Such actions still require careful assessment, but enforcement alone cannot resolve the underlying conflict when formal standards leave little space for everyday adaptation.

The literature also identifies mechanisms for more effectively integrating community knowledge into planning. Intermediary actors can connect lived experience with institutional procedures, while participatory mapping can translate local knowledge into evidence that informs later conservation decisions (Zhao, 2019). These mechanisms become meaningful when the knowledge produced can alter heritage interpretation and project priorities. People-centred approaches extend this principle further by giving communities a role in framing the significance of heritage and negotiating future change (le Masurier, 2025; S. Sun & Nakajima, 2023).

The central question is therefore: where does participation enter the decision process and what authority accompanies it? Participation redistributes influence by enabling communities to shape how heritage is interpreted, which interventions receive priority and how the consequences of change are negotiated. This shifts attention from the visible presence of participation towards the institutional conditions that determine whether community contributions can affect outcomes.

4.3. Selective continuity and the internal reordering of rural life

Tourism and rural revitalisation reorganise continuity by redirecting visibility, investment and space across the landscape. Heritage forms that can function as attractions or model projects often gain support, while other practices lose the conditions on which they depend. The result is selective continuity: heritage may survive at the level of representation while becoming thinner at the level of lived use. This process may occur without obvious physical loss. A ritual can continue as a scheduled performance while losing its relationship with community life. A house can retain its external form while becoming difficult to adapt to current needs. A public space can be improved for visitors while residents lose informal access to it. These changes alter the function and social ownership of heritage even when its visible form remains intact.

The evidence from tourism and revitalisation studies illustrates this internal reordering. Gao et al. (2023) show how multi-scalar development agendas can produce visible model landscapes while reshaping local meanings. Law et al. (2025) trace the standardisation of cultural practices as they are converted into performances and tourism resources. Yuan et al. (2026) identify tensions between visitor-facing placemaking and residents' everyday experience. Xue (2022) similarly shows how the production of consumable rural places can remake older atmospheres and meanings. These processes do not simply remove heritage. They alter which parts of the landscape remain institutionally supported and the purpose for which they continue.

Branding and spatial reorganisation can intensify this selection. Funding often follows projects that promise visibility, visitor circulation or measurable development outcomes. Buildings and symbolic spaces that fit these aims become more prominent, while maintenance practices and ordinary spaces remain difficult to justify within project-based investment. Wardana and Haryanto (2026) show how inherited imaginaries and tourism narratives

influence the representation of heritage places. Jimura's (2011) longer-term analysis is especially significant because it demonstrates that successful visual conservation and tourism growth can coexist with increasing pressure on local identity and quality of life.

Tourism can strengthen continuity when it reinforces local livelihoods, preserves access to everyday space and leaves communities with influence over cultural representation (Zuo et al., 2022). Do (2025) demonstrates this relationship in Mang Thit, where kiln heritage depended on the continuing connection between livelihood and ecology. These outcomes are shaped by governance: benefit distribution determines whether residents can remain in the landscape, planning determines whether cultural practices retain appropriate spaces, and control over representation affects whose meanings tourism carries forward. Longer-term protection becomes fragile when these conditions are separated from heritage management (Reeves & Long, 2011).

4.4. Living heritage as reproductive capacity

The preceding mechanisms converge in the reproductive capacity of the landscape: the ability of communities to continue using inherited places, adapt them to present needs and transmit the practices associated with them. Wijesuriya (2018) argues that heritage remains living when it continues to serve a function, communities remain connected to it, cultural expressions evolve, and established forms of care continue. Change is therefore part of continuity. The reproductive-capacity perspective developed here builds on this position by asking whether communities still have the practical means and institutional support needed to sustain these relationships. Wang's (2016) concept of "lived-in cultural heritage" emphasises habitation and adaptation, while Zhu (2026) understands continuity through reinterpretation and renewal. These perspectives reveal how conservation indirectly affects continuity. A practice may remain formally permitted yet become difficult to sustain when access, materials or successors are lost; a protected structure may remain stable while the knowledge needed to maintain it is lost.

Recent studies clarify different dimensions of this capacity. Place attachment changes as residents reinterpret the landscape through shifting social and economic conditions. Its continuity therefore depends on an active relationship with place, rather than on the persistence of familiar scenery alone (Y. Chen & Wang, 2024; Csurgó & Smith, 2022). Yu's (2015) study of Gouliang Miao village makes a related point by showing how ritual continuity depended on vernacular practice and everyday sacred life.

Reproductive capacity also has a spatial basis. Productive activity, domestic life and cultural practice need places where they can continue and remain connected. R. Li et al. (2024) and Y. Sun and Ou (2021) show how the different parts of a traditional village landscape support one another through continuing use. Wang et al. (2025) make the same mechanism visible at the level of ritual space, where collective meaning depends on the setting remaining part of everyday village life. When these connections weaken, preserved elements may retain their form while losing the functions that link them to the wider landscape.

Governance also shapes reproductive capacity. Suhartana et al. (2025) highlight the importance of local institutions and collective obligation, while Zhao (2019) shows how negotiated arrangements can connect local practice with formal governance. These studies indicate that continuity requires more than community commitment. Communities need institutional recognition, access to resources and a credible route through which changing needs can enter conservation decisions.

Thus, reproductive capacity is produced through the interaction of community practice and institutional conditions. Recognition confers legitimacy, governance distributes authority, and development alters the spaces and resources available for continuation. Community commitment remains crucial, but it cannot indefinitely compensate for the loss of access, livelihood support or decision-making influence. The practical test of conservation is whether people can still use inherited places, adapt them and carry their meanings into contemporary life.

4.5. Implications for heritage governance and conservation planning

The reproductive-capacity perspective has direct implications for heritage assessment. Conventional inventories provide necessary information about the physical condition and formal integrity of the property. They should also record how a place remains connected with current life. Assessment can examine who uses a building or space, which activities depend on it and who undertakes the work required to maintain those activities. This would make forms of continuity visible before they are weakened beyond recovery.

The same perspective can inform decisions about intervention. Physical deterioration may require material repair, while a loss of use may require a different response. A conserved building can remain meaningful when residents have practical reasons and institutional permission to use it. Adaptive use should therefore be evaluated in terms of its effects on local life and its compatibility with historic form. Planning guidance can protect significant features

while allowing changes that enable continued occupation.

Participation should be assessed through its position in the decision-making process. Consultation can provide information, but it does not resolve responsibility asymmetry when communities remain excluded from priority setting. Governance arrangements should identify which decisions residents can influence and how disagreements will be negotiated. Intermediary actors can help translate between local knowledge and technical procedures, although mediation requires a clear connection to actual authority.

Tourism and revitalisation planning require a similarly expanded form of evaluation. Visitor numbers, investment and physical improvement capture only part of their effects. Planning should also examine how development changes residents' access to space, the viability of local livelihoods and the community's influence over cultural representation. Monitoring should continue after implementation because selective continuity often develops gradually as uses and responsibilities change.

5. Conclusion

This review examined rural cultural landscape research published between 2010 and 2025 through a hybrid design combining bibliometric mapping with comparative thematic synthesis. The field has broadened beyond fabric-centred conservation, yet this conceptual expansion has not consistently altered how heritage is recognised and governed. Values that can be clearly bounded and documented remain easier to formalise. Communities may carry substantial responsibility for conservation while retaining limited influence over value definition and future change. Tourism and revitalisation can support selected heritage forms while weakening the everyday relationships on which other forms depend. Together, these patterns show that living heritage continuity depends on the conditions that enable people to keep inherited places meaningful, usable and adaptable as circumstances change.

The review brings these findings together through four linked concepts. Administrative legibility explains why visible and classifiable attributes enter formal conservation more readily than relationships grounded in everyday use. Responsibility asymmetry captures situations in which communities undertake the work of continuity while decision-making authority remains concentrated elsewhere. Selective continuity describes how development redistributes visibility, investment and spatial support across different forms of heritage. Reproductive capacity connects these processes by asking whether communities retain the practical and institutional means to carry heritage forward. This framework moves the discussion beyond the separate identification of material bias, limited participation and tourism pressure. It shows how recognition, authority and the conditions of everyday life interact to shape whether a rural cultural landscape can continue as living heritage.

Methodologically, the review connects field-wide bibliometric patterns with structured comparison across the 80-study analytical subset and closer interpretation of 20 anchor studies. This design enabled the authors to relate broad patterns in the literature to the mechanisms through which conservation and development affect lived continuity. Conceptually, the review positions living heritage as a reproductive capacity that depends on repeated use, adaptation and institutional support. From a governance perspective, it directs attention to the relationship between the work communities undertake and the authority they hold over heritage decisions.

These conclusions also have practical implications. Heritage assessment needs to examine how protected places remain connected with contemporary use and who undertakes the work required to maintain those connections. Participatory arrangements should be evaluated through the influence communities can exercise over interpretation, priorities and acceptable change. Tourism and revitalisation planning should consider how development affects residents' access to space, the viability of local livelihoods and community authority over cultural representation. These considerations allow physical conservation to support the social processes through which the landscape continues.

The explanatory reach of the review is shaped by its evidence base. Its restriction to English-language journal articles indexed in Web of Science and Scopus may underrepresent locally grounded Chinese-language research and research published outside international databases. The large number of Chinese studies makes the synthesis particularly sensitive to state-led heritage designation, rural revitalisation programmes, and expert-guided planning. It also limits direct transferability to settings where private ownership, Indigenous authority, community trusts or stronger local autonomy organise heritage governance differently. The purposive selection of the 80-study subset and the use of single-author coding introduce interpretive judgement, although the coding records were reviewed against the final analytical framework. In addition, review evidence can identify conditions that enable or constrain continuity but cannot establish the long-term effectiveness of specific governance interventions.

The framework is therefore most useful as a set of analytical questions rather than a uniform model for

heritage governance. Comparative research should examine how land arrangements, institutional resources, and local authorities shape the relationships among recognition, responsibility, and continuity. Longitudinal studies are also needed because selective continuity may become visible only after conservation or tourism projects have already been judged successful. Such research could establish whether communities retain the capacity to adapt inherited places, maintain everyday practices and negotiate change over time. Rural cultural landscapes endure when protected forms remain connected to the people, practices and institutional conditions that keep them meaningful and in use.

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