


Article

Heritage Value Assessment and Landscape Preservation of Traditional Chinese Villages Based on the Daily Lives of Local Residents: A Study of Tangfang Village in China and the UNESCO HUL Approach

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Abstract: Traditional Chinese villages, recognized as national heritage sites, are invaluable cultural assets. Since 2012, efforts have focused on their preservation, though issues remain such as prioritizing authenticity over usability and material over cultural elements. This paper adopts the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, emphasizing the integration of physical heritage with daily life to shift value assessment. The fundamental argument of this paper is that the HUL method can serve as a new tool for preserving the historical heritage and landscape of rural areas, particularly in the context of assessing and formulating preservation frameworks for traditional Chinese villages. Through the case study of Tangfang village's new conservation plan, the research demonstrates that the value of traditional villages lies in the continuous interaction between daily activities and physical space, including landscape, functional, and spiritual dimensions. The study concludes that a preservation framework based on local residents' daily lives ensures more effective heritage conservation and landscape preservation by addressing both material and human values.

Keywords: value; traditional Chinese village; historic urban landscape; daily life; rural landscape



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1. Introduction

The rich tapestry of traditional Chinese culture, woven over 5000 years of dazzling civilization, finds one of its most profound expressions in traditional Chinese villages. In 2012, the Chinese government officially bestowed a new national protection status on these villages, recognizing their exceptional civilizational value and inheritance significance. By March 2023, a total of 8155 villages, identified in six batches, had been incorporated into the national protection framework [1]. The collective investment in special funds for 'Traditional Chinese Village' has surpassed 10 billion yuan, as reported by various national entities including the State Council, the Ministry of Housing and Construction, and the Ministry of Finance [2]. Protection efforts have integrated cultural empowerment and development, making the preservation of traditional villages a core aspect of the nation's rural revitalization strategy. Despite notable progress and the summarization of intermediate experiences [3], challenges persist. Observations have pointed out that current efforts often prioritize authenticity over practicality [4,5] and favor material conservation over humanistic values [6].

These debates have persisted for a long time and primarily originate from the dispute over authenticity, with viewpoints diverging into three main schools of thought [7,8]. Fundamentally, these debates revolve around the direction of conservation and development centered on value. The first focuses on the material heritage value, treating the 'vernacular architectural heritage' of traditional villages in line with the protection of cultural

relics and monuments. Modern conservation practices, however, are criticized for their ‘static’ and ‘solid’ approaches, resulting in ‘hollowing out’ and ‘symbolization’ [9]. The second advocates a holistic value that combines both material and immaterial elements [10]. Nonetheless, while economic value development is emphasized, issues such as the conflict between modernity and tradition [11], insufficient endogenous power [12,13], and the commoditization of heritage tourism are widely debated [14–16]. The third value is the ‘Historic Urban Landscape’ [17], which emphasizes wholeness and layering and highlights the social attributes of heritage values. This approach advocates local community participation and reflects on how values are formed through the ‘daily life’ of people across different eras [18]. The interaction between material and spiritual spaces is mediated by people’s daily activities, achieving the coupling of traditional culture and environment through everyday production and life [19–21].

From the Machu Picchu Charter, which emphasized the decisive role of human activity in the significance of cultural heritage, to the Recommendation on the Conservation of Historic Areas and their Contemporary Role (Nairobi Recommendation), which stressed the importance of human participation in heritage conservation, modern heritage strategies increasingly integrate the value of physical artefacts with the value of human activities [22,23]. The value of traditional villages lies in the ongoing interplay between human activities and the physical development of these villages. However, existing research has largely focused on either changes in physical spaces or cultural folklore, resulting in a limited theoretical understanding and inadequate exploration of the introduction of the concept of ‘Historic Urban Landscape’ into village settings. Consequently, criteria for evaluating village heritage often lack the perspective of residents, and the impact of human–object interaction on the value of village heritage remains insufficiently understood.

Value assessment is the cornerstone of cultural heritage protection work [24,25]. The World Heritage Convention asserts that “value implies a perceived quality”, and the World Heritage List established by UNESCO demands “outstanding universal value”, defined as “rare cultural and/or natural values of universal significance for all humankind, both now and in the future, which transcend national boundaries”. Traditional Chinese villages are vital components of both the Chinese heritage conservation system and the international heritage conservation framework. According to the Notice on the Survey of Traditional Villages [26], “ancient villages refer to villages established earlier that possess rich traditional resources and exhibit historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, social, and economic values warranting protection”. Criteria for assessing the value of these ancient villages were formulated in 2012, focusing on three main categories: architecture, siting pattern, and intangible cultural heritage, influenced heavily by early international heritage conservation ideas that emphasized originality and wholeness. Generally, value is employed to describe the extent to which objective things satisfy human needs, and value assessment represents the assessor’s description of heritage. This raises a critical question: by what criteria and through what processes do people assess heritage needs?

Authenticity remains central to value judgements concerning original heritage, and three primary historical perspectives surround this issue. Initially rooted in European, Christian, and monumental architectural conservation, the concept of authenticity was dominated by scholars, archaeologists, professionals, and craftsmen [27], who emphasized materiality as a value judgement. Figures such as Viollet-le-Duc, John Ruskin, and William Morris introduced various approaches—stylistic restoration, anti-interventionist thinking, documentary restoration, and scientific restoration—which present different concepts of ‘authenticity’ and monument ‘value’. Michael Petzet, former President of ICOMOS, advocated “Preservation, not alteration and destruction” [28], encouraging members of the Theory of Conservation and Restoration to adopt a heritage-focused approach to building conservation. Early applications of the Venice Charter (1964) in China led to practical confusion and significant debate among Chinese scholars regarding heritage restoration [29]. The differing architectural characteristics of wood and stone in Eastern and Western cultures spurred diverse debates on value and authenticity, leading to disagreements on preserva-

tion methods. Luo Zhewen and other scholars [30], through the Qufu Declaration, argued in favor of “not changing the original state”, proposing the “four originals” principle: original type system, original materials, original structure, and original craftsmanship. The debate between nostalgists and interventionists continued until the 2009 Rio de Janeiro Conference, which achieved consensus on urban development issues by adopting a heritage-guided urban development model, reflecting the notion of ‘common heritage beyond borders’ [31]. This value judgement constitutes a professional and technical assessment, under expert discourse, aimed at maintaining or restoring physical spaces to their most glorious form, representing a past-oriented exhibitionistic value restoration.

‘Cultural landscapes’ emerged as a critique and complement to traditional concepts of authenticity. The international discourse on authenticity has gradually delved into the fundamental theoretical issue of heritage value diversity [32], expanding the spatial and human attributes of heritage values [33,34]. Modern heritage conservation continually reinforces the integration of object value and human activity value [35,36], advocating that value judgements should consider the environmental context and societal activities. Landscapes can ‘encode values and anchor memories in place’, transforming into sites of historical identity and cultural heritage [37]. Simultaneously, monuments become institutions for reembodying social and cultural idioms [38], maintaining a strong historical ‘proximity’ [39] and influencing public perception. The landscape is a fundamental element representative of rural areas and rural identity [40]. The greatest characteristic of cultural landscapes is the ‘co-creation by humans and nature’, embodying the integration of function, landscape, and spirit, and serving as a tool for the sustainable development of rural areas [41]. For example, in relatively isolated and independent remote areas, such as the Hani Rice Terraces in China, a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Landscape, the challenging natural environment has influenced the production and lifestyle of the indigenous people [42]. The activities of the residents, adapted to the unique terrain, not only preserve the distinctive landscape, but also serve as an endogenous force in the region’s new tourism development. In contrast, within a context of frequent social changes, the traditional village landscapes of Lebanon act as beneficial mediums for development [43]. Landscapes formed through daily community life and traditional agricultural practices allow for the preservation of traditional culture, the construction of local identity, and the recognition of rural heritage. In 2012, Feng Jikai proposed that traditional Chinese villages embody a fusion of tangible and intangible elements, intertwined with the villagers’ way of life, reflecting the influence of international heritage ideology on pluralistic and holistic values in China. This context has questioned the traditional expert discourse, diversified the subject of heritage value judgement, emphasized the social life value of heritage, encouraged collaboration between experts and communities, and positioned heritage conservation as a means of developing national soft power and social governance.

In the era of globalization, historic towns have transitioned from marginalized areas to regions with new economic value, posing threats to the preservation of values and the spirit of place [16]. Contemporary urban heritage conservation philosophies reexamine ‘conservation’ and ‘development’. In 2011, UNESCO introduced the concept of the ‘Historic Urban Landscape’ (HUL) based on cultural landscapes. The Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape advocates a holistic approach that intertwines urban development with conservation to promote a more sustainable growth. This approach emphasizes the evolutionary aspects of cultural landscape heritage at the historical level, placing its value within a broader historical context and seeking dynamic connections between landscape representation and value connotation. In the face of complex changes in economic, social, and climatic conditions, the HUL concept situates heritage within a changing social value system, while also making the societal and cultural domains aware of the abundant additional values that heritage possesses. The HUL method is a flexible and continually evolving tool designed to manage change, with the core concept of ‘layering’, viewing the city as a process of social construction across space, time, and experience [44,45]. Since 2011, the HUL strategy has been effectively implemented in several cities around the world

and has been incorporated into new global sustainable urban strategies. In 2013, Ballarat in Australia joined UNESCO's international pilot implementation of the HUL method to manage the changes in a "vibrant historic city", achieving positive outcomes through a decade of practice [46]. Italian cities faced conflicts between heritage conservation and new urban development. Through the HUL theory, strategies such as 'dynamic', 'activation', and 'sustainable' have been integrated into heritage conservation, introducing the concept of 'regeneration' [47]. The historic harbor district of Kyrenia has leveraged community participation to understand the intrinsic values of heritage sites, identify stakeholders, and formulate appropriate conservation strategies [48]. Heritage conservation is gradually being integrated with urban development, fostering the formation of new urban paradigms.

The practice and development of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach aim to address the challenges of destruction or neglect faced by historic urban areas amid rapid urbanization, globalization, and modernization. These challenges include the loss of unique characteristics, identity, and sense of place. HUL shifts the focus from purely preservationist methods to more inclusive and participatory approaches to tackle these crises. By emphasizing the 'dynamic nature of living cities', the value of heritage is seen as a configuration of both tangible and intangible elements, encompassing the past of various groups and communities and their ongoing historical processes. Sustainable conservation strategies can only be achieved when all stakeholders are involved in this process [49]. The value of urban heritage is formed over time and is related to its continually changing functions and everyday use by people. Thus, the value of heritage possesses historical layering and social dimensions, created through the 'everyday lives' of people from different eras. Cultural memory in daily life plays a significant role in creating a sense of place and enhancing the quality of life for residents [50]. Scholars such as Bandarin, Ron van Oers, and others have continually enriched the Historic Urban Landscape model, redefining the connotations of heritage value [51–53]. Reflecting on Alois Riegl's early introduction of the value concept into heritage conservation, the "memory value" and "use value" highlight the value functions of different temporal dimensions, traditional and modern [54]. Heritage conservation must also achieve an organic integration of traditional elements and modern daily life functions [55].

Value judgement not only addresses past and present societal needs, but also forms an organic part of humanity's future development strategies. Every individual is a bearer of value, and each person's daily life influences the formation of these values. The so-called 'everyday life' encompasses the most commonplace actions of daily living, from work to leisure, including the various trivial details of eating, drinking, accommodation, and entertainment. Everyday life was once considered the antithesis of scientific rationality. However, western Marxist scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, Agnes Heller, and Guy Debord have progressively established and developed the theory of everyday life criticism. They argue that the 'platform' of everyday life has assumed a position of primary importance, surpassing production and playing a role akin to what the 'economy' once did, reflecting the values of society. Furthermore, everyday life is intricately connected to all activities, serving as the nexus of all actions and social relations, possessing the capability and purpose for practical implementation [56].

The expert-driven process of value identification, adhering to a typological framework of values, has faced widespread criticism. Inclusive, process-led public participation methods for determining the value of architectural heritage have begun to receive attention and exploration. The construction process of daily life for local residents and communities is becoming a new focal point. The HUL approach highlights that community participation is a crucial tool for integrating heritage practices into sustainable urban development. Europe has a long history of cultural preservation and development with community participation. Participatory theories and practices have been substantiated and developed by numerous scholars. In his book "Culture Economies", Ray [57], drawing on observations of the EU Commission's LEADER program, suggests that the development of rural communities in Europe should be attuned to the needs, capabilities, and perspectives of

local people. This makes development contextual and endows it with a moral dimension, emphasizing principles and processes involving local participation in design and implementation. Ray advocates incorporating cultural, environmental, and ‘community’ values in developmental interventions.

The World Heritage Convention specifies three conditions for inclusion in the heritage list: monuments of outstanding universal value, architectural groups of outstanding universal value, and sites of outstanding universal value. The characteristics of heritage value are human-labor products—objects representing symbolic value, intertwined with daily life, natural conditions, civilization level, and economic and technological factors. Heritage value judgements by contemporary individuals incorporate past wisdom while addressing future developmental needs. Value assessments necessitate a deep understanding of both historical formation processes and future societal requirements.

However, the long-term development of human society has been heavily focused on urban areas, and discussions on historical landscapes within heritage conservation have primarily concentrated on urban regions [58,59], neglecting rural areas from the scope of research. Historically rich traditional rural areas are an important part of the world heritage system. Although the heritage value of traditional settlements has garnered attention from the architectural community since the exhibition “Architecture Without Architects” (1964), with an acknowledgement of their aesthetic, functional, and environmental values, and their potential to promote local socioeconomic development through hereditary processes [60], the diverse spatial forms of rural areas reflect the local lifestyles influenced by cultural diversity. Architects have also noted the potential relationship between physical space and community spirit [61]. Historians and geographers believe that ‘rural landscapes’ include all traces of the activities of rural residents throughout history and reality [62], resulting from a series of human–land relationships. The value of rural heritage has been mentioned in multiple studies [63–65], yet the literature on it remains fragmented and the process of value formation continues to be an underexplored area in current heritage conservation.

As heritage resources shared by China and the world, the multiple values of Chinese traditional villages have been widely recognized by the public. However, related research has mainly focused on the architectural characteristics of traditional dwellings, the evolution of settlement forms, and folk culture, covering purely material or purely cultural aspects. The overall environment of rural areas serves as the material carrier of rural daily life and as a microcosm of rural socioeconomic and technological conditions. Particularly in ancient villages with a unique traditional culture and architectural craftsmanship, the construction of farmhouses reflects the actions taken by local residents over generations in pursuit of a better life, as well as the traditional cultural understanding and needs regarding the concept of ‘family’. The construction and renewal of village and farmhouse spaces also represent the establishment and continuous evolution of social order. In recent years, some Chinese scholars have begun to apply the Historical Urban Landscape approach to analyze changes in village landscapes and identify village characteristics [66–68]. However, they still neglect the integration of human and material values, leading to a fragmented approach in village discussions. This has resulted in issues such as frozen protection practices, continuous decay, destructive construction, segregation of new and old areas, ineffective livability, and contradictions between protection planning and villagers’ needs, among others [69,70]. Currently, the key decision-makers in value judgments remain the government and expert groups, with the identity and voice of local residents often missing. The numerous problems and difficulties in the protection practices of traditional Chinese villages reflect an insufficient understanding of the value of traditional villages [71,72]. A correct ‘perception concept’ is the primary issue that needs to be addressed for the development of China’s cultural heritage protection [73].

From ‘monuments’ and ‘cultural landscapes’ to ‘historic urban landscapes’, the changes in the concepts of heritage conservation objects appear to be an expansion of the protection boundaries, but are, in fact, a continuous evolution of values. The subjects, objects, and standards of value judgments are constantly changing. The statement that “the historic

urban landscape approach is not only applicable to urban areas but also to the management of all types of heritage” [31] represents a management tool for heritage change. The Historic Urban Landscape approach offers new ideas and tools for analyzing the value of traditional Chinese villages by linking Chinese national and international discourses [74,75]. This represents both the challenge and the opportunity for current research on traditional Chinese villages: to engage in discussions of rural heritage values from the perspective of historical landscapes and to clarify the historical interaction processes between people and materials based on the daily lives of local residents, thereby understanding their impact on the formation of village heritage values.

This paper investigates the challenges of value judgment in heritage conservation and, considering the specific context of rural China, analyzes the theoretical issues of how the heritage value of traditional villages is realized through the interaction between people and space. It posits that the value of traditional Chinese villages lies in the continuous integration of people’s daily activities into the material development of these villages, where the value of people interacts and merges with the value of objects, encompassing landscape, functional, and spiritual value connotations on three levels. This aims to reflect on and enhance the traditional standards for rural heritage value judgment and introduce the Historic Urban Landscape approach as a new concept and tool to conserve rural heritage and promote sustainable rural development.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. General Description of the Area under Investigation

This study was part of the counterpart support work undertaken by Chinese universities, focusing on the Tangfang natural village group in the Yanhe administrative village, Lushi township, Yunnan province—a remote area in southwest China (Figure 1). Tangfang was among the first batch of traditional Chinese villages assessed in 2012. The existing “Fengqing County Tangfang Traditional Village Protection Plan” was compiled in 2014, adhering to the traditional village assessment standards introduced by the State in 2012, and it proposes management requirements. The value assessment for Tangfang village highlights that “the historical value of Tangfang is primarily reflected in the culture of the Ancient Tea-Horse Trail and the traditional house-building techniques”. The proposed protection strategy emphasizes “the conservation of Tangfang village’s spatial form, architectural group environments, local historical buildings, and the human landscape of the Tea-Horse Trail”. Over the next decade, efforts in Tangfang will focus on unifying the farmhouse style, aiming to feature stone farmhouses as prominent representatives of the Tea-Horse Trail characteristics. However, a population decline and the village ageing have led to a deteriorating living atmosphere and emerging issues in the rural landscape and economy. Moreover, regional vitality from the local level is key to sustainable development. Conservation and development should focus on preserving the entire spatial entity rather than merely concentrating on specific areas [76].

2.2. Research Methods

As part of the rural revitalization planning and design team, our researchers entered the village to propose comprehensive strategies for the preservation and development of traditional villages. The team utilized a self-raised fund of 100,000 yuan from the university to implement certain improvements in the living environment. Value judgement serves as the cornerstone of conservation, integrating morphological and sociological features of the historic landscape approach, with primary methodologies including on-site surveys and mapping, documentary analysis, and in-depth interviews (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Aerial photo of Tangfang village.



Figure 2. Survey photos of Tangfang village.

The site survey and mapping were based on the historical landscape morphology method. This approach visually represents and explores problems at three scales: macro, meso, and micro, covering the regional environment, the village settlement, and individual villagers' farmhouses. By recreating the regional ecogeographical relationships, the study clarified the township, village, and sub-watershed system where Tangfang village is situated. This analysis included the historical development of neighboring settlements and the interactions between village construction, water sources, and forest vegetation. Mapping the houses effectively helped deduce the spatial form generation process through an examination of architectural forms and materials.

As a migratory ethnic minority village in southwest China, Tangfang, with only 38 households, has a single genealogy compiled by the villagers. This genealogy, which records eight generations from the late Qing Dynasty to the present, was orally compiled through villagers' recollections. Additionally, historical records of the ancient Tea-Horse Trail provide context and details on post stations like Jinma and Lushi and other smaller stations. A comprehensive literature review facilitated the reconstruction of the village's historical development lineage. Combined with on-site surveys and house mapping, the morphological analysis across time slices illustrated the transformations of material and spatial value elements in the historical stratification.

Unlike conventional questionnaire-based interviews, this research employed an immersive approach. During the 2022–2023 village residency, the research team combined a sociological methodology with semi-open questionnaires and records of daily discussions about communal life, avoiding confined narratives on specific issues and encouraging villagers to express themselves freely. These interviews helped recover missing parts of the genealogy and capture villagers' value perspectives on the ecological environment, village landscape, architectural style, spatial functionality, and human–habitat relationships. Participation in the villagers' production, life, and festive cultural activities provided observational insights into their value expressions and actions, aspects often overlooked in rural heritage conservation.

3. Results

The research team found that, in the work in Tangfang village—a traditional Chinese village in Yunnan Province, China—assessing rural heritage value based on the daily lives of local residents aligns more closely with the holistic and layered understanding of heritage value found in HUL. Traditional farming practices need to continuously shape the functional integration of ecological, production, and living spaces for farmhouses and settlement landscapes to reflect the dynamic evolution of time and space. It is through the ongoing adaptation of agricultural and other production practices to meet the ever-changing needs of daily life that the architecture of farmhouses and the landscape of settlements can manifest this dynamic temporal and spatial evolution. The integration of traditional culture and environment is thus achieved through the collective co-construction of material spaces and spaces of significance, strengthening the spiritual and identity bonds of villagers within their heritage protection efforts. Combining human activities with material conservation in decision-making processes allows for a more accurate formulation of heritage conservation strategies, guiding the sustainable and effective preservation and development of traditional villages and bestowing enduring vitality on them.

Change is an inevitable component of the life cycle of any built and natural environment. Traditional Chinese villages are organically evolving entities formed through the daily lives and spatial engagements of relevant subjects over time. Village heritage represents the flow and mixture of values between people and objects. This paper draws on the historic urban landscape approach to reanalyze the value judgments of traditional Chinese villages from the perspectives of temporal dynamics and villagers' daily lives, addressing both human values and material values. This understanding and management of change will serve as the foundation for developing future protection and management frameworks.

The ancient Chinese society was typically a clan society bound by consanguinity. Villagers improved productivity through collective labor, adapted to the natural environment, and transformed living and production conditions, creating unique spatial forms and values. This resulted in spatial forms at various scales, such as family farmhouses as basic units, neighborhoods forming the street and alley framework, public buildings and spaces as the core, and overall mountain–water settlements for clan coexistence. These forms reflect the holistic organic philosophy of “unity of heaven and humanity” in traditional Chinese philosophy [77]. Rural spaces also convey a sense of place unique to their regions, closely linked to community identity [78]. Traditional village spaces, relying on agriculture and self-sufficiency, are settlement configurations closely tied to the natural environment. ‘Eating, living, and working together’ within the same settlement space represents both the agricultural production system and a social model in traditional villages, fostering mutual assistance in production and life, strengthening ties, and sharing public goods to form neighborhood networks and settlement communities. Daily living spaces, especially spiritual spaces like ancestral halls, temples, and village entrance banyan trees, represent the cultural and co-constructive activities fulfilling the villagers' spiritual needs for the past, present, and future. Through collective worship in ancestral halls, praying to mountain gods at banyan trees, and hosting traditional festivals in public spaces, varied folk customs perpetuate a community's culture and spirit through generational inheritance, continuing to construct space with consistent values.

The dynamic interaction between people and objects perpetually evolves the landscape of traditional villages [79], creating layers of value. During the formation of traditional villages, ‘people’ transition from passive participants to active agents—their daily lives, socioeconomic conditions, and behavioral choices dynamically influence space. Conversely, the development and changes in material space affect human spirit and behavior through spatial experiences. The interaction and integration of both aspects over time construct heritage values at given temporal cross-sections, encompassing production methods, life processes, and community subjects [80]. This process also signifies value formation and stratification. The essence of traditional village values lies in human activities continuously permeating the material development of traditional villages, while changes in material

space drive the cultural evolution of settlement communities, and the merger of material and human values mutually influence each other (Figure 3).

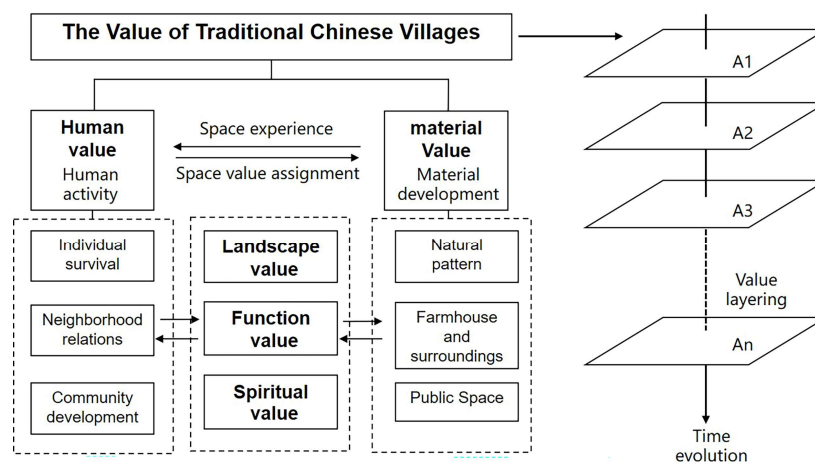


Figure 3. Heritage value framework of traditional Chinese villages.

Starting from the historic urban landscape stratification perspective, the value of traditional villages encompasses three primary dimensions: landscape, function, and spirit. Each of these dimensions will be examined in detail below.

3.1. Landscape Value

Tangfang village is situated in the mountainous region north of the Lancang River in southwestern China. Here, multiple elements collectively form an integrated landscape pattern, characterized by a small watershed ecogeographical structure relying on three water systems. Key value elements include water sources, mountains and forests, and settlements. Geographically, Tangfang is located on a higher ridge within this sub-watershed and is not proximate to the main water sources (Figure 4). Consequently, the villagers' basic survival depends on the water stored in the surrounding mountains and forests, which also provide shelter and essential resources for farming and animal husbandry. Additionally, these natural resources supply the stone and timber needed for constructing the villagers' farmhouses. The effective interaction between villagers and natural resources promotes a balanced production system and sustainable development (Figure 5).

During on-site interviews, the research team discovered dwindling water sources in Tangfang. The vegetation in the hills behind the village consisted primarily of secondary forest, and the 'sacred tree'—a spiritual symbol for the villagers—had been cut down and had perished. Villagers provided insights into these changes:

"The sacred tree was cut down by villager A in the 1960s. I heard he went mad afterwards. How could the God Tree be chopped down indiscriminately? It was the most important tree in the whole village".

"During the 1970s and 1980s mass production period, families rushed to build houses, cutting down all the trees on the mountain, rendering it bald. The current trees were newly planted in recent years".

"The water supply from the back of the mountains is drying up. Cutting down all those trees likely caused it. Without water in recent years, crops can't be grown, livestock suffer epidemics, and life has been greatly impacted".

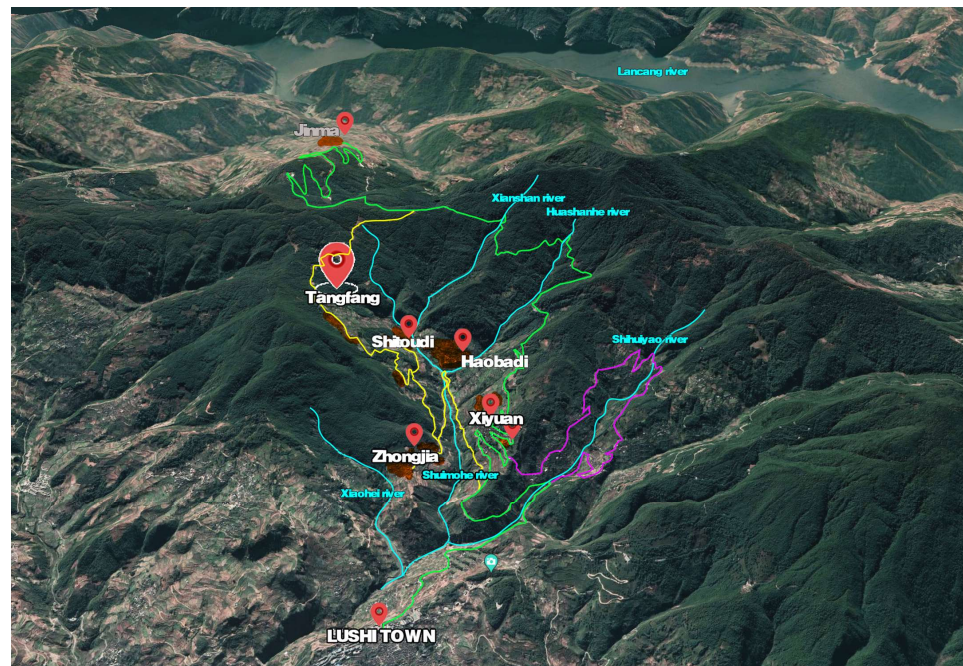


Figure 4. Analysis of landscape pattern in small watersheds.

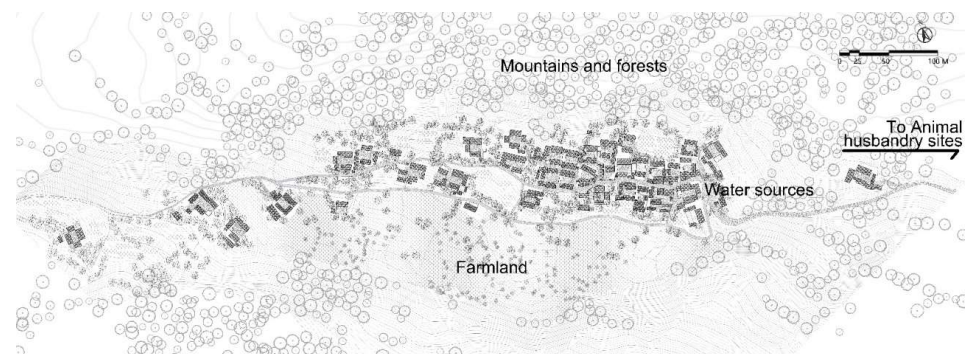


Figure 5. Current function distribution map of Tangfang.

3.2. Functional Value

In the previous protection plan for Tangfang village, there was an objective to develop tourism. In recent years, the local government has been encouraging villagers to consent to the unified construction of livestock farming facilities, aiming to prohibit grazing activities along the ancient Tea-Horse Trail. The villagers' rejection of the proposals to centralize livestock pens highlights their adherence to traditional practices, explaining that segregating livestock would complicate their daily routines and increase the risk of disease:

"We have been herding this way for generations, sharing the day with neighbors and relatives while grazing our animals".

"Mixing cattle and sheep isn't feasible, each family cares for their own livestock. If one falls ill, it quickly affects the rest, leading to major losses".

"We regularly clean livestock feces on ancient paths. High temperatures and sunlight exposure at this altitude keep the area quite clean".

The villagers' desire for accessible water and insistence on traditional grazing reflect their valuation of ecological and production functions. Mountains, forests, and water sources provide essential services to sustain village operations and form the material basis for traditional agriculture and animal husbandry, both of which are central to Tangfang's heritage value (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Photos of the ecological, production, and living conditions in Tangfang.

Understanding the evolution of settlement spaces and farmhouses over time reveals the dynamic nature of landscape formation and its relationship with daily life. Changes in Tangfang village's overall form significantly influence the villagers due to the intimate link with landed property. Initially settled by one household, the village expanded through tree-clearing and housebuilding as the population and economy grew, resulting in the current 38 households. Land's central significance leads villagers to develop and build through land exchanges, purchases, and significant investments of family wealth and labor into their homes, reflecting the fundamental value they place on property (Figure 7).

The research team mapped and recorded Tangfang's 38 farmhouses, noting that the current stone houses do not represent the village's original architectural form. Comparison with other settlements in the sub-watershed indicates that thatched houses were the original building style, with stone houses emerging gradually over the last 30 years. Interviews corroborated this historical transition (Figure 8):

"Farmer B's family lived in thatched roofs until they inherited Farmer C's house post-land reform".

"Farmer C's large, prosperous family frequently subdivided to build new houses".

"Initially, wooden structures were prevalent due to fewer people and the difficulty of transporting stones from the hills. The 1980s saw the discovery and use of a local stone for roofing".

Modernizing farmhouses is a common aspiration among villagers, reflecting functional and spiritual needs. The preference for concrete structures in urban settings signifies modernity and affluence, while traditional building methods are perceived as cumbersome. Villagers expressed resistance to restoring traditional features if practical functionality issues remained unresolved.

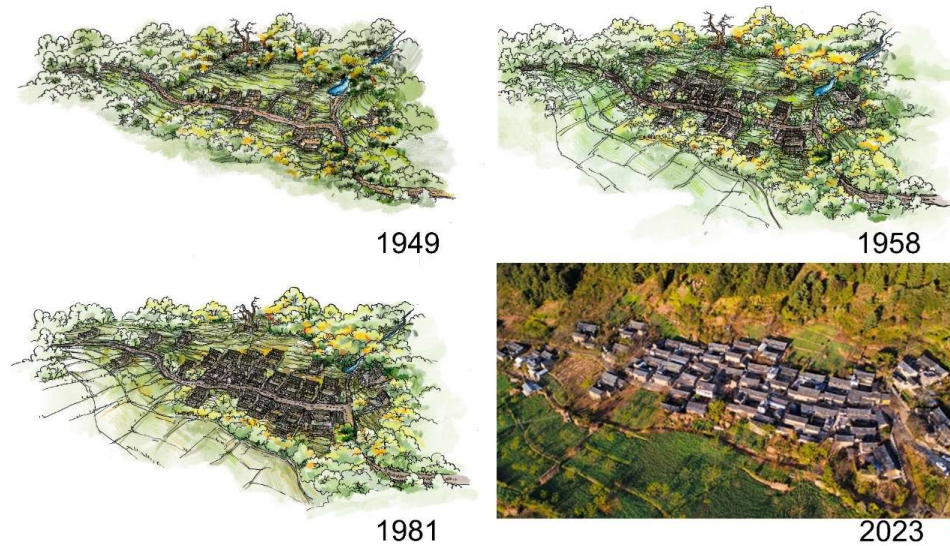


Figure 7. Reconstruction of the overall morphological evolution of Tangfang.

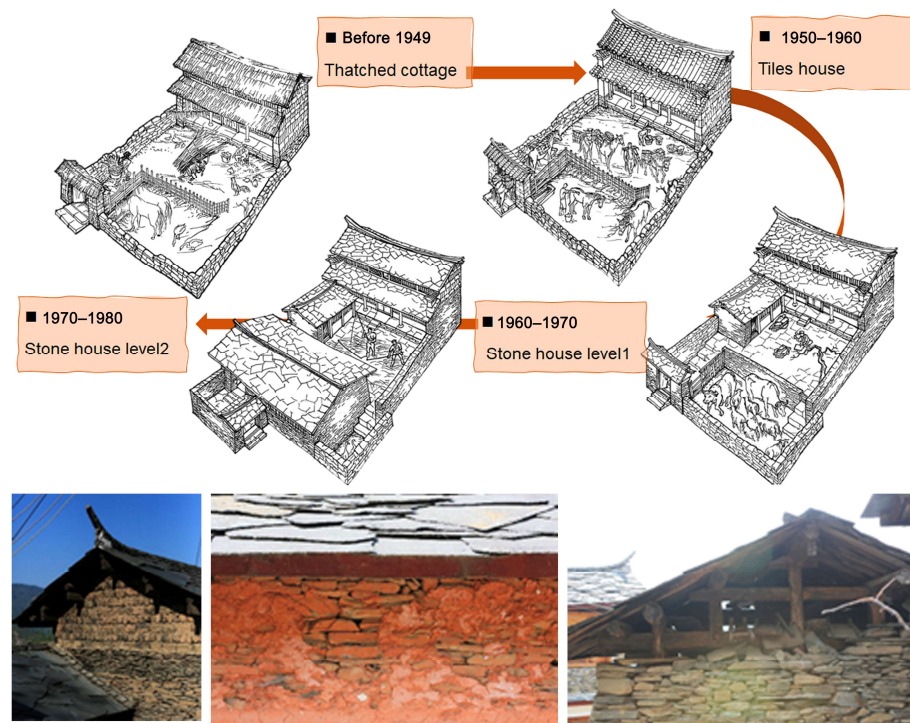


Figure 8. Evolution and restoration of farmhouses in Tangfang.

Despite the inconvenience of traditional kitchen stoves, villagers resist their removal due to their role in community activities:

“The big stove is essential for traditional activities like stir-frying tea and slaughtering pigs, a traditional folk custom of celebrating the Spring Festival”.

“A family cannot function without a big stove”.

It is clear that the functional realization of daily living space and the preservation of community spirit are both fundamental to the value judgments of the villagers (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Comparison between traditional space and modern renovation of Tangfang farmhouse.

3.3. Spiritual Value

The international framework for heritage protection, the Burra Charter, explicitly emphasizes the spiritual significance of ‘place identity’, which resonates with traditional Chinese rural culture. Historically, Chinese rural areas have functioned as autonomous entities, with construction serving as the formal framework for rural organization. Relationships between villagers, shared values, and common interests have been built, continuously strengthened, and inherited through collective labor and communal activities.

This cultural tradition of spatial co-construction remains evident in Tangfang today, perpetuated through intergenerational experiences. In August 2023, preceding the local traditional Torch Festival, Tangfang villagers planned to organize a collective effort to renovate the village temple and subsequently hold a communal picnic. The Great God Temple, located on a mountain distant from the main village area, is revered by the villagers as the guardian deity that protects their livestock, agriculture, personal safety, and overall prosperity. The renovation aimed to expand the temple using traditional materials such as stones and slabs, with the work being collaboratively executed by village craftsmen and the villagers themselves. In adherence to local customs, a picnic party was arranged post-renovation, with preparations managed collectively by women and young people. On the day of the event, the entire village community—including those who had relocated to towns—regrouped in Tangfang to participate in the communal construction. The event activities were well-coordinated: adults were tasked with physically demanding roles such as transporting materials, the youth managed simpler tasks like plucking chickens and boiling water, while the women oversaw ritual preparations and cooking (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Photo of temple construction.

“This is a common occurrence in Tangfang village”, and “we are all blessed”. The construction of the temple’s spiritual site is intrinsically linked to the identity of being ‘Tangfang people’. The spiritual value associated with the grand temple and its site far outweighs the economic value of any individual building or household.

Throughout the process of co-constructing the temple, the research team observed that the value of traditional villages in Tangfang is far from static and uniform; rather, it is dynamically evolving. Villagers’ construction activities imbue the space with spiritual and cultural significance. These acts not only serve as expressions of identity recognition, but also as manifestations of village value recognition. The interaction of communal activities and unique spatial experiences, coupled with the continuous reconstruction of rural communities’ collective will and spirit through intergenerational inheritance, underscores the dynamic nature of these traditional values.

3.4. Presentation of the Conservation and Development Strategy

Following several rounds of field research, prolonged observation, and communication with the villagers, the research team concluded that the heritage value of Tangfang village lies in the villagers’ traditional farming and animal husbandry practices, as well as in the evolving settlement patterns and the landscape of farmhouses. This value encompasses the overall spatial landscape of the small watershed, the functional spaces that embody the traditional culture of the ancient Tea-Horse Trail, and the modern mountainous lifestyles of southwest China, in addition to the spirit of the traditional community.

The value judgements based on the villagers’ daily lives have received recognition from local grassroots government. Subsequently, the villagers, government, and research team collaboratively developed a framework for conservation and development.

Firstly, to leverage the resources of the mountain micro-watershed, aiming to establish a new integrated development system for agriculture, culture, and tourism for Lushi, Yanhe, and Tangfang.

Secondly, to protect and enhance the overall spatial sequence from the entrance of the ancient Tea Horse Road to the end of the village. This includes spaces extending from the main settlement such as the village entrance, pasture lands, the antidrug hero memorial

monument, the temple, the viewing platform, the high mountain tea plantations, and the physical spaces that support villagers' daily production and life, such as private farmhouses and courtyards (Figure 11).

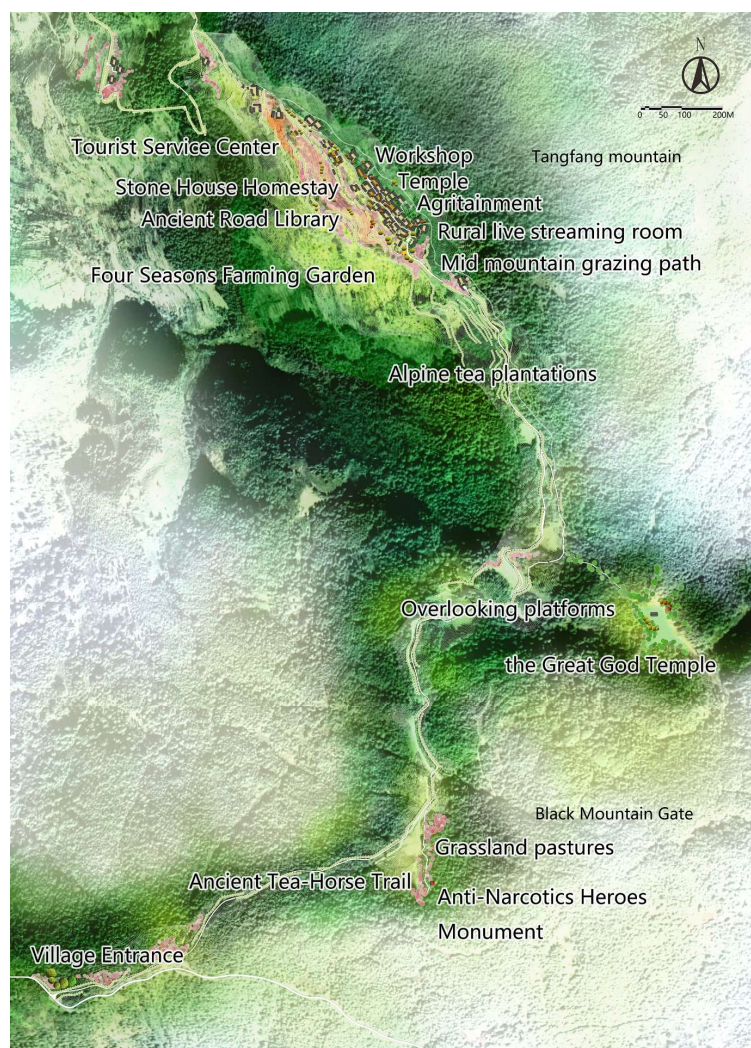


Figure 11. Conservation and development of the master plan.

Thirdly, to preserve traditional activities such as farming and livestock rearing, promoting moderate development that integrates agriculture, culture, and tourism.

4. Discussion

The conservation strategies and development framework balance the interests of the relevant stakeholders, seeking a common ground among diverse parties. For the villagers, the private farmhouses and settlement spaces closely related to their daily lives are core elements affecting their survival and livelihood. These are also perceived as valuable conservation targets, into which villagers are willing to invest personal effort and even funds for house repairs and collective village public space construction. This reflects a combination of private and collective interests. Traditional activities, which villagers take for granted, are in fact cultural resources that can be converted into social capital. These activities not only hold value for the development of Tangfang village, but also foster the development of other settlements in the micro-watershed and the overall tourism growth of Lushi Town. Hence, these are focal points for the town government and grassroots organizations. In many village tourism development practices, traditional activity resources often attract more social capital, though there is a need to guard against

the potential harm of commercialization. In the case of Tangfang village, it was observed that young people in rural areas exhibit greater enthusiasm for participating in traditional collective activities. Modern promotional methods such as TikTok live streams further drive the younger generation's interest and affection for their hometown's traditional culture. Regional development is the core focus of the town government, achieved by identifying regional resources, defining the development system, and breaking down the implementation plans into actionable projects. When the development blueprint is segmented into specific small projects, state or social funds can be flexibly engaged. In the overall regional development, private and public interests form a community, where small villages drive the rebuilding of regional systems and regional development, in turn, provides sustainable support for the small villages.

As to the writing of this article, the conservation efforts in Tangfang village have continued to adopt the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) community participation approach for the protection and repair of farmhouses and courtyards, as well as the overall settlement space. The initial self-raised 100,000 yuan from the university has led to the investment of millions in state funds. The new phase of conservation work, from value assessment to implementation, maintains the concept of villager participation, fully incorporating local residents' opinions into the conservation plans. This approach underscores the value and spatial significance created by the local people, with the local government and expert team leading the process. This marks a shift from the traditional model where experts predominantly make value judgements and decisions from a technical standpoint.

5. Conclusions

Chinese traditional villages, recognized as sites of national heritage, represent precious treasures shared by both China and the world. Although statutory protection for these traditional villages was only established a little over a decade ago, significant progress has been made through the concerted efforts of the state and individuals. These efforts have effectively stemmed the rapid loss of traditional culture and villages. However, in the face of the complex globalization, where world economies, social cultures, and climates are in a constant flux, rural heritage has increasingly become a vital resource for China's urban–rural integration and economic development. This necessitates a shift in traditional heritage conservation concepts and methods. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach offers fresh perspectives for contemporary world heritage conservation and provides a new angle for addressing China's rural heritage conservation and development issues. Western heritage conservation theories have seen a turn toward humanism, further integrating material and spiritual values. On one hand, material value judgements delve deeper into explaining concepts of authenticity and wholeness through technical, aesthetic, and policy-based lenses, evolving 'universal values' critically on global platforms. On the other hand, themes like human rights and sustainability have become focal points in current heritage conservation, necessitating more context-specific cultural value assessments, particularly through community participation tools. This approach emphasizes the role of local residents in value judgements, balancing the various stakeholders' voices. An integrated method that combines traditional material value judgements with the holistic and stratified characteristics of historic urban landscapes can better balance heritage conservation values and community sustainability.

The rapid social changes brought about by globalization drive the adaptive evolution of heritage conservation, development concepts, and methods in different national contexts. For value assessments in rural heritage conservation, incorporating holistic and stratified concepts into Chinese traditional villages links material spatial heritage to daily life, shifting the angle of heritage value assessments. By outlining the process of the new round of conservation and development planning in Tangfang village, this paper aims to reflect on traditional standards for rural heritage value assessments and posits that the value of Chinese traditional villages lies in the continual permeation of human activities into the material development of villages. The interaction between human and material values

includes landscape, functional, and spiritual layers. The research demonstrates that the HUL approach can provide new tools for conserving historical heritage and landscape features in rural areas, particularly in forming value judgements and protection frameworks for Chinese traditional villages. Additionally, the community participation tools of the HUL method have elevated villagers' discourse power during the heritage value assessment phase. Through in-depth interviews, daily interactions, joint labor, and traditional activities, the research team effectively captured the rural value elements based on local residents' daily lives and their primary value judgements. By integrating material space values and human values over time, this approach has somewhat transformed villagers' awareness, fostering greater recognition of their identity as village owners and their intrinsic value. This value judgement has enhanced villagers' pride and confidence, particularly among the younger generation.

The study concludes that heritage value assessments and the formulation of development frameworks inherently balance the discourse and interests of multiple stakeholders. The Tangfang case study reveals that current standards for listing Chinese traditional villages miss significant aspects of value, failing to reflect the interaction between people and their environment. The value of Chinese traditional villages is multifaceted and dynamic. As the true custodians and beneficiaries of future village conservation, the villagers' value judgements and practices can sustainably promote the objectives of 'liveness' and 'development'. Villager participation is crucial and indispensable. Value assessments focused on local residents' daily lives are beneficial for government departments, scholars, and villagers alike. While experts and grassroots organizations predominantly base their judgements on professional standards, considering the realities of funding and technical support, they can mobilize more resources for guiding long-term regional development. Their role is both necessary and significant. Universities or other third-party entities play a supportive role. In Tangfang village, the university research team's immersive engagement in the village life helped amplify villagers' voices and leveraged self-raised funds to attract state funding, consequently drawing social capital. The integration of rural heritage values through multi-stakeholder participation bolsters engagement driven by value recognition.

Heritage value assessments are deeply intertwined with culture and emotion. This study, derived from the context of Chinese rural culture, serves as a reference and supplement to international heritage conservation concepts and contemporary standards for valuing Chinese traditional villages. In the context of globalization, this model of value assessment through villager and multi-stakeholder participation can be adopted by other countries and regions with similar cultural backgrounds, such as Southeast Asian countries with clan cultures or areas preserving traditional production and lifestyle practices. However, the conclusions may have limitations in regions with significant cultural disparities. Future research should integrate different socio-cultural resource conditions to continually enrich the concepts and methods of rural heritage value assessments. As the next step, further exploration of HUL concepts and tools in other stages and aspects of conservation, beyond value assessments, will be of significant importance to villagers, practitioners, academic institutions, and local governments.

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