

Core Advances in Cultural Landscape Research and Pathways Towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract

As the theoretical core of cultural geography, cultural landscape research has undergone a century of disciplinary evolution, gradually establishing an interdisciplinary and integrative research paradigm. This paper systematically reviews the research trajectory of cultural landscapes, analyzes their academic development, and explores current research hotspots and challenges. The findings indicate that cultural landscape studies primarily focus on conceptual definitions, landscape gene identification, ecological function analysis, and cultural heritage conservation. With the deepening academic exploration of cultural landscape connotations, the research scope has progressively expanded to include rural landscapes, historical heritage conservation, the perception and assessment of cultural landscapes, and their dynamic evolution. Notably, the application of new technologies has facilitated precise spatial analysis and dynamic monitoring of cultural landscapes, significantly enriching both theoretical research and practical exploration. Future studies should strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, emphasize the protection of intangible cultural heritage, and explore sustainable development pathways in the context of globalization. Additionally, improving technical support systems and establishing a comprehensive cultural landscape value assessment framework will provide a scientific basis for the resilient conservation and adaptive utilization of cultural landscapes.

Keywords

Cultural Landscape; Landscape; Research Content; Research Progress; Cultural Geography.

1. Introduction

Cultural landscape is one of the five major research themes in cultural geography and a key research focus in both cultural geography and human geography. As a product of the interaction between humans and the natural environment, the cultural landscape is not only an organic integration of natural landscapes and human activities but also a manifestation of the intertwined history, culture, social activities, and geographical environment of a region or cultural group ^[1]. It reflects how humans shape and utilize natural resources within a specific environment, carrying cultural identity, social history, and regional characteristics. As a complex carrier that embodies both humanistic connotations and natural attributes, the cultural landscape's profound historical accumulation and multidimensional value system have made it a significant research domain in cultural geography.

Existing literature primarily explores topics such as landscape gene identification, heritage conservation mechanisms, ecological service functions, and cultural landscape heritage. By reviewing the progress in cultural landscape research, this study systematically examines academic discussions on the concept, research methodologies, and applications of cultural landscapes across various fields. Furthermore, it proposes key directions for future research to

provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the protection, management, and socio-economic development of cultural landscapes.

2. Overview of Cultural Landscape

The concept of cultural landscape was first proposed in the late 19th century by German scholar Schlüter [2], who regarded it as a phenomenon evolving from the natural landscape and advocated its study as an independent research subject. American geographer Carl Sauer is considered the founder of the cultural landscape school. In his work *Recent Developments in Cultural Geography*, he provided a classic definition of cultural landscape, describing it as "the human activity imprint superimposed on the natural landscape." This perspective fundamentally reveals the relationship between human activities and the natural environment, laying the foundation for cultural landscape research.

In China, geographers have conducted localized studies of cultural landscapes based on international research findings. Li Xudan, a pioneer of modern Chinese human geography, defined cultural landscapes as "complexes of cultural phenomena on the Earth's surface," reflecting the geographical characteristics of a region. Tang Maolin [3] integrated various definitions of cultural landscapes from domestic and international scholarship, proposing that a cultural landscape is a landscape formed by human activities superimposed on the natural landscape to meet specific needs using natural resources. Geographer Wu Bihu, drawing from the concept of the "general natural complex," explored the historical evolution of Chinese landscapes. With the advancement of academic research, scholars have continuously enriched the connotation of cultural landscapes through extensive studies and practical applications. Cultural landscapes are not merely collections of geographical and ecological features; they also encompass the multiple influences of history, culture, society, and human activity [3]. As a composite concept, cultural landscape involves the integration of natural and human elements, reflecting a region or cultural group's production and lifestyle as well as its cultural identity in a specific environment.

The core characteristics of cultural landscapes include diversity, dynamism, and historicity. Their diversity lies in the combination of natural, social, historical, and cultural elements; their dynamism reflects the continuous evolution of cultural landscapes over time in response to social changes; and their historicity emphasizes the formation and transformation of cultural landscapes within specific historical contexts. Currently, cultural landscape research extends beyond the material aspect of heritage conservation to encompass multiple dimensions, including intangible culture, ecosystem functions, and socio-economic development. Research on toponymic cultural landscapes, rural landscape ecology, and historical heritage conservation has become key academic focuses.

3. Major Research Topics and Progress

3.1. Cultural Landscapes of Traditional Rural Settlements

As an important research subject in cultural geography, the cultural landscape of traditional rural settlements generally refers to the spatial representation of settlement culture formed through residents' productive and daily practices within a specific geographical unit over the course of historical evolution [4]. Research on traditional rural settlement cultural landscapes focuses on spatial layout and architectural features, encompassing the inheritance of cultural heritage and the protection of ecological functions. It explores how the interplay between human activities and the natural environment collectively shapes the cultural landscapes of specific regions. Traditional rural settlement landscapes are regarded as the result of the

intertwining of nature and culture, serving as historical records of human-environment interactions.

First, the spatial layout and architectural styles of traditional rural settlements reflect the cultural characteristics and social order of specific regions. Zheng Wenwu (2016), taking the Xiangxi region as an example, analyzed 29 traditional villages and towns using hierarchical clustering analysis and GIS spatial technology. He proposed an evaluation index for the similarity of tangible and intangible cultural landscapes, revealing significant ethnic differences in traditional Xiangxi settlements.

Second, the identification of cultural landscape genes in traditional settlements has emerged as a key research focus in recent years. Wang Cheng (2022) conducted a study on the identification and extraction of cultural landscape genes in traditional Dong villages in northern Guangxi, constructing a genetic lineage for settlement cultural landscapes. His study analyzed the "three-tier structure" of Dong settlements, highlighting that local fir wood and bamboo are used in constructing the iconic diaojiaolou (stilted houses), which exhibit distinctive regional cultural characteristics. Hu Zui (2024) proposed a health assessment method for traditional settlements based on cultural landscape genes. Using the entropy weight method and analytic hierarchy process (AHP), he examined the health status of 37 traditional settlements in southern Hunan. His study revealed that natural environment, architectural history, tourism development, and management mechanisms play critical roles in the conservation of settlement cultural landscapes.

Additionally, Xiao Jing (2014) argued that the cultural landscape of historical settlements is not merely a presentation of the material environment but also reflects relationships between people and nature as well as among individuals within the settlement. He proposed viewing the "cultural landscape" as a dynamic component of urban and rural historical settlements, emphasizing that cultural landscapes represent the organic integration of history, culture, and geographical environment.

Furthermore, in his research on rural settlement landscapes in Tibetan-inhabited areas, Yang Ding (2024) introduced the concept that the ecological, productive, and living spaces of settlements form unique landscape genes through human-nature interactions. His study indicated that the site selection of traditional Tibetan settlements is largely dependent on natural conditions, while their architectural forms are closely related to ecological, religious, and social functions. The concept of landscape genes further elucidates the deep connections between settlement morphology and its cultural background.

In summary, research on traditional rural settlement cultural landscapes has expanded from focusing solely on tangible cultural landscapes to multidimensional analyses encompassing spatial layout, architectural styles, cultural genes, and ecological functions. With the advancement of rural revitalization and cultural heritage conservation, scholars have increasingly adopted a comprehensive and dynamic research perspective, emphasizing the preservation and inheritance of traditional settlement cultural landscapes in the modernization process. Through the identification of landscape genes and the construction of genetic lineages, researchers have provided theoretical foundations and practical approaches for cultural heritage conservation, rural revitalization, and sustainable development of traditional settlements.

3.2. Cultural Landscape Transformation and its Interpretation

Cultural landscape transformation is a complex process driven by multiple factors, including the interplay of natural environment, socio-economic development, cultural identity, and historical memory. With the advancement of globalization and urbanization, traditional cultural landscapes are often subjected to external forces such as modernization and tourism development. Meanwhile, internal factors, such as community awareness and cultural

consciousness, also contribute to landscape transformation to a certain extent. In this process, landscape changes not only represent physical spatial alterations but also reflect the evolution of human cultural cognition and historical memory.

Wang Jiange (2018) studied the changes in rural landscapes in the Jiangnan region, noting that traditional agricultural landscapes are gradually being replaced by modern agricultural models due to urbanization and contemporary agricultural policies. Wu Zhongjun (2013) analyzed the impact of tourism development on cultural landscapes, taking Goutan Village in the Beijiang Scenic Area of Rongshui, Guangxi, as an example. His study found that tourism-driven external factors, coupled with the cultural consciousness of local residents, jointly influenced the transformation of traditional settlement landscapes. External policies and evolving tourist demands have gradually commercialized traditional residences and folk customs, while internal cultural identities have prompted residents to preserve and creatively inherit certain cultural elements during this process. Kawai Hiroshi (2024) conducted field research on Kume Island in Okinawa, Japan, and observed that local traditional landscape elements, such as red-tiled houses and sacred groves ("Utaki"), have been actively protected and recreated by local communities amidst tourism development, reflecting cultural adaptability and agency in landscape transformation. Tu Xiaoqiang (2022) carried out an in-depth study on landscape changes within overseas Chinese settlements in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, indicating that these landscape transformations were influenced by colonial history and urban expansion policies, as well as reflecting the proactive reshaping of cultural identity by overseas Chinese communities in response to modernization.

In summary, the transformation of cultural landscapes is not merely a change in physical space but also a comprehensive reflection of social, cultural, and economic shifts. External factors such as tourism development, urbanization, and policy adjustments drive landscape evolution, while local community cultural identity, historical memory, and social adaptability play crucial roles in this process. Cultural landscape transformation is an ongoing and dynamic process, and finding a balance between traditional cultural preservation and modern development has become a central issue in global cultural landscape research and practice.

3.3. Research on Cultural Landscape Perception

Cultural landscape perception is rooted in the dynamic evolution of landscapes and represents the cognitive and emotional feedback formed by human interactions with the environment [5]. This research focuses on how people perceive and experience different elements of cultural landscapes, particularly in the fields of tourism, heritage conservation, and urban planning. Studies on cultural landscape perception primarily aim to reveal its multidimensional attributes, including aesthetic perception, emotional response, and cultural value recognition by visitors and local communities. The research methods have gradually evolved from early qualitative descriptions to data-driven quantitative analyses.

Liu Tao (2022) applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to study visitor perceptions of red cultural heritage sites in Shaanxi Province. His research found that cultural functions and educational significance played crucial roles in determining visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Fang Cheng (2024) combined social media data analysis to explore visitor perceptions of cultural landscapes in riverside historical parks, finding that visitors had a relatively comprehensive perception of natural landscapes, yet demonstrated weaker cultural identity and emotional responses. Ren Wei (2024) utilized novel techniques such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic clustering and sentiment analysis to examine visitor perceptions of Quanzhou's World Cultural Heritage landscapes, highlighting visitor recognition of cultural value, historic significance, and emotional orientations toward heritage landscapes. Zhang Rui (2024) analyzed the relationship between transportation routes and cultural landscapes using

Digital Elevation Model (DEM) data, proposing an interactive relationship between landscape functional segmentation and perceptual differences.

In summary, cultural landscape perception research has gradually shifted from qualitative analysis to quantitative studies, particularly leveraging advanced computational techniques such as machine learning and sentiment analysis to explore the multidimensional aspects of cultural landscape perception. Current research not only examines the physical and visual characteristics of landscapes but also delves into emotional identity, cultural value assessment, and the dynamic changes in landscape cognition among tourists and local communities.

3.4. Research on Cultural Landscape Ecology

Research on cultural landscape ecology integrates theories from both ecology and cultural landscape studies, exploring the interactions between human activities and the natural environment. With the rapid progression of globalization and urbanization, traditional cultural landscapes are undergoing significant transformation and degradation. Finding a balance between development and conservation has become a major focus of academic research [6]. Cultural landscape ecology studies emphasize the analysis of landscape ecological functions, spatial patterns, and ecological process conservation, particularly how ecological methods can promote sustainable landscape development and optimize ecosystem services. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the ecosystem services provided by cultural landscapes, not only for the protection of natural resources but also for enhancing social well-being and strengthening local cultural identity.

Zhang Yanfang et al. (2022) analyzed the landscape ecological construction of Yulin, a desert-edge city in Shaanxi Province, emphasizing that urban landscape ecology in desertification-prone areas should integrate ecological protection with urban development. Their study highlighted the impact of regional matrix backgrounds on urban landscape patterns. Liu Zhongwei (2002), through a case study of Shaoxing, proposed that sustainable tourism development of cultural landscapes should adopt a landscape ecology perspective to optimize spatial heterogeneity, maintain functional integrity, and provide strategies for the macro-ecological management of regional cultural landscapes. Tang Jia jia (2022) applied participatory mapping to evaluate the cultural services of the Taoxichuan ceramic cultural landscape in Jingdezhen, revealing that the ecological cultural services of cultural landscapes, particularly in terms of aesthetic value and heritage perception, exhibit distinct spatial distribution patterns. Lei Linghua (2007) summarized research on the ecological aspects of rural settlement landscapes, emphasizing the ecological adaptability of traditional rural settlements in site selection, spatial planning, and vegetation configuration, while advocating for the harmonious coexistence of rural settlements and the natural environment. Xu Li et al. (2024) conducted a multi-scale perception study on cultural ecosystem service demands in the Lijiang River Basin, finding that landscape diversity and public demand for ecological cultural services exhibit significant spatial differentiation, highlighting the crucial role of ecological landscapes in cultural services.

In conclusion, research on cultural landscape ecology has made significant progress across various fields. By adopting landscape ecology methods, scholars have gradually advanced the multifunctional protection and development of cultural landscapes, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for sustainable landscape planning.

3.5. Research on Cultural Landscape Heritage

With the introduction of the concept of cultural landscape heritage, especially following the revision of the World Heritage Convention, cultural landscapes have gradually been incorporated into the World Heritage protection system. Currently, academic research on cultural landscape heritage primarily focuses on landscapes that possess historical, cultural,

and ecological value, emphasizing methods of conservation, management, and transmission. Cultural landscape heritage encompasses not only tangible cultural resources such as historical buildings and archaeological sites but also closely associated natural environments and socio-cultural contexts. In recent years, as the scope of the World Heritage List continues to expand, international consensus on the identification and preservation of cultural landscape heritage has steadily increased. Consequently, scientifically evaluating the values of cultural landscapes and developing effective conservation strategies have become crucial topics in contemporary academic research.

Wang Chenli et al. (2021) utilized remote sensing techniques to monitor land-cover changes in the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces World Cultural Landscape Heritage, analyzing spatial patterns and transformation trends of the landscape. The study emphasized the impact of tourism on landscape change, demonstrating the applicability of remote sensing in heritage conservation and providing new insights for heritage monitoring. Gao Fei et al. (2023) developed a value assessment framework specifically tailored for the cultural landscape heritage of the Yuan Shangdu site in Inner Mongolia. Combining Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) with fuzzy comprehensive evaluation methods, they proposed locally relevant and culturally sensitive evaluation indicators, providing a scientific foundation for heritage conservation. Yun Hong et al. (2021), through a dynamic perspective on heritage village changes, argued that protecting heritage villages should not only focus on their cultural heritage itself but also integrate the lifestyles of local communities, thereby promoting the preservation and development of living heritage. Chen Chen et al. (2021), in examining the heritage values of the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces cultural landscape, underscored the dynamic relationship between authenticity and cultural identity. They suggested that deeper experiences and multicultural recognition could better conserve and transmit cultural landscape heritage. Xu Hong (2022), employing bibliometric analysis, reviewed research progress on cultural heritage landscapes. The study revealed a gradual shift from a focus on natural environmental conservation to integrated cultural landscape protection and management, emphasizing the fusion of heritage landscape ecosystems and digital conservation strategies. Chen Yaohua et al. (2023) integrated resilience theory to explore the sustainable evolution of the Pu'er Jingmai Mountain Ancient Tea Forest cultural landscape heritage, proposing new insights into rural heritage conservation from a resilience perspective. Yang Yan (2023), through the case of the Grand Canal cultural landscape, analyzed heritage conservation pathways from a landscape geography perspective, suggesting a more comprehensive framework for cultural landscape heritage preservation. Zhang Wenzheng et al. (2023), studying historical landscapes of the Nanjing city wall, proposed the concept of a "city-landscape mutual visibility" model, highlighting the historical values and spatial associations inherent in cultural landscape heritage. Finally, Zhou Mi and Wu Dongfan (2022), applying bibliometric methods to analyze the development of research on cultural heritage landscapes, indicated that future studies should place greater emphasis on value recognition and local expressions of cultural landscape heritage.

3.6. Research on Place-name Cultural Landscapes

Place-name cultural landscapes embody the historical processes of interaction between specific regional environments and human societies, serving as vital carriers for exploring regional culture as well as preserving and transmitting place-names. From a geographic perspective, analyzing human-environment interactions reflected through place-name culture in spatial and temporal dimensions has become a central theme in contemporary place-name cultural landscape research^[7]. Current studies primarily focus on regional place-name characteristics, influencing factors of spatial distribution, and patterns of place-name evolution, highlighting their significance in cultural identity, social history, and regional distinctiveness.

First, existing literature often examines the spatial distribution and formation mechanisms of place-name cultural landscapes. Feng Siyu et al. (2019), in a study of rural place-name cultural landscapes in Chaoyang City, Liaoning Province, argued that place-name distribution is influenced not only by natural environmental factors but also by multi-ethnic cultural integration and socio-economic transformations. Their research reveals the complex interrelationship between spatial distribution and cultural interactions of place-names. Sun Baisheng et al. (2017), using GIS analysis of rural place-names in Chengde, found that geographic location, historical context, and social activities profoundly influence the spatial distribution of place-names. Additionally, Feng Siwen (2024) analyzed settlement place-names in the Yuanshui Basin, Hunan Province, emphasizing the role of waterways, geographic conditions, and historical events in shaping place-name cultural landscapes and further illuminating the dynamic evolution of place-names.

In addition, some scholars have focused on studying the historical evolution and cultural significance of place-name cultural landscapes. Zhao Siwen et al. (2023) investigated place-names in Hong'an County, Hubei Province, to explore how historical events and cultural heritage influence the formation of place-names, particularly highlighting aspects related to revolutionary history. Zhang Da et al. (2023) analyzed the spatiotemporal evolution of place-name cultural landscapes in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, concluding that changes in place-names reflect interactions among natural environments, historical transitions, and population migration. Zhang Junling et al. (2022), through reviewing the existing research on place-name cultural landscapes, emphasized the close connections among place-names, human-environment relationships, spatial cognition, and regional identity, further highlighting the significance of place-names in cultural landscape studies.

Additionally, several studies have emphasized the roles of place-names in multi-ethnic integration and cultural heritage preservation. Li Jianqiao et al. (2022) examined rural place-name cultural landscapes in multi-ethnic areas, proposing that place-names reflect not only natural and social environments but also embody multiple cultural values such as ethnic identity, historical memory, and social change. Chen Zeyu et al. (2024) analyzed the importance of place-name cultural landscapes in heritage transmission and preservation, highlighting that enhancing regional cultural identity and historical conservation can be effectively achieved through the cultural meanings embedded in place-names.

In summary, research on place-name cultural landscapes encompasses spatial distribution, historical evolution, multi-ethnic cultural integration, and cultural heritage preservation. These studies indicate that place-names serve not merely as spatial identifiers but also as carriers of cultural identity and social history, providing significant insights into regional culture and societal transformations.

4. Research Review and Prospects

4.1. Research Review

International research on cultural landscapes dates back to the 1920s, and since then, its theoretical framework has gradually matured. Through extensive exploration, Chinese scholars have achieved significant progress in conceptual definitions, classification and evaluation, regional characteristics, rural cultural landscapes, cultural landscape heritage, and conservation technologies. However, compared to the relatively mature theoretical systems developed internationally, domestic studies remain in a stage of integrating local characteristics and advantages with further exploration and development, continuously enhancing comprehensiveness, innovation, and progression. Research emphases have shifted from early concerns with cultural landscape preservation, tourism development, planning, and design to contemporary interests in cultural landscape transformation and reproduction within

tourism contexts, as well as visitor perception and evaluation. Consequently, research outputs have become increasingly abundant, accompanied by methodological innovations. Despite active and effective academic discussions from various theoretical perspectives and methodological applications, overall, China's cultural landscape tourism research is still in a developmental stage. It faces challenges such as a relatively weak theoretical foundation, limited research perspectives, insufficient interdisciplinary integration, and the need to further enhance both the breadth and depth of research [8].

4.2. Future Prospects

To further enrich the body of knowledge on cultural landscape research in China, the following prospects are proposed based on existing research:

In terms of theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to integrate representational and non-representational perspectives more thoroughly, incorporating theories such as post-colonialism and globalization, and constructing a cultural landscape research framework with Chinese characteristics. This would foster interdisciplinary integration and encourage theoretical innovation rooted in local contexts.

In terms of technical methodologies, full utilization of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, Virtual Reality (VR), big data, and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies should be prioritized. These tools will facilitate dynamic monitoring and precise analysis of landscapes. Additionally, non-representational methods such as ethnography and photography should be explored to capture the emotional and behavioral dimensions of landscapes that are difficult to quantify. Digital technologies will enable more precise and scientific management of cultural landscapes, providing better decision-making support and promoting effective conservation and sustainable utilization.

In terms of sustainability research, scholars should pay closer attention to landscape dynamics under rapid urbanization and globalization contexts. By combining ecological sensitivity assessments and a "dwelling perspective," sustainable development pathways for cultural landscapes can be explored to balance conservation and development effectively.

At the practical level, efforts should be made to establish scientific value assessment systems, improve conservation regulations, and design institutional frameworks. Enhancing collaboration among governments, communities, and academia, and innovating models for revitalization and utilization, such as "Intangible Cultural Heritage + Tourism" or "Creative Culture + Spatial Regeneration," will help achieve both economic and social functions of cultural landscapes. Through the organic integration of theory, methodology, and practice, cultural landscape research can better respond to the complex challenges arising from globalization and localization. This approach will further explore the potential of cultural landscapes to enhance local social identity, cohesion, and contribute to sustainable social development.

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