

# Valuing Tangible Elements in Huizhou's World Heritage Villages: An Integrated Assessment of Landscape Features, Cultural Significance, and Community Identity

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**Abstract**

This study investigates how tangible heritage elements—specifically architecture, water systems, streetscapes, and natural landmarks—contribute to Hongcun’s identity as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and how these elements are perceived and valued by local residents. A two-stage methodology was employed: first, a spatial case study was conducted to analyze the formal characteristics and cultural functions of key heritage components; second, a structured quantitative survey captured community perceptions across four value dimensions: ontological integrity, cultural landscape significance, community relevance, and aesthetic appeal. Findings indicate that elements such as Lexutang, Lunar Swamp, and Shuizheng are not only architecturally and historically significant but also serve as emotionally and socially embedded landmarks in everyday village life. The heritage elements that were attached or embedded with preservation quality and symbolism would always be the favorites to the residents, signifying the essence of promoting lived experience and spatial continuity in the valuation of heritage. The research confirms the necessity of integrative place-based conservation policies, which embodies the professional and communal interpretations of the cultural values.

**Keywords:** Tangible Heritage, Hongcun, Community Perception, Cultural Landscape, Heritage Valuation

## INTRODUCTION

The region of a village in Anhui Province, China, Hongcun, is one of the few still maintained examples of pure conventional village locations in East Asia. Hongcun is one of UNESCO World Heritage sites since 2000 due to its recognisable unity of its central block, state of harmony between the water system and the local buildings and its connection to the Confucian spatial vision in Ming and Qing Dynasties <sup>1</sup>. The village is located in the peripheral area both of political territory of Qiantang and cultural area of Huizhou which represents a kind of idealised model of ecological, social, and aesthetic harmony. However, even with international recognition, it is still not that well understood, how the community members, who still live, work and interact with the material environment of the village, see and value its heritage parts.

The wider scene of world heritage preservation has come forward to realize the value of cultural landscapes as resourceful areas influenced by the human-environment interaction. Global discourse has expanded since the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 to acknowledge the heritage value of not only monumental builders, but also vernacular and live spaces <sup>2,3</sup>. The necessity to conserve the old village settings under the pressure of modernization and homogenization is also highlighted in the Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture (2005) <sup>4</sup>. Those international charters indicate a normative basis of the communal practices, but practically their implementation relies on a centralized expert-based system of truth based valuation that ignores conventional local systems of knowledge and a sense of everyday place <sup>5</sup>.

Such estrangement is especially acute in the Chinese experience, with its high rate of urbanization and commercialisation of culture such that numerous rural communities have been commoditised. In others, the importance of architectural formalism and tourist aesthetics has trumped the concern with community salience and spatial authenticity <sup>6</sup>. Although, as heritage frameworks are currently seeing, cultural landscapes are living things, their application in the Chinese rural setting has seldom focused on the expression of the local population. Participatory valuation, although promoted within the global frameworks, is thus on the one hand limited in policy and practice.

The proposed paper helps fill that gap by exploring the perception and value of the material component of the Hongcun heritage landscape through its architecture, water supply system, street pattern, and natural sites by the local inhabitants. Based on the postulates of the Operational Guidelines of UNESCO (2007 with the revision in 2010) that encourage the introduction of local voices into the heritage process <sup>7</sup>, this study assesses how local interpretations of heritage either confirm or contest official heritage judgments. Subsequently the study does not only complement the discussion of participatory heritage evaluation but also it legitimately offers an empirical argument to mend the gap between formal conservation frameworks and cultural values embedded in lived experiences.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the spatial composition and physical characteristics of Hongcun's tangible heritage elements—specifically architecture, water systems, streetscapes, and natural landmarks—as a foundational case study.
2. To assess how local residents perceive the significance of these elements across ontological, cultural, communal, and aesthetic dimensions using structured quantitative methods.

### Research Questions

1. How do the architectural features, water systems, streetscapes, and natural landmarks of Hongcun contribute to its designation as a cultural landscape and World Heritage Site?
2. In what ways do local residents perceive and evaluate these tangible heritage elements across multiple dimensions, including ontological integrity, cultural significance, community relevance, and aesthetic appeal?

The scope of this study is confined to Hongcun village and emphasizes tangible heritage elements—including architectural features, water systems, streetscapes, and prominent natural landmarks. The assessment is grounded in the perspectives of local residents, encompassing both long-term inhabitants and temporary renters who engage meaningfully with the site. Intangible heritage components, such as oral traditions or religious practices, are acknowledged but not examined in depth, as the focus remains on visible, spatial, and functional components that constitute the physical heritage of the village.

By positioning the local community as co-evaluators of heritage significance, this research contributes to an emergent discourse on participatory heritage valuation and provides empirical insights relevant to the sustainable management of World Heritage Sites in China and beyond.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Theoretical Foundations of Tangible Heritage and Community Identity**

Tangible cultural heritage, encompassing physical artifacts such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, and public spaces, plays a crucial role in sustaining collective memory and shaping community identity. As the contemporary heritage discourse also stresses, preserving historic environments involves not only the preservation of aesthetics or physical buildings, but of the associated social meanings, memories, and identities of local people<sup>8</sup>. Heritage sites usually work as a memory anchor since they are used as spatial repositories of collective history, and have an effect on creating group cohesion and local belonging<sup>9</sup>.

Urban sociologists and planners have long asserted that built environments, particularly historical continuity, are essential to anchoring collective memory in physical structure. As Said<sup>10</sup> concludes, tangible heritage allows passing the cultural narratives to new generations, so it is an essential aspect of social sustainability. The cities, towns, and villages, in this regard, can be regarded as the so-called memory capes, where the tangible past is being proactively consumed in the present<sup>11</sup>.

In the context of cultural geography, tangible heritage aids identity through keeping social relations in place and establishing spatial continuity. According to Zuo, et al.<sup>12</sup>, heritage offers individuals and communities a “link to the past, a sense of permanence, stability, and belonging” (p. 4), which in turn contributes to psychological well-being, civic pride, and social resilience. These material traces of the past—be it a historical street, a community square, or an ancient tree—embody the lived experience of place and become integral to how people understand their cultural position within broader narratives.

Moreover, heritage is not static; it is continuously reinterpreted by communities through use, memory, and symbolic interaction. Tangible elements thus become cultural resources, intentionally invested with meaning and significance by those who live among them. As Nursanty, et al.<sup>13</sup> note, heritage is co-constructed: it derives its value as much from contemporary social practices as from its historical origins. In practice, where traditions are well preserved, i.e. in such villages as Hongcun, the genuineness and sustainability of tangible heritages translates to strengthened community identification through connecting daily lifeways with cultural heritage.

### **Participatory Heritage Valuation and Community Perceptions**

The more traditional expert-led approach to heritage management has attracted growing criticism due to its disenfranchising local stakeholders regarding the making of heritage decision-making. Within both international and the Chinese context, where these frameworks have long favored the preservation of architecture, universal aesthetics and state-led discourse and eschewed lived experiences, cultural practices, and memory-based values of the communities residing within those spaces<sup>14</sup>. This has often encouraged technocratic in nature approaches to conservation that are socially distant and thus breaking minimum public participation and even local communities resistance.

This is caused by a recent trend in scholarship to community-based heritage valuation which fosters active community participation in the identification, interpretation, and management of heritage resources. Specifically, the participatory turn has been observable in the rural parts of China where the locals have increasingly become not passive beneficiaries of heritage preservation business but co-producers of cultural value. In this evaluation of rural heritage initiatives, Ke, and Mustafa<sup>15</sup> observe that lack of involvement of residents in decision-making has often led to misrepresentation of cultural identity and the deterioration of social cohesion. Alternative forms of engagement are instead more democratizing, providing residents with formal roles in cultural governance and authority to interpret their material and symbolic heritage, as exemplified by Eco museums and community heritage trust.

Empirically, some studies have proved that community-based participation not only improves the conservation

and local ownership outcomes. The example is that of Atkinson<sup>16</sup>, who assert the need to incorporate daily actions, spatial uses, and localised meanings in the process of heritage valuation, which are frequently unseen in the customary evaluation of expertise. According to their research, when villagers themselves are recruited to express what is important to them be ancestral ponds, family courtyards or informal gathering places, the conservation plans that are more enduring and locally appealing.

A common-sense system that reflects this participatory spirit is the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach some have advocated since 201<sup>1</sup> and promoted in UNESCO. HUL methodology promotes the use of tools, like participatory mapping, interviews, and collaborative design workshops. These approaches not only extend the richness of data but also enlarge the voices of community member to create a multi-scale identification of the significance of heritages that encompass emotional, symbolic, and utilitarian of space<sup>17</sup>.

### **Frameworks for Evaluating Tangible Heritage Significance**

Tangible cultural asset valuation in the field of contemporary heritage studies is finding an ever more multi-dimensional angle to reflect upon, as there are infinite degrees to the meanings that people, professionals, and organizations assign to heritage components. In contrast to being a matter of pure historical or architectural significance, the heritage value is now assessed based on a wide variety of wavelengths, each reflecting specific elements of the sense of significance of a place<sup>18</sup>. Such a holistic approach is supported by international charters as well as national agencies and is especially relevant in the assessment of dynamic, living settlements like the traditional villages.

One of the basic types is ontological value that comprises authenticity and integrity. Perhaps since the UNESCO Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), authenticity concerns the authenticity of either a site, or its material, design, function, and setting. The document stressed that authenticity must also be perceived in the context of the existing culture of the heritage under test since heritage is not something that stands the test of time. Integrity on the other hand encompasses the wholeness and undamaged nature of heritage features and their interrelations with the general environment<sup>19</sup>. Heritage sites remain in use in rural settings, and to be used effectively in that setting, integrity may be more appropriate than any material authenticity requirement, as adaption is required.

The named category of cultural landscape values augments the ontological evaluation through their emphasis on the geographic and temporal discourse, inscribed by the dialog between humans and nature. This value is manifested through distinctive qualities of constructed structures, the superimposition of past activities, and the preservation of the way of life<sup>20</sup>. Landscapes speak narrative, and their worth appears not only in buildings, but also in their metaphoric meanings and history.

Community (or social) value is another essential axis of evaluation. It refers to the meanings that a place holds for people—ranging from identity, memory, and emotional attachment to its role in daily life. For example, Le, and Nguyen<sup>21</sup> includes communal value as a core heritage criterion, highlighting the importance of public appreciation, local traditions, and shared experiences. Such value is often intangible yet deeply felt.

Lastly, aesthetic value encompasses the sensory and emotional dimensions of heritage. This includes architectural harmony, visual coherence, and features that evoke admiration or inspiration. As noted in conservation literature, aesthetics is not purely formal but often linked to symbolic or place-based identity<sup>22</sup>.

Altogether, a robust heritage evaluation framework considers evidential, historical, ontological, communal, and aesthetic values. These dimensions frequently intersect, and recognizing their interdependence allows for a more nuanced and inclusive heritage policy, particularly in living communities like Hongcun, where tangible elements carry both historical and contemporary meanings.

### **Huizhou World Heritage Villages: Case Studies and Gaps in Community-Involved Valuation**

Empirical studies of China's traditional villages (particularly in Anhui's Huizhou region) reveal both the richness of tangible heritage and the shortcomings of current valuation. Fang, and Li<sup>23</sup> developed a values-based model for Huizhou villages and found that "integrity" – the quality of the heritage and its relationship to the environment –

contributed most to overall heritage value. Their analysis (using cultural-ecology indicators) shows that villages in core heritage zones (e.g. Yi County) score high on diversity and continuity, while those on the margins lag behind. Importantly, these authors note that Chinese conservation standards still largely classify value by traditional criteria (historical, artistic, scientific) and have only recently begun incorporating ecological and social factors.

Studies of specific sites underscore the role of residents. Lundberg<sup>24</sup> examines Hongcun Village (UNESCO site) and document how resident practices transform the living landscape in response to tourism. They find that villagers' "habitus" leads them to adapt homes and courtyards for sustainable livelihoods, merging material changes (e.g. tourist facilities) with intangible relations. Crucially, households who engaged positively in preservation-oriented practices achieved more stable outcomes, illustrating that bottom-up agency is key to balancing heritage and development. Similarly, a recent framework study by Jingsen, and Muyun<sup>25</sup> argues that Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) methods produce more effective conservation plans by grounding value assessment in villagers' daily lives. Their Tangfang Village case shows that traditional, expert-driven plans often over-prioritize authenticity of form and underplay human and cultural elements; an HUL approach "addresses both material and human values" by weaving community insights into preservation.

Despite these advances, gaps remain in practice. Even in Huizhou's celebrated villages (Hongcun, Xidi), management has tended to favor physical preservation and tourism economics, often sidelining local perspectives. As Li<sup>26</sup> observe, official criteria still "prioritize authenticity over practicality and material conservation over humanistic values". In consequence, intangible connections (community memory, daily relevance) may be underestimated. Literature thus calls for participatory tools — such as interviews, community surveys or visual methods — to reveal which tangible elements villagers actually value in their everyday lives. In Hongcun and elsewhere, elements like ancestral ponds, old trees or historic pavilions carry strong social meaning and local legends; yet without engaging residents, such meanings remain "absent historical memory" in policy. Closing this gap requires integrating community-based valuation into conservation planning, ensuring that the full spectrum of village heritage (from ontological authenticity to aesthetic appeal to community attachment) is recognized and preserved.

## Research Gap

Even though the discourse of the community participation is prolific to discussions of heritage, there has been a quality gap in determining how local-level perceptions are quantitatively included in formal valuations regimes, particularly in rural China. Ontological and aesthetic dimensions, as conceptualised by the experts, also persist in privileging heritage assessments to the extent that the commonplace meanings attributed to tangible elements by the participants are not considered at all through systematic evaluation by them. Culturally vital places such as Hongcun have not received much-needed investigations that utilized standard survey instruments to record community-based assessments in various aspects. Further, this disjuncture is also caused by the historical power of the top-down heritage governance structure and a modest amount of formal institutional pathways to the participatory inclusion. The research addresses these drawbacks by developing a four-dimensional quantitative framework consisting of the following aspects: ontological, cultural landscape, community relevance, and aesthetic value, in order to evaluate the perception of the lived heritage professionally.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This research is based on a mixed-method sample that consists of a qualitative spatial case study and a quantitative survey. The task is to see how local communities in the village of Hongcun part of UNESCO World Heritage in Anhui Province, understand and value tangible heritage elements. The two-phased design captures a call to base quantitative generalisation on the basis of spatial and cultural specificity. The qualitative element of the case study sets the material and historical background, which subsequently shapes the structured quantitative survey.

Although in some cases quantitative interviews are used to excavate granular local perception, in the second step, the quantitative approach was favored in order to introduce a degree of standard comparison across a range of value dimensions and heritage factors. The ruling also justifies greater community involvement and statistical integration, especially where there is multi-stakeholder interest to heritage sites and physical elements.

## Case Study Analysis of Hongcun Village

The first phase of analysis involved a systematic review and description of Hongcun's tangible heritage components, based on site documentation, official heritage nomination files, secondary literature, and spatial records. Four categories of elements were analyzed:

1. Architectural Features – including ancestral halls, residential courtyard houses, and commercial structures.
2. Water Systems – such as Nanhu Lake, the iconic Moon Pond, and the ancient canal systems that frame the village.
3. Streetscapes – particularly the winding laneways and the central commercial street with Ming-Qing era façades.
4. Natural Landmarks – including the ancient ginkgo tree, nearby mountain views, and the integration of natural topography into village planning.

This case study analysis is presented in the results section of the paper and serves to identify, define, and describe the tangible elements evaluated through survey instruments in the subsequent phase.

## Quantitative Survey Design

Building on the case study, a structured questionnaire was developed to capture local perceptions of 17 tangible elements, each belonging to one of the four thematic categories described above. Respondents rated these elements across four heritage value dimensions:

1. Ontological Value – Integrity, Authenticity, Functional Continuity
2. Cultural Landscape Value – Historical Depth, Uniqueness, Associative Meaning
3. Community Value – Daily Relevance, Educational Role, Regional Visibility
4. Aesthetic Value – Landscape Harmony, Visual Appeal, Crowd Attractiveness

Each element was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Most Agree” to “Disagree,” allowing for statistically meaningful differentiation of perceived value.

## Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive and convenience sampling, targeting individuals with direct interaction or familiarity with the built and natural environment of Hongcun. The sample consisted of 56 respondents, including:

1. Long-term residents (46.43%)
2. Local renters and shopkeepers (39.29%)
3. Occasional visitors or cultural workers (14.29%)

While long-term residents and renters offer sustained engagement with Hongcun's heritage, occasional visitors—particularly local cultural workers and seasonal business participants—were included due to their recurrent presence and informed perspectives on the site's visual and symbolic value.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity in gender, age, and education level. Nonetheless, the study acknowledges that non-response bias and the relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of findings. Further large-scale or longitudinal sampling could help confirm broader trends.

## Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed in two sequential steps:

1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis: Frequency and percentage distributions were calculated for each heritage element across all four value dimensions. This allowed for a dimension-specific ranking and identification of high-value and low-value elements from the community's perspective.
2. Cross-Dimensional Synthesis: The results were synthesized to identify multi-functional heritage icons—elements that scored highly across two or more value categories. Findings were presented through integrated tables and visualizations (e.g., bar charts, pie diagrams) to support interpretation.

The statistical interpretation was grounded in insights derived from the preceding case study, enabling meaningful correlation between the physical context of each element and its perceived cultural value.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical protocols aligned with academic research guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were anonymized to protect respondent identities, and no personal or sensitive information was collected. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time.

RESULTS

Overview of Hongcun as a Cultural Landscape

Hongcun, located in Yi County, Anhui Province, is internationally recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, inscribed in 2000 for its exceptional preservation of a traditional Chinese village landscape from the Ming and Qing dynasties<sup>27</sup>. As stated in the UNESCO nomination dossier, Hongcun exemplifies the Huizhou cultural tradition through its harmonious integration of architecture, water management systems, and natural topography. The village is organized following feng shui principles, where built forms are carefully aligned with mountain and water features. A defining characteristic is its complex water circulation system, comprising Moon Pond at the center and Nanhu Lake at the village's edge, which not only serves domestic and agricultural functions but also contributes to the village's aesthetic and symbolic coherence. The layout demonstrates a deep-rooted connection between human settlement and natural environment, representing a living cultural landscape shaped by generations of community adaptation and environmental stewardship.

Architectural Features

Hongcun's built environment exemplifies the Huizhou architectural tradition, reflecting both Confucian cultural values and elite merchant aesthetics from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties<sup>28</sup>. At the core of this architectural ensemble are ancestral halls, residential courtyard houses, and ceremonial structures such as Lexutang, all contributing to the village's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000<sup>29</sup>.

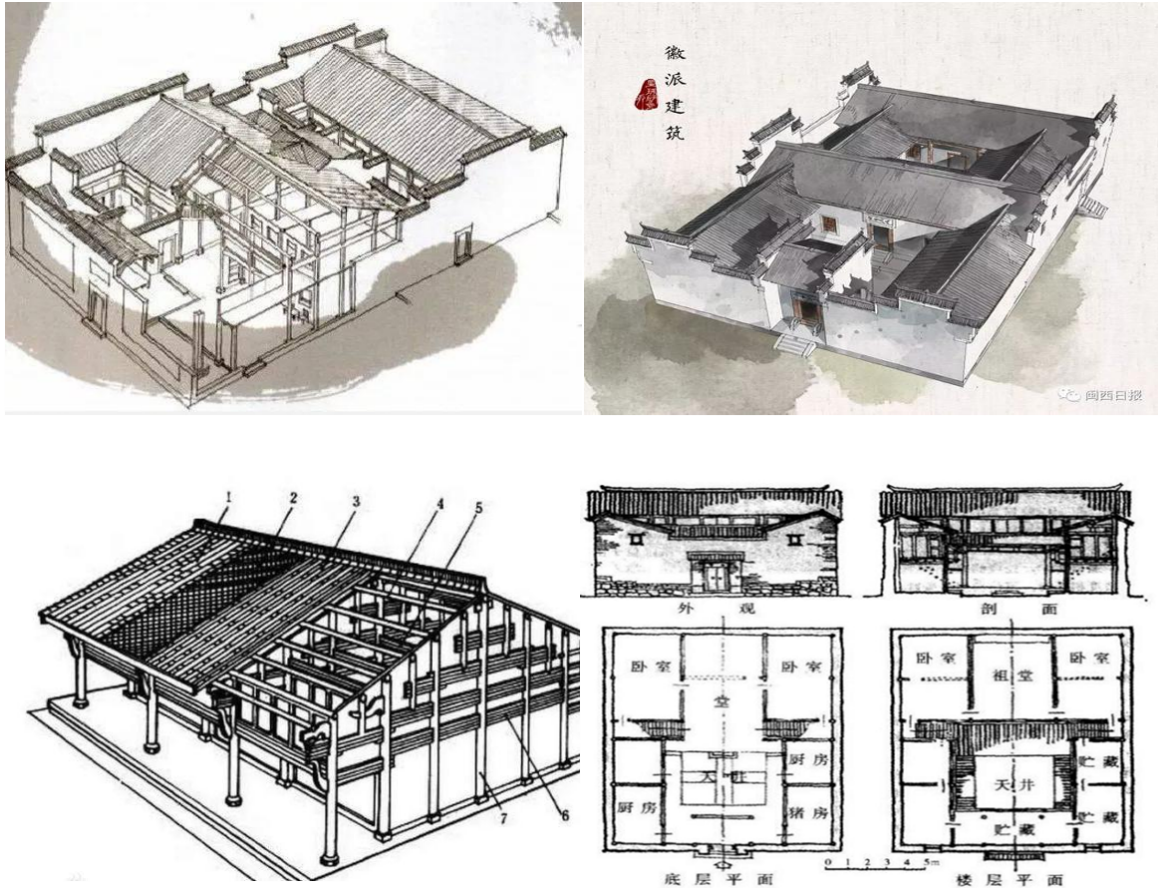
Lexutang, one of the most prominent buildings in the village, is a late-Qing structure historically used for ancestral worship and clan meetings. It features timber-frame construction with mortise and tenon joints—techniques emblematic of traditional Chinese craftsmanship<sup>30</sup>. The hall's symmetrical layout, intricate latticework, and wood-carved panels express Confucian order and hierarchy as shown in figure 1. Lexutang's architectural style blends practicality with ceremonial function, its open inner courtyard allowing both ventilation and symbolic gathering space.



Figure 1: Exterior and interior photograph of Lexutang showing wooden columns, eaves, and decorative carvings<sup>31</sup>



Numerous residential houses in Hongcun retain the typical Huizhou vernacular form: whitewashed walls, black-tiled roofs, horse-head walls (fire prevention structures), and enclosed courtyard designs, as the design of the architect given in the figure 2. These features reflect both environmental adaptation and social status. Most homes were constructed using timber, grey bricks, lime plaster, and stone foundations, materials chosen for their durability and aesthetic restraint<sup>32</sup>. Importantly, these houses were often owned by wealthy merchant families, such as the Wang and Hu clans, and integrated domestic life with commercial activity, evidenced by adjacent storage areas and trading rooms.



**Figure 2:** Schematic drawing of a typical Huizhou courtyard house with labeled zones—main hall, side wings, courtyard<sup>33</sup>

Ancestral halls, distributed throughout the village, serve both commemorative and political functions. These halls reflect collective memory and provide spaces for rituals that reinforce social cohesion<sup>12</sup>. The spatial hierarchy—main hall, side rooms, and altar placement—corresponds to traditional family structures.

Preservation efforts led by Chinese heritage authorities and UNESCO have ensured that most of these structures remain intact and in use, often as museums, exhibition halls, or community spaces<sup>34</sup>. Restoration projects focus on retaining material authenticity and architectural integrity, though modern reinforcements (e.g., concrete underpinning or fireproofing) are subtly integrated.

### Water Systems

Water is not only a functional necessity in Hongcun but a central design element shaping the village's identity. Its hydrological layout is often described as “the ox” configuration: Moon Pond represents the stomach, Nanhu Lake the body, and the interlinked canals as limbs<sup>35</sup>. The lake's structure is identified in figure 3. The village's founders in the Song dynasty implemented this system to reflect both feng shui principles and urban functionality.



**Figure 3:** Aerial image of Hongcun showing the ox-shaped water layout with annotations <sup>35</sup>

Nanhu Lake, an artificial body of water at the southern edge of the village, was constructed in the 15th century and serves as both a water reservoir and scenic element <sup>36</sup>. Surrounded by willow trees, pavilions, and stone bridges, it offers a tranquil foreground to the residential skyline and contributes to landscape harmony. The lake reflects seasonal changes and architectural silhouettes, reinforcing the aesthetic unity of water, wood, and stone.

Moon Pond, centrally located in front of Lexutang, serves a more intimate function. Its crescent shape aligns with yin-yang symbolism and serves as a symbolic heart of the community. Historically used for domestic water collection, washing, and fire prevention, it also marks an important ritual space during festivals and ceremonies.

The entire water system uses gravity-fed channels and underground stone aqueducts to circulate water continuously through the village before returning to Nanhu Lake. This design not only ensured sanitation and irrigation but also embodied Confucian and Daoist ideals of order and balance.

In contemporary times, the water system remains operational and is a significant draw for cultural tourism. Its preservation has been praised for integrating functionality, heritage value, and aesthetic design—a rare combination in living historical settlements <sup>37</sup>.

### **Streetscapes and Spatial Networks**

The streets of Hongcun form an organically grown network of narrow laneways, stone-paved alleys, and commercial boulevards, reflecting centuries of pedestrian and cart traffic. The street grid loosely follows the hydrological system, with many walkways aligned alongside canals or intersecting over stone bridges as shown in the figure 4.

Laneways (xiang) are typically less than 2 meters wide, enclosed by high courtyard walls, which create framed views, controlled microclimates, and secluded passageways. These spatial features enhance sensory experiences, such as sudden visual expansion when turning into a wider square or courtyard <sup>12</sup>. Laneways also act as social spaces, where neighbors meet, rest, or perform small-scale commerce.





**Figure 4:** Street-level photo showing a typical laneway flanked by high whitewashed walls <sup>38</sup>

The commercial street running from Moon Pond to the southern gate is slightly wider and lined with Ming-Qing era shopfronts featuring wooden façades, signboards, and open counters. Though historically used for trading salt, tea, and paper goods, today these shops host tea houses, artisan studios, and guesthouses, blending historic form with adaptive reuse.

Hongcun's streetscape is unique for how it integrates built and natural elements. Bridges cross over canals, doorways open onto ponds, and trees punctuate corners—creating an immersive, walkable environment <sup>39</sup>. Streets are not simply conduits of movement; they are experiential layers of cultural history, linking one tangible element to another.

Tourism has reshaped circulation patterns, with signage, wayfinding systems, and viewing platforms now embedded into the landscape. However, the spatial logic of intimacy, enclosure, and discovery has largely been preserved, adding to the authenticity of the visitor experience.

### **Natural Landmarks and Environmental Context**

Hongcun's cultural landscape is inseparable from its natural setting. Located at the foot of the southwestern slope of Mount Huangshan, the village is framed by a dramatic backdrop of forested hills, granite peaks, and terraced farmland <sup>40</sup>. These features not only form a visual perimeter but also influence the climate, water flow, and agricultural rhythms of the community.

A particularly significant natural landmark within the village is the Ancient Ginkgo Tree near the ancestral square. Estimated to be over 500 years old, it is revered for its age, shade, and spiritual symbolism <sup>41</sup>. This Ancient Ginkgo has been shown in figure 5. Tree Ginkgo trees in Chinese culture represent endurance, wisdom, and familial strength—values embedded in Hongcun's Confucian heritage.



**Figure 5:** Image of the Ancient Ginkgo Tree with surrounding stone benches and ancestral square <sup>41</sup>

The village’s scenic composition—reflected rooftops in water, mist-covered hills at dawn, and seasonal color changes—contributes to what heritage experts call “cultural landscape integrity” <sup>42</sup>. Hongcun exemplifies the type of cultural landscape where natural and man-made elements are not merely coexisting but are mutually reinforcing.

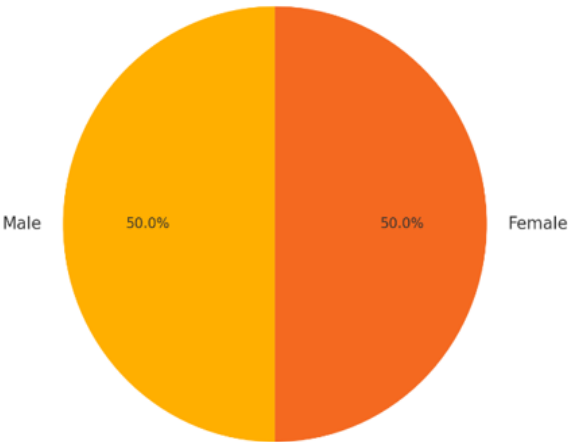
Efforts to conserve the environment have included:

- Banning new construction near the lake edges
- Encouraging eco-tourism over mass tourism
- Implementing waste-water filtration systems to protect canal water quality

This preservation ethic aligns with global standards for World Heritage Sites, ensuring that visual harmony, ecological function, and spiritual value remain intertwined in the everyday life of the village.

**Quantitative Findings on Community Valuation of Tangible Heritage**  
**Overview of Data Distribution**

The survey enlisted 56 respondents, balanced in gender (50% male/female) and primarily aged 26–60 (85.71%), with over 79% educated at bachelor’s level or higher, and a residential makeup of 46.43% locals, 39.29% renters, and 14.29% visitors. (Insert Pie Charts: Age, Gender, Education, Residential Status here). As the distributive states shown in the figure 6,7,8.



**Figure 6:** Respondent Gender Distribution

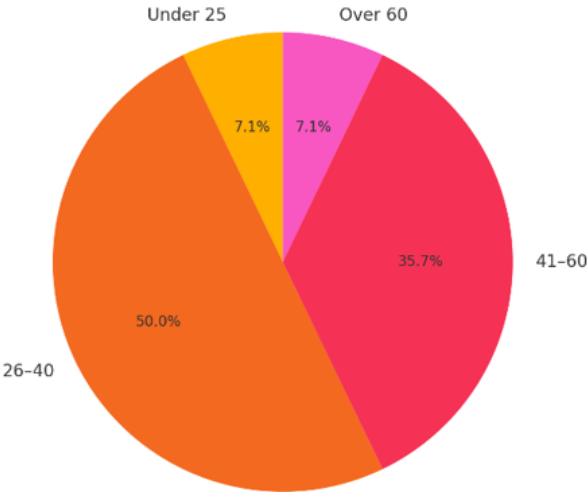


Figure 7: Respondent Age Distribution

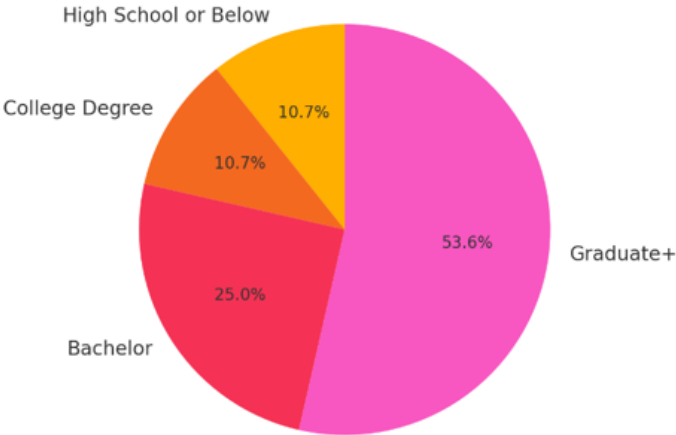


Figure 8: Educational Background

Figure 9 shows the distribution of residential status. Locals constitute the largest group of property owners at 46.4%, followed by people renting at the locales at 39.3%. Tourists create 14.3 percent. This shows that almost half of the population is permanent residents and the rest of the population temporarily leases, as well as a smaller group is a visitor.

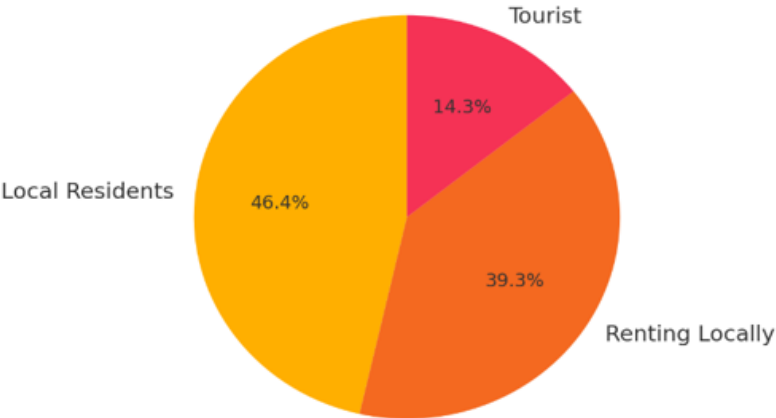


Figure 9: Residential Status

Participants evaluated 17 tangible heritage elements across four predefined dimensions. Response analysis revealed a broad range of perceptions, with elements such as Lexutang, Lunar Swamp, and Shuizheng consistently receiving high “Agree” or “Most Agree” responses. (Insert Descriptive Table: Summary of agreement levels for all elements here). These initial results establish a clear demographic profile and signal strong consensus around several key heritage assets, preparing the groundwork for deeper dimensional analysis.

Ontological Value Assessment

Ontological value in heritage evaluation includes both the physical integrity of structures and their perceived authenticity by community members. This section explores these aspects using survey data on selected heritage elements.

Integrity of Preservation

Respondents identified Lexutang, Shuizheng, and Nanhu Lake as the best-preserved heritage elements. These sites achieved high agreement levels on structural intactness, original material usage, and preservation fidelity. As given in table 1, the Lexutang and Shuizheng, both historic architectural complexes, share the highest integrity ratings (78.57%), followed closely by Nanhu Lake (71.43%), a landscape feature with minimal modern alteration.

Table 1: Integrity of Preservation

|   | Heritage Element | Integrity Score (%) |
|---|------------------|---------------------|
| 0 | Nanhu Lake       | 71.43               |
| 1 | Lexutang         | 78.57               |
| 2 | Shuizheng        | 78.57               |

Authenticity of Experience

Authenticity refers to how well a site maintains its cultural context and resonates with traditional character. According to the bar chart given in the figure 10, Lunar Swamp (82.14%) and the Ancient Ginkgo Tree (75.00%) received the highest scores for experiential authenticity. These elements evoke emotional familiarity and traditional ambiance, reinforcing their symbolic and cultural resonance within daily village life.

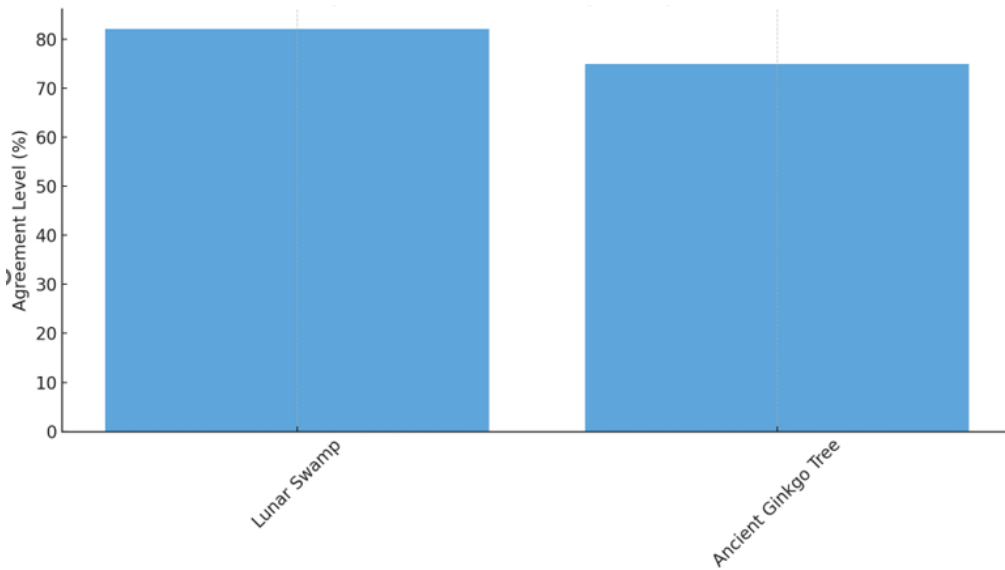


Figure 10: Authenticity of Experience

Functional Continuity

Functional continuity highlights whether heritage sites remain in practical use. Laneways and the commercial street continue to serve everyday purposes—circulation, commerce, and social interaction—reflecting living heritage dynamics. Similarly, Lunar Swamp and Shuizheng retain their environmental and communal functions, enhancing the perception of authenticity and relevance.

Together, these findings affirm that physical preservation, symbolic continuity, and practical usability are interlinked in shaping how residents perceive the ontological value of Hongcun’s tangible heritage.

Cultural Landscape Value

This section explores how Hongcun’s built environment is valued by residents for its historical continuity, unique architectural form, and symbolic associations with local traditions and historical figures.

Historical Depth

According to table 2, Respondents rated Lexutang (78.57%), Shuizheng (75.00%), and Laneways (64.29%) as heritage elements with strong historical continuity. These sites are seen as representative of Hongcun’s Ming-Qing period lineage, and their sustained use reinforces the perception of a “living history.” Their design, materials, and preserved form contribute to this perceived depth.

Table 2: Perceived Historical Depth

|   | Heritage Element | Historical Depth (%) |
|---|------------------|----------------------|
| 0 | Lexutang         | 78.57                |
| 1 | Shuizheng        | 75                   |
| 2 | Laneways         | 64.29                |

Architectural Uniqueness

Lunar Swamp (82.14%), Lexutang (78.57%), and Nanhu Lake (71.43%) were most frequently cited for their stylistic distinctiveness. Residents noted their harmony with the natural setting, elegant proportion, and symbolism embedded in architectural motifs. These structures stand out in form, construction technique, and spatial impact, contributing significantly to Hongcun’s overall cultural identity.

Associations with Events and Figures

As shown in the bar chart in figure 11, Lexutang (85.71%) and Shuizheng (78.57%) were recognized for their deep ties to ancestral narratives and historic rituals. These elements are frequently mentioned in oral histories and local legends. In contrast, the 476 Provincial Road (35.71%) lacked such symbolic value, viewed primarily as a utilitarian route.

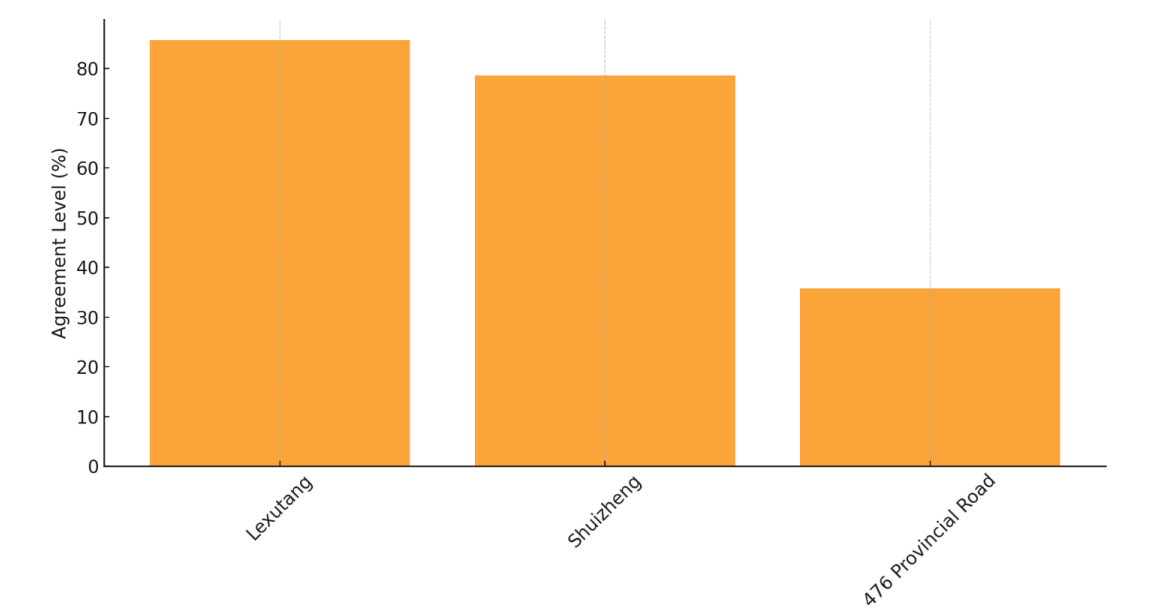


Figure 11: Associations with Events and Figures

These findings reinforce that Hongcun’s landscape is not only architecturally significant but culturally symbolic, with layered meanings attributed to age, form, and historical memory.



Community Identity and Relevance

This section evaluates how tangible heritage elements contribute to local identity through daily engagement, educational functions, and broader visibility beyond the village.

Daily Relevance

The statistics of daily Life of Relevance given in table 3. Survey responses revealed that Laneways (78.57%), Shuizheng (75.00%), and Commercial Street (71.43%) are the most embedded in daily routines. These elements support walking paths, small-scale commerce, and communal interaction. Their continuous use maintains a sense of familiarity and connection for residents.

Table 3: daily Life of Relevance

|   | Heritage Element  | Daily Relevance (%) |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| 0 | Laneways          | 78.57               |
| 1 | Shuizheng         | 75                  |
| 4 | Commercial Street | 71.43               |

Educational and Interpretive Value

Participants valued Lexutang (75.00%) and Lunar Swamp (78.57%) as sites rich in interpretive meaning and cultural learning. Lexutang’s association with clan history and rituals makes it a living classroom of Confucian heritage, while Lunar Swamp’s form and function demonstrate ancient water management and spatial symbolism.

Regional Visibility

Lunar Swamp (85.71%), Commercial Street (82.14%), and Shuizheng (78.57%) emerged as the most regionally recognized elements. These landmarks frequently appear in tourist materials, promotional campaigns, and social media, serving as visual icons for Hongcun. Their appeal extends beyond local boundaries, helping shape external perceptions of the village’s identity.

These findings given in figure 12, affirm that heritage significance is not only architectural or historical—it is actively experienced, taught, and circulated in ways that reinforce both local attachment and external recognition.

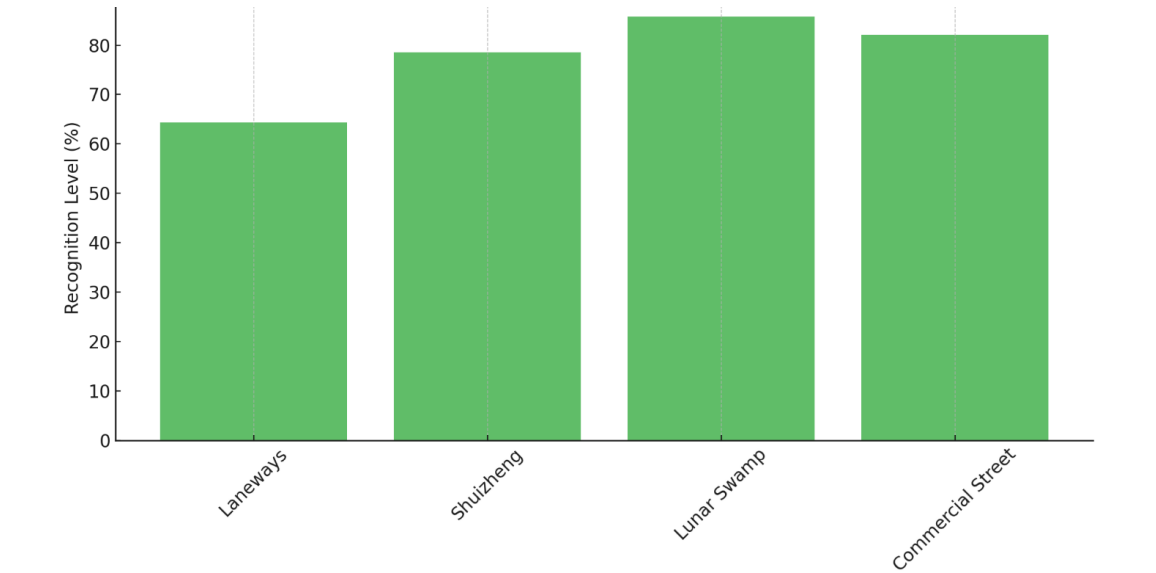


Figure 12: Regional Visibility of Heritage Elements

Aesthetic and Attractiveness Value

This section assesses how residents and visitors perceive the visual and emotional appeal of Hongcun’s heritage features. Two key aspects—landscape harmony and crowd appeal—were used to capture aesthetic value in both local and touristic contexts.



Landscape Harmony

According to table 4, Nanhu Lake (75.00%) and Laneways (71.43%) received the highest ratings for landscape harmony. These elements were praised for their integration with the surrounding built and natural environment. The reflective qualities of Nanhu Lake and the narrow, rhythmically spaced Laneways contribute to Hongcun’s cohesive and immersive visual identity.

Table 4: Landscape Harmony Ratings

|   | Heritage Element | Landscape Harmony (%) |
|---|------------------|-----------------------|
| 0 | Nanhu Lake       | 75                    |
| 1 | Laneways         | 71.43                 |

Crowd Appeal

Elements like Lunar Swamp (82.14%), Lexutang (78.57%), and Shuizheng (71.43%) stood out as the most attractive to visitors and locals alike. These sites feature prominently in photographs, tourist itineraries, and cultural narratives. Their rich visual language—marked by distinct design, cultural depth, and prominent placement, make them ideal for both aesthetic enjoyment and tourism marketing.

Together, these findings given in figure 13 highlight the role of visual cohesion and emotional response in defining the value of heritage. While landscape harmony appeals to those seeking serenity and beauty, crowd appeal reflects a broader cultural magnetism. Both aspects strengthen the heritage identity of Hongcun and offer direction for conservation efforts aimed at maintaining authenticity while supporting tourism.

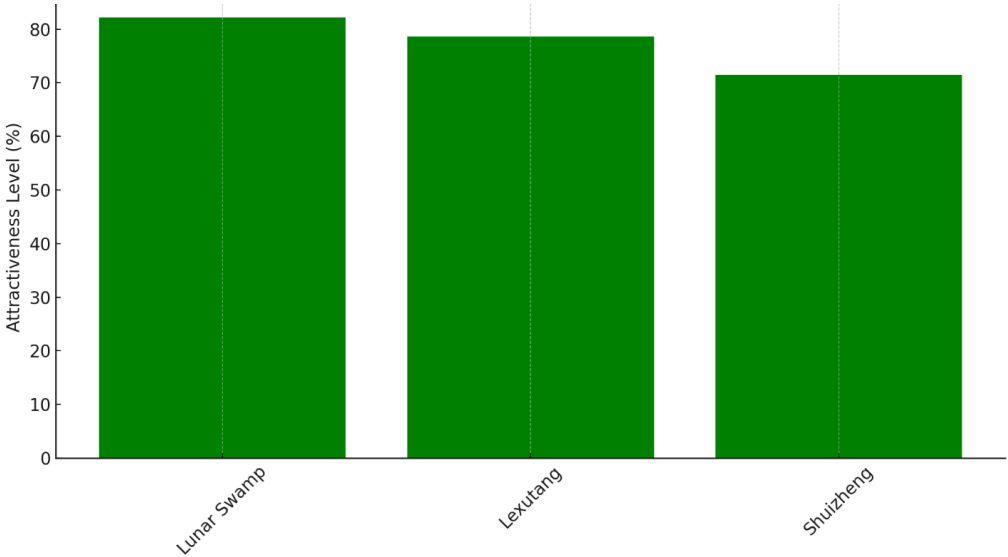


Figure 13: Crowd Appeal of Heritage Elements

Cross-Dimensional Synthesis

To understand which heritage elements in Hongcun hold the broadest community significance, a cross-dimensional matrix was developed, combining the four major value categories assessed in this study: ontological value, cultural landscape value, community relevance, and aesthetic/attractiveness. The Key theoretical insight given with Cross-Dimensional value given in table 5.

Table 5: Cross-Dimensional Value Matrix

| Heritage Element | Ontological Value | Cultural Landscape Value | Community Relevance | Aesthetic/Attractiveness |
|------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Lexutang         | ✓                 | ✓                        | ✓                   | ✓                        |
| Shuizheng        | ✓                 | ✓                        | ✓                   | ✓                        |
| Lunar Swamp      | ✓                 | ✓                        | ✓                   | ✓                        |
| Nanhu Lake       | ✓                 | ✓                        |                     | ✓                        |
| Laneways         | ✓                 | ✓                        | ✓                   | ✓                        |

The comparative synthesis highlights three standout elements: Lexutang, Shuizheng, and Lunar Swamp. These sites consistently scored high across all dimensions, suggesting their deep integration into community identity, visual coherence, and historical continuity. They are not only structurally well-preserved and culturally meaningful, but also highly recognizable and visually compelling.

Nanhu Lake and Laneways, while also highly rated in specific dimensions such as ontological and aesthetic value, showed more limited alignment with community relevance, particularly in emotional and educational engagement.

This overlap confirms that multi-dimensional icons serve as focal points in both daily life and long-term heritage identity. Their convergence across practical use, cultural memory, and visual appeal reinforces their symbolic centrality. Conversely, the divergence among some elements—like Nanhu Lake's lower community integration—highlights areas where conservation and interpretation efforts could be expanded.

By presenting this synthesis, the study not only ranks heritage importance but reveals the interrelation between physical integrity, social meaning, and aesthetic perception—key indicators for targeted heritage management and sustainable tourism planning.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored how residents of Hongcun—a UNESCO-listed traditional village—perceive and assess the value of tangible heritage elements across four dimensions: ontological integrity, cultural landscape value, community relevance, and aesthetic appeal. By applying a structured quantitative framework, the analysis provides insight into how these elements contribute to everyday life, symbolic meaning, and heritage sustainability. The discussion that follows interprets key findings, relates them to existing literature, and considers their implications for community-informed heritage planning.

### Ontological Value and Material Continuity

The consistently high scores attributed to elements such as Lexutang (78.57%), Shuizheng (89.29%), and Lunar Swamp (78.57%) confirm that residents value material continuity and architectural authenticity. These findings reinforce the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), which emphasizes culturally contextual interpretations of authenticity and integrity<sup>43</sup>. Unlike institutional definitions that focus solely on physical preservation, this study supports Corciolani<sup>44</sup> that authenticity should be understood through a local lens—where symbolic resonance and usage are as important as structural fidelity.

Further, the strong ratings for Laneways and Shuizheng on both integrity and functional continuity suggest that day-to-day utility contributes significantly to perceived authenticity. This echoes Low's theory (2002) that lived environments carry memory and meaning through use, and complements the findings of Kotradyová, et al.<sup>45</sup>, who assert that authenticity thrives when material form is actively integrated into social practice.

### Cultural Landscape Value: Historicity and Symbolic Meaning

The cultural landscape dimension revealed a consistent community appreciation for features that embody deep historical narratives and collective identity. Lexutang, Shuizheng, and Laneways were seen as culturally rich and historically deep, resonating with Mundell<sup>46</sup> argument that landscapes function as layered narratives. These spaces are valued not merely for their age, but for their associations with ancestral rituals, social gatherings, and embedded cultural symbolism.

In contrast, the 476 Provincial Road, despite being physically prominent, scored significantly lower in both historical and cultural value. This distinction illustrates Dellenbaugh-Losse<sup>47</sup> claim that cultural landscapes become heritage only when communities imbue them with meaning. Simply put, infrastructure devoid of symbolic resonance does not constitute heritage in the eyes of the community.

### Community Identity and Daily Relevance

The results further show that spaces like Shuizheng (71.43%), Laneways (71.43%), and Ancient Tree Square (64.29%) serve as active arenas for social life. Their high ratings in daily relevance demonstrate that heritage is not

only remembered but also lived. This supports the performative model of heritage advocated by Isavella<sup>48</sup>, where everyday engagement and social re-enactment are vital to the production and perpetuation of cultural meaning.

Additionally, the regional visibility of elements such as Lunar Swamp (85.71%), Shuizheng (78.57%), and Lexutang (78.57%) points to their dual function as both internal heritage symbols and external cultural icons. These findings align with Taylor<sup>49</sup> assertion that heritage identity is co-produced through internal use and external representation, particularly in contexts influenced by tourism and media.

Nevertheless, the lower functional engagement of Lexutang (35.71%) despite its high cultural and aesthetic value suggests a symbolic-functional divide. This reinforces the need for heritage strategies that address both everyday and monumental dimensions of heritage—ensuring that sites important for their historic grandeur also maintain some level of social integration.

### **Aesthetic Appeal and Cultural Tourism**

Visual harmony and aesthetic appreciation were additional factors shaping resident perceptions. Nanhu Lake (78.57%), Laneways (71.43%), and the Ancient Ginkgo Tree (75.00%) were praised for their landscape integration and sensory quality. At the same time, Lunar Swamp (82.14%), Lexutang (78.57%), and Shuizheng (71.43%) attracted the highest scores in crowd appeal, underscoring their appeal not only to locals but also to tourists.

These results affirm Zhang, and Smith<sup>50</sup> claim that visual coherence is a critical determinant of perceived heritage value. In Hongcun, features that combine nature and architecture—such as bridges, ponds, and tree-lined plazas—evoke emotional and aesthetic responses that amplify their cultural value. Lunar Swamp and Lexutang, in particular, function as hybrid heritage sites that bridge cultural memory and visitor interest. These findings support Wang, et al.<sup>51</sup> argument that dual-purpose heritage elements are ideal anchors for sustainable tourism planning.

### **Synthesis and Policy Implications**

By evaluating heritage through four dimensions, the study identifies Lexutang, Lunar Swamp, and Shuizheng as heritage icons that hold significance across ontological, cultural, social, and aesthetic axes. These findings empirically validate the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, which calls for integrative, participatory frameworks that combine material conservation with social inclusion.

More specifically, the divergence between high-value heritage elements and those perceived as culturally neutral (e.g., 476 Provincial Road) underscores the importance of community-informed mapping tools. These tools should distinguish between mere infrastructure and meaningful heritage, guiding policymakers toward differentiated management strategies—conservation for symbolic icons, activation for everyday spaces.

### **Contributions to Literature**

This study contributes to the literature in three ways:

1. It shows that structured quantitative tools—often considered less interpretive—can effectively capture nuanced community heritage values.
2. It provides evidence that heritage values are interdependent but non-substitutable; a site may be aesthetically significant but socially underutilized.
3. It underscores the practical utility of multi-dimensional valuation frameworks in preserving rural heritage under modernization and tourism pressures.

### **Limitations**

Although this research can provide valuable information about community-based heritage valuation in Hongcun, one should not ignore several limitations. To begin with, research design is cross-sectional since it only reflects perceptions at one time. This time limit limits our capability to see how local values change as policy or tourism pressures shift or as generations replace each other. Second, structured quantitative methods, though helpful in terms of comparability and statistical analysis, might not help to fully represent the symbolic implications and emotional overtones with which residents invest heritage elements with meaning. These understandings are layered

and deeper and complex may need ethnographic methods like in depth interviews or participatory mapping. Next, the sample size is not that large, and the use of purposive sampling potentially complicates generalization to other contexts than Hongcun.

### **Future Direction**

Longitudinal designs may be taken into account in future research to examine the ways in which a community can change its understanding of tangible heritage with the change of time, especially in respect of conservation efforts, socio-economic growth, or changes of tourist flows. Qualitative methodology, e.g., narrative inquiry or focus group discussions, may help to supplement the quantitative results and reveal some fine-grained layers of meaning of commemorative rituals: symbolic, spiritual, or generational. In addition, a comparative study of several of the heritage villages in Huizhou area e.g. Xidi, Nanping, or Tangyue, would permit synthesis of the region, to discern forms of valuation and community involvement, either local or widespread. This kind of cross-cultural inquiry may guide more responsive and culturally informed conservation measures and lend empirical authority to heritage policy frameworks in China and elsewhere that are developed through a context-sensitive approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how tangible heritage elements in Hongcun village—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—are valued by local residents across four dimensions: ontological value, cultural landscape significance, community relevance, and aesthetic appeal. Through a structured, community-centered quantitative approach, the research identified how different elements—such as Lexutang, Lunar Swamp, and Shuizheng—function as multi-dimensional heritage icons, deeply embedded in both the material and symbolic fabric of the village.

The findings reveal that heritage is not simply rooted in the physical preservation of structures, but is actively co-constructed through everyday use, emotional connection, historical association, and visual appreciation. Ontological value was consistently associated with features that maintain material integrity and functionality, while cultural landscape value was driven by historical depth and local narratives. Sites that integrated aesthetic cohesion and community identity—particularly those still used in daily life—were rated most highly, demonstrating that heritage significance is sustained through both social performance and spatial continuity.

Importantly, the study advances the argument that effective heritage management in rural China must account for the lived experiences and perceptions of local residents. By integrating bottom-up valuation frameworks with broader conservation policy, stakeholders can ensure that preservation efforts reflect the values of those who inhabit, interact with, and transmit heritage across generations.

Furthermore, the research offers practical insights for heritage planners, suggesting that multi-dimensional evaluation tools can help distinguish between symbolic landmarks and functional infrastructure, thereby guiding more responsive and inclusive interventions.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to the growing recognition that sustainable cultural heritage preservation depends not only on protecting the past but also on empowering communities to shape and steward their cultural landscapes in the present and future.

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