

From Rhetoric to Reality: Unpacking the Participation Paradox in Chinese Traditional Village Conservation

Si Zeng^{1,2}, Noor Aimran Samsudin^{*1}, Qinghua Jia¹

¹Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, 81310, Malaysia

²Faculty of Creative Design, Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan, 523668, China

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700544>

Received: 24 July 2026; Accepted: 29 July 2026; Published: 07 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Community participation has been widely endorsed as a cornerstone of sustainable heritage conservation, yet its implementation in Chinese traditional villages reveals a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and grounded realities. This conceptual paper critically examines this participation paradox by synthesising insights from 26 empirical and theoretical studies. Drawing on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, recent critiques of participatory models, and the critique of expert-dominated heritage discourse, the paper argues that current participatory frameworks in Chinese traditional village conservation often constitute tokenistic engagement rather than genuine power-sharing. Three interconnected barriers are identified: top-down governance structures that limit community influence, the ambivalent role of clan networks as both resources for and mechanisms of exclusion, and the disjuncture between expert-led conservation values and community understandings of heritage. The paper proposes a pathway toward more substantive participation through recognition of community knowledge, integration of informal governance mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives. Theoretical contributions include extending the participation critique to the Chinese traditional village context, unpacking the dual role of clan networks, and identifying the conditions under which participatory rhetoric can be translated into meaningful practice.

Keywords: community participation; traditional villages; heritage conservation; clan network

INTRODUCTION

The protection of traditional villages has become a significant policy priority in China. Since 2012, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development has designated over 8,000 villages as national-level traditional villages (Zhou et al., 2019). This large-scale recognition reflects an important shift in how rural heritage is understood. The concept of heritage value has expanded from distinguished sites to diverse vernacular settlements, from tangible fabric to intangible practices, and from material preservation to people-centred approaches (Zhou et al., 2019). Alongside this policy development, international heritage discourse has increasingly emphasised community participation in conservation (Foroughi et al., 2023; Rosetti et al., 2022). The idea that local residents should be active participants rather than passive recipients has gained widespread

acceptance.

Yet a troubling pattern has emerged. Despite policy rhetoric celebrating people-centred approaches, resident participation in traditional village conservation often remains limited and circumscribed (Zhou et al., 2026). Residents may be consulted during planning processes, but decision-making authority typically remains with government authorities and external experts. Conservation plans are often developed by professional teams using criteria that prioritise expert judgments over community values. Residents are positioned as informants or implementers rather than partners in shaping conservation strategies.

The gap between participatory discourse and practice is not unique to China. International research has consistently documented tensions between normative commitments to community engagement and the institutional realities of heritage governance (Foroughi et al., 2023; Rosetti et al., 2022; Pastor Pérez & Colomer, 2024). Arnstein (1969) developed the influential ladder of citizen participation to distinguish between symbolic and substantive forms of engagement, arguing that much of what passes for participation is tokenism in which communities are heard but not heeded. Heritage scholars have argued that heritage governance is often dominated by expert knowledge, material authenticity, and state-sanctioned values, which systematically marginalises community perspectives. Nevertheless, the specific configuration of this gap varies across contexts. The Chinese context adds distinctive dimensions to this paradox. The legacy of a strong state tradition in heritage governance, the enduring influence of clan networks in rural social organisation, and the specific institutional arrangements of the traditional village listing system all shape the possibilities and constraints for community participation in ways that differ from Western contexts (Fan et al., 2023). Clan networks can serve as resources for collective action but also may be exclusionary, privileging certain lineages while marginalising others (Sheng & Ma, 2023; Xu & Xia, 2023).

This is not to suggest that China's traditional village conservation policies have been ineffective. The listing system has mobilised substantial state resources for rural heritage protection, halted the demolition of countless historic settlements, and elevated heritage awareness among local officials and the public (Zhou et al., 2019). Rather, the argument is that the very success of this state-led framework has created a new set of challenges. As heritage governance becomes more institutionalised and expert-driven, the space for community negotiation and local agency tends to shrink. The question is not whether the state should lead heritage conservation, but how community participation can be meaningfully integrated into a largely state-led governance framework.

Empirical research has begun to document this participation gap. Studies have identified the top-down nature of heritage decision-making, where community engagement is structured as consultation rather than partnership (Law et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026). Research has revealed significant disjunctures between expert and resident perspectives on heritage value, composition, and characteristics (Shi et al., 2024; Katapidi, 2023). Other studies have examined factors influencing residents' participation, including motivation, opportunity, and ability (Abdelazim et al., 2025; Kunasekaran et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2023), and the role of social networks and clan ties in shaping engagement (Amat & Wang, 2025; Cai et al., 2025; Cao et al., 2021). Yet these studies remain fragmented, with limited integration into a coherent framework.

Drawing on Arnstein's (1969) ladder and the critique of expert-dominated heritage discourse, this paper addresses three research questions:

1. What forms does community participation actually take in Chinese traditional village conservation, and how do these compare to participatory ideals?
2. What barriers prevent the translation of participatory rhetoric into substantive community engagement?

3. What conditions and strategies might enable a move toward more genuine participation?

The paper argues that current participatory frameworks often constitute tokenistic engagement rather than genuine power-sharing. Three interconnected barriers are identified: top-down governance structures (Law et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026), the ambivalent role of clan networks (Fan et al., 2023; Sheng & Ma, 2023; Xu & Xia, 2023), and the disjuncture between expert and community heritage framings (Shi et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Qin & Leung, 2021). The paper then proposes a pathway toward more substantive participation through recognition of community knowledge, integration of informal governance mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review Methodology

This paper employs a systematic literature review approach to synthesise existing research on community participation in heritage conservation, with a particular focus on the Chinese traditional village context. The literature search was conducted across three databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), covering publications from 1991 to 2026. The search strategy combined keywords related to community participation (“community participation,” “resident participation,” “public engagement”), heritage conservation (“heritage conservation,” “cultural heritage,” “traditional village,” “historic village”), and context (“China,” “Chinese”). The initial search yielded 385 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts against inclusion criteria, 68 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Studies were included if they: (a) examined community or resident participation in heritage conservation or related governance contexts, (b) provided empirical data or theoretical frameworks applicable to the Chinese context, and (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals. The final synthesis draws on 26 studies that were identified as most relevant to the participation paradox in Chinese traditional villages. The analytical framework was developed iteratively through thematic analysis, with key themes identified inductively from the literature and subsequently organised around the research questions of this paper.

Arnstein's Ladder and the Critique of Expert-Dominated Heritage Discourse

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation provides a foundational framework for distinguishing between different forms of community engagement. The ladder arranges participation along eight rungs, from manipulation and therapy at the bottom to citizen control at the top. The middle rungs, informing, consultation, and placation, represent tokenism, where communities may be heard but not necessarily heeded. Only at the upper rungs, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, does participation become substantive, involving genuine redistribution of decision-making authority. The framework remains valuable for its insistence that evaluating participatory practice requires attention to where decision-making authority actually resides.

Despite its analytical utility, Arnstein's ladder is not without limitations. The ladder presupposes a linear progression from lower to higher forms of participation, implicitly assuming that citizen control is always the most desirable outcome. In non-Western contexts, however, community participation may take forms that do not fit neatly onto this ladder. Informal institutions such as clan networks, kinship obligations, and community-based dispute resolution can enable forms of collective action and influence that are not captured by Arnstein's framework. These informal mechanisms may not involve formal “partnership” or “delegated power” as Arnstein defines them, yet they can constitute meaningful forms of community agency. Moreover, the ladder's implicit normative preference for individualised citizen control may not align with the more collectivist orientations of rural Chinese communities, where decision-making is often mediated through group consensus and lineage-based authority.

Recent scholarship has further questioned the assumption that participation is inherently empowering, arguing that non-participation may equally reflect strategic withdrawal, cultural misalignment, or ethical refusal rather than simply exclusion or incapacity (Zhang, 2026). This does not render the ladder irrelevant, but it suggests that its application to the Chinese context requires sensitivity to local institutional realities and a recognition that substantive participation may look different from the model Arnstein envisioned.

A complementary critical perspective is provided by scholars who have argued that heritage governance is often dominated by expert knowledge, material authenticity, and state-sanctioned values. When expert knowledge is treated as the only legitimate basis for conservation decisions, communities become passive recipients rather than active participants. Their knowledge about heritage places is devalued, and their priorities are subordinated to professional criteria. Conservation interventions developed without community input may fail to resonate with residents, undermining both legitimacy and sustainability (Katapidi, 2023; Shi et al., 2024). Yao et al. (2026) similarly documented that expert-led conservation interventions in cave dwelling villages prioritised material authenticity over community understandings of heritage as lived practice, a pattern that reflects what they term a 'material-centric bias' in conservation practice.

In the Chinese context, this expert-dominated discourse operates through specific institutional channels. Conservation planning is typically led by expert teams who apply professional criteria to assess heritage value and develop conservation strategies (Zhou et al., 2019; Law et al., 2025). Communities may be consulted but have limited influence over the framing of problems or selection of options. Expert frameworks have historically privileged tangible fabric and architectural authenticity over intangible practices and living social relations (Zhou et al., 2019), creating heritage that is valued by experts but disconnected from community life.

Current Approaches in Participation Research

Recent research has applied multiple theoretical frameworks to understand community participation in heritage conservation. The theory of planned behaviour, developed by Ajzen (1991), proposes that behavioural intentions are predicted by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Tang et al. (2022) applied this framework to neighbourhood micro-renewal in Shanghai, finding that participatory intention and behaviour were predicted by subjective norms, attitudes, and perceived control, with community attachment moderating the intention-behaviour relationship. Xie et al. (2024) examined green cultural heritage conservation in Tokyo, finding that perceived behavioural control had the greatest positive influence on conservation intentions. Amat and Wang (2025) integrated social network theory with the theory of planned behaviour, finding that social networks, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly impacted rural residents' engagement in living environment improvement.

The motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) model has also been applied. Abdelazim et al. (2025) extended the MOA framework with place attachment to explore participation in the Jubbah World Heritage Site in Saudi Arabia. Their findings showed that opportunities, awareness, and place attachment positively affected community participation. Kunasekaran et al. (2022) applied the MOA model in Taiping, Malaysia, finding that residents' perceptions of positive socio-cultural impacts and opportunity were significant for participation. Fu et al. (2023) examined resident participation in neighbourhood regeneration in China, finding that information acquisition, social norms, and perceived grassroots government support overcame psychological inertia and reconstructed participation behaviour.

Other studies have examined the role of place attachment. Cai et al. (2025) found that place attachment influenced sustainable behaviours toward cultural heritage in Dongmen Village, Fujian Province. Cao et al. (2021) examined residents along the Grand Canal Yangzhou Section, finding that place attachment was positively correlated with support for tourism, with perceptions mediating this relationship. Boley et al. (2021) developed

an Abbreviated Place Attachment Scale, providing a cross-cultural measurement tool.

Studies have also examined informal institutions. Fan et al. (2023) demonstrated that clan culture affects patterns of industrial specialisation in China today. Xu and Xia (2023) found that the strength of clan networks significantly positively affected farmers' participation in living environment improvement, while the scale of clan networks did not have significant effect. Sheng and Ma (2023) found that village clans positively affected willingness to participate in domestic waste governance, with common rules and reciprocity increasing collective action.

Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain. Studies applying the theory of planned behaviour and MOA model have focused on identifying factors that influence participation intentions but have paid less attention to the distinction between symbolic and substantive participation. The role of informal institutions, particularly clan networks, has not been fully integrated into analyses of heritage participation specifically. The disjuncture between expert and community heritage framings has been documented but not systematically examined as a barrier to substantive participation. Furthermore, the literature has paid limited attention to regional variations in participation outcomes across different village types, governance systems, and cultural contexts within China. This paper addresses these gaps by drawing on Arnstein's ladder and the critique of expert-dominated heritage discourse to analyse the participation paradox in Chinese traditional village conservation. The key studies on community participation in heritage conservation as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Key Studies on Community Participation in Heritage Conservation

Study	Context	Theoretical Framework	Key Findings
Abdelazim et al. (2025)	Jubbah WHS, Saudi Arabia	Extended MOA with place attachment	Opportunities, awareness, place attachment positively affected participation
Amat & Wang (2025)	Hebei, China	TPB; social network theory	Social networks, subjective norms, perceived control significantly impacted engagement
Cai et al. (2025)	Dongmen Village, Fujian, China	Place attachment theory	Place attachment influenced sustainable heritage behaviours
Cao et al. (2021)	Grand Canal Yangzhou, China	Place attachment	PA positively correlated with support for tourism; perceptions mediated relationship
Chen (2024)	Pokfulam Village, Hong Kong	Trans-local knowledge	Global knowledge flows influenced local participation
Fu et al. (2023)	Neighbourhood regeneration, China	SOR theory; psychological inertia	Stimuli overcame inertia and reconstructed participation
Kunasekaran et al. (2022)	Taiping, Malaysia	MOA model	Positive perceptions and opportunity were significant for participation

Law et al. (2025)	Tangwei Village, Guangdong, China	Top-down governance	Heritage tourism served government objectives rather than community needs
Qin & Leung (2021)	Nalu Village, China	Sustainable development	Traditional village designation increased income, satisfaction, and attachment
Sheng & Ma (2023)	China	Self-governance theory	Village clans positively affected willingness to participate
Shi et al. (2024)	Luzhong region, China	Living heritage	Significant expert-resident differences on heritage value and composition
Tang et al. (2022)	Shanghai, China	Extended TPB; ECM	Participatory intention predicted by attitudes, norms, perceived control
Xie et al. (2024)	Tokyo, Japan	Extended TPB	Perceived behavioural control had greatest positive influence
Xu & Xia (2023)	Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, China	Informal and formal institutions	Strength of clan networks positively affected participation
Yao et al. (2026)	Yellow River Basin cave dwellings, China	CCAR framework; Y-LHSI/Y-LHI indices	Collective action efficacy is a strong predictor of living heritage preservation outcomes
Zhang (2026)	Houhai Village, China	Willingness-Capability model; ethnography	Participation shaped by interplay of willingness and capability; non-participation may reflect strategic withdrawal, not just exclusion
Zhou et al. (2026)	Qiaonan Village, China	Macro-meso-micro governance framework	Only 34% of residents perceived planning input as influential; multi-level governance mismatch identified

The Gap Between Rhetoric And Reality

Policy Aspirations and Institutional Constraints

China's traditional village listing system provides formal recognition and funding for villages deemed to have outstanding heritage value (Zhou et al., 2019). Policy documents accompanying the listing system increasingly reference community participation. The Basic Requirements for the Protection and Development Planning of Traditional Chinese Villages, issued in 2013, emphasises that planning should involve local residents.

Subsequent policy documents have continued to underscore the importance of public participation (Zhou et al., 2019).

However, the institutional mechanisms through which participation is enabled reveal important limitations. The listing process itself is fundamentally top-down, with villagers having limited input into designation decisions (Zhou et al., 2019). Criteria for listing are developed by experts and administered by government agencies. The tension is not merely a gap between policy and implementation; it is inscribed within policy documents themselves. The Basic Requirements for the Protection and Development Planning of Traditional Chinese Villages, for instance, simultaneously mandates "broad public participation" and specifies that conservation plans must be prepared by "qualified professional teams" using "scientific evaluation methods." The document does not specify how community input should be integrated with professional assessment when they conflict, nor does it provide mechanisms for communities to challenge expert determinations. This institutional ambiguity is not accidental. It reflects a broader governance logic in which community participation is valued instrumentally as a source of local knowledge and a means of securing implementation rather than intrinsically, as a matter of community rights or democratic legitimacy. The consequence is that participatory mechanisms are designed to elicit community input without redistributing decision-making authority.

The planning frameworks that guide conservation are typically prepared by outside experts and approved by government authorities, with communities consulted after key decisions have been made (Law et al., 2025). Participation is thus often structured as a response to external initiatives rather than a process of community-led identification and prioritisation.

Community Practice in Traditional Villages

Empirical research reveals that participation in traditional village conservation often approximates tokenism. Residents may be informed about conservation plans but have little influence over their content (Law et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026). Community consultation meetings may occur, but the agenda is set by authorities, and outcomes are often predetermined.

Law et al. (2025) provide a detailed case study of Tangwei village in Guangdong Province. Their research reveals that government-led rural heritage revitalisation initiatives serve government economic objectives rather than addressing community preservation needs. Traditional cultural practices become commodified and detached from local communities through standardised festivals and artistic interventions.

Other research documents instances of more meaningful engagement. Qin and Leung (2021) examined Nalu Village, finding that the state's designation as a traditional village promoted rural tourism, increased villager income, and enhanced sense of attachment. The pride of villagers in turn made them cherish their village history. However, whether this represents substantive participation or the benefits of a fundamentally external process remains an open question.

The limitations of participation are evident in the contrast between policy discourse and community experience. Shi et al. (2024) quantified differences in heritage perspectives between experts and residents in the Luzhong region, finding significant discrepancies concerning heritage value, composition, and characteristics. While experts emphasised integrity and material authenticity, residents gave greater weight to living aspects of heritage. Yao et al. (2026) documented a similar pattern in cave dwelling villages, finding that expert-led conservation often prioritised material authenticity over community understandings of heritage as lived practice.

These findings suggest that expert-led conservation may fail to reflect community priorities, a pattern that may be particularly pronounced in regions with strong clan-based social structures or where tourism development

pressures are intense. However, the extent of this gap likely varies across regions. In areas where clan networks remain strong, residents may have alternative channels for influence outside formal participatory mechanisms; in areas where clan structures have weakened, residents may be more reliant on formal channels that offer limited influence. This suggests that expert-led conservation may fail to reflect community priorities.

The Ambivalent Role of Clan Networks

Clan networks play a significant role in rural Chinese social organisation, shaping patterns of social interaction, mutual obligation, and collective action (Fan et al., 2023). Their role in participation is ambivalent.

Clan networks can enable participation. Sheng and Ma (2023) found that village clans positively affected willingness to participate in domestic waste governance, with common rules and reciprocity increasing collective action. Xu and Xia (2023) found that the strength of clan networks significantly positively affected farmers' participation, with the perceivable authority of village chiefs having a positive moderating effect.

However, clan networks also present liabilities. They may be exclusionary, with non-clan members or those from smaller lineages having limited access to decision-making channels (Sheng & Ma, 2023). Clan-based decision-making may reflect established power hierarchies that suppress rather than amplify diverse community voices. Furthermore, clan networks can be co-opted by local authorities, becoming vehicles for state objectives rather than authentic community expression (Xu & Xia, 2023). Promoting inclusive participation requires attention to both the enabling and constraining effects of informal institutions.

The evidence reviewed above suggests that the relationship between clan networks and participation is conditional rather than deterministic. Two propositions emerge from this analysis. First, clan networks are more likely to enable participation when they are characterised by strong internal norms of reciprocity and when local authorities recognise and engage with clan-based decision-making structures. Under these conditions, clans function as social infrastructure that lowers the transaction costs of collective action. Second, clan networks are more likely to constrain participation when a single lineage dominates the village and when formal governance mechanisms do not provide safeguards for minority voices. In such contexts, clan-based participation may reproduce existing power hierarchies rather than democratise decision-making. These conditional propositions point toward a more nuanced understanding of informal institutions in heritage governance than either celebrating or condemning clan networks would permit. **Table 2** summarizes the gap between participatory rhetoric and practice.

Table 2. The Gap Between Participatory Rhetoric and Practice

Dimension	Participatory Rhetoric	Practice Realities	Sources
Decision-making authority	Communities as partners	Communities as consultation recipients	Zhou et al. (2026); Law et al. (2025)
Knowledge recognition	Local knowledge valued	Expert knowledge privileged	Shi et al. (2024); Katapidi (2023); Yao et al. (2026)
Participation mechanisms	Inclusive engagement	Information provision, limited consultation	Zhou et al. (2026); Foroughi et al. (2023)
Power relations	Equal partnership	Power asymmetries	Pastor Pérez & Colomer

		reproduced	(2024); Rosetti et al. (2022); Zhang (2026)
Community outcomes	Benefits to communities	Limited community influence	Qin & Leung (2021); Law et al. (2025)

The dimensions identified in **Table 2** represent a systematic gap between what participatory policies promise and what participatory practices deliver. To visualise how this gap is produced and sustained, **Figure 1** presents an integrated model of the participation paradox. The figure illustrates how the contradictions between policy rhetoric and practice realities converge into a participation gap, which is reinforced by three interconnected barriers, ultimately producing tokenistic engagement rather than substantive community influence.

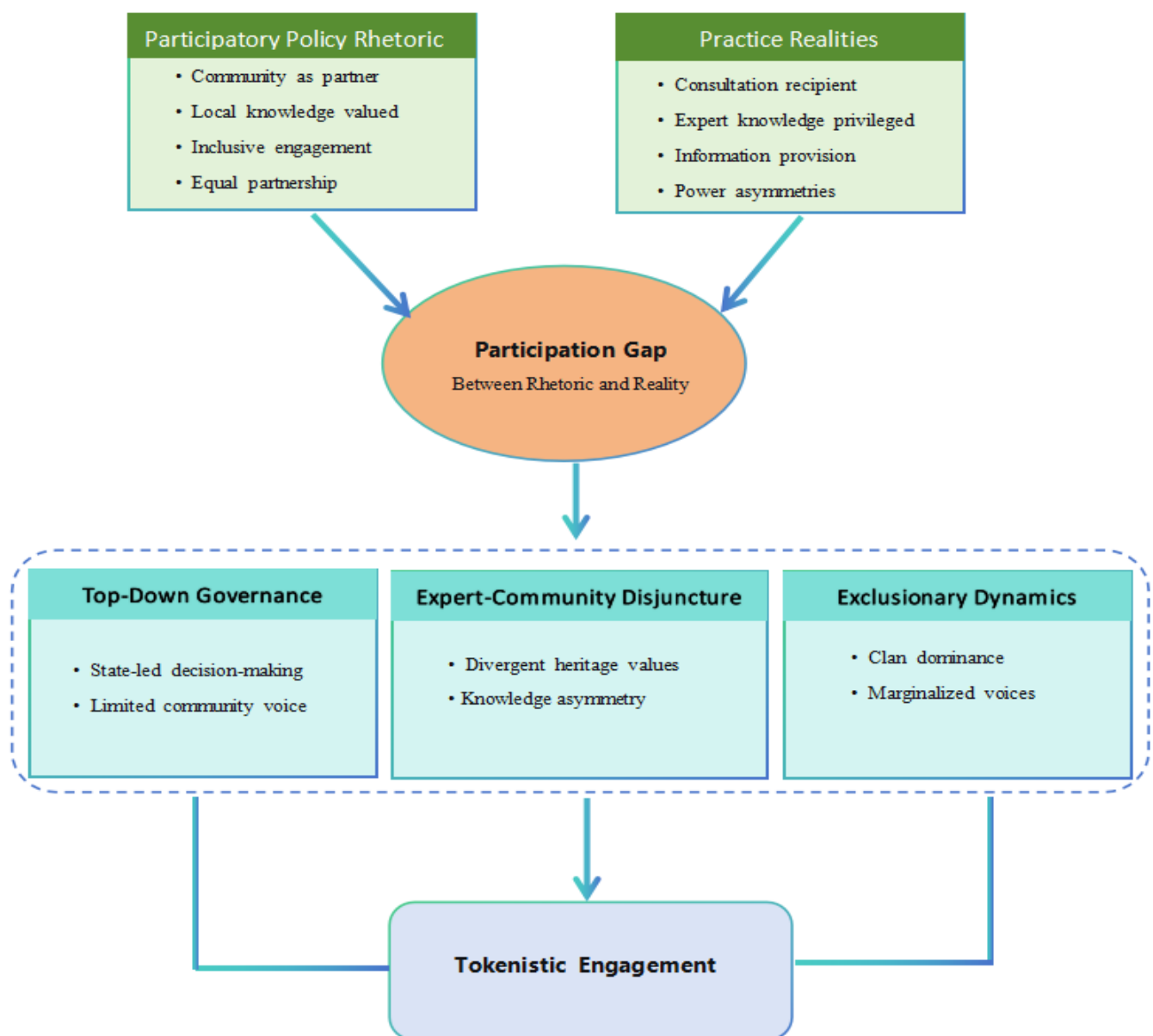


Figure 1. The Participation Paradox in Chinese Traditional Village Conservation

Barriers To Substantive Participation

Top-Down Governance Structures

The most fundamental barrier to substantive participation is the institutional structure of heritage governance itself. Traditional village conservation is governed through a system in which authority resides with state actors and expert bodies, with communities positioned as consultation recipients rather than decision-making partners (Law et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026).

This top-down structure is evident at multiple levels. National government establishes policy frameworks and listing criteria. Provincial and local authorities implement these policies through bureaucratic procedures that allow limited community input. Expert teams conduct heritage surveys and develop conservation plans (Zhou et al., 2019). Residents may be consulted but rarely have the opportunity to shape planning assumptions or priorities.

The consequences extend beyond procedural concerns. When decisions are made externally, they may fail to reflect community values and priorities (Shi et al., 2024). Conservation plans developed by outside experts may prioritise what experts regard as significant while neglecting what residents consider important. This reduces community buy-in and commitment.

The Disjuncture Between Expert and Community Framings

A related barrier is the disjuncture between how experts and community members understand and value heritage. This reflects different knowledge systems and relationships to heritage places (Shi et al., 2024; Katapidi, 2023; Chen, 2024).

Expert conservation discourse emphasises material authenticity, historical fabric, and tangible attributes. Conservation professionals are trained to identify and protect architecturally or historically significant elements (Zhou et al., 2019). This framework may marginalise community perspectives that emphasise living use, social meaning, or intangible dimensions. For residents, heritage is about lived experience, memory, identity, and practice (Chen, 2024; Qin & Leung, 2021). What matters is not just preserving old buildings but sustaining the social relationships and cultural practices that give them meaning.

Katapidi (2023) examined Greek traditional settlements, arguing that conservation policies can negatively affect local notions of heritage if the living aspect is not tactfully addressed. Shi et al. (2024) provided empirical evidence in the Chinese context, finding significant differences between expert and resident perspectives. While experts emphasised integrity and material authenticity, residents gave greater weight to living aspects. Yao et al. (2026) similarly found that expert-led conservation in cave dwelling villages prioritised material authenticity over community understandings of heritage as lived practice. Conservation interventions that follow expert priorities may fail to resonate with community members, leading to reduced commitment and engagement.

Exclusionary Dynamics of Participation

Even when participatory mechanisms exist, their effects may be limited by exclusionary dynamics. Participation reflects and reproduces existing power relations (Pastor Pérez & Colomer, 2024; Rosetti et al., 2022). Gender, age, and economic differentiation shape who can participate and with what effect. Women may have limited voice in decision-making. Younger residents may be excluded from processes dominated by elders. Wealthier residents may have greater opportunities to influence outcomes.

Clan networks are a particularly important dimension of exclusion. In villages where one lineage dominates, the perspectives of other lineages may be marginalised. Residents who are not members of the dominant clan may have limited access to decision-making channels. Participatory mechanisms may advantage those with existing

resources, knowledge, and connections (Zhang, 2026). Addressing these dynamics requires deliberate strategies to build capacities and reduce barriers.

Rosetti et al. (2022) examined international declarations and policy documents, finding that the low incidence of decisional forms of participation confirmed challenges of power-sharing at all scales. Pastor Pérez & Colomer (2024) explored whether institutionalised participation continues to be a symbolic tool that supports expert-dominated heritage discourses. Their critique resonates with the participation paradox in Chinese traditional village conservation. The barriers to substantive participation as show in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Barriers to Substantive Participation

Barrier	Description	Key Mechanisms	Sources
Top-down governance structures	Authority resides with state actors and experts	National listing system; expert-led planning	Zhou et al. (2026); Law et al. (2025)
Expert-community disjuncture	Different understandings of heritage value	Expert-dominated discourse; expert criteria	Shi et al. (2024); Katapidi (2023); Chen (2024); Yao et al. (2026)
Exclusionary dynamics	Some voices privileged, others marginalised	Clan dominance; capacity barriers	Sheng & Ma (2023); Xu & Xia (2023); Pastor Pérez & Colomer (2024); Zhang (2026)

Toward Substantive Participation

Recognising Community Knowledge

A first step is recognising community knowledge as legitimate and valuable (Shi et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Katapidi, 2023). Residents possess detailed knowledge about the history, uses, and meanings of heritage places that experts typically lack. This includes understanding of how places have changed over time, how they are used in daily life, and what they mean to different community members (Cai et al., 2025; Qin & Leung, 2021). This knowledge is not static but evolves through practice.

Practical strategies include participatory documentation approaches that involve residents in heritage surveys (Chen, 2024), community-led interpretation projects (Shi et al., 2024), and collaborative planning processes (Foroughi et al., 2023). These approaches require experts and authorities to treat community perspectives as equally valid. When communities see their knowledge reflected in conservation strategies, they are more likely to commit to conservation outcomes.

Integrating Informal Governance Mechanisms

The second strategy is integrating informal governance mechanisms, particularly clan networks, while mitigating their exclusionary tendencies (Sheng & Ma, 2023; Xu & Xia, 2023; Fan et al., 2023). Clan networks provide mechanisms for collective decision-making, mobilise resources, and enable social sanctions that support cooperative behaviour (Sheng & Ma, 2023). These features can be harnessed for conservation when conservation is framed in ways that resonate with community values.

However, integration requires attention to inclusiveness. Formal conservation mechanisms can provide safeguards against exclusion by dominant lineages (Xu & Xia, 2023). This might involve codifying decision-making processes, establishing complaint mechanisms, or supporting groups who may be marginalised in clan-based decision-making. The integration of informal and formal governance requires careful institutional design.

Building Participatory Capacity and Pursuing Institutional Reform

Meaningful participation requires capacity to engage effectively (Abdelazim et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2024). Capacity-building strategies include training programs that enable residents to understand heritage policies and planning processes (Fu et al., 2023). However, capacity-building must not become one-way. It should also involve building institutional capacity to engage with communities, including training officials and experts in participatory methods (Foroughi et al., 2023).

Ultimately, moving beyond tokenism requires institutional reform that redistributes decision-making authority (Zhou et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026). This might include establishing community advisory bodies with formal decision-making authority, developing accountable processes, and creating funding mechanisms for community-led initiatives (Qin & Leung, 2021). The traditional village listing system could be reformed to incorporate community-led heritage identification and resident representation on evaluation committees (Zhou et al., 2019).

These proposals, however, face significant implementation challenges. Local governments may resist power-sharing because it complicates administrative procedures and introduces uncertainties into planning processes. Clan elites may oppose formalising decision-making processes if it threatens their informal authority. Community members themselves may be reluctant to invest time and effort in participatory processes if they have experienced prior consultations as tokenistic and fruitless. Addressing these barriers requires more than technical fixes. It requires building trust through demonstrated responsiveness, showing communities that their input leads to visible changes, and creating accountability mechanisms that hold authorities to participatory commitments. It also requires patience. Institutional change in heritage governance is unlikely to occur rapidly, and meaningful participation may need to be built through cumulative small wins rather than grand reforms. Recognising these realities does not make the pathway less valid; it makes it more realistic.

A key consideration for implementing these strategies is regional variation. In southern China, where clan structures tend to be stronger and more lineage-based, integrating informal governance mechanisms may be more feasible but also carries greater risks of exclusion. In northern China, where clan structures are often weaker, building participatory capacity and formal institutional reform may need to take precedence. Similarly, villages heavily dependent on tourism may face different participation dynamics than those with limited tourism exposure. Practitioners should tailor their approaches to local conditions rather than applying a uniform model across all village types.

To translate the proposed strategies into a coherent pathway, Figure 2 outlines the conditions under which tokenistic participation can be transformed into substantive engagement. The figure identifies three enabling conditions: recognition of community knowledge, integration of informal governance, and capacity-building combined with institutional reform. These conditions together facilitate the transition from tokenism to genuine participation.

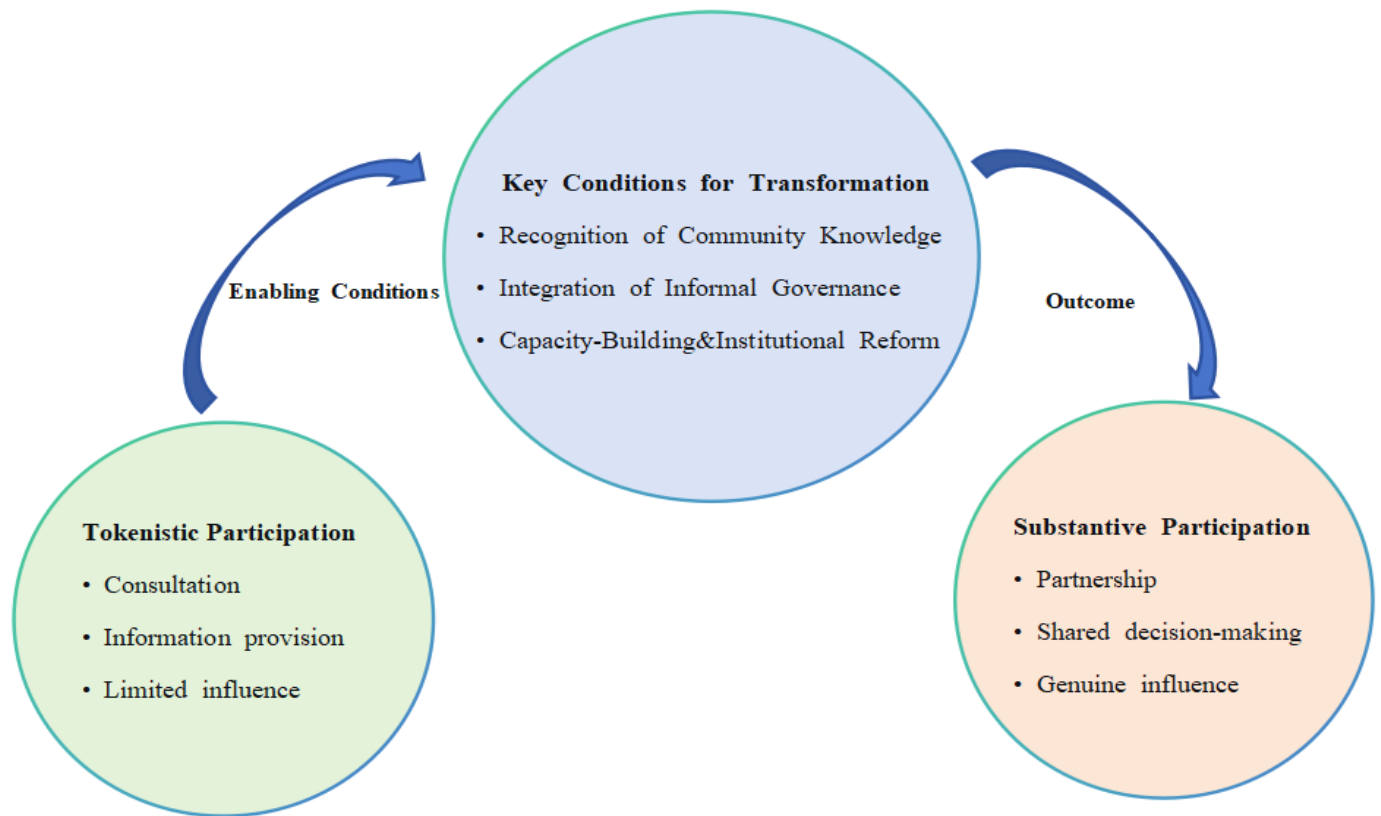


Figure 2. Pathway from Tokenism to Substantive Participation

DISCUSSION

This conceptual analysis yields several insights that extend existing understandings of community participation in Chinese heritage governance. The discussion below synthesises the paper's theoretical contributions, reflects on practical implications for heritage practitioners and policymakers, and identifies key limitations alongside directions for future research.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes three contributions. First, it systematically examines the participation paradox in Chinese traditional village conservation, extending international critiques of tokenistic participation to this specific institutional and cultural setting. Second, it unpacks the dual role of clan networks as both resources for and constraints on participation, challenging simplistic assumptions about informal institutions. Third, it identifies conditions for translating participatory rhetoric into meaningful practice, offering a framework for understanding and addressing the participation gap.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the analysis suggests that evaluating participation requires attention to where decision-making authority resides, not just whether communities were consulted. Tokenistic engagement may undermine genuine participation by creating the appearance of engagement without substantive influence. Supporting community participation requires attention to the specific institutional and cultural context. Attending to clan network dynamics and understanding how they intersect with formal governance structures is essential. Capacity-building must be accompanied by institutional capacity to engage with communities. Institutional reform that redistributes

decision-making authority is necessary for meaningful participation.

Furthermore, practitioners should recognise that participation strategies must be adapted to regional and village-level variations. The effectiveness of different participatory mechanisms likely depends on local governance arrangements, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural traditions. A one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement in traditional village conservation is unlikely to succeed. Instead, practitioners should conduct local assessments of clan structures, tourism pressures, and existing governance capacities before designing participatory interventions.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper offers a critical perspective on the participation paradox in Chinese traditional village conservation. As a conceptual paper, it does not present primary empirical data. The arguments advanced here are grounded in existing literature and case studies. Future research could extend this critique by examining whether similar patterns of tokenistic participation emerge in other heritage contexts, such as historic towns, urban heritage districts, or heritage sites outside China. Comparative studies across different governance systems would further illuminate how institutional structures shape the gap between participatory rhetoric and practice.

Several specific directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, participatory observation studies in diverse traditional villages could provide rich empirical evidence of how communities experience and negotiate conservation processes, revealing the micro-dynamics of participation that are not captured in policy documents or large-scale surveys.

Second, comparative research across regions with different governance structures, clan strengths, and socioeconomic conditions could identify the contextual factors that shape participation outcomes, moving beyond the general patterns identified in this paper toward more context-sensitive theorising. Third, longitudinal studies tracking changes in community participation over time, particularly as villages undergo tourism development or policy shifts, could reveal how participation dynamics evolve and how participatory reforms actually unfold in practice. Finally, action research that actively involves communities in co-designing conservation strategies could test the feasibility and effectiveness of the pathways proposed in this paper, generating both practical insights and theoretical refinements.

CONCLUSION

The participation paradox in Chinese traditional village conservation reflects a broader tension between normative commitments to community engagement and institutional realities. While policy rhetoric emphasises participation, practice often remains tokenistic. Three interconnected barriers were identified: top-down governance structures, the disjuncture between expert and community understandings of heritage, and exclusionary dynamics of participation. Understanding these barriers as interconnected rather than isolated reveals why participatory reforms in Chinese traditional villages have repeatedly fallen short. Each barrier reinforces the others: top-down structures marginalise community knowledge, expert framings exclude local voices, and exclusionary dynamics legitimate technocratic control. Breaking this cycle requires simultaneous action across all three fronts.

Moving beyond the paradox requires recognising community knowledge, integrating informal governance mechanisms, building participatory capacity, and pursuing institutional reform. When communities participate meaningfully in shaping their heritage, conservation is more likely to be legitimate, effective, and sustainable.

REFERENCES

1. Abdelazim, T., Alfraidi, Y., Tueaiman, A., Alhamli, F., Elhassan, A., & Nassr, A. (2025). Local people's participation in Jubbah Heritage Site conservation: extending the motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) theory. *Npj Heritage Science*, 13(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s40494-025-01554-9>
2. Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211.
3. Amat, G., & Wang, J. (2025). The Impact of Social Networks on Rural Residents' Engagement in Living Environment Upgrade: An Integrated Analysis Drawing on Social Network Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. *PLOS ONE*, 20(1), e0312779. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0312779>
4. Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
5. Boley, B. B., Strzelecka, M., Yeager, E. P., Ribeiro, M. A., Aleshinloye, K. D., Woosnam, K. M., & Mimbs, B. P. (2021). Measuring place attachment with the Abbreviated Place Attachment Scale (APAS). *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 74, 101577. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101577>
6. Cai, W., Shu, Z., & Liu, Y. (2025). Exploring the Role of Place Attachment in Shaping Sustainable Behaviors toward Marine Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Dongmen Village in Fujian Province, China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1476308. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1476308>
7. Cao, W., Yu, W., & Xu, J. (2021). City vs. Town residents' place attachment, perceptions and support for tourism development in a linear World Cultural Heritage Site. *PLOS ONE*, 16(10), e0258365. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258365>
8. Chen, F. (2024). Trans-Local Knowledge and Community Participation: A Study of Heritage Conservation of Pokfulam Village in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(4), 420-437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2024.2315236>
9. Fan, H., Li, C., Xue, C., & Yu, M. (2023). Clan culture and patterns of industrial specialization in China. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 207, 457-478. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.01.026>
10. Foroughi, M., de Andrade, B., Roders, A. P., & Wang, T. (2023). Public Participation and Consensus-Building in Urban Planning from the Lens of Heritage Planning: A Systematic Literature Review. *Cities*, 135, 104235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104235>
11. Fu, X., Qian, Q. K., Liu, G., Zhuang, T., Visscher, H. J., & Huang, R. (2023). Overcoming inertia for sustainable urban development: Understanding the role of stimuli in shaping residents' participation behaviors in neighborhood regeneration projects in China. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 103, 107252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2023.107252>
12. Pastor Pérez, A., & Colomer, L. (2024). Dissecting authorised participation in cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 29(5), 625-643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2284741>
13. Katapidi, I. (2023). The role of conservation policies in local understandings of heritage in living heritage places: a Greek testimony. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 29(4), 275-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2181377>
14. Kunasekaran, P., Mostafa Rasoolimanesh, S., Wang, M., Ragavan, N. A., & Hamid, Z. A. (2022). Enhancing local community participation towards heritage tourism in Taiping, Malaysia: application of the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) model. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 17(4), 465-484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2022.2048839>
15. Law, L., Chen, H., Liu, S., & Cheung, M. (2025). Top-down rural heritage revitalization and economic development: A case study of Tangwei village, Dongguan, Guangdong, China. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*, 0(0), 5029. <https://doi.org/10.36922/jcau.5029>

16. Qin, R. J., & Leung, H. H. (2021). Becoming a Traditional Village: Heritage Protection and Livelihood Transformation of a Chinese Village. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2331. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042331>
17. Rosetti, I., Bertrand Cabral, C., Pereira Roders, A., Jacobs, M., & Albuquerque, R. (2022). Heritage and Sustainability: Regulating Participation. *Sustainability*, 14(3), 1674. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14031674>
18. Sheng, L., & Ma, J. (2023). Village Clans and Rural Households' Willingness to Participate in Domestic Waste Governance: Evidence from China. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 425, 138951. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.138951>
19. Shi, X., Beza, B. B., Liu, C., Wu, B., & Qiu, N. (2024). Differences in Perspectives Between Experts and Residents on Living Heritage: A Study of Traditional Chinese Villages in the Luzhong Region. *Buildings*, 14(12), 4022. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings14124022>
20. Tang, D., Gong, X., & Liu, M. (2022). Residents' Behavioral Intention to Participate in Neighborhood Micro-renewal Based on an Extended Theory of Planned Behavior: A Case Study in Shanghai, China. *Habitat International*, 129, 102672. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2022.102672>
21. Xie, J., Li, H., Furuya, K., Chen, J., & Luo, S. (2024). Participatory Intention and Behavior in Green Cultural Heritage Conservation: An Application of the Extended Theory of Planned Behavior. *Heritage Science*, 12(1), 299. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-024-01407-x>
22. Xu, K., & Xia, X. (2023). The Influence of Farmers' Clan Networks on Their Participation in Living Environment Improvement during the Time of Transition in Traditional Rural China. *Agriculture*, 13(5), 1055. <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture13051055>
23. Yao, J., Zhao, L., Wang, Y., & Ouyang, Z. (2026). Revitalising Living Heritage Through Collaborative Design: An Adaptive Reuse Framework for Transforming Cave Dwellings into Urban-Rural Symbiosis Hubs. *Sustainability*, 18(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su18021079>
24. Zhang, S. (2026). The willingness-capability model: Reframing local participation in a tourism economy. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 116, 104096. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2025.104096>
25. Zhou, M., Chu, S., & Du, X. (2019). Safeguarding Traditional Villages in China: The Role and Challenges of Rural Heritage Preservation. *Built Heritage*, 3(2), 81-93. <https://doi.org/10.1186/BF03545729>
26. Zhou, Y., Xiao, L., Mokhtar, N. A., & Mat Sulaiman, M. K. A. (2026). Revitalising Heritage Villages in Asia: Multi-Dimensional Approaches to Cultural Landscape Preservation-A Case Study of Qiaonan Village, China. *Sustainability*, 18(10), 4970. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su18104970>