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EVALUATING CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM THROUGH A MULTIDIMENSIONAL LENS: METHODS, MODELS, AND THE CASE OF THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

*(Penilaian Pelancongan Warisan Budaya Bangsa Melalui Kaca Mata Multi-Dimensi:
Kaedah, Model Dan Kajian Kes Tembok Besar China)*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage tourism plays a pivotal role in the preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage while contributing to regional socio-economic development. This study addresses the growing needs to evaluate the multidimensional value of cultural heritage amid rapid tourism expansion. The objective is to systematically review the development of cultural heritage tourism and examine contemporary methods used for heritage value assessment. Methodologically, this research adopts a literature review approach, analyzing domestic and international sources to explore qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools, including Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), factor analysis, fuzzy comprehensive evaluation, the

Travel Cost Method (TCM), and the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM). Case analyses—particularly the Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor and its incorporation into China’s National Cultural Park framework—highlight the evolving practices of integrated conservation, digital engagement, and community participation. Findings reveal a predominance of economic and tangible asset valuation in current literature, with insufficient attention paid to socio-cultural dimensions such as collective memory, identity, and local participation. The paper concludes that sustainable cultural heritage tourism requires a more inclusive and community-centered governance model, alongside innovative strategies such as immersive digital technologies and cross-sector collaboration. This multidimensional and dynamic approach ensures heritage remains a living cultural asset while balancing conservation and development goals.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism, Heritage Value Assessment, Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor, National Cultural Park.

INTRODUCTION

The definition of cultural heritage tourism has evolved from an initial focus on tangible heritage—such as monuments, buildings, and historical artifacts—to include intangible elements like traditional crafts, customs, festivals, and oral traditions. With the ongoing process of globalization, the protection and development of cultural heritage have become central to many national cultural policies and economic strategies. Tourism serves not only as a medium for the transmission of cultural values but also as a vehicle for socio-economic development in local communities. However, the challenge of balancing cultural heritage preservation with tourism development remains a critical issue that warrants deeper exploration.

DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM

Cultural heritage tourism refers to the experience-driven exploration of a destination’s cultural legacy—both tangible and intangible. While traditional definitions emphasized physical monuments, architectural relics, and archaeological sites, the contemporary understanding has expanded to include intangible cultural heritage such as oral traditions, performing arts, religious practices, culinary knowledge, and community-based rituals (Mallongi & Mufidha, 2025; Pratama & Tanius, 2025). This shift reflects a growing awareness that culture is not merely a static inheritance but a dynamic and evolving expression of identity, belonging, and memory (Zhang, Ma, & Wang, 2008).

In the context of globalization and rapid urbanization, cultural heritage tourism serves a dual-purpose function: it safeguards cultural expressions while also catalyzing local development. As a vehicle for cultural transmission, it fosters intercultural dialogue and reinforces national and regional identities (UNWTO, 2023). Moreover, organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2023) emphasize that heritage tourism plays a vital role in recognizing cultural diversity and strengthening shared cultural values. At the same time, it

creates employment opportunities, supports creative industries, and contributes to economic diversification—particularly in rural and heritage-rich regions (Guju, Luca, & Comănescu, 2025; Klein & Bueno Carvajal, 2025).

However, the growing popularity of heritage tourism has also triggered critical tensions. The commodification of culture, overcrowding of heritage sites, and the erosion of authenticity are challenges that frequently arise when tourism development is not balanced with conservation ethics (Poria, 2001). Furthermore, state-led, and top-down tourism strategies may marginalize local communities, resulting in cultural alienation and resistance (Jiang, Jin, & Nakajima, 2025).

Given these complexities, it is essential to understand cultural heritage tourism not only as an economic activity but as a socio-cultural process. Its significance must be assessed through multiple dimensions: cultural continuity, community participation, education, identity formation, and ecological sustainability. This recognition sets the foundation for developing integrated models of heritage value assessment, which will be explored in the following sections.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACHES TO CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM VALUATION

To better understand the comprehensive value of heritage tourism, this section categorizes assessment models into three key dimensions—economic, socio-cultural, and ecological—and explores both qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools relevant to each. These models provide critical theoretical foundations for the case studies presented later in the paper.

Cultural heritage value encompasses far more than its economic potential. Scholars emphasize multidimensional attributes, including historical, aesthetic, scientific, and symbolic values. A common theoretical distinction is made between intrinsic values—those cultural, spiritual, and identity-based—and extrinsic or utilitarian values, such as tourism utility, educational relevance, and economic output (Fan, Wang, & Li, 2024; Quan et al., 2025). This classification serves as a framework for building inclusive and equitable heritage evaluation models, which are essential for guiding policy-making, budget allocation, and stakeholder engagement.

In terms of economic valuation, methods such as the Travel Cost Method (TCM) and the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) have become widespread. These market-based tools assess visitors' willingness to pay and quantify recreational or consumer surplus derived from heritage experiences. Advanced integrations, such as fuzzy-AHP combined with CVM, have demonstrated effectiveness in evaluating the economic contribution of heritage landscapes in China and Vietnam (Ha et al., 2025).

For socio-cultural dimensions, qualitative methods including participatory mapping, stakeholder interviews, and Delphi techniques are commonly employed to assess community attachment, identity reinforcement, and cultural continuity. However, there is a growing effort to formalize these approaches using quantifiable indicators—such as social cohesion metrics and indices of cultural vitality—to enable comparative evaluation across regions (Yepes & Martín, 2022).

On the ecological side, heritage valuation increasingly considers environmental sustainability and landscape integrity. Factor analysis and GIS-based spatial modeling are applied to evaluate the impact of tourism development on environmental carrying capacity, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, particularly in mixed cultural-natural sites (Zhang, Xiong, & Huang, 2023).

Despite these advances, heritage assessment research remains skewed toward economic or tangible aspects. There is insufficient integration of community-based knowledge, local narratives, and intangible values—elements that are crucial for truly sustainable and inclusive tourism planning. Future research should aim to embed heritage valuation in a triadic framework that balances economic viability, cultural meaning, and environmental sustainability.

Such an integrated perspective is especially relevant when applied to large-scale heritage systems, such as the Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor. The following section will explore how multidimensional valuation models are operationalized in practice through this case.

CASE STUDY: THE GREAT WALL CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR

The Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor represents a paradigm shift in China's approach to cultural heritage governance—moving from isolated, site-specific preservation toward an integrated, landscape-scale conservation model. This national initiative reframes the Great Wall not simply as a monument, but as a dynamic cultural ecosystem that spans multiple regions, ethnic histories, and ecological zones (Tao et al., 2024; Shan, 2005). It serves as a valuable case study to examine how multidimensional valuation frameworks can be applied in real-world heritage tourism planning.

At its core, the corridor approach seeks to integrate tangible elements—such as fortifications, military relics, and ancient villages—with intangible assets like folk traditions, religious practices, and collective memory. The objective is to create a “cultural-ecological symbiosis” that fosters both heritage protection and regional development (Shan, 2005). Within this framework, heritage is no longer seen as static material, but as a living, participatory landscape that can generate cultural pride, environmental stewardship, and economic opportunity.

From a socio-cultural valuation perspective, the project emphasizes community identity and cultural continuity. However, practical engagement remains limited. Local residents often lack sufficient awareness, resources, or mechanisms to meaningfully participate in corridor planning and benefit-sharing (Mi et al., 2023). This top-down tendency risks alienating communities and undermining the very cultural vitality the project seeks to sustain.

On the economic front, heritage-based tourism along the corridor has contributed to employment and rural revitalization, particularly in underdeveloped western provinces (Kong et al., 2024). Yet, over-reliance on standardized tourism formats and underdeveloped cultural industries limits the corridor's long-term economic potential. Diversification through creative industries, cultural entrepreneurship, and local branding remains underexplored.

Meanwhile, the ecological dimension of valuation has gained momentum. The corridor model emphasizes landscape-level protection, integrating environmental management with heritage policies. However, few tools have yet been fully deployed to quantify ecosystem services, monitor ecological thresholds, or address tourism-related environmental pressures. More robust coordination between heritage authorities and environmental agencies is needed.

Innovation through digital technologies offers potential solutions. Strategies such as virtual reconstructions, immersive storytelling, and geolocation-based heritage apps have emerged as tools to revitalize public engagement, especially among younger generations (Tian, 2023). Nevertheless, digital integration remains uneven and often superficial, lacking depth in narrative design and community co-creation.

In summary, the Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor embodies the challenges and possibilities of applying multidimensional heritage valuation in practice. While it demonstrates substantial progress in integrating spatial, cultural, and ecological dimensions, its future success depends on deepening community participation, diversifying cultural industries, and embedding sustainability in both policy and design.

The following section will examine how this corridor model has been expanded and institutionalized through the National Cultural Park framework, offering further insight into macro-level governance innovations.

THE GREAT WALL PROTECTION UNDER THE NATIONAL CULTURAL PARK FRAMEWORK

The launch of the Great Wall National Cultural Park in 2021 marks a critical milestone in China's effort to institutionalize the protection of large-scale heritage systems. It represents a top-down yet integrated framework for managing cultural, ecological, and spatial resources across the 15 provinces spanned by the Great Wall (Zhang & Liu, 2024). Unlike fragmented site-based preservation strategies, this initiative adopts a unified planning model that aligns national policy goals with regional development, heritage conservation, and tourism promotion.

At the heart of this framework is the concept of "great heritage" (大遗址)—a holistic approach that seeks to integrate tangible relics, intangible cultural practices, and ecological landscapes into a coherent system of governance (Chen et al., 2024). Policy instruments include zoning regulations, standardized heritage documentation, central-local funding mechanisms, and cross-sector collaboration between cultural, tourism, and environmental agencies.

From a socio-cultural valuation perspective, the national park initiative emphasizes public education, cultural identity reinforcement, and inclusive cultural narratives. However, empirical research has shown that grassroots participation remains limited. In many under-resourced areas along the Wall, local residents have little awareness of the park's goals or opportunities for engagement in its construction (Mi et al., 2023). This gap threatens the long-term sustainability and cultural authenticity of the park system.

In terms of economic impact, the park has catalyzed improvements in infrastructure, rural employment, and creative industries. Studies highlight how regional tourism clustering around key segments of the Wall has stimulated industrial diversification and heritage-based entrepreneurship (Kong et al., 2024). Nevertheless, excessive focus on economic output may result in over-tourism, standardized cultural products, and weakened historical interpretation.

Ecologically, the Great Wall National Cultural Park aims to protect the heritage-environment interface—balancing human activities with natural landscape integrity. While progress has been made in implementing conservation zoning and green corridors, systematic ecosystem valuation models and real-time environmental monitoring are still lacking.

To address these limitations, scholars have proposed a “community-centered governance model” that integrates participatory planning, digital empowerment, and localized storytelling (Wu et al., 2025). Tools such as smart guide systems, immersive digital exhibitions, and AI-based interpretation platforms can help enhance public engagement and cultural resonance. In particular, co-creation strategies involving schools, local artisans, and village collectives are essential to embedding heritage in everyday life.

In summary, the Great Wall National Cultural Park reflects a significant evolution in heritage management—from symbolic protection to multi-dimensional governance. Its success depends not only on top-level planning but also on adaptive, inclusive, and culturally embedded implementation practices. These lessons offer valuable insights for future national-level heritage protection schemes in China and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined cultural heritage tourism through a multidimensional lens, emphasizing the need to balance economic, socio-cultural, and ecological values in the assessment and management of heritage resources. In response to the growing complexity of global heritage governance, the paper reviewed a range of valuation models—from AHP and fuzzy evaluation to CVM and stakeholder-based approaches—and demonstrated how these models can be applied to real-world cases, particularly the Great Wall Cultural Heritage Corridor and the National Cultural Park framework in China.

Key findings underscore that current heritage tourism practices often overemphasize tangible assets and market-based valuation, while undervaluing community participation, cultural continuity, and landscape ecology. The shift toward integrated heritage management, as seen in the Great Wall initiatives, reflects a promising direction but remains challenged by limited grassroots engagement, uneven digital integration, and institutional fragmentation.

To advance the sustainable development of cultural heritage tourism, future strategies must prioritize:

1. Participatory governance that empowers local communities as co-creators of heritage narratives and stewards of their cultural assets;
2. Culturally adaptive valuation frameworks that incorporate intangible values such as identity, memory, and social cohesion alongside economic indicators;

3. Digital innovation in interpretation, experience design, and public education, especially to engage younger generations and underrepresented audiences.

Ultimately, cultural heritage should be regarded not merely as a relic of the past, but as a living, evolving system that supports identity, fosters creativity, and contributes to inclusive and sustainable development. Viewing and managing heritage tourism through a multidimensional framework is essential for unlocking its full potential as a tool for cultural resilience and regional revitalization.

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