# Rural Cultural Heritage Research (2004–2024)：Trends, Patterns, and Insights from Web of Science

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**Abstract** Research on rural cultural heritage encompasses cultural heritage management, tourism, and conservation. However, despite growing academic interest in recent years, systematic bibliometric analyses in this field remain limited, and a comprehensive knowledge framework has yet to be established. Based on the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, this study conducted a bibliometric analysis of 657 articles published between 2004 and 2024 using CiteSpace 6.2.R4 to visualize the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of rural cultural heritage research. The results revealed a steady increase in publication output and the emergence of an interdisciplinary framework integrating culture, ecology, and community. The United States, China, Germany, and Italy acted as central hubs in international collaboration networks, with China demonstrating notable performance in publication volume, digital heritage preservation, and policy development. Keyword analysis showed a paradigm shift from static conservation to dynamic governance, highlighting growing scholarly attention to cultural ecosystem services, sustainable tourism, and community engagement. This study presented the first knowledge map of rural cultural heritage research, offering insights into paradigm transformation and providing quantitative support for future theoretical and policy-oriented advancements. It concluded by emphasizing the need for enhanced interdisciplinary integration and global-local collaboration to develop resilient and context-sensitive models for rural cultural heritage governance.

**Keywords** CiteSpace, Rural cultural heritage, Research progress, Conservation and revitalization, Heritage management

**DOI** 10.16785/j.issn 1943-989x.2025.6.007

Rural cultural heritage has received growing attention in recent decades, driven by rural decline, urban-rural disparities, and the weakening of traditional knowledge systems[1]. As a multi-faceted socio-cultural construct, it comprises both tangible and intangible components-vernacular architecture, agricultural systems, festivals, oral traditions, and cultural landscapes-that collectively anchor regional identity and collective memory. With the rise of sustainable development and digital humanities, heritage was increasingly viewed not only as an asset requiring protection but also as a dynamic cultural practice embedded in governance, tourism, community development, and digital innovation[2].

Existing research can be broadly categorized into 3 interconnected streams. The first focused on heritage governance, where debates have shifted from centralized protection toward participatory, community-based models[3]. Studies highlighted the limitations of the "authorized heritage discourse," the importance of multi-level governance, and the tensions between economic revitalization and cultural sustainability. The second stream examined heritage tourism and cultural ecosystem services. While tourism enhanced heritage visibility, concerns regarding commodification and authenticity persisted. Cultural ecosystem services frameworks have refined understandings of identity, aesthetic value, and human–land relationships in rural contexts. The third stream explored conservation and digitalization, emphasizing how GIS, remote sensing, VR/AR, 3D scanning, and digital archives reshaped documentation, analysis, and public engagement. These technologies have advanced vulnerability assessment, preventive conservation, and new modes of heritage presentation[4].

Despite these developments, rural cultural heritage research remains fragmented across disciplines, lacking an integrated synthesis. Bibliometric analysis offers a systematic and reproducible means to identify publication patterns, thematic structures, and knowledge networks. Prior bibliometric studies have focused on intangible cultural heritage, agricultural heritage, or digital technologies, yet a comprehensive overview of rural cultural heritage as a distinct research field was still absent[5].

To address this gap, this study conducted a bibliometric analysis of rural cultural heritage research from 2004 to 2024 using the Web of Science Core Collection. The selected 20-year span captured the rising academic and policy relevance of rural heritage and supports the examination of thematic evolution. This study aimed to:

(1) Track publication trends;

(2) Identify major contributing countries and collaborative networks;

(3) Determine core journals in the field;

(4) Highlight influential authors and institutions;

(5) Review high-impact research themes;

(6) Reveal emerging topics and conceptual linkages.

By integrating bibliometric techniques with thematic interpretation, this paper provided a comprehensive overview of rural cultural heritage research, identified future research frontiers, and offered strategic insights to inform heritage-oriented rural development.

## 1 Methodology

This study adopted a bibliometric analysis approach to objectively examine the development trends, research themes, and knowledge structures of visualization technologies in the field of rural cultural heritage. Relevant literature was retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, and CiteSpace was employed for data processing and visualization analysis. The study period spanned from August 1, 2004 to August 1, 2024. Search terms included rural, cultural heritage, and visualization, with rural cultural heritage used as a combined keyword.

After limiting the document type to articles and refining the scope, 657 publications were selected from an initial 698 records as the final dataset.

All records were imported into CiteSpace in RefWorks format, containing metadata such as authors, institutions, keywords, abstracts, and publication dates[7]. The time slice was set to one year, and the g-index (k=25) was applied in the selection criteria. Cluster analysis was conducted using the log-likelihood ratio (LLR) algorithm. Bibliometric indicators were calculated using Microsoft Excel 2016.

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Bibliometric performance and schol–arly structure

**2.1.1** Annual publication trends. The development of rural cultural heritage research can be divided into 3 distinct phases. The first phase, from 2004 to 2012, can be considered the emergence period, during which the number of annual publications remained below 10 on average, peaking at 17 articles in 2010. In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which, along with the increasing number of countries ratifying the convention, led to initial scholarly attention toward rural cultural heritage. The second phase, from 2013 to 2018, represented the development period, characterized by a significant increase in academic output, with an average of nearly 40 publications per year. During this period, both theoretical frameworks and practical approaches in rural cultural heritage studies experienced substantial progress. In 2017, *The Principles Concerning Rural Landscapes as Heritage* issued by ICOMOS and IFLA emphasized both tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage, prompting a growing number of scholars to focus on rural cultural heritage (ISCCL, 2016). The third phase, from 2019 to the present, was marked as the stabilization period, with an average annual publication volume exceeding 70 articles. This indicated that rural cultural heritage has become an emerging and increasingly prominent research field within the international academic community (Fig.1).

**2.1.2** Collaboration network among major countries. A total of 88 countries or regions have contributed to rural cultural heritage research, forming 364 collaborative links with a network density of 0.0951 (Fig.2). The United States, Germany, China, Italy, and Australia occupied central positions, reflected in their high betweenness centrality values (0.44, 0.29, 0.22, 0.18, 0.10).

The U.S. maintained its leadership through early investment in digital humanities (NEH), and institutions such as the Smithsonian and NPS have promoted GIS, 3D, and VR-based rural heritage projects, shaping strong partnerships with China, Germany, and Italy (National Park Service, n.d.). China has rapidly risen to the first in publication volume (130 articles, 19.79%), supported by national policies including the *Traditional Villages Catalogue* (Government of China, 2023), the Digitalization Project of Cultural and Natural Heritage in 2018, and the *Smart Culture and Tourism Plan* in 2021. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China's collaborations increasingly extended to the Global South. Italy contributed long-standing expertise in conservation and digital reconstruction, driven by the Italian National Research Council's "Smart Cultural Heritage Project," which fostered extensive cooperation with China, the U.S., and Germany[8]. Although Australia showed lower centrality, it excelled in digital representation of Indigenous and local cultures; the Trove platform has become a model for shared cultural heritage databases and supports collaborations with New Zealand, China, and the U.K. Overall, these countries formed the core of the global collaboration network, advancing visualization, digital archiving, and methodological innovation in rural cultural heritage research.

**2.1.3** Journals with the highest number of articles. Based on the Web of Science Core Collection, Table 1 presented the journals with the highest publication volumes and h-index values. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* served as the core outlet for rural cultural heritage research, publishing 155 articles (23.59% of the total) with 3,246 citations, and focusing primarily on historical origins and typological frameworks. Sustainability followed with 59 articles and 2,313 citations, embedding heritage research within sustainable development, rural revitalization, and ecological synergy, thereby highlighting strong interdisciplinary integration.

*Heritage Science* emphasized technical dimensions such as conservation, restoration, and digitization; Land focused on land-related and spatial aspects; and *Journal of Rural Studies* contributed socio-economic perspectives. Collectively, these journals addressed key gaps across the "theory–technology–context" spectrum, demonstrating the integrative potential of interdisciplinary research.

Since 2010, interdisciplinary studies have expanded rapidly under the influence of rural revitalization strategies and global sustainability agendas. Nevertheless, persistent challenges remained, including regional fragmentation and insufficient engagement with rural practice. Strengthening international dialogue and balancing local specificity with global perspectives were essential for advancing rural cultural heritage research from fragmented studies toward more systematic and innovative frameworks.
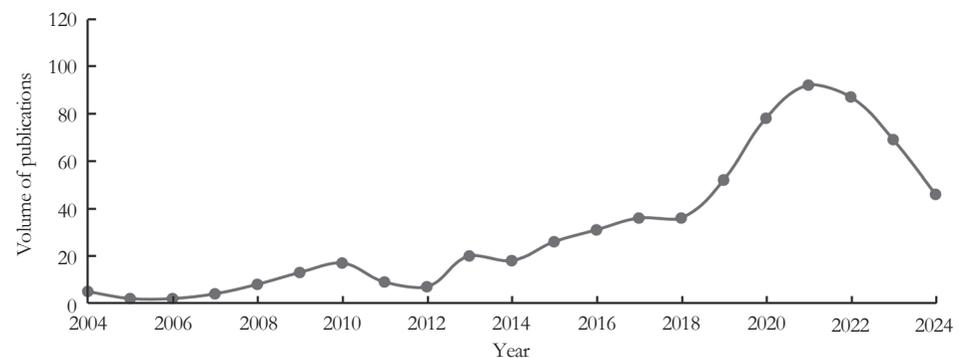


**Fig.1 Annual scientific results of the WoS core database in the field of rural cultural heritage (2004–2024)**

**Table 1 Top 5 Journals for rural cultural heritage research**

| Journal | Count | proportion//% | h-index | TC | PY |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Journal of Cultural Heritage* | 155 | 23.59 | 28 | 3 246 | 2000 |
| *Sustainability* | 59 | 8.98 | 16 | 2 313 | 2010 |
| *Heritage Science* | 32 | 4.87 | 13 | 1 161 | 2010 |
| *Land* | 23 | 3.50 | 12 | 825 | 2011 |
| *Journal of Rural Studies* | 18 | 2.74 | 10 | 513 | 2013 |

*Note*: TC total citations, PY the year publication started.

**2.1.4** Most cited research articles. As shown in Table 2, research on rural cultural heritage increasingly demonstrated interdisciplinary integration and a convergence of theory and practice. Existing studies covered ecological restoration, cultural tourism, ecosystem services, landscape policy, and community impacts, reflecting the breadth of current scholarship. For instance, Navarro et al. highlighted how rewilding in abandoned European landscapes linked ecological restoration with cultural heritage, while Everett et al. showed how food tourism reinforced regional identity. Berkel et al. incorporated cultural ecosystem services into quantitative frameworks, marking an ecological and technological shift in methodological approaches. Governance and social participation were further emphasized in studies on European rural landscape policies and the impacts of World Heritage designation[9]. Overall, these works illustrated a transition from "static preservation" to "dynamic management," highlighting heritage's multidimensional roles in cultural identity, ecological enhancement, and sustainable development. Although western scholarship remained dominant, growing attention to Asian cases such as Shirakawa-go indicated an increasingly diversified global research landscape.

## 2.2 Trends of topics and relationship among keywords

Keyword analysis was an effective method for identifying prominent research areas as well as tracking the evolution of research hotspots and emerging frontiers[10]. Accordingly, this study employed CiteSpace to conduct a comprehensive keyword analysis, generating three types of visual maps: co-occurrence, clustering, and burst detection.

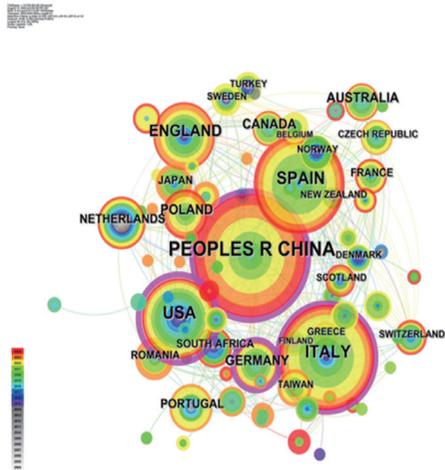**2.2.1** Keyword co-occurrence analysis. The



**Fig.2    Main national cooperation net-works in the field of rural cultural heritage**
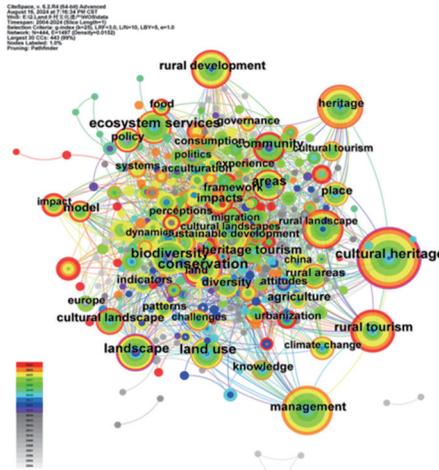


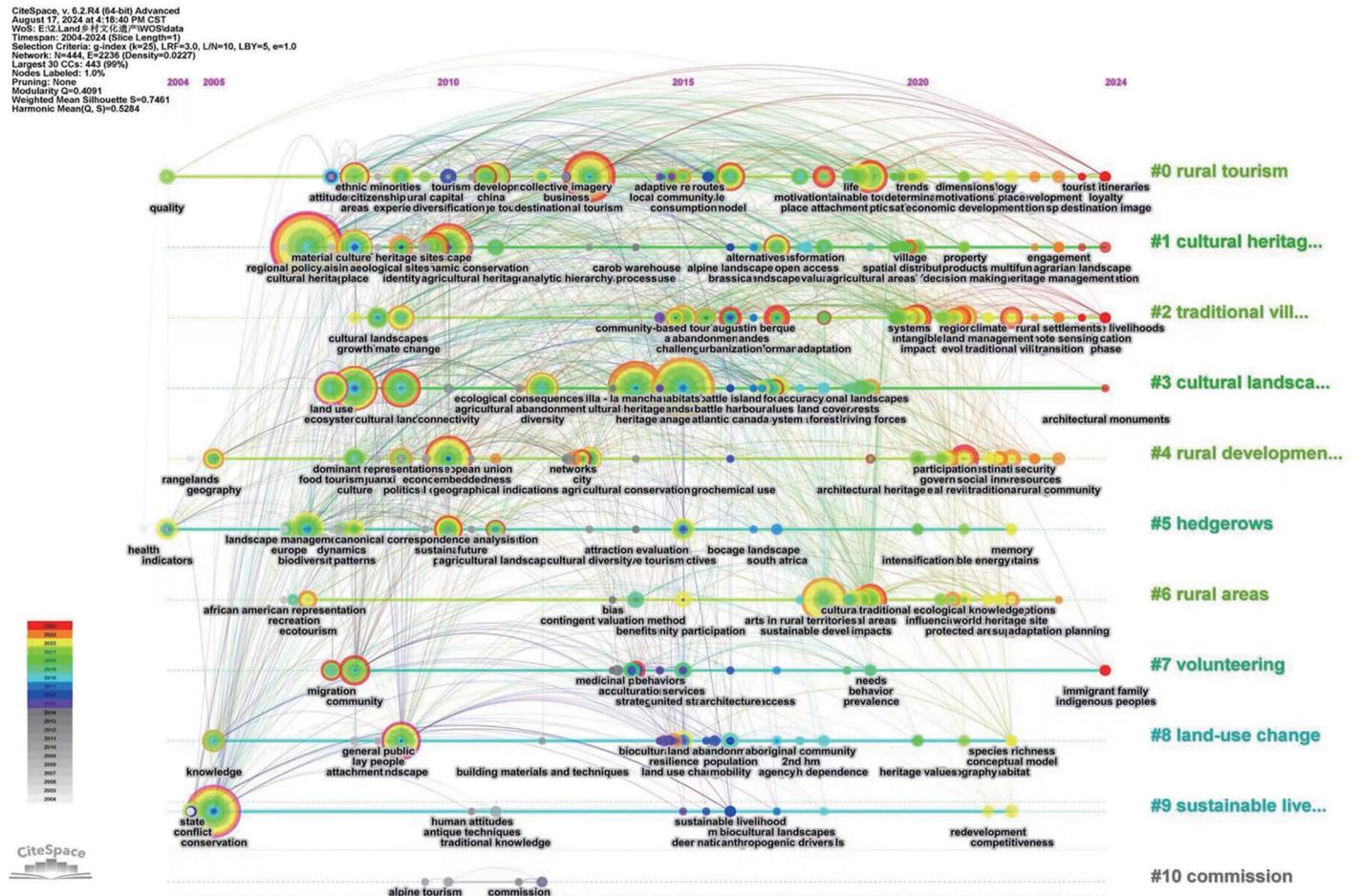**Fig.3    Co-occurrence of keywords in the field of rural cultural heritage**



**Fig.4    Timeline of keyword clustering in the field of rural cultural heritage**

keyword co-occurrence network revealed the knowledge structure, research hotspots, and intellectual evolution of rural cultural heritage studies at both domestic and international levels[11]. Based on data from the Web of Science Core Collection, the co-occurrence map shown in Fig.3 consisted of 444 nodes and 1,497 links, with a network density of 0.0152, indicating a densely connected structure. Currently, rural cultural heritage research exhibited a pattern centered on the term 'cultural heritage' with 'management' and 'conservation' serving as key thematic axes. These three keywords demonstrated both high frequency and high betweenness centrality, underscoring their central positions within the knowledge network. At the same time, the frequent appearance of terms such as 'rural tourism','rural development' and 'sustainable development' suggested that the academic community increasingly viewed cultural heritage as a vital resource and pathway for advancing rural revitalization. The linkage between 'ecosystem services' and 'landscape' further indicated a disciplinary shift toward ecological valuation and landscape system governance within heritage studies. Overall, research hotspots were transitioning from traditional static preservation to more integrated approaches oriented toward tourism, ecology, and sustainability signaling a move toward dynamic management and interdisciplinary convergence.

**2.2.2** Clustering timeline analysis. The keyword clustering in rural cultural heritage research within the Web of Science database exhibits clear thematic evolution and multidimensional expansion (Fig.4, Table 3). The most central cluster, #1 'Cultural heritage', has served as a foundational topic in the field since 2007, focusing on traditional research trajectories such as archaeological sites, rural planning, and cultural conservation. Subsequently, the emergence of clusters #0 'Rural tourism' and #2 'Traditional village' signals a shift toward the revitalization and development of cultural heritage. These clusters emphasize the integration of community based tourism, local identity, and culinary culture, reflecting the growing trends of 'living heritage' and the 'economization' of rural cultural resources. In addition, clusters such as #4 'Rural development' and #3 'Cultural landscape' suggest that cultural heritage has increasingly been regarded as a key resource for rural revitalization and regional sustainable development. These clusters highlight the coupling of heritage with ecological and social systems. Emerging clusters, including #7 'Volunteering' and #8 'Land-use change', further indicate rising scholarly interest in public participation and spatial transformations of rural land, marking them as new focal points in international research. Overall, rural cultural heritage studies are evolving from a traditional 'material–cultural' perspective toward an integrated 'ecological–social–participatory' approach. This has led to the formation of a comprehensive research framework grounded in heritage conservation, employing tourism and development as strategic tools, and oriented toward sustainability and community engagement.

**2.2.3** Keyword emergent graph analysis. 'Rural revitalization' is currently the most prominent keyword in rural cultural heritage research, with a burst strength of 3.99, reflecting growing academic interest despite its short burst period. In contrast, 'attitudes' had the longest burst duration (2008–2018), indicating long-term concern with stakeholder perspectives. Recently emerged terms like 'evolution', 'valuation', 'nature conservation', 'sustainable tourism', 'traditional village' and 'cultural landscape' show a shift from static preservation toward integrated discussions on governance, ecological value, and sustainability.

Internationally, the field shows increasing integration of institutional, community, and spatial dimensions. In the U.S., the National Trust system exemplifies mature public participation mechanisms. Fairclough emphasized that even non-functional rural landscapes retain ecological and cultural value[12]. Schmitz and Kranjeviexplored the diverse meanings of rural heritage through leisure value and spatial reconstruction[13]. Lekakis highlighted the decisive role of local identity in shaping heritage recognition. In cultural tourism, UNESCO advocates global cooperation to protect heritage of universal value[14]. Scholars have expanded tourism heritage interaction studies from pers-pectives such as interpretation, tourist motivation, experiential tourism, and regional development, underscoring the mutual

## Table 2 Top 5 most cited research articles in the field of rural cultural heritage

| Title (year) | Citation frequency | Author | Journal | TC per year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rewilding abandoned landscapes in Europe (2012) | 467 | Laetitia M. Navarro, et al. | *Ecosystems* | 35.923 076 92 |
| The role of food tourism in sustaining regional identity: a case study of Cornwall, South West England (2008) | 317 | Sally Everet, et al. | *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* | 19.812 5 |
| Spatial quantification and valuation of cultural ecosystem services in an agricultural landscape (2014) | 251 | Derek B. van Berkel, et al. | *Ecological Indicators* | 22.818 181 81 |
| Rural landscape, nature conservation and culture: Some notes on research trends and management approaches from a (southern) European perspective (2014) | 246 | Mauro Agnoletti | *Landscape and Urban Planning* | 22.363 636 36 |
| The impact of world heritage site designation on local communities: a case study of Ogimachi, Shirakawa-mura, Japan (2011) | 198 | Takamitsu.Jimura | *Tourism Management* | 14.142 857 14 |

## Table 3 List of clustering results in the field of rural cultural heritage

| Cluster | Size | Year of first use | Tag words (Select the first three) |
|---|---|---|---|
| #0 Rural tourism | 57 | 2013 | Sustainable development, tourist potential, local specificity; |
| #1 Culural heritage | 115 | 2007 | Archaeological sites, rural, planning; |
| #2 Traditional village | 59 | 2014 | Rural development, community-based tourism, food tourism; |
| #3 Cultural landscape | 24 | 2009 | Service, system, social-ecological; |
| #4 Rural development | 47 | 2010 | Innovation, territorial, building; |
| #5 Hedgerows | 43 | 2008 | Traditional, landscapes, knowledge; |
| #6 Rural areas | 18 | 2019 | Cultural, biodiversity, naturalness; |
| #7 Volunteering | 15 | 2009 | Wellbeing, Australia, integration rural; |
| #8 Land-use change | 29 | 2008 | Indications system, agricultural, county. |

reinforcement between tourism and cultural transmission. Overall, research is shifting from policy to participation, from conservation to tourism, and from single villages to integrated cultural landscapes.

## 3 Conclusions

This study employed CiteSpace 6.2.R4 to analyze 657 journal articles from the Web of Science Core Collection (2004–2024), focusing on publication trends, keywords, and clustering. The main conclusions are as follows:

(1) Research on rural cultural heritage continues to grow, with new research areas gradually emerging.

(2) The United States, Germany, China, Italy, and Australia remain at the forefront of international research. China forms the largest academic community and maintains collaboration with 30 countries and regions, such as Portugal, Japan, and the Czech Republic.

(3) *Journal of Heritage Studies* is the most influential journal in this field.

(4) Highly cited literature emphasizes the linkage between cultural heritage and ecological restoration, demonstrating a multidisciplinary shift integrating theory and practice.

(5) Emerging keywords—'Management', 'Tourism', 'Conservation', and 'Development'—indicate core themes in rural cultural heritage governance, tourism, and preservation.

In summary, future research should prioritize multi-scale and multi-stakeholder collaboration through an integrated culture–ecology–community framework. This requires deeper application of digital technologies in documentation, management, and dissemination, as well as strengthened international and North–South exchanges to develop governance models that balance global consensus with regional specificity, thereby enhancing cultural resilience under climate change and population mobility. This study also has limitations. Keyword-based retrieval may omit relevant studies or include partially unrelated literature, and the Web of Science Core Collection mainly covers academic journals, with limited representation of books, conference proceedings, and grey literature. Despite these limitations, this study is the first to construct a comprehensive knowledge map of rural cultural heritage research, integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives. It clarifies the global academic landscape and emerging research frontiers, providing a systematic reference and a solid foundation for future academic inquiry and policy practice.

## 4 Discussion

Keyword clustering and burst analysis reveal a clear shift in rural cultural heritage research from static preservation toward dynamic governance. Early studies emphasized material protection and historical value reassessment, reflected in keywords such as 'cultural heritage' and 'conservation'. The recent rise of terms like 'rural revitalization', 'sustainable tourism', and 'valuation' signals growing interest in the functional role of heritage within rural socio-ecological systems. This transition aligns with Social–Ecological Systems (SES) theory and new institutionalism, highlighting co-evolution between resources and institutions, as well as diversified, participatory governance. Accordingly, research is shifting from protecting "objects" to governing "people," marking a fundamental paradigm transformation.

The frequent emergence of keywords such as 'ecosystem services', 'landscape', and 'valuation' indicates an expansion of heritage value beyond symbolic or memory-based meanings toward ecological capital that provides regulation, aesthetic, and identity functions. This reflects the deepening influence of Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) theory and suggests a comprehensive valuation framework integrating emotional, utilitarian, and intangible values. It also promotes quantitative approaches such as GIS modeling and spatial assessment, contributing to a more scientific and application-oriented direction for heritage research.

Collaboration network analysis and highly cited literature show continued dominance by western countries—particularly the United States, Germany, and Italy—in institutional development and methodological innovation. However, China has rapidly increased its influence through publication growth and international cooperation, illustrating the rise of developing countries in shaping global cultural heritage governance. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road, digital heritage, and rural revitalization demonstrate how the Global South is constructing research frameworks rooted in local experience and regional perspectives, encouraging a more multipolar global discourse.

Overall, rural cultural heritage research has shifted from an "object-centered" to a "mechanism-oriented" approach. Scholars now focus less on describing heritage elements and more on institutional logics, policy frameworks, participatory processes, and value reconstruction. This shift responds to governance transfor-

mation, sustainable development needs, and glocalization trends, elevating cultural heritage from a peripheral humanities topic to a core interdisciplinary field. The interaction between theory and policy practice strengthens the relevance of research and positions heritage as a key interface for rural–urban integration, ecological civilization, and global sustainability.

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product conversion rates.

**3.4.3** Integrating resources-based omnichannel communication. Promotional materials such as brochures and videos that integrate ecological aesthetics and cultural depth should be produced, highlighting core attractions including the Han River waterfront landscape, Chu Opera intangible cultural heritage, farming experiences, and popular homestays. These contents should be disseminated precisely to target demographics such as youth and family groups in Wuhan's main urban area via new media platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat official accounts. Simultaneously, local mainstream media outlets such as Wuhan Television and the Yangtze River Daily should be leveraged to enhance brand credibility. Additionally, outdoor advertising should be placed in strategic locations such as metro stations (connected to transportation hubs in the subdistrict) and along the Wuhan Ring Expressway to increase brand visibility.

**3.4.4** Sparking viral sharing with influencer power. Local travel bloggers, food influencers, and cultural content creators in Wuhan should be invited to explore popular spots such as the metasequoia forest at "Gege Shijie · Secret Land," the riverside area of Xiangjiatai, and Nangong Market. They can share immersive experiential content, with a focus on promoting themed itineraries like "Han River Hiking + Camping" and "Farming and Picking + Homestay." Hashtag campaigns such as #Xiangban Cihui Slow Life and #Farming Fun By The Han River can be initiated to encourage villagers and tourists to share their travel experiences and food check-in videos. This will form a multidimensional communication matrix combining official promotion and user-generated content.

**3.4.5** Developing a distinctive promotional IP system. By means of organizing annual cultural and tourism festival events centered on core thematic pillars such as "Han River Ecology," "Folk Culture," and "Agricultural Experientialism," a distinctive promotional IP shall be established to enhance brand salience.

## 3.5 Strengthening policy support and investment promotion

To accelerate the development of agriculture-culture-tourism integration, a multidimensional policy support system must be established. Firstly, by implementing preferential policies such as investment subsidies, tax incentives, and land use guarantees, high-quality enterprises can be attracted to participate in scenic area development and business operation. Simultaneously, priority support should be directed towards key areas including industrial development, talent introduction and cultivation, and brand building. This involves prioritizing land use quotas and streamlined approvals for projects, as well as revitalizing existing resources such as idle rural homesteads in hollowed-out villages and abandoned factory buildings for developing tourism facilities. In terms of financial support, a dedicated fund should be established to support infrastructure and core projects. Funds related to rural revitalization, agriculture, culture, and tourism should be integrated to create demonstration projects. A subsidy mechanism should be refined to reward leading enterprises and local brands. Investment promotion methods require innovation. This can be achieved by combining study tours outside the region with promotional exhibitions, optimizing the business environment to simplify approval procedures, and establishing interdepartmental coordination to provide one-stop services. A follow-up service system should be implemented for landed projects to assist in resolving construction and operational challenges, ensuring their efficient progress. Through the triple guarantee of policy, funding, and services, a virtuous ecosystem for the integrated development of agriculture, culture, and tourism can be formed.

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