

## ARTICLE

# Social Sustainability in Cultural Heritage Tourism: The Case of Lijiang Old Town and Venice

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the importance of social sustainability within the field of tourism management, focusing on the preservation of cultural heritage and the role of community participation in this context. The article explores how sustainability strategies can promote tourism development while ensuring that cultural heritage is properly maintained and promoting the active participation of local communities. By examining a number of case studies and management practices, the paper aims to propose effective strategies to achieve a balanced development of tourism activities in relation to society, culture and the environment.

**Keywords:** Tourism management; Social sustainability; Cultural heritage; Community participation; Sustainability Strategies

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary perspectives, the term “heritage” has come to encompass the process of evaluating, selecting, interpreting, and utilising valuable things from the past (Larkham, 1999). Since the emergence of heritage tourism in Europe in the 1990s, cultural heritage tourism has become an economic mainstay of many cultural heritage sites around the world,

not only providing opportunities to explore history, traditions and culture as an important part of the tourism industry, but also having a variety of positive impacts on heritage regeneration and development.

To fulfil the role of heritage tourism and maintain this positive impact, sustainable development is essential, where social sustainability requires an assessment of the impacts of development activities on the community’s inhabitants, cultural traditions

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and social structure (Hall, 2008). In the context of cultural heritage tourism, social sustainability includes advocating the importance of preserving and disseminating local cultural heritage, but also emphasis the importance of engaging and sharing the fruits of development with local communities, and how to amplify the positive impacts of cultural heritage tourism to provide more tangible development opportunities for the region (Richards, 2012). Therefore, an in-depth study of the importance of social sustainability in cultural heritage tourism, which together with economic and environmental sustainability constitutes the three pillars of sustainable tourism development, is of great significance for the formulation of more effective heritage management measures and development strategies for the healthy development of cultural heritage tourism.

## **2. Research Background**

### **2.1 Definition of social sustainability**

With regard to the definition of social sustainability and what it encompasses, some scholars have argued that it pursues the same fundamental goal as the other two pillars of sustainability, that is, the ability to satisfy current needs while guaranteeing that future generations will be able to maintain the same or a higher level of quality of life, only in terms of guaranteeing social equity, human rights, and social well-being (Yoonhee Jung, 2023). This concept emphasises the balanced development of society, environment and economy, respecting social justice and human rights while ensuring the rational use and protection of resources. Some definitions of social sustainability emphasise equity and inclusiveness of social systems, community development and participation, robustness of social security systems and respect for cultural identity and diversity (Bouchier, 2012).

A definition that has gained more consensus from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) document state that social sustainability takes into account factors such as equality, inclusion,

participation, education, health care, culture, etc. for all segments of society with the aim of achieving a stable, prosperous and harmonious society.

In addition, Hieu and Hai (2023) state that political stability and governance effectiveness are also critical in achieving social sustainability, and that effective political systems and governance mechanisms promote civic engagement, legality, and transparency, thereby maintaining social order and stability. Scholars have also noted that policies and regulations related to health and well-being are also key components of social sustainability. Moreover, good health-care services, education, housing and social security systems can improve people's quality of life and contribute to the long-term stability and development of society (Birn, 2009).

### **2.2 Social Sustainability from a Heritage Tourism Perspective**

In the context of cultural heritage tourism, social sustainability has been defined by some scholars as the preservation, dissemination and utilisation of cultural heritage while actively contributing to an inclusive, participatory and just society, while respecting and meeting the needs of current and future generations (Lai, 2020). Regarding specifics, Brooks, et al. (2023) puts a strong emphasis on how to promote host community participation and enhance their long-term health and well-being in heritage tourism, where heritage tourism brings positive impacts such as economic development, infrastructure development, and so on, while also focusing on, but potentially, negative impacts on community health such as limiting community participation, and community relocation or fragmentation.

Similarly, based on the problems of gentrification and cultural preservation caused by over-tourism in many areas, some studies have emphasised that sustainable heritage tourism means ensuring that local communities and indigenous peoples are able to benefit from cultural heritage tourism while avoiding and reducing the social inequalities and conflicts that may result. In order to ensure that

tourism development has a positive and sustainable impact on local societies (Bertocchi et al., 2020).

### **2.3 Social Problems Caused by socially Unsustainable Tourism Development**

Social problems that may result from heritage tourism with low social sustainability include community change, social inequity, and heritage damage. Among them, community change may be manifested by the increase in real estate development, gentrification and foreign population as a result of heritage tourism, leading to problems such as higher cost of living and cultural conflicts faced by local community residents. Noise pollution, environmental damage and traffic congestion caused by tourism activities may also affect the quality of life of local residents. In addition, the problem of social inequity may be reflected in the fact that the economic benefits brought about by heritage tourism are not equitably distributed to local residents, thus further widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Various unfavourable factors may lead to the loss of local community residents and the disruption of daily life, which is not conducive to the cultural survival and sustainable development of heritage sites (Timothy and Nyaupane, 2009).

### **3. Social Sustainability Assessment Framework for Heritage Tourism**

Research on assessing the level of social sustainability of heritage tourism in a particular location encompasses several aspects, for example, studies by Biju et al. (2024) and Huang, Lin and Li (2019) explored the relationship between Community participation and the sustainability effects of the project through the local community's perception of the heritage tourism activities and the level of Community participation in the project, and referred to how to maximise the respect and protection of local communities' interests.

In addition, Bertocchi et al. (2020) focused on the effects of tourism projects on the preservation and transmission of culture in heritage sites. They

studied the impact of tourism activities on historical sites, folk culture and daily life of residents, and how to avoid commercialisation and distortion of unique cultures. Zhao et al. (2022) analysed the local economic and social changes and the role transformation of the local residents resulting from the context of spatial consumption activities in heritage sites.

Finally, some scholars focus on the interaction between the local government and the community during the project process, talking about the government's policy making in terms of community resettlement and heritage culture preservation, as well as the impact of governance measures on sustainable heritage tourism (Liu, 2012).

## **4. Case Study**

### **4.1 Sustainability performance in tourism development**

#### **4.1.1 Community participation**

Local communities play a crucial role in the development of heritage tourism in both Lijiang old town and Venice, and in Lijiang, local communities have a closer relationship with specific tourism activities, as they participate in the tourism industry and derive economic benefits from it by providing tourists with folklore performances, handicrafts, and organising festivals and events (Pan et al., 2019). However, the resulting community development is limited due to the fact that with the rise of the tourism industry, there has been an influx of foreign merchants, leading to the marginalisation of local communities in the network of interests (SHO, 2012). Another study points out that with the development of external links and tourism in Lijiang old town, the foreign population has increased, which may affect the voice and influence of the original community. The rising cost of living may also affect the quality of life of the aborigines and their commitment to the community. Some residents choose to relocate out of dissatisfaction with the status, this may lead to the phenomenon of "empty nesting" in the original

community (Qi, 2021). In terms of the voice of the local community, local government agencies, such as the Ancient City Protection Administration, are in a dominant position and have strong interests in tourism enterprises, while the community is involved in serving tourists and lacks a channel to speak out for the impacts on their original way of life and space (Zhao et al., 2022). The social inequalities resulting from the above factors and the disconnection between local communities and places have a negative impact on the social sustainability of local heritage conservation and utilisation.

#### **4.1.2 Cultural preservation**

In the development of heritage tourism in Lijiang old town and Venice, both the tangible heritage buildings and intangible daily life culture of the area have been affected by tourism to varying degrees. The initial phase of heritage conservation in Lijiang old town focused on the preservation and maintenance of historic buildings and local features, neglecting the importance of community residents and cultural traditions. This has led to the development of heritage tourism in Lijiang old town since the beginning of the 21st century to the present day, which has been criticised for over-commercialisation, destruction of the original culture, and alteration of lifestyles (Qi, 2021). In order to solve this problem, measures to encourage the return of aborigines and to support the heritage and presentation of traditional culture have been implemented, such as inviting aborigines to lead tourists to experience the traditional lifestyle of the Naxi people, and organizing cultural festivals, such as the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain Cultural Festival, which can promote understanding and respect for local culture. In addition, some scholars have noted that although the connection between the community and the old town places is difficult to repair, the aborigines in the resettlement community still maintain a lifestyle with cultural value that deserves attention and preservation (Pan et al., 2019)

#### **4.1.3 Local governance**

Officials in both Lijiang old town and Venice

have taken a range of measures to regulate heritage tourism activities in order to protect the rights of local communities and enhance social sustainability. In Lijiang old town, low-priced or free residential housing has been provided in a number of resettlement residential areas, such as Beimenpo and Xi'an Street, to divert the residents of the old town through new residential areas (Pan et al., 2019), in order to alleviate the environmental pressure in the core area of the old town and improve the quality of life of the local residents. In addition, the Lijiang old town government has clarified the list of business projects and market management methods in the old town to control the old town business and balance the relationship between business and culture. In order to protect the rights of the indigenous people, the local government has implemented the "Aboriginal Housing Repair Subsidy Programme" and stipulated the proportion of aboriginal people amongst the business operators in the Old Town, which ensures the spatial rights of the aboriginal people and promotes the inheritance of the local culture while providing employment opportunities (Shao, 2012). Despite these efforts, sustainability issues such as 'empty nesters' still exist and require further strategies for improvement.

#### **4.2 Feasible improvement measures for heritage tourism**

The cases of Lijiang and Venice show that the status and role of local or original communities in heritage tourism development depends on a variety of factors. The establishment of effective community participation mechanisms and the implementation of conservation policies are crucial for balancing tourism development with the interests of local communities and improving social equity. Heritage tourism should take into account and benefit local communities, rather than becoming a threat to their way of life and cultural traditions.

Secondly, heritage tourism development in Lijiang old town and Venice faces different cultural preservation problems. Therefore, more effective conservation measures and cultural dissemination

strategies need to be developed to address the different geographic environments, cultural traditions and tourism development conditions, in order to ensure that heritage tourism activities can truly promote the transmission and preservation of local cultural heritage.

## 5 Conclusion

This essay focuses on the exploration of social sustainability in the development of heritage tourism. Firstly, the definition of social sustainability and the research results on social sustainability in the context of heritage tourism are reviewed. A framework for assessing social sustainability in terms of Community participation, cultural preservation and local governance is then developed through a literature review, and the social sustainability performance of heritage tourism in Lijiang old town and Venice is discussed according to the framework. Finally, suggestions for the social sustainability of heritage tourism are provided to inform subsequent heritage conservation and utilisation practices.

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