

**Living Heritage and the Reconfiguration of Nature–Culture Relationships in Hong
Kong’s Depopulated Hakka Villages**

Yang Simo

The University of Hong Kong

Laidlaw Scholars Research Essay

Dr. Creighton Connolly

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is globally recognised as a metropolitan city, defined by its skyscrapers and high-density urban development. Yet it is often overlooked that rural areas account for approximately 75% of the land, encompassing villages, farmland, forests, and fishponds (環境及生態局, 2025). And according to Hong Kong's "Recognised Villages List," there are currently a total of 642 approved Recognised Villages across the territory (立法會, 2017). Hakka communities, in particular, established rural settlements whose built forms, agricultural systems, religious practices and everyday livelihoods developed in close relationship with their surrounding environments. Such settlements are therefore more appropriately understood as cultural landscapes than as collections of individual historic buildings—a view that aligns with UNESCO's definition of cultural landscapes as “manifestations of the interaction between humankind and the natural environment”.

This historical relationship has been profoundly affected by population decline. Many of the villagers first emigrated to Europe or America, and subsequently relocated to Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, or the new towns, leaving some of the more remote indigenous villages to gradually decay (Zhang et al., 1999). This altered the practices and relationships through which a rural landscape is reproduced: agricultural land is abandoned, irrigation systems deteriorate, buildings become underused and ecological succession changes former cultivated environments.

In the face of rural decline, the Hong Kong government has shifted its policy from neglect to active intervention over the past ten years. The 2017 Policy Address announced the setting up of a Countryside Conservation Office to coordinate conservation projects that

promote sustainable development of remote countryside areas. With HK\$1 billion set aside for conservation and revitalisation efforts (香港特別行政區行政長官, 2017), HK\$500 million was allocated to the Countryside Conservation Funding Scheme (CCFS), launched in 2019, and the remaining HK\$500 million designated for minor improvement work and revitalisation of the existing architectural environment (Countryside Conservation Office, 2018).

However, revitalisation does not necessarily restore the social conditions that originally produced the cultural landscape. The three villages examined in this study illustrate this tension. On ordinary weekdays, Kat O may remain relatively quiet despite large cultural events attracting substantial numbers of visitors. Mui Tsz Lam has very few permanent residents. Lai Chi Wo has developed comparatively extensive systems of agricultural, ecological and community engagement, yet parts of its continuing operation still involve external organisations. These situations raise a question: how can a cultural landscape remain alive when the communities and daily practices that historically reproduced the cultural landscape have changed?

This question requires an understanding of the nature-culture relationship. First, the cultural landscape approach (UNESCO, 1992) provides a guideline for overall heritage conservation: that heritage is “the combined works of nature and of man.” This concept helps to understand the value of the three Hakka villages, which lies in the integrated relationship of architecture, ecology, living memory, festivals, and food. Second, the living heritage approach (Poulios, 2014) shifts the focus from preserving material authenticity to maintaining continuity. UNESCO affirms that living heritage “establishes a profound connection between

people, nature and culture” (Wulf, n.d.). This approach is particularly relevant to Hakka villages: even when significant outmigration has occurred, heritage can remain “living” through education, tourism, cultural practices, and other forms of continued engagement.

The article makes two arguments. First, nature–culture integration is best understood as a relational basis for continuity rather than as a simple combination of “natural” and “cultural” assets. Second, depopulated villages require a conception of community continuity that recognises dispersed and emerging forms of participation without treating new participants as straightforward replacements for historical residents. The comparative analysis of Lai Chi Wo, Mui Tsz Lam and Kat O demonstrates how these different configurations produce different possibilities and limitations for living heritage continuity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Landscape as a Nature–Culture Process.

The concept of cultural landscape was introduced to overcome the separation of the nature and culture elements in heritage studies. Sauer (1925) argued that “Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result”, establishing a framework for understanding the reciprocal formation of human settlement and environmental conditions. UNESCO officially formalized this concept and classified cultural landscapes as a major category of World Heritage Sites in 1992. UNESCO (2021) also recognises organically evolved landscapes, including continuing and relict landscapes, thus acknowledging that landscapes can change over time rather than existing as static historical artefacts.

The process dimension is particularly important. As Taylor and Lennon (2012) have observed, viewing cultural landscape from the process dimension involves seeing the

landscape “not simply or predominantly as history or a physical cultural product, but also — and more significantly — as cultural process reflecting human action over time with associated pluralistic meanings and human values.” Recent research also argues that the Cultural Landscape category enables a wider and more representative protection regime for sites where cultural and natural heritage is inseparable, although there are still significant barriers preventing further utilisation of this category (Koch & Gillespie, 2024).

However, a process-oriented perspective does not resolve the nature-culture divide by itself. Byrne et al. (2013) caution that cultural landscape approaches may still place excessive emphasis on human agency, seeing nature as merely a setting or stage upon which human projects are enacted. They argue instead for attention to ecological relationships in which human and non-human processes are mutually entangled. This understanding is also reflected in UNESCO’s sustainable-development policy (2015), which recognises the “close links and interdependence of biological diversity and local cultures within the socio-ecological systems of many World Heritage properties”. Such systems are not produced through separate natural and cultural processes, but through long-term interactions and mutual adaptations between people and their environments.

Hong Kong’s rural heritage provides a useful context for understanding this relationship. In 2020, the Lai Chi Wo project received the inaugural UNESCO Asia-Pacific Special Recognition for Sustainable Development. The Jury commended its success in “interweaving nature and cultural heritage” to set “a new urban-rural sustainability agenda” (UNESCO, 2020). This recognition indicates that the value of the landscape does not lie in the separate existence of its natural or cultural components, but in the interrelationships among ecological

protection, agricultural practices, historical settlements, and contemporary community activities.

Therefore, an understanding of nature-culture integration helps us understand how the social-ecological relationships that constituted the landscape in the past have been disrupted, maintained, or reconfigured as a result of changes in population.

2.2 Living Heritage, Community Change and Continuity.

While the cultural landscape draws attention to the evolving relationships between people and their environments, the living heritage approach provides a way to examine how these relationships remain socially meaningful in the present. A living heritage approach emphasises the recognition of criteria of continuity as primary drivers for the definition, conservation and management of heritage (Poulios, 2014). Wijesuriya (2015) further emphasizes continuity as “the key to characterizing living heritage”. Poulios (2014) identifies four principal continuity criteria: the continuity of the heritage site’s original function; the continuity of the community’s connection with the heritage site; the continuity of care; and the continual evolution of tangible and intangible heritage expressions, a process through which heritage remains relevant to contemporary society.

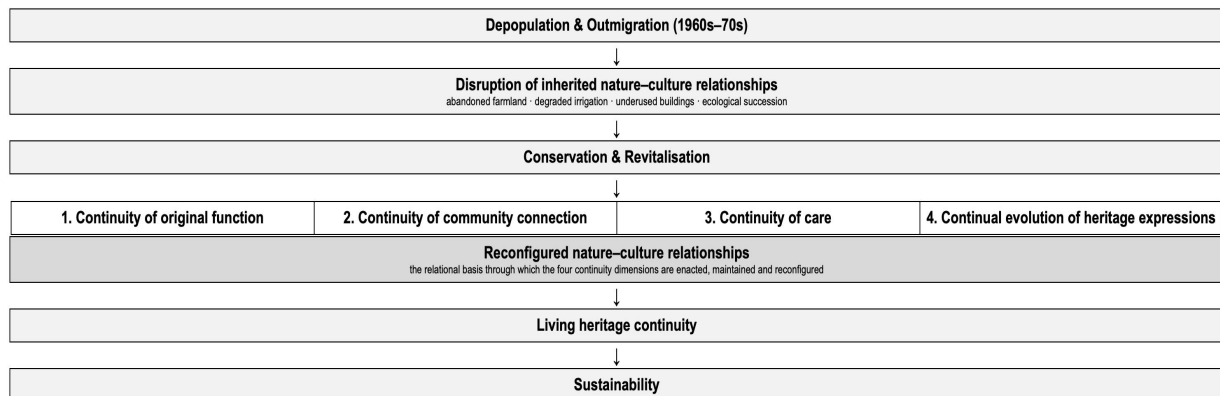
The concept of community is central to this approach, particularly through the notion of the core community. According to a living heritage approach, the starting point, as well as the focal point in the conservation and management process, is the present and the present community’s association with a heritage site (as cited in Poulios, 2014). Poulios (2014) defines the core community as the group that sustains the original function of a living heritage site, retains an ongoing connection with it, considers it integral to its identity and

well-being, and sees its care as an inherent obligation. This community is assigned the primary role in the conservation process, while conservation professionals and the broader community are assigned a secondary role. Therefore, this concept emphasizes not only participation, but also the community's autonomy, and the ability to manage the heritage.

However, in situations where a core community has been displaced elsewhere or affected by overtourism, the effectiveness of the living heritage approach may be either compromised or rendered ineffective (Chen & Wang, 2024). In the context of the Hakka villages in Hong Kong, although many people have returned and settled in the villages after the implementation of the conservation policies, the core community lacks sufficient members. Most of the projects for conservation are being applied for by NGOs and university institutions, while the opinions of the villagers are being solicited. This situation raises a question: how can continuity be maintained when the core community itself has become dispersed or diminished?

This question is particularly important in cultural landscapes because continuity is closely tied to relationships between people and their environments. In the Hakka villages, functions, community connections, care practices and cultural expressions have all been shaped by these relationships. Nature–culture integration therefore provides an important basis for understanding how continuity can be maintained and adapted under changing demographic conditions (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Nature–Culture Integration as the Relational Basis of Living Heritage Continuity in Hong Kong’s Depopulated Hakka Villages

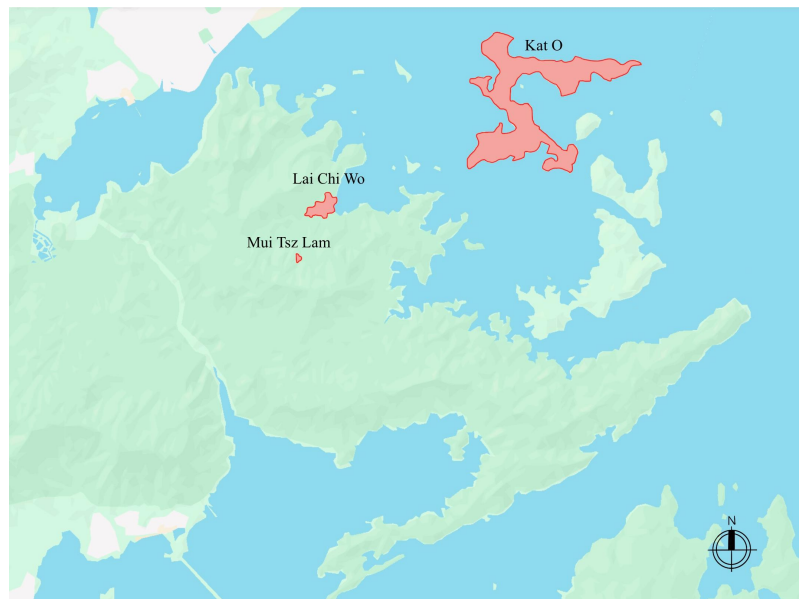


3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach. Three Hakka villages in Hong Kong’s northeastern New Territories are chosen for the field observation: Lai Chi Wo, Mui Tsz Lam, and Kat O (Figure 2). The three sites can all be considered organically evolved cultural landscapes. Data were collected through document analysis, field observation, and semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews included representatives from the CCO, project organisers, researchers and designers, village heads, a local NGO and villagers. The interview structure focused on four themes: understandings of nature–culture relationships; experiences of community participation; changes in cultural practices and landscape use; and perceptions of long-term sustainability.

Figure 2. Location of Lai Chi Wo, Mui Tsz Lam and Kat O in Hong Kong's Northeastern New Territories



4. Findings

4.1 Depopulation and Disruption of Heritage Continuity.

Historically, the Hakka villages in Hong Kong can be understood as cultural landscapes in which settlement, agriculture, and ecological processes were mutually constituted. In Lai Chi Wo, the agricultural landscape is the result of more than 300 years of interaction between a traditional Hakka settlement and its natural environment, which reflects the ancient Chinese Feng Shui philosophy (Chick, 2017). In Kat O, settlement and economic life were shaped by the island's coastal geography and waterborne connections. In Mui Tsz Lam, agricultural terraces and forested hills formed a landscape increasingly transformed after agricultural activity declined. However, since the 1960s-70s, these villages have experienced extreme population decline and the communities have become fragmented. In Kat O, village head Chow Siu-wa recalled that the 1966 census recorded about 5,000 residents, while “today, the actual number of people living in the village is no more than fifty”. In Mui Tsz Lam, field

observation showed that “there are basically no permanent residents”.

Depopulation drove ecological transformation. In Lai Chi Wo, much of the farmland were abandoned since the 1950s due to a wave of migration to foreign countries and the severe competition from the agricultural market. Gradually, the invasion of shrubs deteriorated the functions of the freshwater wetlands created by the paddy fields (Rural Sustainability, n.d.). Villagers have lost their diverse interactions with nature, and biodiversity and ecological values have slowly changed. In Kat O, large scale of villagers’ displacement led to terraces and fish culture zone became redundant. In the absence of a stable community and facing threats of age population, Kat O can be described as an organically evolved cultural landscape which is transiting from a continuing to a relic landscape (Yung, 2020).

In some cases, even cultural continuity was disrupted. Chick (2017) observes that the young generation’s weak attachment to Lai Chi Wo “poses considerable uncertainty about the continuity of the Hakka tradition.” This uncertainty is echoed by Professor Lisa, who organises local cultural events MeGoOut in Kat O. Reflecting on the future, she noted: “All the villagers have already reached nearly 60 or 70 years old, so they don't have the physical ability to organise the event.” Cultural continuity depends not on property passed down, but on practices passed on. Without new generations to sustain them, traditions risk becoming heritage preserved in memory yet no longer lived.

4.2 Revitalisation as Reconnecting People, Land and Practices.

Table 1 shows that revitalisation across the three villages is not a single intervention type but a portfolio spanning material conservation, ecological restoration, agriculture, community

organisation, cultural practice, education and tourism. The portfolio is also unevenly distributed across the villages. Lai Chi Wo has developed the broadest and most integrated combination of different aspects. Mui Tsz Lam shows a stronger concentration around adaptive restoration, agroforestry, and cultural transmission. Kat O has a comparatively stronger emphasis on festivals and visitor-oriented activities, while the continuation of maritime productive relationships is less visible in contemporary intervention portfolios.

The importance of this distribution is that intervention domains and continuity dimensions do not map one-to-one. A single intervention can support several dimensions of continuity, while a village may have many visible projects but still exhibit weakness in particular dimensions.

Table 1. *Intervention Domains across Lai Chi Wo, Mui Tsz Lam and Kat O*

Intervention Domain	Lai Chi Wo	Mui Tsz Lam	Kat O
Material Heritage Conservation	Hakka Life Experience Village. Restoration of 15 traditional village houses as guesthouses and exhibition spaces. Prevention of Deterioration and Landscape Improvement. Removal of dangerous structures; improvement of village open spaces and landscape. Village Garden: Fong, Stove and Hall. Adaptive reuse of three collapsed village houses as community garden spaces.	Old House Restoration Project. Restoration of the Mui Tsz Lam “Old House” using rammed earth and modern materials, creating the rural cooperative “Village Community Hub”.	Kat O Story Room (established with AFCD assistance, 2019). A small museum opened by villagers next to Tin Hau Temple, displaying Hakka and fishing community artefacts. Kat O Heritage Trail (AFCD, 2021). 27 interpretation panels installed in the village, guiding visitors to historic wells, Tin Hau Temple and other relics. Small-scale projects: Kat O Tree Garden.
Landscape & Ecology	Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme. Leasing abandoned farmland to	Forest Village: Mui Tsz Lam and Kop Tong Sustainable Village Programme	

Conservation	introduce ecological farming; restoration of terraces and irrigation systems. Management Agreement Scheme. Collaborative farming with villagers, biodiversity monitoring, and promotion of organic farming methods. Village Garden (as above).	(2021–2024; 2024–2027). Restoration of approximately 20 hectares of farmland and habitat; increased biodiversity; over 200 kg of crops produced.	
Agriculture & Livelihood	Sustainable Lai Chi Wo (as above). Agricultural Produce Marketing (HKU). Sales of local agricultural products. The social enterprise has achieved self-sufficiency after HSBC funding ended.	Terrace Rehabilitation. Villagers and volunteers cleared terraces and ponds in Mui Tsz Lam and planted dozens of mandarin trees.	
Community Engagement & Governance	Hakka Life Experience Village (as above). Villagers trained as volunteer guides; project revenue used for village maintenance. Village Garden (as above). Public planting days organised to involve residents in planting activities.	Community Building Workshops (Mui Tsz Lam revitalisation phases). Through the formulation of management and operation plans for the Village Community Hub in joint hands with villagers, the project transformed the Old House as a multi-functional base camp — “Village Community Hub” — that displays Hakka settlement and village culture, promotes and supports the advancement of village conservation and revitalisation in Mui Tsz Lam and beyond. Friends of Mui Tsz Lam. In 2017, villagers invited volunteers to plant mandarin and kumquat trees in the village. The “Friends of Mui Tsz Lam” WhatsApp group became a platform for coordinating boats and work schedules, and a virtual space for villagers and	Community Collaboration. Kat O villagers spontaneously organise festivals such as Tin Hau Festival.

		volunteers to socialise, discuss and share.	
Cultural Practices	Cultural Centre Exhibition. The Lai Chi Wo Cultural Centre displays themes including Hakka marriage, singing and herbal medicine. “Villages Get Together”. Following the successful conclusion of the "City of Harvest" series in early 2026, the project team will present the "Village Early Summer Arts Fest 2026: Be One of Us" from May to June 2026 in Kuk Po, Yung Shue Au and Lai Chi Wo.	“Nature, Earth and Human” — Mui Tsz Lam Art Revitalisation Project. Murals themed “Nature, Earth and Human”, painted by students and volunteers on the exterior walls of Mui Tsz Lam village houses, showcasing the human stories and rural characteristics of Mui Tsz Lam.	Festivals. Kat O celebrates Tin Hau Festival and the ten-yearly Da Chiu Festival, with many overseas villagers returning to celebrate. MeGoOut. The festival features a vibrant programme showcasing Hong Kong's east-meets-west cultural fusion, diversity and creative vitality. Reviving Kat O's Pearl Farming Industry (Exploratory Study).
Tourism & Education	“Learn from Our Village Heritage”. Secondary school students visit Lai Chi Wo to experience village life and visit farmland and ecological landmarks. Rural Tourism Development. Lai Chi Wo leverages Geopark resources to develop Hakka experience tours and rural guesthouses (e.g. Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation organises rural cultural experience activities). Village Festivals. Lai Chi Wo! Village Fest; Countryside Harvest Festival 2026.	Mui Tsz Lam · Kop Tong · Forest Life Festival 2025 — Forest Life Carnival. Eco-camping site	Geopark Tours. Kat O is included in the UNESCO Global Geopark of Hong Kong, with regular boat tours and coastal hiking. Conservancy Association Kat O Ecological and Historical Heritage Tour.
	Action Research on Developing Sustainable Tourism Model in Yan Chau Tong Eco-recreation and Tourism Circle. The study developed an operational model for in-depth sustainable tourism that has reference value. These activities included local events design and experiences, guided itinerary planning, and solution recommendations, serving as a reference guide for sustainable tourism development in these coastal communities.		

4.2.1 People and Land: Function through Nature–Culture Integration.

The clearest expression of nature–culture integration occurs in the relationship between agriculture and ecological processes. The project in Lai Chi Wo has rejuvenated the cultural landscape as a living agroecosystem by reviving its mosaic of land uses. And the local community has been encouraged to participate in agricultural activities to bring productivity and vibrancy back to the village (Chick, 2025). In the continuity framework, agriculture therefore contributes simultaneously to original function, community connection and care.

The case in Mui Tsz Lam is a bit different. After the village became unoccupied from the late 1970's to 1980's, the farmland gradually became abandoned and natural succession followed (Lau, 2024). Therefore, the project cannot simply clear the newly grown vegetation and rebuild the entire historical agricultural system without simultaneously disregarding the ecological value developed during the abandonment period. The project team adopted intercropping and reclamation methods in agriculture and forestry, preserving large trees and rare plants, and planting shade-tolerant crops such as coffee and ginger beneath the forest (Countryside Conservation Office, 2026). Here, continuity depends on negotiating between historical function and contemporary ecological conditions.

Kat O presented the third configuration. The core natural-cultural relationship is less organized around agricultural terraces and forest land, but more related to settlements, topography, water bodies and marine life. Su and Guo (2024) argue that the coastal settlements of Kat O should be understood as a cultural landscape related to environmental dynamics, especially through the historically changing land-water relationship. They explicitly challenge the purely land-centered approach of rural conservation and advocate for a water-centered understanding of the settlements and heritage of the island. However, this

marine dimension seems relatively underrepresented in contemporary revitalization efforts.

Although current conservation measures do not aim to restore fishing as a productive industry, the field investigation still showed that residents who regularly returned to Kat O were fishing along the coast, indicating that fishing as a life relationship between the residents and the marine environment has not completely disappeared.

4.2.2 Reconnecting People through New Community Networks.

The second dimension of continuity concerns the community's connection with the heritage site and its capacity to care for it. These three cases demonstrate the transformation from geographically concentrated village communities to more dispersed and diversified community forms. The original villagers and their descendants are increasingly living outside the countryside, while new participants include NGOs, universities, architects, researchers, volunteers, social enterprises, and tourists.

Chang (2022)'s study of the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme shows that HKU researchers, NGOs and volunteers were involved in agricultural work, ecological research, water management, house restoration and community coordination, while mechanisms were established to bring former villagers and urban residents into cooperative activities. And increasing numbers of urban residents have sought rural places as an alternative to crowded and stressful urban life. The revitalisation of Lai Chi Wo works by "connecting these two groups of people with rural lands and establishing a rural-urban community to facilitate rural-urban interaction" (Law et al., 2018). Dr. Hu observed that some urban visitors had developed such deep connections that they became permanent residents: "Some people even settled directly in the village. Some people take leave to come over and do farming activities

or volunteer work related to the village.” Such cases underlie the concept of the “new villager”. Professor Su observed a similar pattern of transformation among volunteers: “Along the way, we engaged numerous volunteers who evolved from casual visitors into dedicated stewards with a true sense of ownership over the island.” This indicates that participation can lead to the emergence of new social connections and stewardship around the landscape.

Apart from these new external participants, Village Heads remain an important intermediary for connecting the scattered community members with external organizations. The Village Head Chow Siu-wa of Kat O described his role as follows: “I responsible for holding meetings and organizing affairs. My main job is to coordinate. For example, for this Da Chiu event, it was all my responsibility to arrange it.” In Mui Tsz Lam, Village Head Tsang Yuk On played a more prominent role. He began to promote the village revitalization efforts since the 1990s. The Chairman of the Association for Sha Tau Kok Culture and Ecology Charles Lee also emphasized: “The best thing about Mut Tsz Lam that other villages cannot learn from it is the very strong support from the village head, he goes back to the village every week to participate in activities and promote the affairs of the village.”

These findings indicate that community continuity should not be equated with residential continuity. Village communities can maintain social ties through means such as festivals, village organizations, family networks and volunteer services, while still becoming dispersed. However, this dispersed continuity is different from the historically dense daily interactions within the village.

4.2.3 Reconnecting People and Cultural Practices.

The fourth continuity criterion concerns the evolution of tangible and intangible heritage expressions. In Kat O, cultural heritage encompasses a wide range of practices, including festivals, the Hakka dialect, Hakka food, herbal tea, traditional skills and religious practices (Yung, 2020). Festivals provide one of the clearest mechanisms for this reactivation. In Kat O, the Tin Hau Festival and the ten-yearly Da Chiu continue to provide occasions for dispersed villagers to return to the island and participate in collective activities.

Food provides another important medium through which cultural knowledge is made accessible to new participants. During the Me Go Out activities in Kat O, Professor Lisa encouraged local villagers to develop traditional food products, which attracted visitors. Similarly, in Mui Tsz Lam, the Hakka rice wine workshop organised by the Sha Tau Kok Cultural and Ecological Association under the Forest Village project enabled participants to engage directly with local cultural knowledge through taste. Another example is the Hakka culinary workshop led by the Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation, which brought secondary school students into Mui Tsz Lam. Villagers prepared ingredients while students helped cook a Hakka lunch.

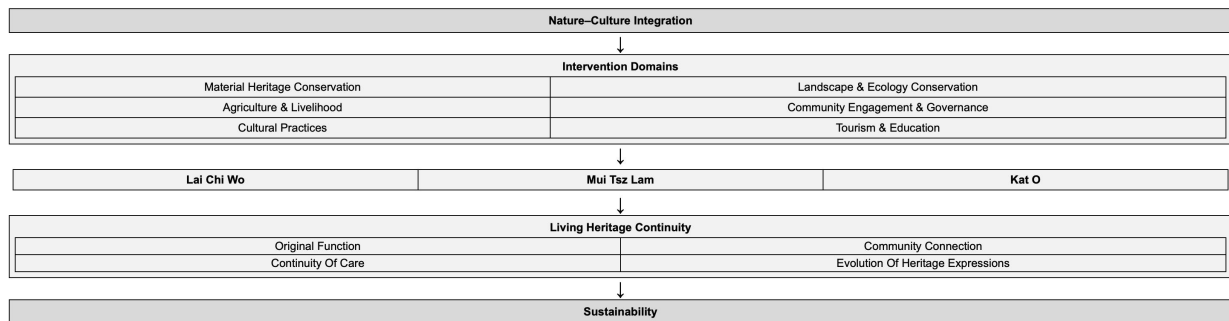
Taken together, these findings suggest that a single intervention may operate across several domains and continuity dimensions. A restored building may become an educational venue and community space; an agricultural project may also become a mechanism for ecological care and cultural transmission; and a festival may simultaneously strengthen community connection and public interpretation. Revitalisation is therefore better understood as a set of overlapping relational interventions than as a sequence of discrete projects.

5. Discussion

5.1 Nature–Culture Integration as the Relational Basis of Continuity.

The findings support a relational interpretation of nature–culture integration. Its significance lies not in placing natural and cultural heritage components side by side, but in sustaining the relationships through which different dimensions of continuity are enacted (Figure 3). The Kat O case illustrates the limitations of treating heritage components as discrete assets. Yung (2020) observed that conservation interventions there largely followed a “point” approach, protecting individual buildings or natural features separately while leaving the collective value of the cultural landscape insufficiently addressed. This suggests that protecting individual buildings or natural features does not necessarily sustain the collective relationships among people, place and practice. Continuity instead depends on connections among ecosystems and livelihoods, material form and memory, and cultural practice and landscape.

This relational understanding is particularly relevant to the Hakka cultural landscape, in which the natural environment was not merely the setting for rural life but an active condition shaping settlement, production and cultural practice. Chang and Peng (2023) described the Hakka settlements in Hong Kong as “living nuclei” and “production hubs” formed through the continuous cultivation and adaptation of natural conditions, including the use of slopes, water, farmland and locally available materials. Nature–culture integration can therefore be understood not only as a contemporary conservation principle, but also as a characteristic of how these cultural landscapes were historically produced and sustained.

Figure 3. *Nature – Culture Interventions And Living Heritage Continuity*

5.2 Living Heritage under Demographic and Community Change.

Depopulation has not simply weakened the community associated with these villages; it has changed the form through which community continuity is maintained. In the three cases, historical resident communities have become geographically dispersed, while new forms of participation have emerged through returning villagers, descendants, volunteers, NGOs, universities, urban residents and visitors. Community continuity is therefore better understood as a process of reconfiguration rather than the restoration of a historically concentrated village community.

The concept of “core community” was introduced in the previous chapter. However, it has subsequently been questioned and revised. Poullos acknowledged that the core community should not be “seen as a fixed and coherent community, but as one consisting of several smaller community groups with partially divergent views” and that just like “heritage itself” communities “including the core community ... are considered to continually evolve over time” (Poullos, 2015, as discussed in Shortland & Emery, 2026). This is particularly relevant to the Hakka villages, where continuity of community connection can no longer be equated simply with permanent residence. The findings show that village organisations, family networks, returning villagers and volunteers continue to maintain connections with the

villages despite geographical dispersion.

Meanwhile, these emerging relationships should not be interpreted as a straightforward replacement for the historical resident population. Chang (2022) notes that long-term urban participants may become deeply invested in the village while remaining less influential than indigenous villagers in decisions concerning land and future development. More people may become connected to the village, while the rights and responsibilities associated with those connections remain unevenly distributed. Living heritage continuity thus depends not simply on enlarging participation, but on how these differentiated relationships are sustained and negotiated over time.

5.3 Sustainability and the Future of Rural Revitalisation.

For these three villages, sustainability cannot be reduced to the physical preservation of heritage or the completion of individual revitalization projects. It is about the ability to maintain meaningful connections among people, the place, cultural practices while adapting to changing environments. One important dimension is the continued involvement of people in the landscape. As one interviewee emphasised, sustainability should not mean preserving a “pristine” environment independently of human presence. His perspective resonates with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 11, which emphasises inclusive, resilient and sustainable communities, and SDG 15, which concerns the protection and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (United Nations, 2015). Sustainability therefore requires both continued human engagement with the landscape and the maintenance of the ecological relationships on which rural heritage depends.

A key challenge is continuity beyond external intervention. The project coordinator in

Lai Chi Wo mentioned that their vision is for the villagers or local organisations eventually be able to “self-govern” and “self-run” the village. External organizations can provide funds, expertise, and coordination, but long-term sustainability depends on whether the practices and organizational capabilities they have established can continue after the direct intervention ends. The CCO’s response also emphasizes the long-term and sustainable operation model rather than a one-off approach: “The CCO provides funding to non-governmental organizations to carry out projects in rural areas. The focus is not on completing a single project itself, but rather on leveraging resources to establish a self-sustaining development foundation at the project site. This aims to gradually involve villagers, stakeholders, and the community in the process, ensuring that the relevant projects and positive impacts can continue even after the funding period ends.”

The CCO’s policy framework also highlights the broader social value of heritage conservation. Expanding participation can broaden the community associated with heritage, and create more opportunities for people to engage with the landscape. According to the CCO, for heritage buildings, applicants are required to provide plans for public access, promotion, management and maintenance, reflecting the principle that restoration should generate longer-term public, educational and community value rather than end with physical conservation.

Currently, economic continuity presents a main challenge. The Chairman of Association for Sha Tau Kok Culture and Ecology, Charles Lee argues that project continuity is not the same as financial self-sufficiency. While Lai Chi Wo has been regarded as a participatory and collaborative model, its dependency on newcomers and corporate-scale third-party assistance,

at a total cost of more than HKD 100 million over 10 years, has also hindered LCW from exemplifying a sustainable and replicable model (Ho, 2024). The experience of Mui Tsz Lam demonstrates another possibility. The 2019 “Nature, Earth and Human” art revitalisation project achieved a significant public response with relatively limited funding, using villagers’ stories and mural production to reconnect people with the village. This suggests that small-scale, locally grounded projects can generate substantial cultural and social impact.

The Kat O case further suggests that sustainability is place-sensitive. Its island setting means that transport and infrastructure affect whether people can access and repeatedly use the village. Professor Su emphasised the importance of a healthy exchange between urban and rural realms, while cautioning against imposing a predominantly land-based development logic on an island where social connections have historically been shaped by water and maritime activities. Future infrastructure supporting longer stays may therefore be more significant than simply increasing visitor numbers. Tourism can contribute to sustainability when it creates repeated and deeper relationships with place, but episodic events do not necessarily restore everyday village life.

Ultimately, the most fundamental challenge is continuity across generations. The village head Tsang Yuk-on, defines sustainability as having “someone to take over” so revitalisation does not become a short-lived intervention. In this view, completing a project is insufficient if buildings, facilities or community resources subsequently become unused. Alternative forms of stewardship, participation and local management may therefore become increasingly important.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that Hong Kong's depopulated Hakka villages require a living heritage approach because heritage continuity can no longer be understood as the preservation of inherited material forms alone. The three cases show that continuity is reconfigured through changing relationships between people, cultural practices and their environments.

Nature–culture integration provides an important relational basis for this process, while community continuity increasingly depends on dispersed and emerging forms of participation rather than residential continuity alone. However, revitalisation does not automatically ensure long-term sustainability. Its potential depends on continued use, care, local capacity and intergenerational succession.

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