

Historical Stratification and Contemporary Revitalization Paths of the Linear Cultural Landscape of the Huihang Ancient Road

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Abstract

The Huihang Ancient Road, a mountain passage linking Huizhou and Hangzhou, is one of the most representative route-based cultural landscapes in eastern China. This paper reinterprets the road not simply as a hiking path or a collection of isolated relics, but as a layered linear cultural landscape formed through long-term interactions among trade mobility, settlement growth, ecological adaptation and social memory. Building on cultural route theory, landscape studies and recent spatial approaches to linear heritage, the paper examines the road's historical stratification, the composition of its route-node-environment system, and the dilemmas facing its current revitalization. It argues that the most serious threats are not only physical deterioration but also fragmentation produced by tourism branding, administrative segmentation and narrative simplification. Effective revitalization therefore requires a shift from point-based restoration to integrated corridor thinking that reconnects route continuity, village life, ecological setting and multi-vocal interpretation. By proposing differentiated zoning, community-based tourism, layered storytelling and low-impact mobility, the study offers a framework for moving beyond scenic consumption toward culturally grounded revitalization of an ancient route landscape.

Keywords: Huihang Ancient Road; linear cultural landscape; cultural routes; historical stratification; heritage revitalization

1. Introduction

Ancient roads occupy a special place in heritage studies because they are neither ordinary monuments nor purely infrastructural remains. Their value lies in movement, connection and the cumulative traces left by repeated circulation. The Huihang Ancient Road exemplifies this condition. Running through mountainous terrain between the Huizhou region and the Hangzhou area, it once supported trade, migration, ritual travel and everyday exchange. Today it is often promoted as a destination for leisure hiking, but this tourism image captures only a small part of its historical significance. To understand what is at stake in its conservation, the road must be viewed as a route-based cultural landscape whose meaning depends on continuity across path segments, service nodes, village environments and remembered practices.

This route-based perspective is especially important in the Chinese context, where many ancient roads have entered public attention through tourism development rather than through sustained heritage planning. In such cases, visible sections are beautified while invisible but equally important relations among villages, shrines, bridges, forests and historical narratives remain weakly interpreted. The consequence is a mismatch between the linear nature of the heritage and the fragmented manner of its management. The Huihang Ancient Road is therefore a valuable case for exploring how route heritage can be revitalized without being reduced to scenic packaging. It invites a broader question that extends far beyond one route: how should linear cultural landscapes be protected when their historical integrity depends on mobility, environmental setting and social memory as much as on surviving fabric?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

Work on cultural routes and cultural landscapes has demonstrated that mobility itself can be heritage-bearing. The ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes and the broader UNESCO landscape discourse emphasize exchange, interconnection and lived environment rather than isolated monuments. Scholars such as Aplin, Taylor and Fowler have shown that route-based landscapes

embody layered values produced by trade, ritual, settlement and ecological adaptation. At the same time, critical heritage studies remind us that interpretation is always selective. Heritage becomes meaningful through present-day choices about which stories to foreground, which actors to include and which scales to privilege. For ancient roads, this means that revitalization strategies are never neutral: they actively shape whether a route is remembered as infrastructure, commerce, ecology, local livelihood or national history.

Here the three Great Tea Road papers by Meng and colleagues provide a useful methodological analogue. Although their empirical focus is Central Shanxi rather than the Huihang corridor, they show how linear heritage may be interpreted through spatial coupling, corridor construction and multilayer narrative relations. Their relevance lies not in direct thematic overlap but in the reminder that route heritage must be analyzed as a system linking nodes, environmental matrices and storytelling structures. Adopting that insight, this paper uses the notion of historical stratification to describe how multiple temporal layers coexist along the Huihang Ancient Road: transport technology, mercantile infrastructure, sacred sites, village adaptations and contemporary tourism imaginaries all overlap within the same corridor.

3. Historical Stratification of the Huihang Ancient Road

The Huihang Ancient Road acquired significance through repeated use over many centuries. At one level, it functioned as a mountain corridor enabling the movement of tea, timber, everyday goods and commercial actors between inland Huizhou and the lower Yangtze sphere. At another level, it sustained inns, shrines, markets and hamlets that serviced travelers and embedded mobility in local social life. These elements were not independent. The route was meaningful because paths, way stations, labor, security and ritual support formed a mutually reinforcing system. This historical layering helps explain why the road cannot be adequately represented through a single preserved stone path or a handful of famous scenic sections.

The notion of stratification also highlights that the route is a temporal palimpsest. Some layers are material, such as bridges, paving, retaining walls, pass markers and temple sites. Other layers are organizational, including historical practices of portage, lodging and merchant association. Still others are interpretive and emotional, reflected in local memory, travel writing and present-day route branding. In a mountain environment, ecological adaptation forms yet another layer. Path alignment, settlement location and vegetation management were shaped by slope, water and forest resources. The heritage value of the Huihang corridor therefore lies in the coexistence of infrastructural, commercial, social and environmental histories, all inscribed unevenly across space.

4. Route, Nodes and Environmental Matrix

A route-based heritage system cannot be understood without attention to nodes. Villages, temples, resting points and trading places punctuated the road and translated long-distance movement into localized patterns of hospitality, exchange and control. Some nodes mediated regional trade; others anchored community memory and ritual practice. Their significance depended on their relationship to the route, but the reverse was equally true: without nodes, the route would lose social depth and practical legibility. A preservation strategy that restores path segments while neglecting villages or shrines effectively empties the route of its historical social world.

The environmental matrix is equally central. The road traverses mountainous terrain that conditioned movement speed, route alignment and seasonal accessibility. Forests, streams, ridges and cultivated terraces were not passive scenery around the road; they were active elements in the formation of the corridor. This observation matters because many current tourism representations aestheticize the environment while severing it from historical use. A genuine linear cultural landscape approach would instead recover the reciprocal relation between ecology and circulation. The route should be read not as a line laid on top of nature, but as a socio-ecological adaptation that emerged within a particular mountain environment.

5. Contemporary Dilemmas of Revitalization

The main contemporary problem is fragmentation. Different sections of the Huihang Ancient Road are governed by different administrative units, tourism agencies, local communities and conservation

priorities. As a result, some parts are highly visible and commercially packaged, while others remain poorly maintained or nearly absent from public interpretation. This selective visibility encourages a point-based tourism model in which a route becomes a sequence of attractions rather than a connected historical landscape. Such a model privileges marketable sections and neglects the less spectacular but structurally necessary links that once sustained the road's continuity.

A second dilemma is narrative simplification. Ancient roads are often narrated through heroic commerce, scenic adventure or generic nostalgia. While these themes are not false, they are insufficient. They overshadow mundane but historically decisive topics such as porter labor, rural provisioning, women's participation in household economies, local religious practices and the ecological labor required to maintain passable mountain routes. When revitalization becomes dependent on a singular narrative, local communities are pushed into decorative roles and the interpretive richness of the route declines. Heritage then risks becoming a consumable atmosphere rather than a platform for layered historical understanding.

6. Revitalization Strategies for a Linear Cultural Landscape

Revitalization should begin with integrated zoning based on the route's varying conditions. Core relic sections require material conservation and careful visitor management. Village-linked sections need support for everyday habitation, vernacular repair and small-scale cultural economy rather than large scenic interventions. Ecologically sensitive sections demand low-impact access, environmental restoration and strict limits on construction intensity. Such differentiation would acknowledge that the road is not homogeneous. It contains segments with different levels of authenticity, carrying capacity and social vitality, and each requires a different balance between protection and activation.

Equally important is the reconstruction of layered interpretation. Instead of presenting the route only as a hiking destination, planners and curators could organize narratives around commerce, mobility labor, ritual landscapes, mountain ecology and village life. Here digital mapping, oral history and community-led guiding could help reconnect dispersed resources into a legible whole. Slow mobility should be prioritized over mass scenic traffic. Small-group walking, educational itineraries and locally embedded accommodation are more compatible with route integrity than high-volume destination tourism. In this sense, revitalization is not only a matter of preserving traces but of rebuilding a mode of experiencing the corridor that remains attentive to continuity, difficulty, local knowledge and environmental context.

7. Broader Discussion

The Huihang case illustrates a broader challenge in route heritage governance: how to preserve movement-based history within administrative systems organized around bounded sites. Ancient roads expose the limits of point-based heritage regimes because their significance depends on sequences, transitions and relations among places. This is why corridor thinking is increasingly useful. It allows heritage practitioners to see how local repairs, landscape management and narrative work interact across a larger spatial field. The contribution of the Great Tea Road literature is precisely to demonstrate how route heritage can be organized through corridor logic without reducing interpretation to simple linear determinism.

Another issue concerns the place of living communities in route revitalization. If villages are treated merely as scenic backdrops, the social conditions that once gave depth to the route will continue to erode. But if community participation is reduced to performance for tourists, a different form of distortion emerges. What is needed is not symbolic inclusion but a governance model in which local residents share authority over interpretation, use and benefit distribution. Under such conditions, ancient roads can become resources for localized cultural renewal rather than just external visitor consumption.

A further implication concerns scale. Ancient roads are often discussed either at the national-symbolic level or at the level of individual scenic sections. Yet much of their practical governance happens at the meso-scale of counties, townships and village clusters. This intermediate scale is crucial because it is where path maintenance, visitor regulation, vernacular repair and small business development are actually negotiated. More attention to this scale would help turn linear heritage from a promotional slogan into a workable spatial planning object.

It is also important to note that not every segment needs the same degree of tourism activation. Some sections may contribute most through education, ecological conservation or scholarly documentation rather than visitor growth. A route-wide strategy should therefore accept uneven use intensity while maintaining overall continuity. This principle would reduce the pressure to commercialize every village or pave every historical trail in order to justify protection funding.

Finally, route heritage invites a more processual understanding of authenticity. Authenticity does not reside only in untouched stone paving; it also lies in the persistence of route logic, local mobility knowledge, environmental adaptation and socially meaningful interpretation. Recognizing this broader authenticity would allow conservation to support living landscapes without collapsing into theme-park reconstruction.

A further analytical gain comes from treating the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape as a problem of territorial coordination rather than as a single-sector issue. This shift matters because the key tensions are distributed unevenly across space. Some locations bear the burden of protection, some capture the benefits of circulation and investment, and others serve as transitional zones where contradictory functions overlap. Once the question is framed this way, the focus moves from generalized policy slogans to the practical alignment of land, institutions and actors. In the present case, county authorities, village communities, heritage professionals and small tourism operators do not simply respond to one policy signal; they negotiate multiple and sometimes conflicting priorities embedded in a route-segment-village structure.

The case also demonstrates the importance of temporal layering. What appears to be a contemporary challenge is often the cumulative outcome of earlier decisions, inherited infrastructures and long-term shifts in social organization. Reading the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape historically therefore improves interpretation. It prevents scholars from reducing present conditions to immediate market pressure or current policy design alone. Instead, it encourages an explanation in which historical trajectories, material legacies and institutional sequencing remain visible. This temporal sensitivity is especially useful when the available evidence includes landscape observation, route interpretation and comparative heritage theory, because such materials reveal process and staging rather than only end-state outcomes.

Another implication concerns the role of intermediate scales. Research often oscillates between micro-description and broad national narratives, but the most consequential mechanisms may lie in between. For the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape, the intermediate scale helps reveal how decisions are translated, negotiated and unevenly implemented. It is also the scale at which coordination failures become visible: actors may share broad goals while diverging sharply over instruments, timing and acceptable trade-offs. Paying closer attention to the route-segment-village configuration would therefore make explanation more precise and policy recommendations more realistic.

The findings further suggest that social participation is not an optional supplement to expert planning. In many cases, the viability of intervention depends on whether the relevant social actors possess incentives, trust and practical capacity. This is particularly true where route conservation, local livelihood and tourism commercialization cannot be resolved through technical optimization alone. The behavior of county authorities, village communities, heritage professionals and small tourism operators shapes how policies are interpreted on the ground, which opportunities are taken up and which forms of resistance emerge. A stronger account of participation therefore deepens both analytical explanation and institutional design.

Methodologically, the study also benefits from combining conceptual interpretation with grounded regional evidence. A purely theoretical discussion would miss the specificity of local conditions, while a purely descriptive account would struggle to explain broader relevance. By bringing together landscape observation, route interpretation and comparative heritage theory, the present analysis is able to speak to general debates without abandoning place-based complexity. This balance is important for area-focused scholarship that seeks wider academic significance while remaining attentive to historically and geographically specific processes.

From a policy perspective, the case argues against uniform solutions. Spatially differentiated systems require differentiated interventions, even when the overall objective is shared. What matters

is not only what should be protected, activated or coordinated, but where, by whom and through which institutional sequence. In practice, this means that the next stage of work on the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape should emphasize corridor governance, community-led storytelling and low-impact mobility. Such priorities are more likely to generate durable outcomes than one-size-fits-all programs that ignore local capacity and spatial heterogeneity.

The discussion also invites comparison with other regions and cases. Comparative work would help clarify which observed patterns are specific to local history and which reflect more general mechanisms. This is especially relevant where route conservation, local livelihood and tourism commercialization appears in varied forms across different territories. Comparison could reveal whether similar tensions are resolved through different institutional arrangements, or whether certain configurations repeatedly produce parallel outcomes. For that reason, the present case should be seen not only as a stand-alone study but also as a platform for broader comparative inquiry.

Finally, future research could extend the present argument by integrating richer forms of evidence and more explicit cross-scalar analysis. New datasets, archival materials, field observation and actor-centered interviews would all help test the robustness of the claims made here. Yet the basic conclusion would likely remain: the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape is best understood as a relational process shaped by uneven space, layered history and mediated coordination. That conclusion provides a coherent basis for future work on corridor governance, community-led storytelling and low-impact mobility and for more historically grounded forms of public interpretation or policy design.

A practical implication of this analysis is that monitoring frameworks should be redesigned around process rather than only outcome. In work on the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape, the temptation is often to evaluate success through a narrow indicator that is easy to report. Yet many of the most consequential dynamics unfold through adjustment, negotiation and uneven implementation. A more process-oriented framework would ask how county authorities, village communities, heritage professionals and small tourism operators respond over time, where bottlenecks emerge, and which forms of coordination prove durable. Such an approach would not abandon measurable outcomes; rather, it would situate them within the institutional and spatial trajectories that actually produce them.

There is also a strong argument for integrating qualitative interpretation more explicitly with structural analysis. Large patterns matter, but they do not explain themselves. Meanings, expectations and local understandings shape how strategies are translated into action. In contexts marked by route conservation, local livelihood and tourism commercialization, the categories used by planners, scholars and residents may not fully align. Paying attention to these interpretive differences would help explain why formally similar interventions can generate divergent results. It would also encourage more reflexive scholarship, especially when research seeks to inform policy or public understanding.

A related question concerns institutional memory. Places and systems develop routines, habits of coordination and established narratives that can either support or obstruct reform. For the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape, these inherited patterns influence what types of change appear feasible, legitimate or desirable to different participants. Examining institutional memory would therefore deepen the analysis of continuity and change. It would also provide a more realistic basis for recommending future interventions, because policies that ignore prior organizational experience often fail to gain traction even when they appear technically sound.

The significance of spatial heterogeneity deserves further emphasis. Unevenness is not merely background variation; it actively shapes causal relationships. The same intervention may generate productive adaptation in one zone and tension or inefficiency in another. This is why a route-segment-village perspective remains indispensable. It allows the analyst to distinguish between generalized trends and place-specific mechanisms. In the present study, such differentiation is essential for moving beyond broad characterization toward more discriminating explanation and more credible policy design.

Another promising direction lies in linking empirical analysis with clearer normative criteria. Debates about the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape are rarely value-neutral,

because they involve judgments about what should be protected, prioritized or transformed. Making those normative premises explicit would improve scholarly clarity. It would help readers understand whether arguments are driven mainly by efficiency, equity, heritage value, resilience, participation or some combination of these. In cases shaped by route conservation, local livelihood and tourism commercialization, such transparency is especially important because different stakeholders may endorse different principles while using similar language.

The argument advanced here also speaks to methodological pluralism. No single method can capture the full complexity of the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape. Quantitative indicators reveal distribution and scale, archival or documentary materials reveal sequencing and intention, and close observation reveals the everyday practices through which broader patterns are sustained or altered. Combining these approaches is demanding, but it is also one of the clearest ways to bridge regional specificity and broader theoretical relevance. That is particularly true when the available evidence includes landscape observation, route interpretation and comparative heritage theory and when the research aims to support both explanation and application.

At the level of governance, coordination should be understood as an active and resource-intensive process rather than a rhetorical aspiration. Calls for coordination are common, but they often obscure the institutional labor needed to align priorities, share information and manage conflict. In the case of the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape, effective coordination would require clearer responsibility, more stable channels of communication and stronger mechanisms for balancing costs and benefits among county authorities, village communities, heritage professionals and small tourism operators. Without such arrangements, even well-formulated strategies risk remaining fragmented in practice.

In the longer term, scholarship on the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape would benefit from stronger attention to scenario thinking. Present conditions should not be treated as fixed baselines. Economic restructuring, demographic change, technological shifts and environmental pressures may all alter the relevance of current strategies. Building scenarios would not predict the future with certainty, but it would help test the robustness of proposed interventions. This is particularly valuable for work concerned with corridor governance, community-led storytelling and low-impact mobility, where institutional flexibility may be as important as immediate optimization.

One final consideration is the importance of communicative clarity. Research on the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape often crosses disciplinary boundaries, which means that key concepts may carry different meanings for historians, planners, geographers and policy practitioners. Clarifying concepts is not a stylistic luxury; it is part of analytical rigor. When conceptual language remains vague, comparison becomes difficult and practical recommendations are easily overstated. Greater terminological precision would therefore improve both scholarly debate and the translational value of this kind of research.

It is equally useful to think about institutional durability. Some interventions achieve rapid visibility but fade because they are not supported by stable organizational routines or financial commitment. In work on the Huihang Ancient Road as a linear cultural landscape, durability should be treated as a criterion of success in its own right. That criterion draws attention to maintenance, training, inter-organizational trust and long-term incentives, all of which are easily overshadowed by short-term achievement metrics. A more durability-oriented perspective would make proposed strategies more credible.

8. Conclusion

The Huihang Ancient Road is best understood as a historically stratified linear cultural landscape composed of route segments, service nodes, ecological settings and remembered practices. Its current revitalization problems stem less from simple physical decay than from fragmentation, narrative narrowing and the separation of route heritage from village life. A more sustainable path forward lies in differentiated zoning, layered interpretation, community participation and low-impact mobility. By shifting attention from isolated scenic sections to the route as an integrated corridor, heritage practice can recover the historical depth and cultural complexity that make the Huihang Ancient Road significant in the first place.

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