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RESPONSE ACTIONS TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN A WORLD HERITAGE SITE: A CASE STUDY OF THE OLD TOWN OF LIJIANG, CHINA

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Abstract

Nowadays, heritage is seen as a significant tourism resource that contributes to developing quality tourism destinations. Places with world heritage are filled with valuable cultural and economic resources. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector has been hit hard by this inevitable global crisis. COVID-19 has negatively impacted World Heritage Sites (WHS), resulting in reduced tourism revenue, decreased employment in the tourism sector, and loss of local community livelihoods. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic also provides a chance for heritage sites to adjust and improve tourism management and development, therefore WHS can address the challenges brought by other inevitable crisis in the future. This study aims to explore the actions taken to address the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, using the Old Town of Lijiang (OToL), a cultural WHS in China, as a case study. A qualitative approach was adopted, and in-depth interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholders including government officials, local residents, and business owners. The findings reveal that OToL implemented a series of effective response actions, including effective government response management, strict pandemic prevention actions, application of technology, active participation of local communities and business owners, and public publicity and education. These actions contributed to maintaining social and economic stability while facilitating tourism recovery. The experiences of OToL provide valuable lessons for other World Heritage Sites in designing adaptive responses to future crises and promoting sustainable tourism development in a post-pandemic context.

Keywords: World Heritage Sites, Old Town of Lijiang, Response actions

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage has been seen as a significant tourism resource and contributes to quality tourism destination development (Pavlic et al., 2020). Places with world heritage are filled with valuable cultural and economic resources. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector has been hit hard by this inevitable global crisis. In early 2020, the world was confronted with an unexpected global crisis caused by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (UNESCO, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic has already impacted all aspects of our daily lives, such as the way we work and study, the way people interact and spend time together (UNESCO, 2021a). According to data from the World Tourism Organization, international tourist arrivals dropped by 74% in 2020, and destinations worldwide accommodated 1 billion fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in 2019 due to the unprecedented drop in demand and travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic is the unprecedented global crisis and the tourism industry has been hit hard by the pandemic; many studies have conducted to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism sector (Chibaya & Mashokob, 2022; Gössling, et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020), relatively few studies have focused on the actions taken to address the crisis within WHS, particularly in China.

As many WHS in China serve as major tourist attractions, which contribute significantly to the local and national economy, thus it is imperative to explore actions to address the COVID-19 impact on WHS in China for safeguarding cultural and natural treasures, supporting local communities, and promoting sustainable tourism development in the post COVID-19 era. Despite some global studies exploring management adaptations and community resilience, there remains a significant gap in research on how Chinese WHS—especially those with active tourism economies—have responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the response actions taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic in a cultural WHS, using the Old Town of Lijiang as a case study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural heritage

According to UNESCO (2022a), heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. It is recognized as a valuable tourism resource that contributes to the development of high-quality destinations (Pavlic et al., 2020). World Heritage Sites (WHS) are categorized as natural, cultural, or mixed (UNESCO, 2022a). While natural heritage includes naturally occurring phenomena such as mountains and rivers (Timothy, 2011), cultural heritage reflects human creativity and history, encompassing both

tangible and intangible elements. As noted by Ismail, Masron, and Ahmad (2014), cultural heritage can be divided into three categories: the built environment (e.g., buildings and townscapes), the natural environment (e.g., agricultural landscapes and coastlines), and the artefact environment (e.g., books, objects, and artworks).

Cultural heritage tourism holds substantial value, not only for its economic and social contributions but also for its role in reinforcing cultural identity, reviving traditions, and preserving monuments (Ismail, Masron & Ahmad, 2014). It reflects the way of life, customs, and artistic expressions passed down through generations. Given its importance, this study focuses on cultural heritage tourism in China, with a case study of the Old Town of Lijiang. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997, Lijiang is renowned for its rich cultural significance and popularity among both domestic and international tourists (Qi, 2021; Fang, 2017). The next section introduces the Old Town of Lijiang in more detail.

Old town of Lijiang

The Old Town of Lijiang (OToL) is located on the Lijiang plain at an elevation of 2,400 meters in southwest Yunnan, China, surrounded by mountain passes that historically served as strategic routes (UNESCO, 2022b) (see Figure 1). Water from the Yulong Snow Mountain feeds into the Heilong Pool (Black Dragon Pond), which then supplies a network of canals that run through the town (UNESCO, 2022b). OToL consists of three main areas: Dayan Old Town, Baisha, and Shuhe. Dayan, established in the Ming dynasty as a commercial centre. Baisha, established during the Song and Yuan dynasties, lies 8 km north of Dayan, while Shuhe is located 4 km to the northwest. These clusters, nestled between mountains and waterways, reflect a rich blend of local cultures, folk traditions, and architectural heritage spanning several centuries (UNESCO, 2022b).

The vivid urban space, the vigorous water system, the harmonious building complexes, the comfortable residences of appropriate size, the pleasant environment, and the folk art of unique style combine to form an outstanding example of human habitat (UNESCO, 2022b). Beyond its valuable built heritage, the most significant element of the OToL is its local community—the Naxi minority. As one of China's 56 recognized ethnic groups, the Naxi people are primarily concentrated in Lijiang, Yunnan Province. Renowned for their rich artistic traditions in poetry, painting, sculpture, music, and dance, the Naxi culture forms the "living heritage" of the OToL. Their language, customs, and traditional lifestyle are still actively preserved and practiced, serving as the cultural soul of the heritage site and a major attraction for visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences (Baidu, 2022).

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Figure 1: Location of the OToL

(Source: Google Maps, 2024)

Response actions to address the COVID-19 pandemic in tourism sector

Many studies have proposed strategic frameworks to support tourism recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhatia et al., 2022; Brouder, 2020; Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Sharma et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020; Stankov et al., 2020). However, most of these strategies remain theoretical and have not been widely implemented in practice. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate concrete actions that have been taken on the ground to address the crisis in the tourism sector. According to UNWTO, many countries have implemented fiscal policy to support travel and tourism during the pandemic, for instance, the Chinese government has asked banks to extend the terms of business loans and commercial landlords to reduce rents; refunding travel agencies and improving infrastructure, etc. In Malaysia, the government has launched three economic stimulus packages worth US\$59.9 billion (RM260 billion) based on three main strategies of protecting social welfare, supporting businesses and strengthening the economy (UNWTO, 2024). New Zealand also launched economic packages and government loans to support tourism sector (UNWTO, 2024).

Sigala (2020) identified specific actions in response to the pandemic, including the implementation of social distancing policies, redesigning tourism experiences for smaller groups, and shifting to outdoor and private activities. Winery experiences, museum visits, tours, sports events, and in-room dining and entertainment are being reimaged to feature smaller groups of tourists and

outdoor activities; hotels are focusing on in-room entertainment and amenities instead of shared facilities to minimize contact (Sigala, 2020).

Tourism businesses have upgraded hygiene protocols, promoted health certifications, and adapted offerings to enhance customer trust (Sigala, 2020). Some have used this period to improve service quality and differentiate products, while also investing in employee training and revising human resource policies to build workforce resilience (Kuščer et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Bulchand-Gidumal (2022), COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerability and sensitivity of the tourism industry, implementing smart technology can enhance destination management, positioning destinations more effectively to handle crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. He highlights the significance of applying technology and artificial intelligence to address the COVID-19 in tourism sector.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs the qualitative research approach; in order to achieve the research's aim and objectives, this research adopts a case study approach, choosing one famous WHS in China—the Old Town of Lijiang in Yunnan Province—as an example. Different stakeholders of the OTOL tourism were interviewed, respondents include government, local residents, local business owners (Table 1 is the summary of respondents). Considering the research objective and data saturation, the number of interviewees was determined. A senior government officer was interviewed to provide authoritative insights into the official policies, emergency responses, and pandemic management strategies. This respondent was selected due to his extensive institutional knowledge, ensuring access to accurate data and policy-level perspectives necessary for understanding governmental actions and tourism governance during the crisis. In terms of the local residents, the interviewees must be native Naxi people living in the OTOL, five interviewees are selected according to their age, gender and occupation. The selection considered diversity in age, gender, and occupation, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how different demographic groups within the community responded to the pandemic. Lastly, local business owners are people who own the store in the OTOL area, the study chooses five business owners of different sizes and types, including guesthouses, medium-sized restaurants, souvenir shops, and cultural or entertainment-oriented services. Their inclusion allows the study to investigate how entrepreneurs responded through adaptation, innovation or government support.

Table 1: summary of interview respondents

Stakeholder group	Code	Gender	Age Group	Profession	Rationale for Inclusion
Government	GOV-1	Male	30-40	Director of the Heritage Protection Department of the Management Bureau	Deep understanding of relevant policies and response coordination
Local resident	RES-1	Female	60+	Housewife	To capture how different demographic groups maintained cultural life and community resilience through various forms of local action.
	RES-2	Male	40-50	Tour guide	
	RES-3	Female	20-30	University student	
	RES-4	Female	30-40	Artisan (shawl)	
	RES-5	Male	60+	Cultural worker (retired)	
Business owner	BUS-1	Male	30-40	Guesthouse owner	To explore practical response actions and business model adjustments in response to pandemic challenges.
	BUS-2	Female	40-50	Restaurant manager	
	BUS-3	Male	30-40	Souvenir shop owner	
	BUS-4	Female	20-30	Cafe owner	
	BUS-5	Male	60+	Director of cultural courtyard	

DISCUSSION

Response actions to address the COVID-19 pandemic

The actions have been taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic is valuable to WHS, the OToL responded to the pandemic rapidly, and all stakeholders participated in fighting the COVID-19 campaign to mitigate the negative

impacts of the pandemic (see Figure 2). The actions to address the COVID-19 pandemic are organized in five aspects: effective government response management, strict pandemic prevention actions, application of technology, active participation of local communities and business owners, and public publicity and education (Table 2 presents the actions to address the pandemic in the OToL).

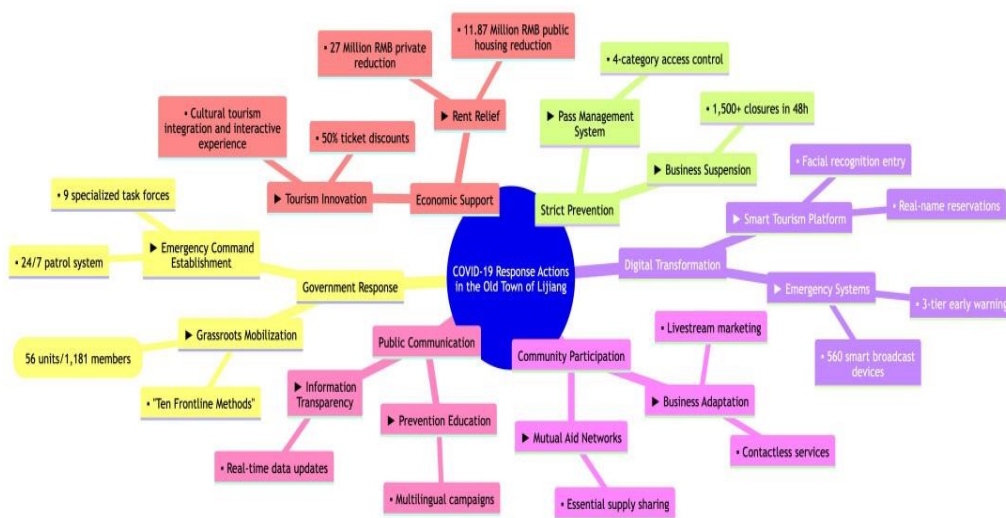


Figure 2: Mind map of the response actions in the OToL

Effective government response management

Establishing pandemic prevention and control headquarters

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Old Town of Lijiang (OToL) swiftly established a pandemic prevention and control headquarters. As GOV-1 stated, “We had to act quickly and systematically—our immediate goal was to stop tourist flow and isolate risks.” On January 25, 2020, the OToL World Heritage Conservation and Management Bureau issued a work plan to suspend tourist reception and launched an emergency response involving all staff. Nine specialized working groups were formed to handle access control, logistics, public information, market order, and merchant coordination. Over 20 checkpoints were set up at major entrances, and more than 1,500 businesses were closed within two days, leaving only essential services such as inns and pharmacies open. Meanwhile, a dedicated team assisted stranded tourists with refunds, relocation to guesthouses, and basic health monitoring.

Strengthening Frontline Governance and Grassroots Mobilization in Pandemic Control

To strengthen the frontline of pandemic prevention in the OTOL, the OTOL Protection Administration, in collaboration with the OTOL Management Co., Ltd., Dayan Street Office, the local law enforcement brigade, and the old town police station, implemented the “Ten Frontline Working Methods.” Guided by the principle of “preventing external import and internal spread,” these efforts aimed to refine responsibilities, reinforce measures, and establish the strictest defense line within the scenic area, effectively disrupting transmission routes and minimizing infection risks.

In addition, grassroots political mobilization played a vital role. According to GOV-1, “The success of our early containment efforts relied on both professional coordination and grassroots political leadership.” The Party Working Committee of the OTOL World Heritage Conservation and Management Bureau cancelled Spring Festival holidays and swiftly deployed 56 grassroots party organizations and 1,181 Communist Party members to the frontline. Under the guidance of the “five-leader” model, party members actively participated in joint prevention and control efforts, demonstrating a strong commitment to public safety and contributing to the stability and recovery of the old town.

Rental Relief for Public Housing and Private Tenants

To mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector, Lijiang allocated 30 million yuan in tourism development funds to support cultural and tourism enterprises through scenic spot construction, tourism promotion, and loan interest subsidies. The government also suspended a total of 15.24 million yuan in quality guarantee deposits for 87 travel agencies. Additionally, rent relief measures were introduced: 271 public housing tenants in the OTOL received a three-month rent reduction totaling 11.87 million yuan. The OTOL Protection Administration and Dayan Subdistrict Office also called on private landlords to reduce rents, resulting in over 27 million yuan in additional reductions. These joint efforts aimed to ease financial burdens and support business recovery during the suspension of tourism activities.

Tourism transformation and tickets discount

During the pandemic prevention and control period, Lijiang resolutely implemented a 50% reduction in ticket prices for state-owned scenic spots to benefit tourists. At the same time, efforts were made to develop new products and formats such as leisure vacation, health preservation, and cultural research and learning, promoting the transformation of the tourism industry from a “ticket economy” and “sightseeing economy” to a cultural tourism integration and

interactive experience. GOV-1 noted, “We used the pandemic period as an opportunity to rethink tourism—we encouraged innovation beyond the traditional sightseeing model.”

The OToL launches some cultural tourism innovation activities, such as the game map "My World: The Old Town of Lijiang" has been launched, along with the OToL national style Carnival and the introduction of "The Old Town of Lijiang: Floating Life" and Yunxi scripted murder mystery game. These new ways to experience the ancient town allow Lijiang's culture to be showcased through a "game + tourism + culture" model, providing visitors with a deeper immersive experience and boosting the development of Lijiang's cultural and creative industries.

Conduct emergency drills for pandemic prevention and control

To enhance emergency preparedness, the OToL conducted a COVID-19 drill simulating a real-life scenario in which a tourist from a high-risk area showed an abnormal temperature. The exercise covered all key procedures—from detection and reporting to isolation and disinfection—and involved full coordination among departments. GOV-1 stated, “Drills were not symbolic—they were essential to test and refine our coordination, speed, and decision-making in real scenarios.” The drill effectively assessed the scenic area's command system and emergency response capacity, while also improving staff awareness and readiness for future public health emergencies.

Strict pandemic prevention actions

Pass management, the Old Town of Lijiang formulates pandemic control measures

Since the suspension of tourist reception, the OToL pandemic control headquarters and its nine working groups have continuously adjusted their strategies based on evolving conditions. On February 5, 2020, they implemented the "Old Town of Lijiang Pass" system to regulate movement within the scenic area, issuing passes to original residents, business operators, stranded tourists, and migrant workers. As GOV-1 described, “Controlling who could enter and exit was one of the hardest yet most necessary decisions—we had to protect residents and preserve order.” This measure enhanced the control of entry and exit to ensure effective pandemic management. Meanwhile, business owners were promptly mobilized to close their shops. By January 26, 2020, all businesses except essential inns and pharmacies had shut down. Authorities also used WeChat, phone calls, and radio broadcasts to notify residents and business owners not to return until tourist reception resumed.

Application of technology

The transformation and upgrading of tourism in Lijiang rely heavily on technological support. The development of smart tourism has played a crucial role in facilitating pandemic response and sustaining long-term tourism development. GOV-1 explained “We began developing smart tourism in 2019, and it has since become a vital tool in helping us respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Since the reopening of the OTOL on February 20, 2020, for visitors from Yunnan and other low-risk areas, smart tourism technologies have been fully utilized to manage visitor flow and ensure safety. Standard features such as online reservations, staggered visiting times, and capacity limits were introduced through Lijiang’s smart tourism platform.

Smart services like online ticketing, facial recognition for entry, and self-guided tour systems have enhanced both visitor safety and satisfaction. When the number of tourists in the scenic area peaked at 20,000, the platform triggered a Level-3 warning. In response, 560 smart emergency broadcasts and 27 digital guidance screens were activated to support real-time crowd control and safe evacuation. To strengthen health and safety management, a smart terminal system was implemented requiring visitors to scan ID cards and complete real-name registration, replacing manual check-ins. These technologies have enabled safer, faster, and more efficient entry processes.

As the pandemic eased, business operations in the OTOL gradually resumed. The number of entrance checkpoints was adjusted to 16, with staff working in rotating shifts to maintain 24-hour monitoring. Smart tourism has not only helped the OTOL respond effectively to COVID-19 but has also laid the foundation for sustainable, tech-driven tourism management.

Active participation of local communities and business owners

During the interviews, both local residents and business owners demonstrated active engagement in addressing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. All residents’ respondents reported taking practical measures such as regularly disinfecting public and private spaces, sharing protective supplies and daily necessities, and forming mutual aid groups to support vulnerable families. “We helped each other through the hardest times—sometimes just delivering a bag of rice made a big difference,” said a middle-aged resident (RES-2). Many also reported gradually adjusting their emotional state by learning more about the virus and actively cooperating with government efforts. “Once we understood what was happening, we stopped panicking and started doing what we could to help,” noted a retired cultural worker (RES-5).

Business owners, meanwhile, adapted to survive financial hardship, particularly during lockdowns and business closures. Some had to lay off

employees or rent out parts of their premises to cover basic costs. “I had no guests, so I rented rooms to tenants just to make ends meet,” said one guesthouse owner (BUS-1). Many turned to smart technologies to transform their business models. Many business owners increasingly adopted e-commerce and social media platforms to promote and sell their products, implementing contactless services such as online reservations, deliveries, and self-pickup options. “Going online helped us stay in touch with customers—we had no other choice,” explained a souvenir seller and cafe owner (BUS-2,3). Based on the pandemic situation, many owners (BUS1-5) have flexibly adjusted employees' working hours and shifts to reduce the density of people in stores and ensure a safe working environment.

A particularly successful case is BUS-1, a guesthouse owner who began livestreaming on social media in early 2020. “I started by simply sharing stories about the Old Town and Naxi culture,” he recalled. His creative broadcasts attracted more than 1.7 million followers on TikTok and helped drive significant tourist interest in OTOL. He now leads a network of 57 guesthouses in adopting livestreaming as a core marketing strategy. As BUS-1 said :“The pandemic forced us to change—and it turned out to be an opportunity.” Through a combination of mutual support, digital adaptation, and entrepreneurial resilience, both local residents and businesses have played a vital role in the community’s recovery and long-term transformation.

Public publicity and education

In order to reduce the panic and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 among local residents and cope with the psychological impact of the pandemic on local residents of the OTOL. The OTOL has strengthened publicity and education efforts, disseminating preventive knowledge and measures to local residents and tourists through various channels to raise awareness and create a strong community defense atmosphere. Additionally, actions for information transparency have been implemented, with timely disclosure of pandemic information and preventive measures to boost public confidence and reduce panic. This has united the residents of the old town to collectively combat the pandemic.

Table 2: Summary of response actions to address the COVID-19 in the OToL and Supporting Respondent Code

Category	Description	Supporting respondent code
Effective government response management	Establishing pandemic prevention and control headquarters; Strengthening Frontline Governance and Grassroots Mobilization in Pandemic Control; Rental Relief for Public Housing and Private Tenants; Tickets discount and tourism transformation; Conduct emergency drills for pandemic prevention and control	GOV-1
Strict pandemic prevention actions	Implemented the "Old Town of Lijiang Pass" system	GOV-1
Application of technology	Smart tourism platforms for real-name registration, ticketing, facial recognition, crowd control, and early warning systems.	GOV-1
Active participation of local communities and business owners	Residents self-organized aid networks, disinfection, emotional adjustment; business owners turned to livestreaming, e-commerce, flexible shifts.	RES-1-5, BUS-1-5
Public publicity and education	Health education, transparent communication of pandemic updates, reducing panic and improving awareness among residents and tourists.	GOV-1

CONCLUSION

This study examined the response actions taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the OToL, a WHS in China. The findings highlight a comprehensive and coordinated response actions involving effective government response management, strict pandemic prevention actions, application of technology, active participation of local communities and business owners, and public publicity and education. These actions collectively contributed to the stabilization and recovery of tourism in the OToL while strengthening resilience at both institutional and community levels. The case of OToL offers practical insights for other World Heritage Sites seeking to enhance their preparedness and responsiveness to future crises. By integrating governance, technology, and grassroots engagement, OToL demonstrates a localized yet adaptable approach to crisis management in heritage tourism settings. This study has some limitations. It focuses on a single case study and

is based on qualitative interviews with a limited number of stakeholders. Therefore, the findings may not be universally generalizable. Future research could explore comparative cases across different heritage sites and examine how action strategies evolve over time, particularly in response to ongoing global challenges.

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