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CULTURAL LANDSCAPE HERITAGE SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE FROM RONGCHENG, CHINA

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Abstract

The protection and development of cultural landscape heritage play a crucial role in the sustainable development of rural areas. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the identification and evaluation of cultural landscapes, with limited attention paid to the relationship between these landscapes and sustainable rural development. Utilizing Rongcheng, China as a case study, this research identifies six genetic themes of the landscape—ecological landscape, spatial layout, traditional houses, spiritual culture, and behavioral culture—through literature review and field observation. This study demonstrates that these cultural landscapes are interconnected and do not exist in isolation. The insights gained from this research aim to support rural policymakers and managers in the sustainable conservation and development of rural cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Cultural landscape, Cultural landscape genes, Cultural heritage, Sustainable Development, Rural revitalisation

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural landscapes have garnered extensive attention as a pivotal factor in the sustainable development of rural settlements. Recent research has concentrated on the identification and value of cultural landscapes (Xinyi et al., 2025), the evolution of rural cultural landscapes, the protection of cultural heritage, and the sustainability of rural landscapes. Cultural landscapes are recognized as multifunctional and complex socio-ecological systems (Bidegain et al., 2020) where humans interact with nature, serving as a bridge linking nature and culture, tangible and intangible heritage, and cultural and biological diversity.

As a comprehensive concept, cultural landscapes encompass both material and immaterial entities shaped by the dynamic interplay between humans and nature (Oikonomopoulou et al., 2023). However, rapid urbanization is irrevocably altering rural agricultural environments, impacting the original structure, function, and identity of cultural landscapes (J. Liu et al., 2022). In this context, the sustainability of rural cultural landscapes extends beyond mere preservation or restoration of cultural heritage; it has become a central objective of rural revitalization.

The preservation of traditional villages is related to sustainable rural development and is defined as a form of rural settlement with a long history (Fu & Zhou, 2021), which not only functions as a historical heritage, but also has an important value for cultural legacy and sense of place (J. Li et al., 2023). Therefore, traditional villages are regarded as vital carriers of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. However, urbanization and economic development have led to the significant hollowing out of rural areas (Liu & Xu, 2021), adversely affecting rural cultural landscapes. Although cultural heritage protection has been strongly advocated, with tourism emerging as a means to promote local economic development and support rural areas (Štátná & Vaishar, 2020), the rapid expansion of tourism has also had detrimental impacts on the regional cultural landscape.

In China, within the framework of rural revitalization, landscape renovation, industrial development, and talent attraction have been prioritized as strategies to address the issue of hollowed-out villages (Liu & Xu, 2021). Relevant research has begun to focus on traditional and historic landscape elements, as well as the evolution of the landscape, aiming to regenerate and adapt villages in ways that facilitate coexistence with a growing tourism industry (Cattaneo et al., 2018).

This study employs an integrative review methodology to explore the evolution of rural cultural landscapes and their contributions to rural sustainability. It also examines strategies and measures for the sustainability of rural cultural landscapes in various contexts. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do cultural landscapes contribute to rural tourism and management?
RQ2: What features of cultural landscapes contribute to sustainable rural development?

CONCEPTUALISING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

The concept of cultural landscapes and cultural landscape genes

The concept of cultural landscapes first emerged in geography, with Carl Sauer's Berkeley School attributing temporal and spatial relationships to geographic landscapes. Cultural landscape features have been identified from socio-ecological system perspectives (Arnaiz-Schmitz et al., 2018) and land use perspectives, and the evolution of landscapes has been studied in terms of traditional and historical landscape elements (Cattaneo et al., 2018). These efforts aim to regenerate and transform rural landscapes by identifying their distinctive cultural features.

Based on studies in these various disciplines, cultural landscapes are defined as unique landscapes that reflect a region's cultural content, influenced by the environment and shaped by the combination of natural and human creativity (Marc, 2005). In 2006, the World Heritage Committee included cultural landscapes in its strategy for expanding the World Heritage List, recognizing the importance of human interaction with the environment (Aplin, 2007). Cultural landscapes are characterized by the action and interaction of natural and human factors, reflecting environmental, social, economic, and cultural needs (Bohnet & Konold, 2015).

According to the World Heritage Committee's concept of cultural heritage, Cultural landscape heritage includes three types: landscapes intentionally designed and constructed by humans, organically evolved landscapes, and associative cultural landscapes. Among these, rural cultural landscapes should be valued as organically evolved landscapes that reflect regional characteristics and cultural connotations.

Cultural landscape gene theory identifies cultural landscapes from the perspective of their heritage (Cao et al., 2024). The term "gene" was first introduced to the study of rural settlements as a biological concept, and researchers have found that the replication and transmission characteristics of cultural heritage are similar to those of biological genes. Therefore, these factors are referred to as "memes" (S. Yang et al., 2023). Liu Peilin proposed the concept of cultural landscape genes of traditional settlements to address the challenge of identifying cultural landscape genes in traditional Chinese settlements. He suggests that rural cultural landscape genes encapsulate traditional Chinese philosophical ideas during their formation and development, expressing the characteristics and values of traditional Chinese settlement habitats (P. Liu et al., 2023).

Rural cultural landscapes are valued for their heritage appeal and cultural carrying capacity. Many rural settlement landscapes have evolved over hundreds and thousands of years, now presenting a genetic character that reenacts history (G. Li et al., 2024). Various disciplines have studied them from different perspectives, while the perception of cultural landscapes converges in the interplay of ecological and historical dimensions (Sahle & Saito, 2021). Therefore, the study of the sustainable development of rural cultural landscapes must delve into both their external material manifestations and their internal development and changes (Harun et al., 2021). It is necessary to treat the rural cultural landscape as a synthesis, focusing on a deeper understanding of the ethnicity, history and regionality of rural culture (W. Yang et al., 2022). And new methods and tools are needed both to protect cultural landscapes and to revitalise them from a sustainable development perspective in order to achieve a strategic role in sustainable rural development.

METHODOLOGY

Rongcheng, China, as an example

The case study is located in Rongcheng City, Weihai, China (Figure 1), situated at the easternmost tip of the Shandong Peninsula. It is bordered by the Yellow Sea to the north, east, and south and lies at the eastern end of the Jiaodong low mountainous and hilly area. Rongcheng features complex topography and a warm-temperate continental monsoon humid climate, with prominent marine climatic characteristics.

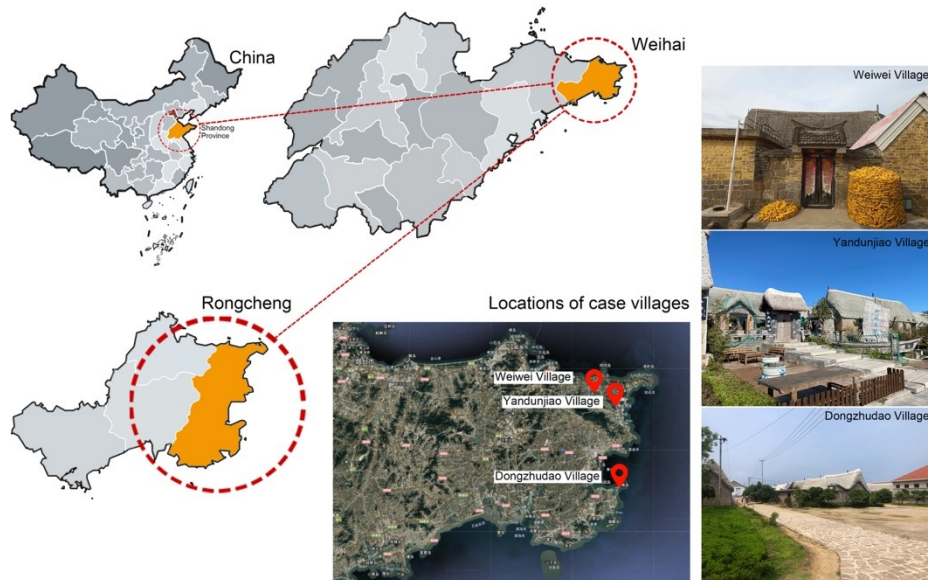


Figure 1: Location of Rongcheng and case villages.

Source: National Centre for Basic Geographic Information, redrawn by the author.

Method and data

The primary data for this study come from three main sources: (1) Traditional villages. Thirteen typical villages located in Rongcheng, recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Housing and Construction, were selected based on principles of good protection of traditional dwellings, integrity of village types, and sustainable development. (2) Network text. Textual data related to Rongcheng's cultural landscapes were obtained from the Rongcheng government website. (3) Field survey. Data such as mapping, photography, and interviews were collected through field surveys.

This study observes and records the cultural landscape genes implicit in the six cultural landscape narratives through fieldwork, ultimately summarizing the cultural landscape gene mapping of Rongcheng's rural settlements. The research analyzes the challenges and opportunities of sustainable rural development by examining the relationships between cultural landscape genes. The research design of this paper is shown in Figure 2.

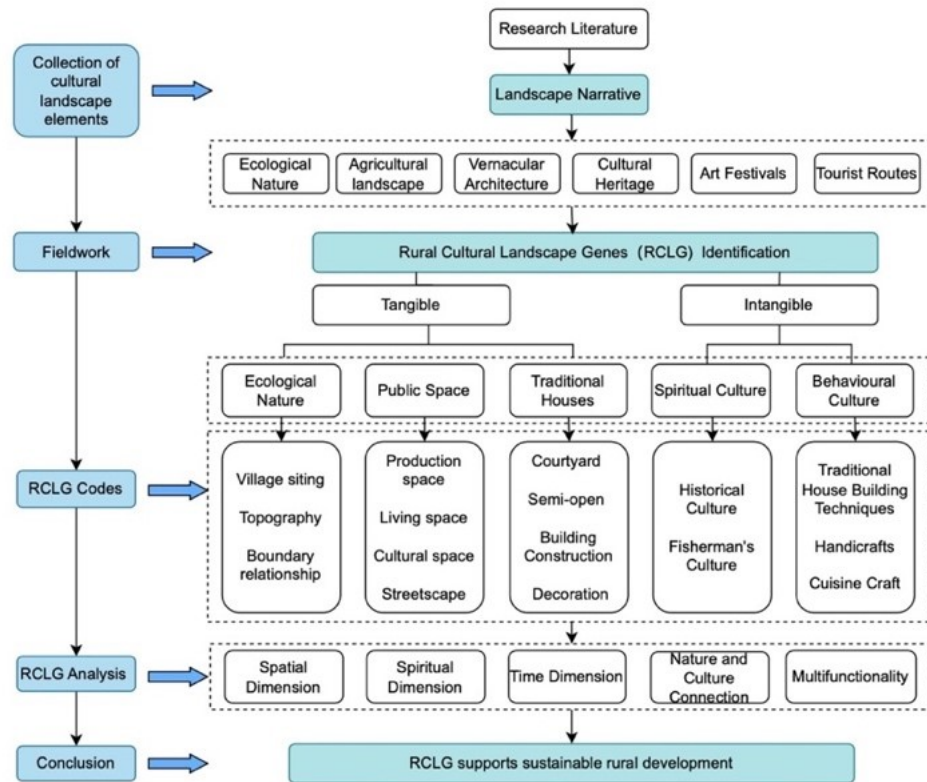


Figure 2: Research design

Source: Author.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identify cultural landscape genes

Ecological nature

The layout of traditional Chinese villages is formed under the principles of Feng Shui, typically featuring “mountains at the back and water at the front”. This spatial layout reflects adaptability to the natural ecology and emphasizes a harmonious relationship between people, nature, and culture (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Rongcheng natural landscape.
Source: Rongcheng government website.

Ecological nature plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity (Lind et al., 2019). These ecological landscapes provide rich natural resources for local residents and serve as important tourism assets, attracting visitors and promoting the sustainable development of the local economy (Pirselimoglu & Demirel, 2012).

Space layout

The spatial layout of Rongcheng villages is characterized by well-organized public spaces and street patterns. These public spaces are highly interactive and interconnected, fostering emotional connections among residents in traditional villages (Zakariya et al., 2025). There are three main types of public spaces: (1) Public production spaces. These areas are used for agricultural and marine production activities, such as drying crops and seafood. (2) Public living spaces. These spaces often feature ancient wells and leisure areas centered around large trees, serving as focal points for community interaction and carrying significant emotional and historical memories. (3) Public cultural spaces. These include auditoriums, temples, and ancient tombs, which host various folk activities, gatherings, entertainment, and rituals. The utilization and preservation of village public spaces enhance community cohesion and a sense of place (Philokyprou & Michael, 2021). As shown in Figure 4, these spaces include: (a) a public production space where villagers dry kelp, (b) a productive living space centered around an ancient well, now abandoned, and (c) a public cultural space featuring an ancient Yuan Dynasty tomb, over 700 years old.



Figure 4: Public space.
Source: Photo by the author.

Vernacular Architecture

Rongcheng's coastal location, characterized by rainy and humid summers and snowy, cold winters, significantly influences its vernacular architecture. The primary consideration for residential houses is to maintain warmth in winter and provide shade in summer. This has led to the development of unique architectural practices, as illustrated in Figure 5. Traditional houses in Rongcheng not only reflect the region's historical and cultural characteristics but also play a crucial role in preserving local architectural skills and lifestyles (Le & Cao, 2023). Protecting and restoring these traditional dwellings promotes cultural diversity and reinforces local identity.

Intangible Cultural heritage

Rongcheng City is rich in traditional resources and well-preserved cultural landscapes. Its tangible cultural heritage includes ecologically representative seagrass houses and other traditional dwellings. Additionally, the city boasts a wealth of intangible cultural heritage, as detailed in Table 2.

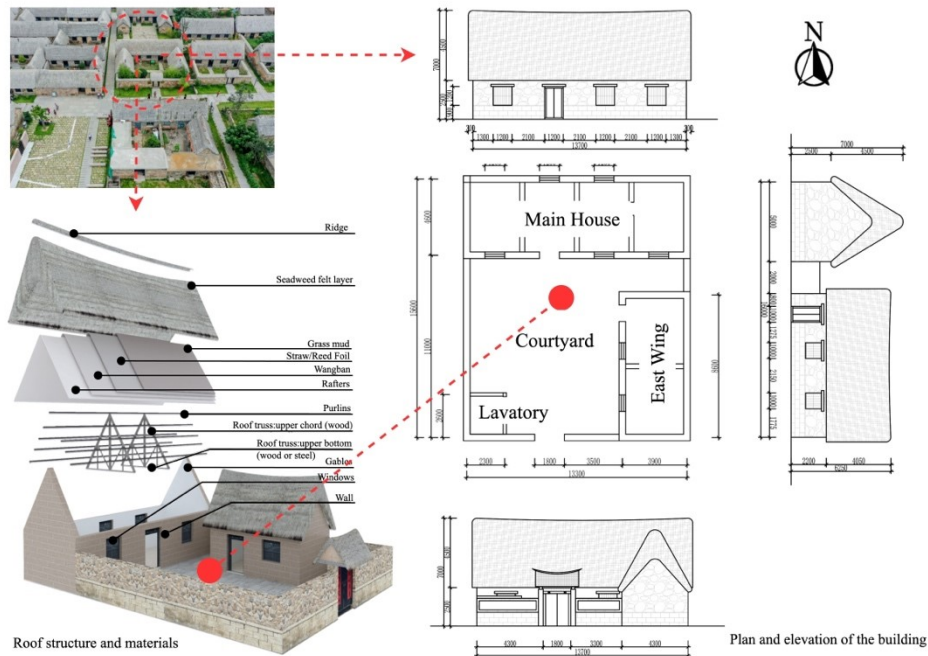


Figure 5: Seagrass house residential structure.
Source: Author.

Table 2: Main intangible cultural heritage in Rongcheng

Intangible Cultural Heritage	Type	Descriptions	Photo (Source: author)
Fishermen's Festival	Folklore	The "Sea Festival" is a folkloric event where fishermen express gratitude to the sea and celebrate a bountiful harvest upon the safe return of their boats.	
Seagrass House Construction Technique	Traditional Skills	The primary building material is seaweed. The construction process is intricate, with the roof being a distinctive feature.	
Fishermen's Horn	Traditional Music	It involves the sounding of fishing horns to boost morale, embodying the fishermen's bold and unrestrained spirit.	

Intangible Cultural Heritage	Type	Descriptions	Photo (Source: author)
Cuisine (Hua-Bobo)	Traditional Arts and Crafts	This cuisine represents ancient folklore and is a significant part of the coastal cultural heritage of Shandong.	

The spiritual and cultural heritage of Rongcheng, encompassing local beliefs and festivals, is a crucial source of community cohesion and identity (Xu & Wang, 2021). These cultural activities not only enrich the spiritual life of residents but also contribute to building a harmonious social environment by promoting social interaction and cooperation. Behavioral cultural genes, such as local customs and lifestyle habits, have a positive impact on promoting environmentally friendly behaviors and sustainable lifestyles. For example, the construction practices of Rongcheng residents highlight the reuse of building materials and environmental consciousness, which are essential for achieving sustainable development goals.

Based on extensive fieldwork and measurements, this paper identifies the cultural landscape genes of Rongcheng's seagrass hut villages. These include tangible cultural components like ecological nature, spatial distribution, architectural patterns, and decorations, as well as intangible cultural heritage elements such as traditions, myths, folklore, cuisines, and handicrafts, as shown in Figure 3.

Correlation and sustainable development of cultural landscape genes

By examining the relationships between cultural landscape genes, this study summarizes both the complementary and conflicting interactions among them. Ecological nature serves as a material carrier, enhancing the physical experience of tourists engaging with ecological landscapes. A harmonious and symbiotic relationship between rural tourism and ecological landscape resources is fundamental for sustainable rural development. Cultural heritage, encompassing both temporal and spatial dimensions, provides valuable resources for sustainable rural growth. Vernacular architecture, as a significant aspect of tangible cultural heritage, influences the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of rural areas. Balancing cultural heritage with economic development enhances cultural values and satisfies the residents' increasing desire for a rural lifestyle. This balance is achieved through cultural exchanges, reviving latent cultural heritage, and boosting rural resilience and economic value, as illustrated in Table 5.

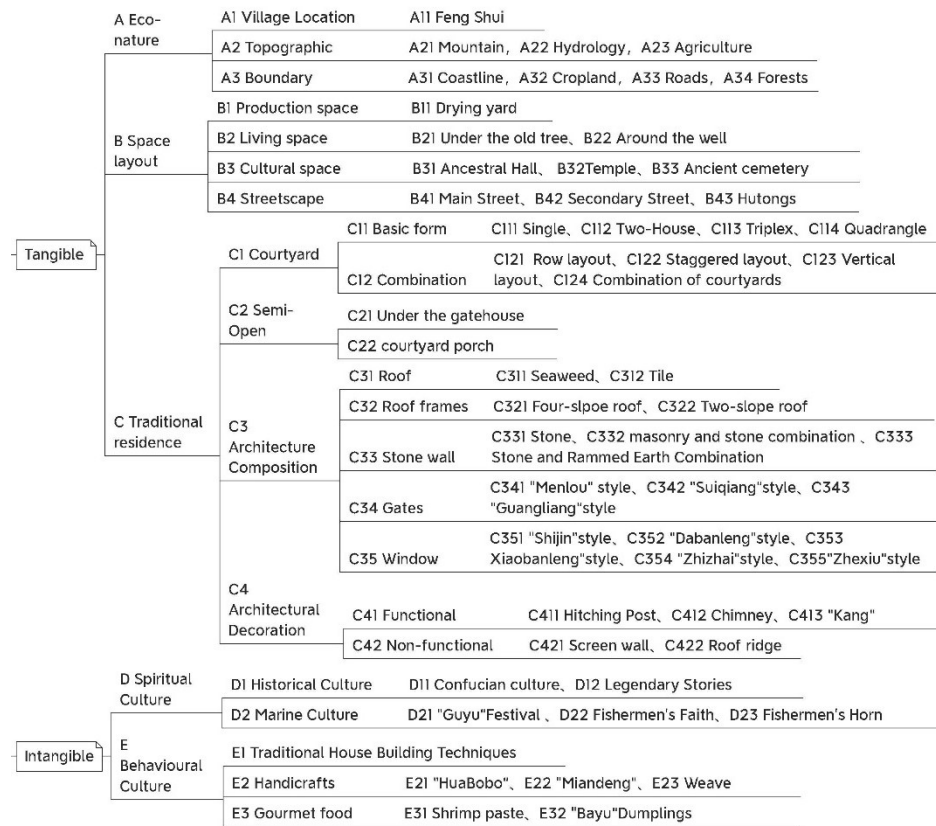


Figure 3: Genetic Mapping of the Cultural Landscape of Rongcheng Seagrass House Villages

Table 5: Relationships between cultural landscape genes

Cultural Landscape genes	Sustainable development	Complementarity between cultural landscapes genes	Tension between cultural landscapes genes
Ecological Nature	Environmentally sustainable:: It not only supports biodiversity but also provides aesthetic enjoyment through beautiful scenery.	Focus on ecological landscape restoration, combining agricultural landscape tourism with the preservation of ancient villages, and transforming agricultural landscapes into commercialized cultural heritage projects.	Emphasis on economic development may lead to neglect of the original ecological landscape. Prioritizing ancient village tourism over agricultural landscapes.

Cultural Landscape genes	Sustainable development	Complementarity between cultural landscapes genes	Tension between cultural landscapes genes
Public Space	Socially sustainable development: Meeting diverse needs and activities through multiple utilizations of space.	Integrating shared spaces with intangible cultural heritage to form creative marketplaces, thereby realizing the multifunctionality of space.	Neglecting the multifunctionality and sense of place in public spaces. Modernized public spaces may not harmonize with traditional settings.
Vernacular Architecture	Cultural and economic sustainability: The adaptive reuse of traditional houses has become an economic resource for local residents.	Adaptive reuse involves creating a spatial model of front shops and back houses, restoring houses to showcase crafts and heritage, and transforming traditional practices into experience-based tourism activities.	Residents might disregard vernacular architectural heritage in favor of modern living. Stakeholders might view tradition as restrictive, creating tension between compliance and innovation.
Spiritual culture	Sustaining traditional folklore and handicrafts by processing and redeveloping them to meet public aesthetics, thus ensuring the conservation and sustainable development of intangible culture.	Conducting creative activities that utilize natural landscapes and traditional architecture as cultural and artistic carriers.	Over-exploitation and commercialization of cultural heritage might occur, leading to a lack of integration with traditional values.
Behavior culture		Balancing cultural heritage with economic development by transforming traditional customs and crafts into experience-based tourism activities. Intangible cultural heritage can be packaged as tourism products.	Neglecting cultural heritage can lead to resource decline. Excessive focus on intangible cultural heritage for tourist experiences may harm the ecological and natural values of cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper focuses on the protection and development of traditional villages in Rongcheng, emphasizing the rural cultural landscape as a vital support for sustainable village development. Using Rongcheng, China, as a case study, the research thoroughly analyzes six landscape gene themes: ecological landscape, spatial layout, traditional dwelling, spiritual culture, and behavioral culture, through literature review and field observation. This demonstrates the comprehensive value of cultural landscape genes in the sustainable development of villages.

The study reveals that these cultural landscape genes do not exist in isolation in Rongcheng's Haigaofang villages but are interdependent and

mutually reinforcing, forming a social-ecological system with intrinsic connections. Identifying and protecting these genes can promote the coordinated development of the economy, society, and environment. Rongcheng's Haicaofang Village model offers valuable insights for other rural areas, showcasing the pivotal role of cultural landscape genes in fostering balanced economic, social, and environmental development. This model emphasizes the conservation and utilization of cultural landscape genes, alongside community participation and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and practitioners:

1. Expand the protection and restoration efforts beyond seagrass houses to maintain the cultural diversity and historical continuity of rural areas.
2. Foster public engagement and multi-stakeholder cooperation in intangible cultural practices and leverage behavioral culture to cultivate spiritual culture, aiming for inclusive and sustainable rural development.
3. Enhance the connections between cultural landscape genes and encourage local innovation and adaptive management to achieve multi-dimensional sustainable development in ecological, social, cultural, and economic terms.

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