Article

Policy Development in China's Protected Scenic and Historic Areas

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Abstract: In China, scenic and historic areas are protected areas which are highly integrated with natural and cultural resources. The study analyzed policies based on the theory of policy instruments using content analyses. The results demonstrated that China's scenic and historic areas have experienced four phases of development: primary development (1980–1994), exploration and growth (1995–2006), deepening and maturity (2007–2018), and integration and optimization (2019–2023). Policy intensity is trending upwards, and contemporary policy authority and restraints are insufficient. The policy instruments showed an imbalance, and are mainly environmentally-type, with only a few supply- and demand-type. Policy topics mainly include management and planning protection. The Chinese government has played a leading role, taking many restraining measures to quickly protect scenic resources. Stronger and more effective policies with more specific content will favor the protection of scenic and historic areas. In the future, financial input, international exchanges, and outsourcing services should be increased to promote the vital development of scenic and historic areas. Legislation, establishment, social participation, operation, and ticket systems must be comprehensive. Overall, the study provides theoretical support for further reforms of China's scenic and historic areas and lessons for improving the conservation quality of the world's protected areas.

Keywords: China; protected areas; scenic and historic areas; policy; protection mechanisms

1. Introduction

The establishment of protected areas is a common practice in natural conservation worldwide. Protected areas are the basis for ecological diversity conservation and positively impact human well-being [1–5]. As of 2023, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA), more than 290,000 protected areas, including nature reserves and national parks, have been established in 244 countries worldwide [6]. The Aichi Biodiversity targets [7] (2010) set by the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 call for the protection of at least 17% of the world's terrestrial and inland water areas and 10% of its marine and coastal areas. This has led to the rapid expansion of the global network of protected areas, which now cover approximately 16% of the world's terrestrial and 8% of marine areas [6]. The IUCN and its member organizations have also proposed a marine conservation target of 30% by 2030 [8]. Moreover, some scholars have advocated for a global terrestrial area conservation target of 50% by 2050 [9–11]. However, research has revealed a need to evaluate protected areas in terms of quality rather than quantity and indicated that well-managed protected areas are more effective in conserving biodiversity than other forms of land use [11–14]. Many currently established protected areas are poorly managed or lack resources for long-term conservation and development [14,15].

Factors at the national level affecting the quality of protected areas conservation differ in each country. In the United States, the main problem is allowing destructive practices, such as resource extraction [16]. In Japan, the location of protected areas that qualify for protection is mainly pertains to geographic and socioeconomic factors rather than key biodiversity features (including evolutionary uniqueness) [17]. Studies have noted that the governance of Japanese national parks is characterized by a lack of administrative resources and weak regulatory authority [18]. In Canada, protected areas tend to be politicized, which hinders nature conservation, potentially leading greenwashing, poor accountability, and other problems [19,20]. An analysis of the extent and effectiveness of the conservation of protected areas in the UK found a high degree of overlap between the different protected areas, which greatly affects protection effectiveness [21]. A study evaluating European protected areas policies found that conservation efforts in Europe lack ambition since policy makers choose lands that are not threatened by development [22]. Funding for protected areas in Brazil is sorely lacking [23]. Many established mechanisms for protected areas in South Amazonia countries exhibit institutional weaknesses. These include power imbalances, lack of legitimacy of decision-makers, unclear responsibilities, unresolved logistical challenges, and lack of financial support [24]. Amid global and national problems in developing protected areas, countries must collaborate to share experiences and discuss solutions.

China is also facing the challenge of improving the quality of its protected areas [25]. Its conservation efficiency is primarily affected by problems such as overlapping and unclear boundaries and multiple management entities [26–29]. Therefore, China is reforming its protected areas. Since establishing the first nature reserve in 1956, developing protected areas in China has undergone tremendous changes, and evolved from single to multiple types, small to large areas, and individual protection to construct regional ecological security barriers, forming a complex system of protected areas [27,30–32]. By the end of 2021, China had established approximately 11,800 protected areas of various types [33,34]. This accounted for 18% of the land area and reached a conservation target of 17% of the 2020 Aichi targets ahead of schedule [35]. As one of the richest countries in the world in terms of species diversity, protected areas are at the forefront issues of maintaining national ecological security. At present, China's protected areas effectively protect 90 per cent of terrestrial ecosystem types, 85 per cent of wildlife populations, 65 per cent of higher plant communities and nearly 30 per cent of important geological relics, and cover 25 per cent of pristine natural forests, 50.3 per cent of natural wetlands and 30 per cent of typical desert areas [36–38]. However, the problem of overlapping protected areas in China is also very serious, with the service overlap rate of buffer zones within 5 km of protected areas at the national level alone being 16.31 per cent, within 10 km 25.03 per cent, and within 20 km even as high as 42.08 per cent [37,39–42]. Thus, although China's protected areas have met the Aichi targets, the level of protection falls short of "eco-representativeness". In particular, reptiles, amphibians and plants, which have low coverage in existing protected areas, require more stringent protection [37,43]. China's State Council issued the Guiding Opinions on the Establishment of a Protected Areas System with National Parks as the Mainstay stay to promote the high-quality development of protected areas in 2019 [44]. This was undertaken to solve the overlap problem through reintegration and reclassification of the types of protected areas. Protected areas were consolidated from more than ten types (e.g., nature reserves, scenic and historic areas, forest parks, wetland parks, mine parks, and marine parks) into national parks, nature reserves, and nature parks [44]. They were incorporated into the State Forestry and Grassland Administration for unified management (Figure 1). In this integration and categorization process, one particular type of protected area, scenic and historic areas do not require changing their original location and scope.
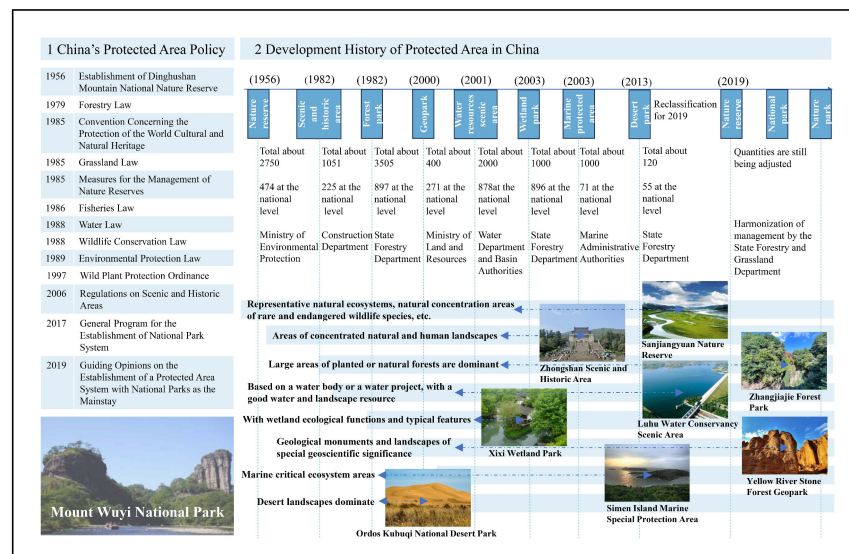
1 China's Protected Area Policy

Year	Policy
1956	Establishment of Dinghushan Mountain National Nature Reserve
1979	Forestry Law
1985	Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage
1985	Grassland Law
1985	Measures for the Management of Nature Reserves
1986	Fisheries Law
1988	Water Law
1988	Wildlife Conservation Law
1989	Environmental Protection Law
1997	Wild Plant Protection Ordinance
2006	Regulations on Scenic and Historic Areas
2017	General Program for the Establishment of National Park System
2019	Guiding Opinions on the Establishment of a Protected Area System with National Parks as the Mainstay

Mount Wuyi National Park

2 Development History of Protected Area in China

	(1956) Nature reserve	(1982) Scenic and historic area	(1982) Forest park	(2000) Geopark	(2001) Water resources scenic area	(2003) Wetland park	(2003) Marine protected area	(2013) Desert park	Reclassification for 2019	(2019) Nature reserve / National park / Nature park
Total	Total about 2750	Total about 1051	Total about 3505	Total about 400	Total about 2000	Total about 1000	Total about 1000	Total about 120		Quantities are still being adjusted
National	474 at the national level	225 at the national level	897 at the national level	271 at the national level	878at the national level	896 at the national level	71 at the national level	55 at the national level		
Department	Ministry of Environmental Protection	Construction Department	State Forestry Department	Ministry of Land and Resources	Water Department and Basin Authorities	State Forestry Department	Marine Administrative Authorities	State Forestry Department		Harmonization of management by the State Forestry and Grassland Department

Representative natural ecosystems, natural concentration areas of rare and endangered wildlife species, etc.

Areas of concentrated natural and human landscapes

Large areas of planted or natural forests are dominant

Based on a water body or a water project, with a good water and landscape resource

With wetland ecological functions and typical features

Geological monuments and landscapes of special geoscientific significance

Marine critical ecosystem areas

Desert landscapes dominate

Zhongshan Scenic and Historic Area

Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve

Zhangjiajie Forest Park

Luhu Water Conservancy Scenic Area

Xixi Wetland Park

Yellow River Stone Forest Geopark

Simen Island Marine Special Protection Area

Ordos Kubuqi National Desert Park

Figure 1. Development of protected areas in China (major protected areas only).

Scenic and historic areas are a special type of protected areas in China, which are formed from by famous mountains and rivers that have evolved and developed over thousands of years, and are a combination of natural beauty and human-created attractions [45–47]. Among the 57 World Heritage Sites in China, 44 are wholly or partially located in national-level scenic and historic areas, and 13 are wholly or partially located in provincial-level scenic and historic areas [48–50]. Among the many types of protected areas in China, only nature reserves and scenic and historic areas are under the unified establishment of the State Council, with a higher legal status and are also the main sources of protected areas for the selection of new national parks [51]. Nature reserves comprise about 14.86 per cent of the national territory, accounting for the largest share, followed by scenic and historic areas, which comprise about 2.23 per cent. The natural ecological value of nature reserves is high, but the combined natural and cultural value of scenic and historic areas is higher, and they have richer heritage attributes and higher national recognition [52]. In the early years of the development of the scenic and historic areas system, the English translation of the name" National Parks of China" was used for 30 years [53]. In 1994, the IUCN developed a globally recognized system of classifying protected areas into six categories based on management objectives, including Ia (Strict Nature Reserves), Ib (Wilderness Areas), II (National Parks), III (Natural Monuments), IV (Habitat/Species Management Areas), V (Protected Landscapes/Seascapes), and VI (Managed Resource Conservation Areas) [54]. The six categories provide a uniform standard for global data collection, and offers the possibility of comparative analyses of global protected area systems. There is controversy as to which type of scenic and historic areas corresponds to the IUCN. Some studies have pointed out that scenic and historic areas correspond to category II [52,53,55]. Other scholars argue that it corresponds to category V [56]. Some scholars state that scenic and historic areas large enough to sustain an entire ecosystem and limit the intensive use of resources (usually tourism) to 25% of the overall area are regarded as category II, if the scenic and historic areas emphasize tourism and recreation on the basis of landscape conservation, it may be regarded category V [37]. According to the Standard for Overall Planning of Scenic and Historic Areas, there are 113 large scenic and historic areas between 101 and 500 km^2, and 25 mega scenic and historic areas over 500 km^2 [57]. Some scholars also argue that scenic and historic areas should be classified as Category II, III, and V [58]. Overall, scenic and historic areas have resources of category II, III and V, emphasizing the balance between resource protection and development. There are 71 national scenic and historic areas in 32 terrestrial biodiversity conservation priority areas in China and 16 national scenic and historic areas in 3 marine biodiversity conservation priority areas. Some scholars have studied the potential list of 84 new national parks in China based on

China's ecosystem service pattern, of which 29 are national scenic and historic areas [59]. Compared with the world's protected areas system, China's protected areas have fewer uninhabited areas, and most of them are areas of symbiosis between humans and nature. Scenic and historic areas are particularly typical of the World's protected areas and are a characteristic type of protected areas.

In 1982, China established the first group of scenic and historic areas, and after 40 years of development, China has established nine groups of 224 national and 807 provincial scenic and historic areas [45]. As a typical type of a protected area that concentrates the world's outstanding natural and cultural heritage resources, China's scenic and historic areas are worthy of the world's reference in terms of their institutional design. However, research on its protection systems and mechanism is yet insufficient. In recent years, some studies have systematically sorted out the development history of scenic and historic areas over the past 40 years [60–62], but the studies have mainly adopted the method of qualitative description and also lack the analyses of the policy and institutional effectiveness. There are more international studies on the effectiveness of policies for protected areas [2,63–65], with one study have analyzing the impact of policy incentives on conservation behaviors, showing that it is more effective in promoting short-term conservation behaviors, while intrinsic motivation and more autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation are more likely to lead to longer-term behaviors [66]. There is also research suggesting that climate impacts should be included in policies for protected areas [67]. A policy evaluation of protected areas in Turkey found that the conservation objectives of the policy emphasized recreational use more than conservation, which is highly detrimental to protected areas [68]. Research has also found that conservationists can focus on incentives to improve the protection capacity of communities [69]. However, current policy research on protected areas mainly focuses on the effects of policies on conservation objectives and lacks systematic research on policy characteristics and the use of policy instruments. A study assessed biodiversity conservation policy instruments for national parks in Bangladesh based on an expert rating methodology [70]. There are also studies that use interviews to test policy instruments for biodiversity conservation in national parks [71]. Current research on policy instruments has mainly used qualitative methods to analyze the effects of policies, which lack standards, and rarely systematically assess protected area systems. The analysis of various protected area policy instruments facilitates more intuitive empirical learning. Therefore, the research objective of this study is to systematically sort out the policy characteristics and effectiveness of China's scenic and historic areas, and to explore the factors and methods for their high-quality development. To achieve this goal, the study is based on the theory of policy instruments, and adopts quantitative method of content analysis. The study mainly focuses on the following questions: what are the trends in policy intensity of the scenic and historic areas? What are the main policy instruments adopted? What role has the government played, and what are the factors that impede and improve the quality of conservation in scenic and historic areas?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Materials

The study used web crawler software Octopus V1.7 to collect data. Since the Ministry of Construction and the State Forestry and Grassland Administration are the main management agencies for scenic and historic areas, they publicly release a substantial amount of policy data. Some policy data is recorded in books, newspapers, and yearbooks. However, they are scattered in distribution, and many cannot be recognized. Therefore, the study uses policy documents publicly available on government departments' official websites as the main source of data. Policies from Chinese law and regulation websites such as Beida Fayi and Beida Fabo were also used as supplementary sources of data.

Policies related to the keywords "scenic and historic areas", "scenic areas", and "scenic spots" were searched for and filtered. A total of 269 policies directly related to scenic and historic areas until 25 March 2023, were obtained. Among them, 11 policies were

issued through departmental cooperation, and 71 policies are outdated and have lost their legal effect. The outdated policies reflect that scenic and historic areas are streamlining government institutions and gradually releasing management and operation rights from the government to the corporate sector, thereby increasing their vitality. The issuance status is shown in Table 1. The State Council is the highest organ of state administration. The other departments are functional departments of the State Council. They are all national departments.

Table 1. Number of documents issued by departments [1].

Issuing Department	Number of Issues	Issuing Department	Number of Issues
Ministry of Construction	200	Ministry of Public Security	3
The State Council	20	Ministry of Natural Resources	4
National Cultural Heritage Administration	23	National Forestry and Grassland Administration	4
Ministry of Culture and Tourism	10	Central Civilization Committee	3
Ministry of Ecology and Environment	14	Ministry of Education	1
National Development and Reform Commission	6	Central Office for Patriotic Health	1
Ministry of Finance	4	National Religious Affairs Administration	1
The state forestry administration	5		

[1] The Ministry of Construction has consolidated the institutional reform process of the Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection Ministry (1982–1988), the Ministry of Construction (1988–2008), and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (2008–2018). For simplicity, the text is collectively referred to as the Ministry of Construction.

2.2. Methods

This study focuses on the quantitative analysis of scenic and historic area policies using content analysis. Content analysis is a method of converting policies expressed in words into numerical data by identifying key features in the text, and then statistically analyzing the data to discover patterns [72]. It requires a rigorous process of inter-coder reliability testing by transforming the text into systematic coding categories. The study first used content analysis to establish a coded database of scenic and historic area policies. Subsequently, it calculated the policy intensity score from the three aspects of policy strengths, policy targets and policy measures, and measured the policy effectiveness by combining the analysis of the changes in policy number. Thereafter, based on the theory of policy instruments, the policy instruments of scenic and historic areas were classified and counted, and the internal characteristics of policies were analyzed by combining the statistics of policy topics. Finally, based on the results of the policy analysis, the characteristics and effectiveness of the institutional development of scenic and historic areas were summarized. The research framework is shown in Figure 2.
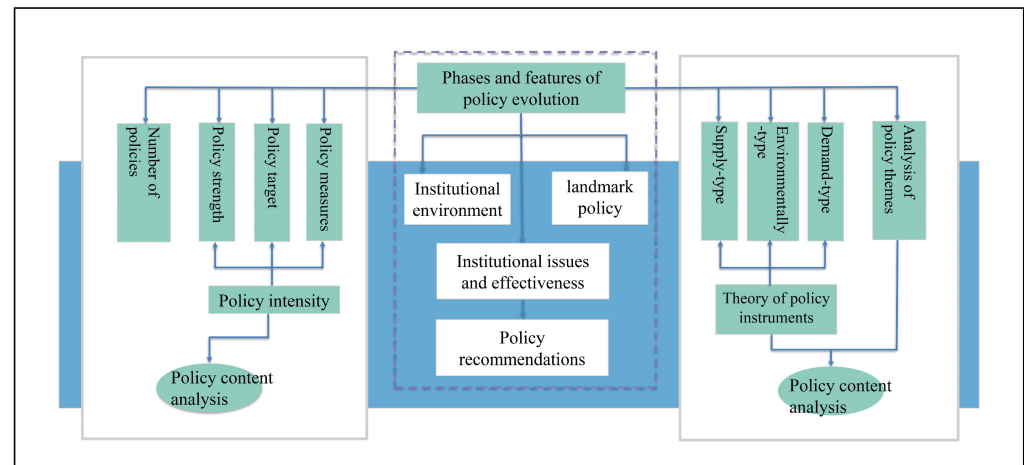
Figure 2. Research framework.

2.2.1. Policy Coding and Reliability Testing

First, two coders simultaneously coded the policy text with chapter-article-section as the coding sequence. The two coders coded the study subjects independently of each other. The reliability result of 0.93 meets the criteria. Mutual agreement and coding reliability were then calculated for the two coders. Second, based on the three-level quantitative indicators of policy strengths, targets, and measures [73], each policy clause was assigned a score from 1 to 5 (Table 2, Appendix A Table A1). The scoring agreement between the two coders was calculated to be 0.96, which meets the criteria. Third, the two coders then extracted and generalized the 1232 policy instrument types according to the classification of the policy instruments. The extraction reliability was calculated to be 0.94, thus meeting the criteria. Fourth, topic words were extracted from the coded policy documents, and an extraction reliability of 0.96 was calculated to meet the criteria. The 1232 policy theme words were then generalized into 10 topics with a reliability was 0.93, which meets the criteria.

Table 2. Quantitative indicators and modalities of policy intensity.

Norm	Specific Quantitative Modalities
Policy strength (S)	1 = departmental notifications, approvals, letters, circulars; 2 = opinions and announcements of various departments; 3 = regulations and standards of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development; 4 = regulations and laws promulgated by the State Council; 5 = laws promulgated by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.
Policy target (T)	1 = uncertain descriptions, such as "may be based on" and "strengthened"; 2 = general descriptions, such as "should be" and "to be observed"; 3 = somewhat certain descriptions, such as "unsuitable" and "sufficiently"; 4 = certain descriptions, such as "may not" and "cannot"; 5 = highly certain descriptions, such as "prohibited" and "not allowed".
Policy measures (M)	1 = general reference with no detailed rules; 2 = set of brief rules; 3 = set of broad rules; 4 = set of specific and detailed rules; 5 = set of specific and strict rules.

In this study, reliability tests were conducted using Holsti's [74] formula, which is simpler to calculate and analyze significant data. All reliability values greater than 0.9 meet the criteria. The Formula (1) for calculating the reliability level is as follows. In the formula, *A* represents a mutual agreement, *M* represents total agreement by both coders, *N1* indicates agreement by the first coder, *N2* indicates agreement by the second coder, *R* represents the coding reliability, and *n* denotes the number of coders. Calculations found that the reliability of each code was greater than 0.9 with the standard.

$$A = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2}, R = n\frac{A}{1 + [(n-1)A]}, \tag{1}$$

2.2.2. Calculation of Policy Intensity

Policy intensity implies the policy effect. Measurement of policy intensity provides the ability to continuously monitor policy effectiveness and improve the policy system. The higher the legal status and administrative level of the general policy issuing authority, the stronger the policy intensity, which is an indicator of the importance of the policy. Libecap [75] developed a formal change index for regulations and policies related to mineral rights in the United States, the earliest research on quantitative evaluation of policies. Scholars have recently calculated the policy intensity using machine learning algorithms [76]. However, it is not used widely due to its complexity. Based on the theoretical construction of policy instruments, Peng Jisheng et al. [73] proposed the weighting of policy strengths, targets and measures indicators to measure policy intensity, which has been more maturely and widely applied in China's policy class research [77–79]. It was also used in this study to calculate policy intensity.

Policy strength (S) is the degree of authority of the policy issued by government agencies. Policy target (T) is the degree of constraints on the policy document's terms. Policy measure (M) are the degree of specificity of policy document terms. Policy intensity is calculated as follows:

$$STM_i = \sum_{j=1}^{n} (t_j + m_j) S_j \tag{2}$$

In the Formula (2), i is the year of the policy release, n is the number of policy items in year i, j is the jth policy in year i, S_j is the strength of the jth policy, $(t_j + m_j)$ is the sum of the scores of each policy target t and policy measure m for the jth policy, and $(t_j + m_j)$ is the sum of the scores of each policy target t and policy measure m for the jth policy [77,78,80].

2.2.3. Classification of Policy Instruments

Policy instruments are measures by the government or the public to achieve policy objectives [81]. It is now a focus of research in public administration and policy sciences [82]. The types of policy instruments used vary across countries and fields. For instance, policy instruments can be divided into mandates, inducements, capacity buildings and system-changing instruments based on their purpose [83]. Based on the degree of government intervention, policy instruments can be divided into compulsory, mixed, and voluntary types [84,85]. Rothwell and Zegfeld divided policy instruments into supply-, environment-, and demand-type according to their impact [86], which is a more complete categorization that has been widely used and highly recognized in studies of policy texts in various fields in China [79,87–91]. In Rothwell and Zegveld's categorization method, each category of policy instruments can be further divided into a variety of specific instruments at the operational level. In recent years, there have also been studies incorporating big data analyses to classify policy instruments, but accuracy is not yet guaranteed [92]. Supply-type policy instruments contribute directly to policy objectives, usually reflecting important government policy orientations and including effective support in terms of finance, human resources, facilities and technology. Demand-type policy instruments play a pulling role for policy objectives, typically reflected in the reduction of adverse impacts through fewer external disadvantages, including service outsourcing, international exchange and trade control. Environmental-type policy instruments, which play an indirect role in promoting policy objectives, are usually reflected in the provision of a favorable policy environment through targets, plans, regulations, and finance and taxation, including target planning, financial services, tax incentives, regulatory controls, and strategic measures. These three policy instruments are interrelated and effective when combined [93]. The classification is also used in this study to analyze policy instruments. The study interprets the policy public instruments according to the connotations of each instrument type and the characteristics of the scenic and historic area system as represented in Table 3.

Table 3. Meaning and distribution of scenic and historic area policy instruments.

Instrument Type	Instrument Name	Interpretation of Instruments
Supply	Financial support	Investing funds, subsidies, and other financial support for scenic and historic areas.
	Personnel support	Providing personnel support for scenic and historic areas, such as attaching importance to personnel training and education.
	Technical support	Providing technical support to scenic and historic areas, such as introducing and innovating core technologies.
	Infrastructure	Infrastructure development of scenic and historic areas.
Environmental	Target planning	Government determination of planning content and target for scenic and historic areas.
	Standardization	Government formulation of standards for the construction of scenic and historic areas.
	Regulatory control	Government establishment of various binding institutions and regulations for scenic and historic areas.
	Strategic intervention	Government formulation of short-term and feasible measures, such as establishing leading organizations and strengthening publicity.
	Pilot demonstration	Government conducting pilot projects and establishing exemplary models to promote the benign development of scenic and historic areas.
Demand	Outsourcing of services	Government contracting out projects to external agencies.
	Social participation	Government guiding public forces for conservation of scenic and historic areas.
	International exchange	Participation in international exchanges through competitions and forums.

2.2.4. Generalization of the Policy Topic

Policy topics reflect a high degree of condensation of the policy content, the core objectives of the policy text, and the most critical issues of the policy. By counting the frequency of policy topics, we can clearly understand the evolution of policy content. In this study, we read each the 1232 coded policy texts carefully, extracted meaningful keywords from them, and filtered the keywords. These 1232 policy keywords are then grouped into 10 topics and statistically analyzed.

3. Policy Characterization

3.1. Distribution of Indicators of Policy Intensity

The results of the quantitative analysis of policy intensity (Figure 3a) revealed that, overall, policy strength was weak, with departmental notifications, letters, and approvals issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development constituting the main documents (87.36% of the total). The effects of policy targets were favorable, with 49.76% of the policies described with high constraints, such as "prohibited" and "not allowed". The effect of the policy constraints was at intermediate level, which should continue to be strengthened to better protect scenic resources. Furthermore, 64.77% of policy measures were insufficiently specific.

3.2. Changes of Policy Intensity and Number

We analyzed the annual changes in policy intensity and quantity (Figure 4). From 1980 to 1994, the number of policy documents was small, overall policy intensity was low, the degree of national awareness regarding the protection of scenic and historic areas was low, and the development of the scenic and historic area system was in the primary phase. From 1995 to 2006, the number and intensity of policies increased. During this period, China had a broader discussion on the content involved in constructing scenic and historical areas. From 2007 to 2018, policy intensity sharply increased, the number and intensity of policies grew, and the development of scenic and historic systems maturing. After 2019, the development of scenic and historic areas entered a new phase, and the number and intensity of policies showed a short-lived abatement trend during the last five years.

The number and intensity of policies essentially maintained the same development trend. However, the number of policies decreased while intensity increased in certain years.
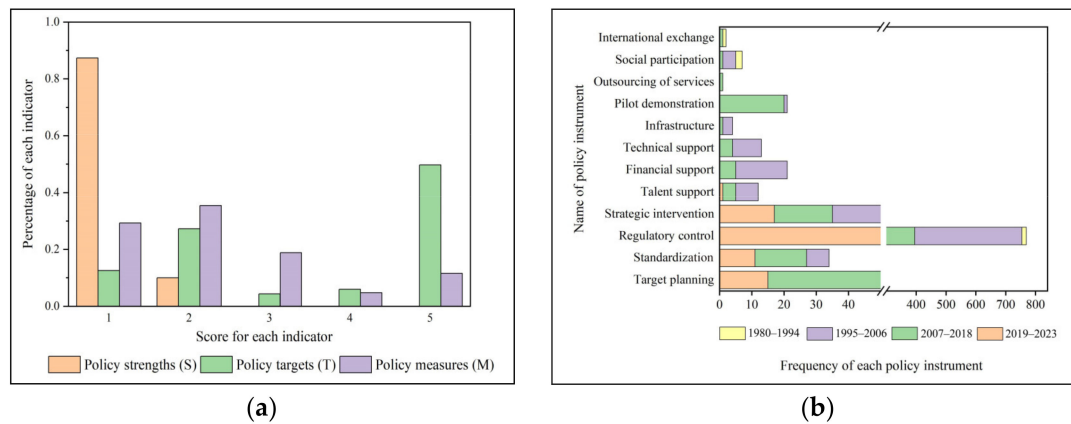

Figure 3. (**a**) Distribution of policy intensity indicators; (**b**) use of policy instruments by period.
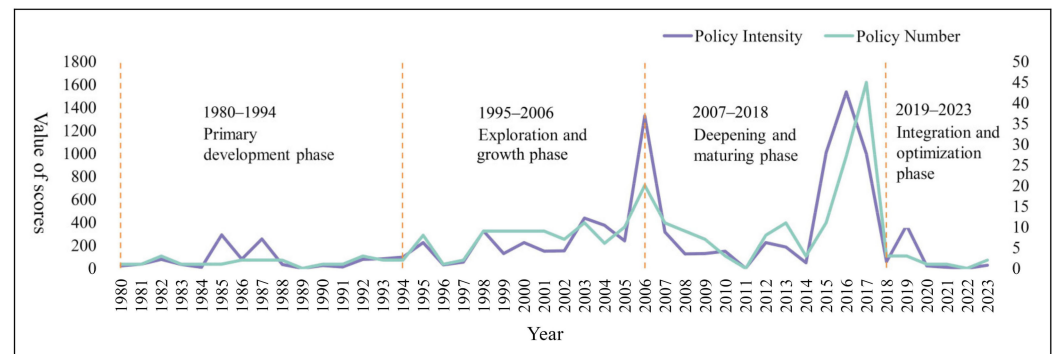

Figure 4. Analysis of annual changes in intensity and number of policies in scenic and historic areas.

Based on the development trend of annual changes in the intensity and number of policies for scenic and historic areas, we analyzed landmark policies in each phase (Appendix A Table A2).

In 1981, the State Council issued Notifications on the Report on Strengthening the Management of Scenic and Historic Areas Protection, indicating that it attached importance to the management of scenic and historic areas. In 2006, the State Council issued the Regulations on Scenic and Historic Areas. Since then, scenic and historic areas had a formal regulatory basis. In 2019, the State Council issued Guiding Opinions on the Establishment of a Protected Areas System with National Parks as the Mainstay. China's protected areas system was reintegrated, and scenic and historic areas began developing. In addition, we analyzed the distribution of the number, resource distribution and their establishment year of national scenic and historic areas (Figure 5a–c). Nine groups of scenic and historic areas were approved and established by the Chinese state. The first, third, sixth, and ninth groups of scenic and historic areas were established in 1982, 1994, 2005, and 2017, respectively.

Combining the development characteristics in different periods, we divided China's scenic and historic area system into four phases of development: primary development (1980–1994), exploration and growth (1995–2006), deepening and maturity (2007–2018), and integration and optimization (2019–2023).
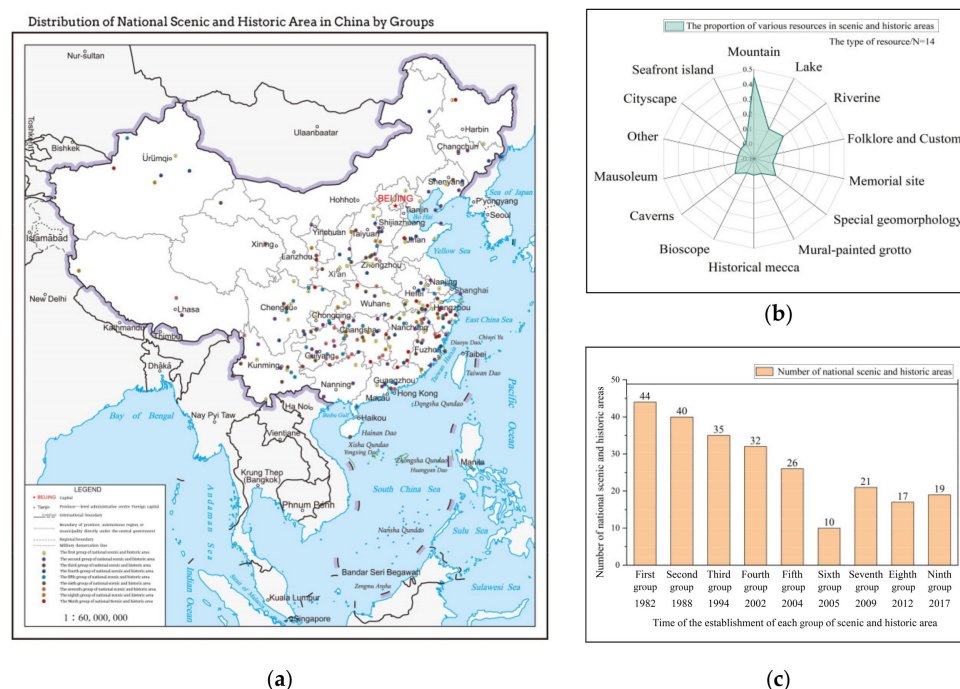
Figure 5. (**a**) Spatial distribution of the nine groups of national scenic and historic areas; (**b**) resource distribution of the nine groups of national scenic and historic areas; (**c**) resource distribution of the nine groups of national scenic and historic areas.

3.3. Analysis of Policy Instruments

Overall, the policy instruments showed an imbalance (Table 4), with a high proportion of environmental-type policy instruments (93.18%), which was significantly higher than supply- (2.52%) and demand-type instruments (4.30%). The reason for the low percentage of supply-type policy instruments is that China is rich in natural and cultural resources, the state's finances are insufficient to maintain them, and the shortage of management personnel and financial investment in scenic and historic areas is an ever-present problem. The reason for the high use of environmental-type policy instruments is that they can achieve conservation results in a short period of time, and in the face of the serious destruction of scenic resources in the early years of the country's founding, the Chinese government needs to quickly protect scenic resources and reduce the behavior of resource destruction. The reason for the relatively low proportion of demand-type policy instruments is that the government is accustomed to sectoral guidance and local autonomy, with insufficient participation by other societal forces.

In terms of the phase distribution of policy instruments (Figure 3b), from 1980 to 1994, the category of policy instruments was mainly environmental-type (99.40%), comprising primarily regulatory control and target planning measures (74.10%). From 1995 to 2006, environmental-type policy instruments dominated (91.72%). The number of demand-type policy instruments increased significantly, comprising mainly pilot demonstrations. From 2007 to 2018, the use of environmental policy instruments remained dominant (92.62%), and supply-type policy instruments increased, primarily comprising investments in technology, talent, and capital. After 2019, China aimed to reorganize and reclassify its protected area system. During this period, the positioning and development direction of scenic and historic areas is unclear, and protected area policies are mainly focused on the reform and construction issues of the national park system. Therefore, policies related to scenic and historic areas are temporarily stagnant.

Table 4. Distribution of policy instruments.

Instrument Type	Instrument Name	Percentage of Instruments	Percentage of Instrument Types
Supply	Financial support	1.70%	2.52%
	Personnel support	0.01%	
	Technical support	0.97%	
	Infrastructure	0.57%	
Environmental	Target planning	18.59%	93.18%
	Standardization	2.76%	
	Regulatory control	62.42%	
	Strategic intervention	8.20%	
	Pilot demonstration	1.70%	
Demand	Outsourcing of services	0.08%	4.30%
	Social participation	0.57%	
	International exchange	0.16%	

3.4. Analysis of Policy Topics

The topics of each policy code were extracted and summarized into ten categories: development and construction, resource protection, management protection, planning protection, supervision management, operation management, establishment protection, legislation protection, social participation, and ticket management (Figure 6a). Planning protection (30.52%) and management protection (28.65%) were high, followed by resource protection (11.28%), development and construction (7.95%), supervisory management (6.41%), social participation (2.19%), and operation management (0.81%). Planning and management protection were considered to be key topics, whereas social participation and operation management were neglected.

(**a**)

(**b**)
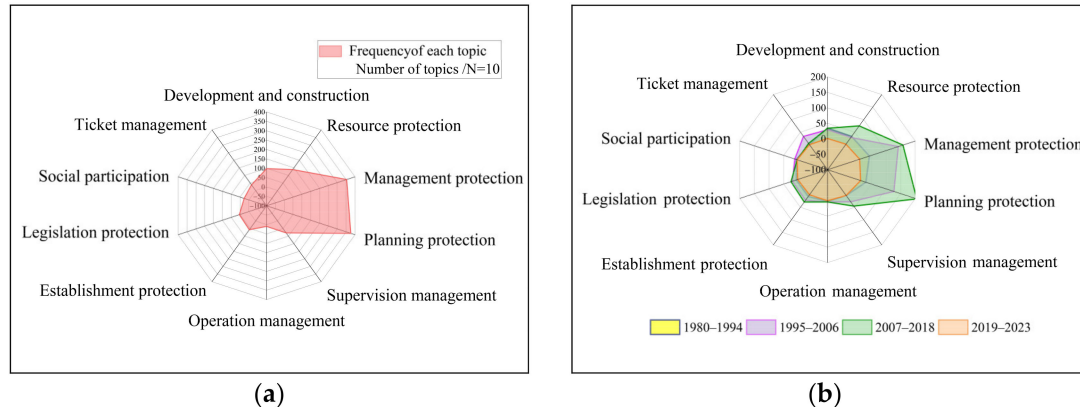
Figure 6. (**a**) Distribution of scenic and historic areas policy topics; (**b**) use of scenic and historic areas policy topics by period.

The phased distribution of policy topics is presented in Figure 6b. From 1980 to 1994, policy topics mainly included development and construction, resource-protection, management protection, and planning protection. The main concern in this phase was to quickly solve the resource destruction problem. From 1995 to 2006, management protection, establishment protection, legislation protection, and ticket management policy topics gradually increased. The policy focus in this phase is to improve the management and planning system and to have a wider discussion on the institutional topics of scenic and historic areas. From 2007 to 2018, the policy topics of the previous phase deepened, and the scenic and historic area system gradually matured. After 2019, China began to reform its protected area system, and improvement in the efficiency of resource protection became a topic of concern. The policy topics of scenic and historic areas were discussed less, whereas social participation issue gradually received attention.

4. Evolution Characteristics of the Scenic and Historic Areas System

We analyzed the policies of scenic and historic areas and investigated the main issues and construction results during each phase, considering the economic, social, and institutional environment.

4.1. 1980–1994: Primary Exploration Phase

During this period, the destruction of resources, illegal construction, and overstepping of the authority to grant land occurred frequently. The government issued a series of policies, such as measures to conduct a national inventory of scenic resources, strengthened safety management, and worked on sanitation in scenic and historic areas.

Two high-intensity policies emerged during this phase: the Interim Regulations on Scenic and Historic Areas [94] and the Measures for Implementation of the Interim Regulations on the Management of Scenic and Historic Areas [95]. These two policies clarified the authority in scenic and historic areas (the General Administration of Urban and Rural Construction). They formed a three-tier protection system for national key, provincial, and municipal scenic and historic areas. Under the leadership of the people's government, the local construction department was responsible for the investigation, declaration, and approval of resources and the supervision management of local scenic and historic areas. The establishment and approval system proceeded from the bottom up. China's system of scenic and historic areas was initially established at this phase.

Social participation policy instruments were used more often during this period, followed by regulatory control and international exchange policy instruments. Combined with analyzing policy topics to show that the form of social participation policy instruments mainly manifested through inviting experts and scholars in various fields of society to participate in the policy discussion of scenic and historic areas construction, increase in public excursion activities, and encourage public participation in scenic and historic areas supervision [62]. Some experts and scholars have also established resource protection organizations, such as the Chinese Society of Landscape Architecture and China Association of National Parks and Scenic Sites [96,97]. Regulatory control policy instruments were mainly reflected in the initial discussion of planning and management issues. Specifically, preliminary systems related to resource protection, establishment and validation of scenic and historic areas, land inventory, safety management, health management and planning have been formulated [98]. The policy instrument of international participation was reflected in reference to the experience of national park construction in developed countries, such as United States, Japan, Canada, and other developed countries and sent representatives to study the national parks of the United States [99]. During this period, the world national parks movement was booming. In October 1982, the Third National Parks Congress was held in Indonesia, which clarified the role and status of national parks and other protected areas in socio-economic development [100]. Governments and many international organizations (IUCN, WWF, UNESCO, etc.) also actively discussed the construction of national parks. The establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 was considered the triumph of the original human movement of nature conservation ideas. Canada, Japan, Australia, Britain, Zaire, and other countries have also developed national parks that emulated American national parks [101]. At the time of the creation of China's scenic and historic areas, the construction of national parks had already been established for a century worldwide. At this time, China's scenic and historic areas were equivalent to the status of national parks in foreign countries, and the English name was "National Park of China". In selecting the name, accorded to the concept of combined nature and culture in China, the names "National Park", "Scenic and Historic Area", and "Natural Scenic Area" were shortlisted. "Scenic and Historic Area" was chosen as the national park with Chinese characteristics [102]. Over the past 30 years, China's scenic and historic areas have been the equivalent of national parks. It was not until 2013 that China proposed the creation of a new national park system.

4.2. 1995–2006: Exploration and Growth Phase

Over-exploitation and the transferred of public resources attributes of scenic resources to corporations or individuals occurred frequently during this period. In 2001, a CCTV report pointed out that the disorderly development and over-exploitation of the Zhangjiajie scenic and historic areas had seriously affected the protection of scenic resources. In 2005, Fujian Province transferred the core scenic resources of the Guozijian scenic and historic areas to Xiamen Huarongtai Industrial Company. In 2006, the State Council formally promulgated the Regulations on Scenic and Historic Areas [103]. It stipulated the legal responsibility for arbitrary changes in managing and owning scenic resources, ending the 20-year history of temporary regulations. The scenic and historic areas were reclassified from national key, provincial, and municipal (county) levels to national and provincial scenic and historic areas. During this period, the cause of China's scenic and historic areas developed rapidly, mainly reflected in establishing and improving the planning and management system, ticket system, supervision system, and management system.

The high-intensity policies at this phase mainly included the Administrative Provisions for the Preparation and Submission for Approval of Master Plans for National Key Scenic and Historic Areas (has lost its legal effect) [104] and the Regulations on Scenic and historic Areas [103]. They reflected further improvements in the planning and management system. Improvement of the planning system was mainly manifests in the stricter selection of qualifications for planning units and preparing materials, determined planning methods for protecting resources in graded and zoned areas, and clarified norms on classifying and evaluating scenic resources. The planning system and management norms have been strengthened, and the situation of disorderly land use and haphazard construction has improved.

The main policy instruments adopted during this period included regulatory control, strategic measures, financial support, and talent support. Due to the serious destruction of scenic resources in the early period of the country's founding [105,106], strong government intervention was needed to protect the scenic and historic areas immediately. Therefore, more regulatory control instruments such as safety management and protection of old and valuable trees were used. Among them, the use of the entrance fee system has greatly improved the initial problem of insufficient funds for scenic resources protection [107]. In 1995, China implemented a double holiday system, and the number of visitors increased rapidly, therefore, the construction of scenic and historic areas could not meet the market demand. The state has limited financial resources, so establishing the ticket system was urgent. The ticket system for China's scenic and historic areas effectively solved the problem of insufficient initial funding for protecting scenic resources, controlled the flow of visitors, and reduced the pressure on ecological landscapes. The state's unified management of ticket prices also ensured the public's welfare in scenic and historic areas. The use of strategic measures policy instruments was reflected that the government has set a number of short-term feasible objectives for the urgent conservation of scenic and historic areas, such as the establishment of sectoral organizations to discuss the construction of scenic and historic areas and the enhancement of publicity in the community. Financial and talent personnel support policy instruments were used since there was a scarcity of financial and human resources and many infrastructures that required construction. Investment in personnel was also an important element in protecting scenic resources, the government mainly used regular training to quickly replenish management personnel.

4.3. 2007–2018: Depenning and Maturity Phase

At this phase, the construction of various systems for scenic and historic areas had matured. However, some problems remained, such as unsound management institutions and lag in the planning process. The government has accelerated the planning process of scenic and historic areas by issuing policies related to supervision and management, formulating industry standards, and developing pilot demonstration activities.

High-intensity policies at this phase included the Administrative Measures for the Construction of Supervisory Information System for National Scenic and Historic Areas (for Trial Implementation) [108], Guiding Opinions on the Construction of Digital Scenic and Historic Areas in National Scenic Areas, Measures for the Management Evaluation and Supervision and Inspection of National Scenic and Historic Areas [109], Notice on the Issuance of the Measures for the Management of the Declaration and Conservation of the World Natural Heritage and the Natural and Cultural Dual Heritage (for Trial Implementation) [110], and Measures for the Approval of the Planning and Preparation of National Scenic and Historic Areas (for Trial Implementation) [111]. The issuance of these policies has greatly promoted the protection efficiency of scenic and historic areas. The world heritage cause has been developing rapidly, by 2023, China has the second largest number (57) of World Heritage Sites globally behind Italy (59) [49]. Moreover, almost all of them are in scenic and historic areas.

The policy instruments at this phase mainly included target planning, industry standards, strategic measures, and pilot demonstration activities. Target planning policy instruments were often used since many established scenic and historic areas completed their planning and approval at this phase. Industry standards policy instruments reflected in planning standards, industry product standards, supervision and management assessment standards, and tour interpretation standards were gradually established. These have further improved the protection mechanism of China's scenic resources. The use of strategic measures policy instruments was mainly reflected in the increase of promotional, commemorative and commercial activities, which progressively contribute to the development of the scenic and historic areas. Pilot demonstration activities mainly included improving the enthusiasm for scenic and historic areas construction by carrying out activities such as network selection, recognition of advanced units and individuals.

4.4. 2019–2023: Integration and Optimization Phase

In this phase, China began to integrate and optimize its protected areas and establish a protected areas system with national parks as the mainstay [44]. Some remained problems of establishing scenic and historic areas, such as the lack of a fixed time for declaration, demonstration, and review as well as multiple management and cross-management remain to be addressed [51,112]. Scenic and historic areas fall under the jurisdiction of the construction sector. However, due to their resource attributes, they overlap with other protected areas. Departments of cultural heritage, forestry, and environmental protection also have management authority (Figure 7). These situations seriously affected the efficiency of scenic resource protection and management.
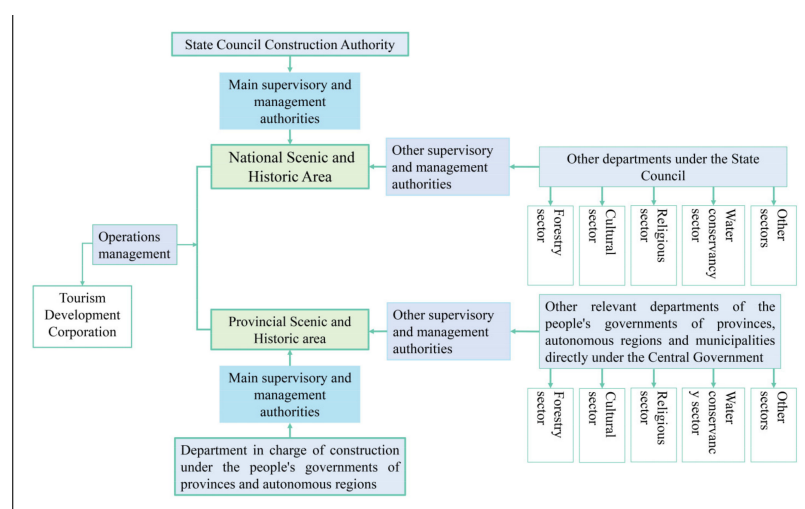

Figure 7. Management of scenic and historic areas.

Policies of higher intensity at this phase included the Guiding Opinions on the Establishment of a Protected Areas System with National Parks as the Mainstay [44]. Protected areas were classified into three categories based on their ecological value and intensity of protection: national parks, nature reserves, and nature parks. Unified management of protected areas have laid the foundation for increased conservation efficiency.

The policy instruments adopted in this period mainly included regulatory control and strategic intervention. At this phase, the society is mainly concerned with the reintegration and classification of protected areas and the construction of the national parks system. The U.S. also had this situation of multiple parks co-existing and chaotic management during the 100 years from 1832 to 1933 [113]. In 1916, the U.S. established the National Park Service to unify the management of all types of national parks. In 1933, most protected areas were put under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. The national park system's legislative process then progressed rapidly, which greatly promoted the efficiency of national park protection. Japan also consolidated administrative powers into the Ministry of the Environment in 1971 [114]. China established the State Forestry and Grassland Bureau in 2018 to unify the management of protected areas. The resource protection legislation process should be accelerated to promote the conservation efficiency of protected areas.

5. Discussion

Policies related to scenic and historic areas in China indicate that the government has increasingly focused on protecting scenic resources. During more than 40 years of development, the Chinese government has strongly intervened in developing scenic and historic areas, manifested in the high utilization of environment-type policy instruments. This has rapidly reorganized scenic and historic areas and rectified resource destruction. However, with the development of scenic and historic areas, strong interventions may affect the market's vitality [115]. Although China has been gradually decentralizing its government, a gradual shift is needed in the development model. For example, supply- and demand-type policy instruments could increase, including greater financial and human resource inputs, international exchanges, and more focus on operation and management and public participation in governance. From the perspective of development history and construction effectiveness, scenic and historic areas in China have protected various resources over the past 40 years. They have formed a protection system for hierarchical management, classification, approval and hierarchical zoning planning. In addition, an effective system of standards, norms, technical support with its own characteristics have been implemented. However, compared to the development of China's economy and social environment over the past 40 years, scenic and historic areas lagged in legislation and standardization [116]. Overall, the factors promoting the rapid development of China's scenic and historic areas have mainly included strong government intervention, rapid economic and social development and gradual improvement of the management and planning system and technology. Factors hindering the quality development of China's scenic and historic areas include lags in establishing legislation and standards, insufficient supply of financial and human resources, and overlapping with other protected areas [112]. In future, strongly authoritative policies such as the Law on the Protection of Scenic Resources and Law on Scenic and Historic Areas should be issued and supplemented, and specific rules should be made in the areas of personnel training, financial support, publicity education, operations management and public participation. Standard policies for establishing scenic and historic areas, classification of resource values and a catalog of scenic resource protection should be examined and formulated [117].

According to the policy analysis, it was found that there are many specific issues in the scenic and historic areas that need attention. Firstly, good operation and maintenance management models are very important to promote public willingness to protect scenic resources [118] and many countries have paid high attention to them [119–121]. Scenic and historic areas also need to pay more attention to maintenance management. Secondly, although China's scenic and historic areas have a strong cultural heritage and artistic atmo-

sphere, the management and application of modern technology to them is insufficient. For example, the improvement of the level of digital technology has greatly contributed to the conservation efficiency of scenic and historic areas, but the application in the conservation of cultural landscape information is still insufficient [122,123]. Thirdly, in-depth conservation awareness is very important for the long-term protection of scenic and historic areas [66], which requires the inclusion of scenic resource protection into the education system. At present, some agricultural and forestry colleges and universities offer relevant courses, but the knowledge system is still scattered and it is necessary to consciously strengthen the general education of resource conservation and establish conservation organizations to promote multidisciplinary exchanges. Japan's entrance examination will incorporate knowledge of national parks into the University examination content, which is also a worthy way to learn. In addition, higher ticket prices for scenic and historic areas compared to other countries have also affected the public experience to some extent, funding sources should be expanded to ease the pressure on entrance fees [124,125]. The United States has many private donations and group associations on nature conservation, which is still relatively rare in China [126]. However, there are more and more volunteer services in China's scenic and historic areas, and now there are many individual groups joining as volunteer workers, which is also a way to contribute.

Currently, China's protected areas are being reformed as a result of the overlap problem, which is good for the long-term development of scenic and historic areas. Name overlap is one of the most serious problems in China's protected areas system. There are at least 1532 spatially overlapping protected areas under different categories and administrative bodies, many areas are even designated under four to five protected areas categories [127]. There are 102 national scenic and historic areas with varying degrees of overlap with protected areas [41]. It is also an impediment to the conservation of scenic resources. China has addressed this problem mainly by unifying ecological management and redrawing boundaries. Currently, a study assessing the performance of protected areas in China found that the expansion of protected area coverage in China has not offset biodiversity loss, that many protected areas are under strong pressure from human activities, and that the effectiveness of protected areas protection must be improved [128]. It was also noted that streamlining China's complex protected area types is one way to achieve effective conservation [129]. In the future, the boundaries of protected areas in China should continue to expand to truly achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. Scenic and historic areas should also continue to increase in number and improve its quality so as to better protect cultural and ecological resources. Other countries have also experienced the problem of overlapping protected areas affecting the quality of conservation [128]. Several studies have proposed to identify larger ecosystems within protected areas based on the permeability of the land near the boundaries of the protected areas (i.e., expanding the scope of ecosystem protection and establishing ecosystems center on protected areas) [37,130]. Since the development pressure on the periphery of protected areas is very high, it may have an impact on the development pressure within the protected areas and may even undermine the conservation objectives that aims to achieve [131,132]. It has also been argued that whether or not it is worth expanding protected areas depends on how great the potential benefits of conservation are, and that replacing a poorly performing protected areas can achieve better conservation outcomes to some extent [133]. Overall, expanding protected areas is a key strategy for addressing increasing human pressures on ecosystems and biodiversity [43,134]. It has also been found that the biodiversity superstates, including China, are critical to global biodiversity conservation and have the greatest potential for expansion [135]. Some studies have shown that countries with low agricultural activities, high economic growth and effective governance have effective national protected areas [136]. It has also been noted that effective management of protected areas is often hampered by social conflicts caused by local communities and other users. Despite the importance of these social impacts, they remain grossly understudied [137]. In addition,

the performance of most protected area types has not been systematically assessed, an issue that also deserves global attention [37].

On the whole, China's policies on scenic and historic areas have played a very big role in the rapid protection of scenic resources. However, the effectiveness and balance of the current policies are still insufficient in terms of the conservation objectives of scenic resources. Other countries also have policies that are not sufficiently effective in achieving biodiversity conservation goals [70], or even deviate from the conservation goals [68]. The combination of policy instruments chosen is very important for achieving policy objectives, and is influenced by different beliefs, values and ideologies [138]. In the future, countries should increase the number of quantitative studies on policy instruments for protected areas in order to better understand and compare conservation policies across countries. At the same time, more empirical research is needed to validate the effectiveness of policy instruments, such as measuring human activities, ecological carrying capacity, visitor experience, and ecosystem services in protected areas. The theory of policy instruments can also verify the rationality of past policy instruments and measures [139]. This provides a more intuitive method for learning from countries' conservation experiences.

6. Conclusions

Based on previous studies on the historical development of the scenic and historic area system, this study used quantitative research methods to reveal the effectiveness of the policy on scenic and historic areas. Based on the policy intensity analysis, conservation trends in scenic and historic areas are revealed. Based on the theory of policy instruments, it reveals the main policy objectives and measures of the scenic and historic areas system. Based on the analysis of policy themes, the focus of attention of scenic and historic areas is summarized. In addition, the development phases of scenic and historic areas were scientifically divided and the construction problems, policy measures and construction effectiveness of the system at different phases of scenic and historic areas were summarized. Consequently, the development experience of scenic and historic areas has been analyzed more comprehensively and in-depth. The study provides theoretical support for the future path of high-quality development of China's scenic and historic areas and a reference model for the high-quality construction of protected areas worldwide.

However, the study also has limitations, such as the time-consuming extraction of policy instruments and thematic content, and the fact that its subjectivity remains unavoidable. This is not conducive to a better understanding of resource conservation policies in countries overall. Hopefully, better research methods analyzing these policies will emerge in future.

Appendix A

Table A1. Examples of policy document coding and content extraction.

Title	Code	Policy Target	Policy Strength	Policy Measures	Theme	Topic	Instrument Name	Instrument Tape
1 Lapsed Circular of the Ministry of Forestry on the Protection…	1. 1	4		2	Construction norm	Development and construction	Standardized	Environmental
	1. 2	1		3	Tourism development	Development and construction	Target planning	Environmental
	1. 3	5	1	2	Tourism development	Development and construction	Target planning	Environmental
	1. 4	1		2	Tourism census	Development and construction	Target planning	Environmental
2 Circular of the State Council Approving the Report of the State Administration of Urban…	2. 1	2		4	Survey of scenic resources	Resource protection	Strategic intervention	Environmental
	2. 2	5	1	4	Sound management systems and institutions	Management protection	Regulatory control	Environmental
	2. 3	5		5	Enhanced protection	Resource protection	Regulatory control	Environmental
	2. 4	5		5	Development and construction	Development and construction	Regulatory control	Environmental

Table A2. Landmark policy of scenic and historic areas.

Year of Release	Publishing Department	Name of Policy Document	Phase of Development
1982	State Council	Notifications on the Report on Strengthening the Management of Scenic and Historic Areas Protection.	First phase (1980–1994)
1982	State Council	Notifications on the Release of the First Group of National Key Scenic and Historic Areas.	
1985	State Council	Provisional Regulations on the Management of Scenic and Historic Areas.	
1994	State Council	Notifications on the Release of the Third Group of National Key Scenic and Historic Areas.	
1995	State Council	Notifications on the Report on Strengthening the Protection and Management of Scenic and Historic Areas.	Second phase (1995–2006)
1999	Ministry of Construction	Code of Planning for Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2004	Ministry of Construction	Notifications on Accelerating the Construction of the Supervisory System for National Key Scenic Areas.	

Table A2. *Cont.*

Year of Release	Publishing Department	Name of Policy Document	Phase of Development
2005	State Council	Notifications on the Release of the Sixth Group of National Key Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2006	State Council	Regulations on Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2008	Ministry of Construction	Criteria for Classification of Scenic and Historic Areas.	Third phase (2007–2018)
2010	Ministry of Construction	Guiding Opinions on the Construction of Digital Scenic Areas in National Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2015	Ministry of Construction	Measures for Assessment and Supervision and Inspection of Management of National Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2017	State Council	Notifications on the Release of the Ninth Group of National Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2018	Ministry of Construction	Standards for Master Planning of Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2019	State Council	Guiding Opinions on the Establishment of a Protected Areas System with National Parks as the Mainstay.	Fourth Phase (2019–2023)
2020	Forestry and Grassland Bureau	Notifications on Effectively Strengthening the Supervision and Management of Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2021	Forestry and Grassland Bureau	Reply to the Recommendations on Accelerating the Optimization and Adjustment of Scenic and Historic Areas.	
2023	Forestry and Grassland Bureau	Reply to the Recommendation on the Expeditious Approval of the Preliminary Plan for the Integration and Optimization of Protected Areas.	

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