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WORKING PAPER SERIES

TRANSLATING TRADITION THROUGH URBAN REGENERATION AND ADAPTIVE REUSE

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

ANALYSIS OF THE CO-EVOLUTIONARY MECHANISM OF "SPACE-FUNCTION- CULTURE" IN TIANJIN'S HISTORIC BLOCKS (1984–2025)

Xing Lin, Jifan Li, Xujun Tao

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Driven by the dual forces of rapid urbanization and urban regeneration of existing stock, deciphering the coupling mechanism between commercial vitality activation and cultural continuity in historic blocks has become a core challenge in global human settlement governance. This study takes the historic city of Tianjin, which features typically differentiated spatial fabrics, as its subject and constructs an analytical framework for the "spatial structure-commercial function-socio-culture" co-evolution. Based on road network topology and commercial functional data from 1984 to 2025, the research employs space syntax segment models and multi-dimensional statistical analysis to quantitatively analyze the forty-year evolutionary process of four typical types of historic blocks. The findings indicate that: first, spatial structure, acting as a "hidden gene," exhibits significant morphological persistence, providing a stable physical substratum for the preservation of historical environmental characteristics; second, the logic of commercial distribution has undergone a scale transition from "local neighborhood services" to "city-level integration," and different morphological genes demonstrate varied levels of carrying resilience; third, spatial configuration exerts a regulatory effect on functional evolution, where traditional fabrics with fine-grained street networks and high connectivity can attract high-frequency daily consumption into the block's interior, while large-scale regular grids are more inclined to attract the clustering of high-order professional services. Based on this, the paper proposes differentiated governance strategies: it advocates for maintaining the density of spatial fabric in traditional areas with high social relevance, while implementing precise matching of function and configuration in professional zones with high structural stability. This study provides a quantitative tool for revealing the steering power of spatial logic over the evolution of urban life, while offering a theoretical reference for the sustainable regeneration of historical environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the dual drivers of rapid urbanization and urban regeneration of existing stock, historic blocks have evolved from static "heritage conservation units" into "urban consumption nodes" that harbor complex socio-economic interactions.^{1,2} However, this transformation has induced deep structural contradictions, where the excessive intervention of commercial capital, while activating spatial efficiency, often strips away the daily life and intangible socio-culture rooted in traditional spaces, leading to "cultural hollowing" and the fragmentation of social networks. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in Chinese cities undergoing radical transitions.^{3,4} Consequently, deciphering the coupling mechanism between commercial vitality activation and cultural continuity has emerged as a core issue in current global human settlement research and heritage governance practice.

The introduction of the "Historic Urban Landscape" (HUL) concept marks a shift in conservation focus from "form" toward "dynamic evolution."^{5,6} Historic blocks are redefined as continuously evolving "socio-spatial systems" where cultural values are constantly reconstructed through dynamic daily practices.^{7,8} Although existing studies have confirmed that the spatial structure of urban blocks possesses cross-scale

socio-economic adaptability^{9, 10} and have made significant progress in measuring commercial vitality,^{11, 12} a systematic quantitative explanatory path remains lacking regarding how socio-culture, as a contextual and constructive entity in historic blocks, interacts with physical spatial morphology and commercial functional layout.¹³ Under the data-driven paradigm, translating abstract socio-culture into observable spatial indicators and revealing its multi-dimensional interaction mechanisms with structure and function represents a critical challenge that urgently needs to be addressed.

Space syntax theory provides an effective methodology for resolving this issue. The theory posits that spatial configuration is not a passive physical container, but rather an underlying structural mechanism that steers social behavior and interaction patterns.^{14, 15} Based on this, the present study intends to construct a co-evolutionary framework: it seeks to treat spatial structure as a "hidden gene" that defines the probabilistic field of socio-economic flows; commercial function is regarded as the "phenotypic expression," representing the functional mapping of spatial potential during specific periods; and socio-culture is mapped within the spatio-temporal isomorphism of the two. This framework aims to utilize the structural perspective of space syntax to embed invisible socio-culture into objective morphological analysis, revealing the steering power of space as a "social logic" over the evolution of urban life.

Taking Tianjin, a historic city with a typical "dual-city structure" where the traditional old city coexists with modern concessions, as the research subject, this paper constructs a collaborative analytical framework of "spatial structure-commercial function-socio-culture" based on multi-period road network topological data and Point of Interest (POI) data from 1984 to 2025. By analyzing the evolutionary correlation between core Space Syntax indicators and commercial vitality, this study aims to systematically explore the regulatory role of spatial structure on functional evolution across different historical periods and to reveal the evolutionary resilience of traditional spaces within contemporary socio-culture. This hybrid research path not only provides a quantitative tool for deciphering the evolutionary genes of Tianjin's historic blocks¹⁶ but also offers theoretical reference and decision support for the sustainable regeneration of historic urban areas in similar global contexts.

2. RESEARCH AREA AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Area

This study selects four urban blocks with high morphological representativeness within the central district of Tianjin as analytical samples, namely the Xinanjiao block, the Jiefangbeilu block, the Anshandao block, and the Zhongshanlu block. These four blocks are not only geographically situated within the urban core but also

reflect the divergence in spatial patterns and socioeconomic structures during the modern urban evolution of Tianjin. As the core of the old walled city, the Xinanjiao block represents a "self-organized" and inward-looking fabric characteristic of pre-industrial Chinese neighborhood units. The Jiefangbeilu block reflects an orderly Western grid system driven by capital investment. The Anshandao block demonstrates a high-density, small-scale mixed-use model of commercial and residential functions. Finally, the Zhongshanlu block embodies a fabric shaped by intentional intervention under the "New Policy" of the late Qing Dynasty, which integrated radial transportation networks with administrative functions. By comparing these four types of distinct spatial morphologies, this research aims to reveal the regulatory mechanisms through which different spatial structures have guided socio-cultural evolution throughout four decades of socioeconomic transformation.

2.2. Spatiotemporal Database Construction and Preprocessing

To analyze the long-term evolution from 1984 to 2025, this study constructs a multidimensional geographic database integrating morphological topology and commercial vitality factors. At the morphological data level, 1984 (the establishment period of the protection system) and 2025 (the mature period of stock renewal) are selected as key temporal nodes. Road centerlines were extracted through the vectorization of historical maps and the retrieval of open-source map data, respectively, which were then imported into the Depthmap software for topological modeling. Regarding commercial data, POI data were acquired for three phases (1984, 2014, and 2025), covering four core business categories that support the daily life of the blocks: life services, accommodation, catering, and shopping. The 1984 data were derived from historical atlases, while the 2014 and 2025 data were obtained through web crawling of big data. Utilizing the Spatial Join technique in ArcGIS, POI points were precisely matched to street units, ensuring the horizontal comparability of data across different historical periods in both spatial scales and attribute dimensions. Furthermore, to eliminate calculation biases of discrete point data in topological path analysis, the study implemented a homogenization process. Taking specific POIs as origins, a composite accessibility threshold was established based on distance and angular decay functions. Commercial intensity was then mapped to the surrounding spatial environment according to reduction rules, thereby achieving the precise coupling of macro-morphological parameters and micro-commercial intensity within a continuous field.

2.3. Space Syntax Measurement Framework

This study utilizes the Segment Analysis model within the Depthmap software to perform morphological analysis of the road networks. The key spatial variables calculated in this model include several critical spatial parameters. The algorithmic meaning of Integration involves calculating the shortest topological distance, defined by cumulative angular change, from a specific segment to all other segments within a defined

geometric radius, which reflects the centrality of that segment relative to others. The algorithmic meaning of Choice refers to the frequency with which a specific segment is traversed by the shortest topological paths, also defined by cumulative angular change, between any two other segments within a certain geometric radius. Based on these two fundamental metrics, Hillier et al. proposed Normalized Angular Choice (NACH) and Normalized Angular Integration (NAIN) in 2012.¹⁷ The significance of these indicators lies in their ability to eliminate the influence of the number of segments on the analytical results, thereby enabling the comparison of spatial systems with different scales and complexities and ensuring horizontal comparability between data from different years. This study analyzes the aforementioned indicators across multiple spatiotemporal scales, including the 800m pedestrian scale, 1600m neighborhood scale, 3200m mesoscale, 4800m urban scale, and the global scale (n). The objective is to deconstruct the structural regulatory power of the road network skeleton as a "physical base map" over social circulation volumes at various hierarchies.

2.4. Measurement of Commercial Vitality and Coupling Analysis

To quantify the distribution characteristics of commercial vitality, this study introduces a dual evaluation index consisting of Kernel Density Estimation (KDE) and Linear Density (CLD). The former identifies commercial agglomeration hotspots at the urban level, while the latter reflects the number of POIs carried per unit length of a street, thereby quantifying the intensity of vitality at the block level. Building upon these metrics, a progressive statistical analysis model was constructed using SPSS. First, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the coupling intensity between spatial independent variables (such as NAIN and NACH) and the commercial vitality dependent variable (number of POIs) across different historical stages. Subsequently, a Linear Regression model was developed to quantitatively evaluate the explanatory power of physical spatial morphology over commercial evolution and the sociocultural landscape. This logical framework aims to elucidate how historical blocks utilize their morphological genes to maintain the organic continuity of sociocultural vitality during the process of functional iteration.

3. THE EVOLUTIONARY LOGIC OF SPATIAL MORPHOLOGY IN TIANJIN HISTORICAL BLOCKS

3.1. Multi-scale Centrality Shift

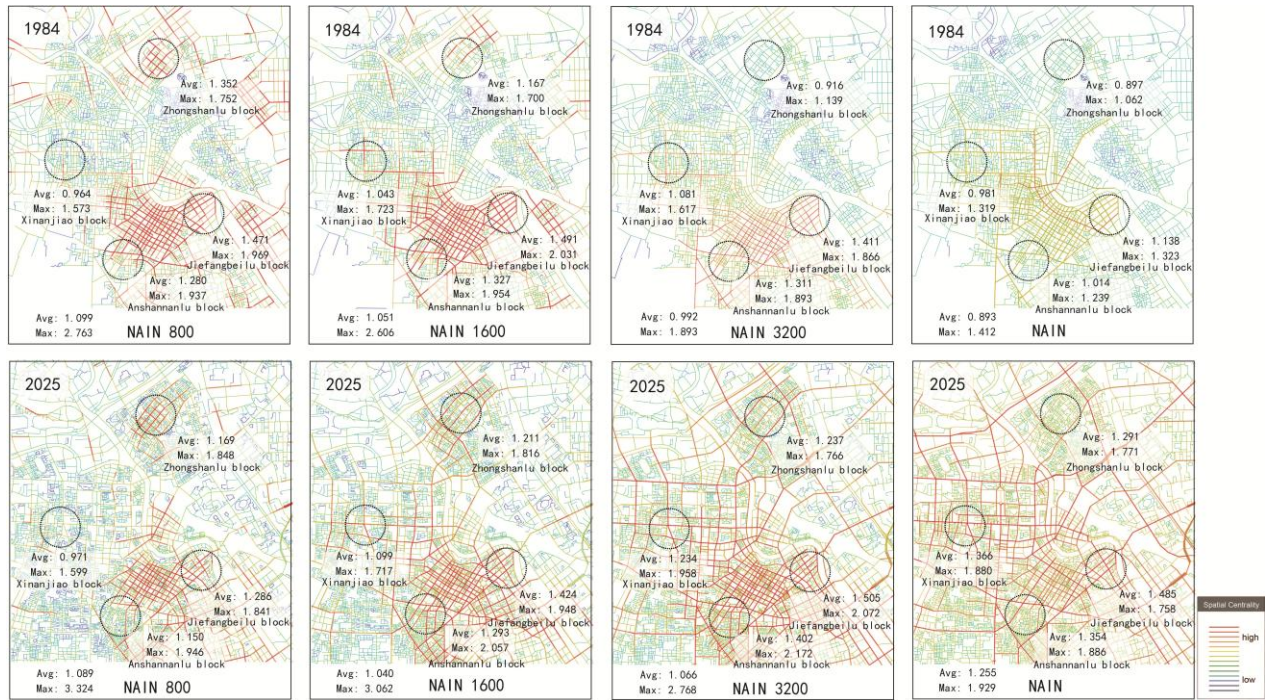


Figure 1: NAIN of the four blocks across different radii in 1984 and 2025 (Source: drawn by the authors).

Based on the evolution trajectories of NAIN from 1984 to 2025, the spatial morphology of historical blocks in Tianjin has undergone a structural embedding from "local isolated centers" into a "global network" (Figure 1). In 1984, at the local scale reflecting pedestrian accessibility ($R=800\text{m}$), the Jiefangbeilu block ($\text{Avg}=1.471$) and the Zhongshanlu block ($\text{Avg}=1.352$) exhibited significant local centrality, which was attributed to the high permeability of the street blocks established during modern planning. By 2025, following the rapid expansion of the metropolitan road network, the historical blocks were fully integrated into the urban spatial system, with the maximum NAIN value at the local scale ($R=800\text{m}$) surging from 2.763 to 3.324. In this context, the average NAIN values at the global scale for the Xinanjiiao block, the Anshandao block, and the Zhongshanlu block increased to 1.366, 1.354, and 1.291, respectively. These figures indicate that these blocks did not become isolated during the process of urban modernization; instead, they achieved a structural reconfiguration from "inward-looking and closed" to "globally open" through the peripheral penetration of modern arterial roads.

3.2. Dynamic Evolution of Through-movement Potential

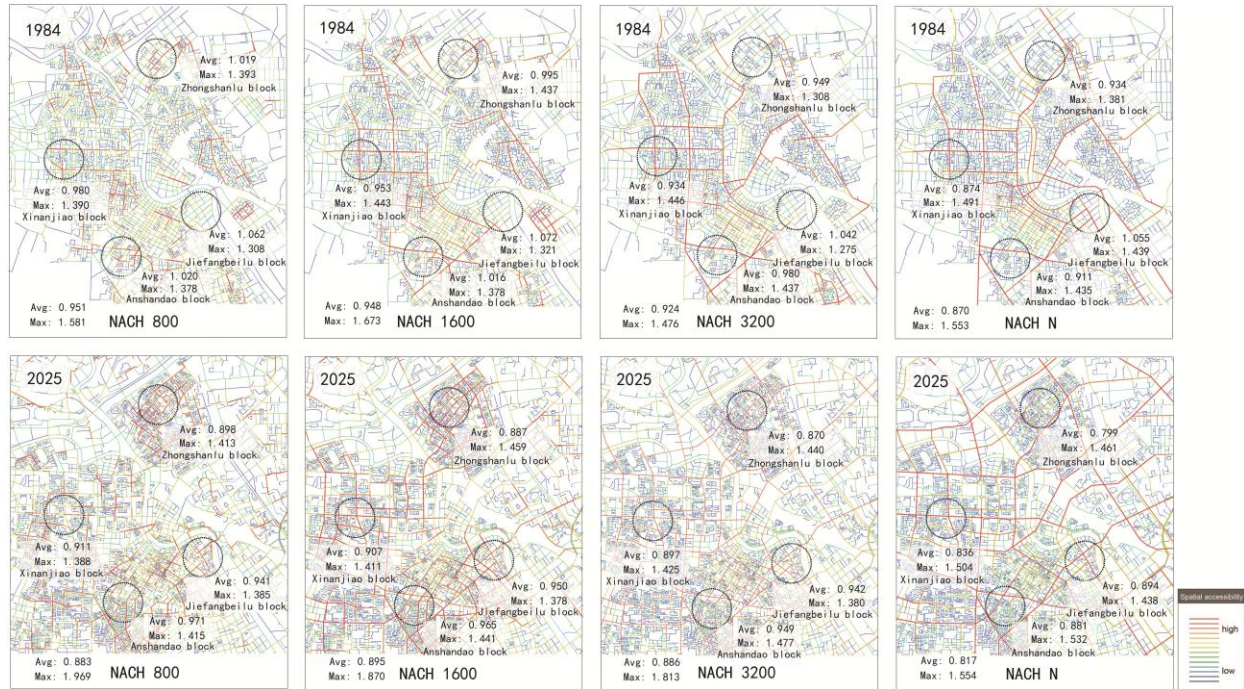


Figure 2: NACH of the four blocks across different radii in 1984 and 2025 (Source: drawn by the authors).

The spatiotemporal evolution of NACH reveals a divergence in the potential of historical blocks to carry social flow (Figure 2). In 1984, the through-movement potential across the sample blocks was relatively balanced, constrained by low levels of motorization. By 2025, a significant scale shift in spatial through-movement potential became evident. At the 3200m mesoscale, the maximum NACH values for the Jiefangbeilu block and the Anshandao block increased significantly, reaching 1.380 and 1.477 respectively. This trend marks their transformation from residential living spaces serving the immediate neighborhood into functional interface zones connecting key nodes within the central urban area. In contrast, although the average global NACH value for the Xinnanjiào block decreased slightly from 0.874 to 0.836, its maximum value remained high at 1.504. This suggests that while maintaining global connectivity, the block has preserved deep-seated local social cohesion and accessibility by leveraging its stable grid-based foundation.

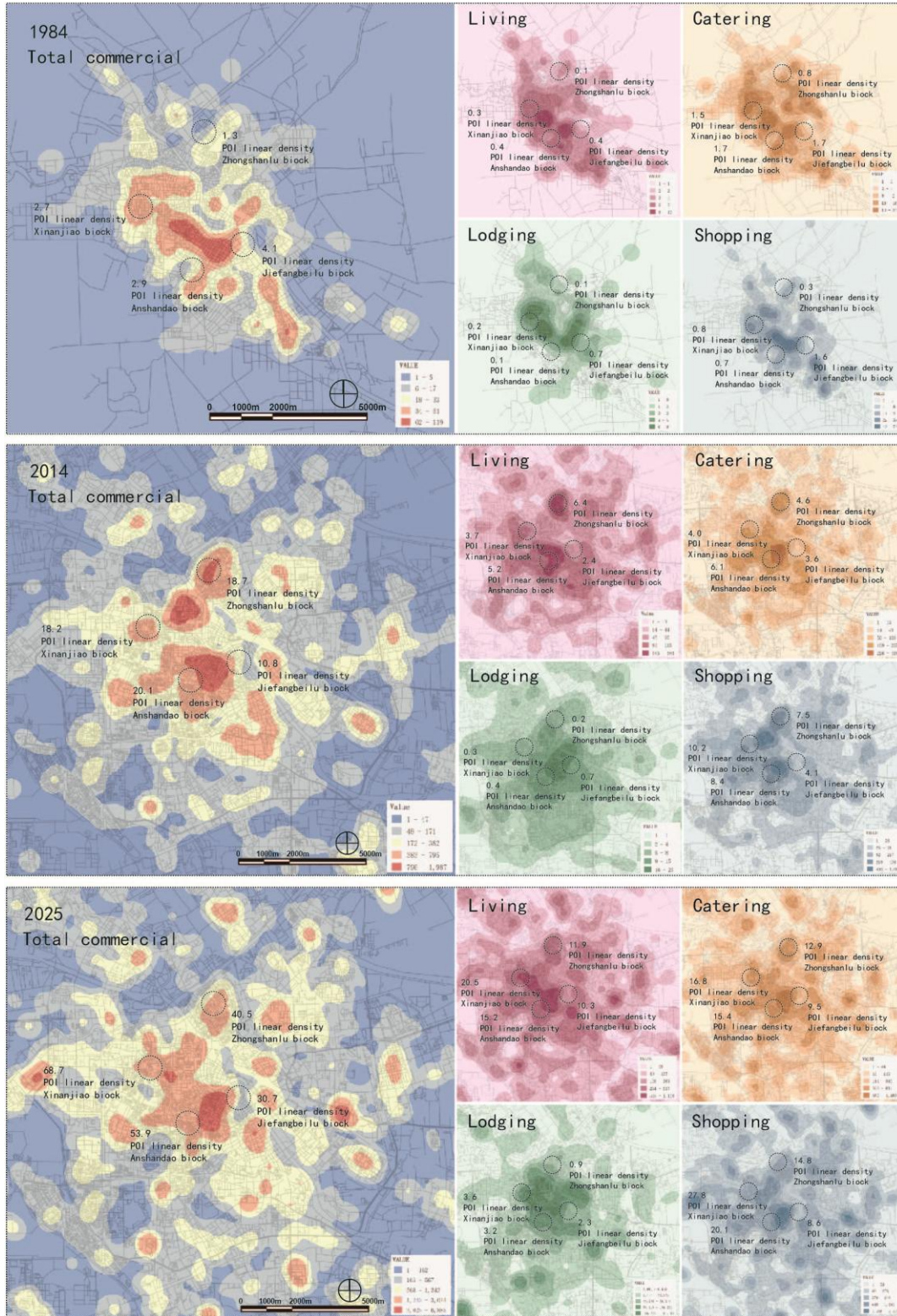


Figure 3: Kernel density and linear density of the four blocks in 1984, 2014, and 2025. (Source: drawn by the authors).

4. SPATIOTEMPORAL DISTRIBUTION AND EVOLUTION OF COMMERCIAL VITALITY IN HISTORICAL BLOCKS

4.1. Spatial Polarization and Penetration of Regional Commercial Heat

Through the evolution analysis of KDE for commercial POIs in the central district of Tianjin across 1984, 2014, and 2025, regional commercial vitality has undergone a functional spillover from "local dispersion" to "multi-centrality" (Figure 3). In 1984, commercial heat exhibited island-like characteristics, with high density confined to the eastern part of the Xinanjiao block extending toward the Haihe River, while sample blocks such as Xinanjiao itself displayed only low density. During the expansion period of 2014, as the urban area expanded, the center of gravity for commercial heat showed significant conglomerate expansion. The Anshandao block and the Zhongshanlu block emerged as high-vitality areas by leveraging their advantages as transportation hubs. By 2025, the number of commercial entities experienced a quantum leap, and commercial clusters began to penetrate deep into the traditional urban fabric. This process represents more than a mere surge in numerical values; it signifies a paradigm shift in commercial logic from "peripheral enclosure" to "ubiquitous penetration," indicating the release of the value of historical spaces as consumption carriers.

4.2. Quantitative Characterization of Block Vitality and Spatial Differentiation of Commercial Sub-sectors

The dynamic comparison of CLD reveals the differences in efficiency among various spatial genes in accommodating commercial volume (Figure 3). In 1984, the Jiefangbeilu block, which is characterized by a Western planning background, recorded a CLD value of 4.1, representing the maximum among the four blocks. However, by 2025, the positional hierarchy had been reshaped. The value for the Xinanjiao block surged to 68.7, marking a 277.5% increase compared to 2014, followed closely by the Anshandao block (CLD=53.9). Together, these two blocks constitute the center of the contemporary commercial structure. In contrast, although the Zhongshanlu block performed strongly during the expansion period (2014), its growth rate slowed significantly in the current stage (CLD=40.5), while the Jiefangbeilu block remained in a stable low-growth interval at 30.7. This heterogeneous growth indicates that traditional Chinese high-density fabrics and Japanese-influenced mixed-use commercial-residential fabrics demonstrate stronger carrying resilience when adapting to contemporary commercial sectors compared to radial structures (Zhongshanlu block) or large-scale grids (Jiefangbeilu block).

Further analysis of commercial sectors reveals a clear "fabric correlation" (Figure 3). In 2025, the Xinanjiao block (CLD=20.5) recorded the highest density for life service sectors, illustrating the robust support

provided by traditional residential fabrics for grassroots social life. The catering sector exhibits a typical "finger-like penetration" characteristic, forming high-density linear distributions within the Xinanjiao block and the Anshandao block, which reflects a significant dependence on high-permeability street networks. By 2025, the shopping sector demonstrated intense "centripetal polarization," with the Xinanjiao block (CLD=27.8) emerging as a city-level commercial center. Notably, the accommodation sector shows a low-frequency coupling with the historical concession background. Although the absolute values of linear density for the Jiefangbeilu block remained low across all years, its kernel density coverage remained consistently stable. This reveals the structural exclusivity and environmental advantages of such urban-scale, low-permeability historical spaces when accommodating specific high-end service practices, such as cultural tourism.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE DRIVING MECHANISMS OF SPATIAL STRUCTURE ON COMMERCIAL PRACTICES

5.1. Correlation Analysis between Spatial Morphology and Commercial Vitality

Through the Pearson correlation analysis between the spatial parameters of each street segment and the number of commercial POIs in Tianjin's historical blocks (Figure 4), the logical reconstruction of the driving force exerted by spatial genes on vitality distribution is revealed. In 1984, commercial distribution exhibited a significant "micro-neighborhood dependency." Specifically, the local integration ($R=800\text{m}$) of the Jiefangbeilu block was highly correlated with commercial agglomeration ($r=0.77$), reflecting the strong attachment of early commerce to the pedestrian scale. During the expansion period of 2014, the spatial regulatory force manifested as the capacity for flow capture. For instance, the local choice ($R=800\text{m}$) of the Zhongshanlu block maintained high statistical stability ($r=0.93$). By 2025, the correlation structure demonstrated a differentiation across scales. The Xinanjiao block showed sustained guiding power at the urban scale ($R=4800\text{m}$ integration, $r=0.56$), while the Anshandao block remained robust at the neighborhood scale ($R=1600\text{m}$ NAIN, $r=0.61$). The evolution of these correlation radii quantitatively demarcates the shift in spatial regulatory effects as historical blocks evolve from "internal community service providers" into "urban functional nodes."

1984 Total commercial	Anshandao block	Jiefangbeilu block	Xinanjiao block	Zhongshanlu block	2014 Total commercial	Anshandao block	Jiefangbeilu block	Xinanjiao block	Zhongshanlu block	2025 Total commercial	Anshandao block	Jiefangbeilu block	Xinanjiao block	Zhongshanlu block
INT 800	0.11	0.77	0.41	0.53	INT 800	0.62	0.22	0.65	0.79	INT 800	0.20	0.60	0.07	0.41
INT 1600	0.17	0.55	0.56	0.56	INT 1600	0.67	0.34	0.74	0.79	INT 1600	0.50	0.42	0.45	0.53
INT 3200	0.15	0.62	0.59	0.76	INT 3200	0.50	0.39	0.51	0.65	INT 3200	0.20	0.47	0.46	0.49
INT 4800	0.12	0.61	0.64	0.86	INT 4800	0.55	0.14	0.62	0.67	INT 4800	0.22	0.41	0.56	0.53
INT N	0.13	0.45	0.82	0.74	INT N	0.58	0.31	0.51	0.38	INT N	0.31	0.28	0.49	0.31
Log CHO 800	0.21	0.57	0.40	0.31	Log CHO 800	0.46	0.11	0.65	0.93	Log CHO 800	-0.16	0.50	-0.07	0.46
Log CHO 1600	0.23	0.43	0.65	0.52	Log CHO 1600	0.62	0.22	0.75	0.87	Log CHO 1600	0.12	0.50	0.24	0.49
Log CHO 3200	0.21	0.38	0.73	0.58	Log CHO 3200	0.67	0.33	0.71	0.75	Log CHO 3200	0.19	0.51	0.40	0.42
Log CHO4800	0.12	0.31	0.77	0.67	Log CHO4800	0.66	0.33	0.65	0.72	Log CHO4800	0.20	0.50	0.45	0.42
Log CHO N	0.16	0.19	0.81	0.71	Log CHO N	0.68	0.34	0.53	0.66	Log CHO N	0.23	0.38	0.50	0.38
NAIN 800	0.12	0.70	0.61	0.03	NAIN 800	0.75	0.41	0.75	0.68	NAIN 800	0.54	0.49	0.01	0.29
NAIN 1600	0.30	0.61	0.60	0.01	NAIN 1600	0.75	0.59	0.78	0.55	NAIN 1600	0.61	0.50	0.30	0.26
NAIN 3200	0.22	0.29	0.57	0.54	NAIN 3200	0.58	0.42	0.64	0.54	NAIN 3200	0.36	0.29	0.50	0.37
NAIN 4800	0.25	-0.16	0.80	0.70	NAIN 4800	0.58	0.43	0.64	0.49	NAIN 4800	0.23	0.51	0.48	0.38
NAIN N	0.13	0.45	0.82	0.74	NAIN N	0.58	0.31	0.51	0.38	NAIN N	0.31	0.28	0.49	0.31
NACH 800	0.18	0.61	0.50	0.31	NACH 800	0.55	0.18	0.72	0.86	NACH 800	-0.09	0.43	-0.14	0.31
NACH 1600	0.26	0.49	0.64	0.54	NACH 1600	0.64	0.28	0.71	0.79	NACH 1600	0.17	0.51	0.11	0.29
NACH 3200	0.21	0.31	0.72	0.59	NACH 3200	0.67	0.35	0.70	0.72	NACH 3200	0.24	0.48	0.36	0.39
NACH 4800	0.15	0.19	0.78	0.69	NACH 4800	0.66	0.37	0.64	0.68	NACH 4800	0.20	0.50	0.42	0.39
NACH N	0.16	0.20	0.82	0.73	NACH N	0.68	0.34	0.53	0.66	NACH N	0.23	0.38	0.50	0.38

Figure 4: Correlation analysis between spatial parameters and commercial volume of the four blocks in 1984, 2014, and 2025 (Source: created by the authors).

5.2. Explanatory Efficacy of Spatial Morphology on Vitality

The multi-period linear regression models quantify the decisive efficacy of the road network's topological skeleton as an independent variable in shaping the distribution of commercial practices (Figure 5). In 1984, the Jiefangbeilu block identified small-scale integration ($R=800m$) as the optimal explanatory variable ($R^2=0.591$), reflecting the high sensitivity of early trade vitality to the fine-grained permeability of streets and alleys. By 2014, the explanatory power of the model reached its peak. The goodness of fit for the Zhongshanlu block, driven by through-movement potential ($R=800m$ integration), reached as high as R^2 of 0.866, which profoundly reveals the strong regulatory force of radial road configurations over modern commercial flows. As of 2025, the Xinanjiao block maintained a robust driving efficacy under urban-scale integration ($R=4800m$, $R^2=0.601$), suggesting that the fabric of the Xinanjiao block demonstrates significant structural resilience in adapting to the transformation of modern urban energy levels. The divergence in optimal explanatory variables across the sample blocks provides powerful evidence that spatial morphology is not a neutral physical container; rather, it constitutes an implicit structural mechanism that presets the logic of commercial practice distribution.

Linear Regression Results - Anshandao block 1984							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-0.371	3.502	-	-0.106	0.916	-	-
NAIN 1600	3.726	2.244	0.304	1.661	0.108	1	1
R ²				0.093			
Adjusted R ²				0.059			
F				F (1,27)=2.758	p=0.108		
D-W Value				0.239			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Jiefanghe block 1984							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	0.552	0.929	-	0.594	0.558	-	-
INT 800	0.049	0.008	0.769	5.765	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.591			
Adjusted R ²				0.573			
F				F (1,23)=33.235	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.891			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Xianjiao block 1984							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-28.301	4.77	-	-5.934	0.000**	-	-
INT N	0.015	0.002	0.822	7.63	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.675			
Adjusted R ²				0.664			
F				F (1,28)=58.222	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.37			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Zhongshan block 1984							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-13.804	2.305	-	-5.989	0.000**	-	-
INT 4800	0.015	0.002	0.857	7.992	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.735			
Adjusted R ²				0.724			
F				F (1,23)=63.872	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.635			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Anshandao block 2014							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	0.696	0.202	-	3.45	0.002**	-	-
NAIN 1600	0.751	0.124	0.754	6.075	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.569			
Adjusted R ²				0.553			
F				F (1,28)=36.901	p=0.000		
D-W Value				2.183			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Jiefanghe block 2014							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	0.238	0.337	-	0.704	0.487	-	-
NAIN 1600	0.774	0.202	0.587	3.833	0.001**	1	1
R ²				0.344			
Adjusted R ²				0.321			
F				F (1,28)=14.688	p=0.001		
D-W Value				0.675			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Xianjiao block 2014							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	0.177	0.245	-	0.722	0.476	-	-
NAIN 1600	1.095	0.168	0.776	6.5	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.601			
Adjusted R ²				0.587			
F				F (1,28)=42.250	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.964			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Zhongshan block 2014							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-0.503	0.17	-	-2.953	0.006**	-	-
LOG CHO 800	0.586	0.043	0.931	13.474	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.866			
Adjusted R ²				0.862			
F				F (1,28)=181.551	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.666			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Anshandao block 2025							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-125.656	64.164	-	-1.958	0.06	-	-
NAIN 1600	151.824	37.555	0.607	4.043	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.369			
Adjusted R ²				0.346			
F				F (1,28)=16.344	p=0.000		
D-W Value				0.742			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Jiefanghe block 2025							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	-11.072	27.721	-	-0.399	0.693	-	-
INT 800	0.493	0.126	0.596	3.927	0.001**	1	1
R ²				0.355			
Adjusted R ²				0.332			
F				F (1,28)=15.418	p=0.001		
D-W Value				0.603			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Xianjiao block 2025							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	0.177	0.245	-	0.722	0.476	-	-
INT 4800	1.095	0.168	0.776	6.5	0.000**	1	1
R ²				0.601			
Adjusted R ²				0.587			
F				F (1,28)=42.250	p=0.000		
D-W Value				1.964			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							
Linear Regression Results - Zhongshan block 2025							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics
	B	Standard Error	Beta				VIF Tolerance
Constant	14.057	17.034	-	0.825	0.416	-	-
INT 1600	0.083	0.025	0.527	3.283	0.003**	1	1
R ²				0.278			
Adjusted R ²				0.252			
F				F (1,28)=10.780	p=0.003		
D-W Value				0.539			
Note: Dependent variable = Total commercial							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

Figure 5: Linear regression analysis between spatial parameters and commercial volume of the four blocks in 1984, 2014, and 2025 (Source: created by the authors).

6. PROTECTION AND GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES DRIVEN BY SPATIAL-FUNCTIONAL SYNERGY

6.1. Stabilizing Spatial Characteristics: The Supporting Role of Morphological Persistence in Social Culture

The analysis of morphological evolution from 1984 to 2025 reveals that the spatial structure of historical blocks, acting as an "implicit gene," has demonstrated significant morphological persistence amidst forty years of intense urbanization. The Jiefangbeilu block, leveraging the structural stability of its Western-style planning and high spatial parameter values, has provided a stable spatial carrier for the organic transformation of the area's historical functions into contemporary cultural creativity and high-end services. The Xinanjiao block has exhibited a "defensive resilience" characterized by fluctuating average values but stable peak values. Through its solid grid-based foundation, it has preserved the spatial continuity of traditional Chinese anchors of daily life despite the impact of rapid urban motorization. The Anshandao block has achieved scalar resilience across micro-pedestrian and meso-circulation levels by utilizing the balanced growth of multi-scale parameters. In contrast, the temporal fluctuations in the spatial parameters of the Zhongshanlu block suggest its structural vulnerability when facing large-scale urban renewal. This research demonstrates that the persistence of these morphological genes is not a form of stagnation; rather, it constitutes the underlying logic through which each block maintains its specific cultural identity.

6.2. Driving Functional Adaptation: The Dynamic Balance between Commercial Distribution and Cultural Characteristics

The spatiotemporal differentiation of commercial vitality reflects a "filtering effect" exerted by varying spatial fabrics on modern business sectors, which in turn shapes diversified modes of cultural production. The Xinanjiao block and the Anshandao block, leveraging their highly connected micro-alleys, demonstrate superior carrying resilience compared to radial or large-grid structures. The "finger-like penetration" of their catering and retail sectors successfully adapts to high-frequency contemporary consumption practices, thereby preventing the "cultural hollowization" often seen in traditional blocks. In contrast, the Jiefangbeilu block utilizes its low-permeability, urban-scale block characteristics to exhibit a form of structural exclusivity. This attractively fosters a low-frequency coupling with specific cultural tourism and high-end service sectors, maintaining its qualitative character as a space for high-level professional services and specialized cultural exhibition. Such an automated "space-function" adaptation mechanism serves as the core impetus for sustaining the cultural vitality of historical blocks.

6.3. Scale Correlation Mechanism: Environmental Evolution under the Guidance of Spatial Logic

Through a deep deconstruction of the correlation and regression models for each block, the regulatory influence of spatial laws over social culture demonstrates clear scalar differentiation, following a logic of "micro-neighborhood dependency—meso-flow driving—multi-scale structural correlation." The sustained high goodness of fit for the Xinanjiao block under urban-scale integration ($R=4800m$) proves that the traditional Chinese fabric maintains potent spatial control while integrating into the transformation of

modern urban energy levels. The robust goodness of fit ($R^2=0.866$) for the Zhongshanlu block during the expansion period, dominated by through-movement potential (Choice), underscores its instrumental attribute as a high-traversal space. Concession blocks such as the Jiefangbeilu block rely more on cross-district flows at the mesoscale to activate their value, while the Anshandao block achieves a dynamic balance between local life identity and urban commercial functions through steady driving at the neighborhood scale ($R=1600m$). This multi-scale correlation reveals that space, acting as a "social logic," presets the evolutionary path of historical environments from physical morphology to social function through precise parametric control.

6.4. Classified Governance Strategies for Heterogeneous Historical Blocks from the Perspective of Resilient Growth

Based on the heterogeneous characteristics of the spatial evolution across the sample blocks, governance strategies should shift from "visual surface restoration" toward "precise typological guidance" rooted in spatial logic. For areas such as the Xinanjiao block and the Anshandao block, which possess high social correlation and micro-scale resilience, the primary task is to maintain their underlying morphological genes. The consolidation or widening of traditional small-scale alleys must be strictly controlled. By preserving a high density of spatial granularity, these blocks can continue to serve as irreplaceable "structural containers" for neighborhood identity and intangible socio-cultural practices. Furthermore, policy support should be implemented to protect livelihood-oriented micro-businesses, thereby preventing cultural hollowization through the structural authenticity of commercial sectors. For specialized functional zones with high structural stability like the Jiefangbeilu block, their urban-scale, low-permeability configurational exclusivity should be utilized to attract high-end cultural exhibitions and specialized service sectors. This enables the organic continuity of the area's unique cultural value through the adaptation of "function-configuration." Finally, for "flow-hub" spaces driven by through-movement potential such as the Zhongshanlu block, their efficient cross-district accessibility should be leveraged. Public cultural installations should be precisely placed at the identified "structural cores" of high integration, thereby transforming high-frequency commercial circulation into opportunities for high-quality social contact. Through this dynamic coupling of road network skeletons and functional sectors, governors can effectively reshape the community cohesion of different block types, achieving a value leap from "physical spatial laws" to the "production of cultural identity" within the modern urban context.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1. Research Findings: Evolutionary Logic and Governance Paradigms Driven by Spatial Genes

Through a longitudinal quantitative analysis of Tianjin's historical blocks from 1984 to 2025, this study derives the following core findings. First, the morphological persistence of spatial structures constitutes the foundational support for the evolution of historical blocks. Measurements of road network topology reveal that despite the intense urbanization process, the core spatial characteristics of Tianjin's historical blocks—such as the grid iron of the old walled city and the regular grids of the former concessions—demonstrate remarkable stability. The continuity of these forms provides an irreplaceable spatial substrate for preserving the characteristics of the historical environment. Second, the evolution of commercial vitality follows a logical shift from local neighborhood services toward the integration of urban energy levels. As urban capacity enhances, the commercial layout logic of historical blocks has shifted from a dependency on micro-pedestrian scales in 1984 to an adaptation to meso- and macro-scale urban spatial flow potentials in 2025. Notably, the Xinanjiao block and the Anshandao block demonstrate structural resilience in transitioning toward city-level functional nodes while simultaneously securing daily community services. Third, spatial configuration exerts a regulatory and differentiating effect on functional evolution. Correlation and regression analyses confirm that different spatial fabrics preset divergent paths for commercial practices. Traditional fabrics with fine-grained alleys and high connectivity attract high-frequency daily consumption that extends deep into the block interior. Conversely, large-scale regular grids tend to attract clusters of high-level professional services, achieving a differentiated synergy between space and function. Finally, based on the aforementioned spatial logic, this study proposes classified governance strategies for historical blocks. It is suggested that for traditional fabric areas with high social correlation (such as Xinanjiao), community identity and livelihood-oriented businesses should be maintained by preserving the density of the spatial fabric. For specialized areas with high structural stability (such as Jiefangbeilu), high-value-added sectors should be encouraged through the precise matching of function and configuration, thereby achieving a leap from physical spatial analysis to the construction of cultural values within the modern urban context.

7.2. Research Limitations and Future Outlook

Although this study utilizes spatial syntax to quantitatively reveal the long-term evolutionary patterns of historical blocks, certain limitations remain. First, due to constraints in acquiring early historical data, the granularity of POI data from 1984 differs from contemporary big data; while calibrations were made through homogenization and smoothing, there is still room for optimization at the micro-level of business sub-sectors. Second, this study focuses on the physical regulatory power of road network topological structures, with insufficient quantitative inclusion of non-material intervention factors such as policy orientation and

property rights complexity. Future research could attempt to introduce multi-source urban sensing data, such as street-view image recognition and social media spatiotemporal trajectories, to further analyze the interaction mechanisms between spatial structure, individual perception, and social behavior. Simultaneously, the "space-function-culture" collaborative analytical framework constructed in this paper could be applied to historical cities with different cultural backgrounds and morphological characteristics. Through horizontal comparisons of larger sample sizes, a more universal theoretical model for the sustainable regeneration of historical environments can be refined.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

THE IMPACT OF REVITALIZATION ON THE VIBRANCY OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS: THE CASE OF HEFEI CITY GOD TEMPLE DISTRICT

Zhou Limao

THE IMPACT OF REVITALIZATION ON THE VIBRANCY OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS: THE CASE OF HEFEI CITY GOD TEMPLE DISTRICT



This paper examines how revitalization affects the vibrancy of historic districts through the case of Hefei City God Temple District. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, it combines GIS mapping, stakeholder questionnaires and interviews, Dianping review mining, archival evidence, and comparisons with Shanghai City God Temple, Xi'an City God Temple, and Nanjing Confucius Temple. The findings show that physical renewal improved safety, accessibility, and visual order, but also weakened informal social life, displaced traditional commerce, and simplified cultural representation. The paper argues for context-sensitive revitalization that balances material upgrading with intangible heritage and everyday use.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late twentieth century, the conservation of historic environments has expanded from the preservation of individual monuments to the management of larger urban districts and their everyday settings. In China, this shift took shape later than in many Western contexts, partly because rapid urbanization and property-led redevelopment made old-city land both vulnerable and attractive. The result has been a practical tension: many historic districts are now renovated in order to protect recognizable heritage fabric, yet the upgrading process can also produce cleaner, quieter, and less distinctive places.¹

This paper uses the term historic district to refer to an area with a clearly identifiable historical scope, relatively intact structure and style, and a need for protection and control.² It understands revitalization not as a narrow process of facade repair, but as a multi-sided effort that can include restoration, modernization, functional reorganization, cultural activation, and social or economic renewal.³ Vibrancy is treated as the visible and experiential result of this process. It includes pedestrian activity and public space use, but also the cultural practices, commercial routines, and social relationships that make an urban district feel alive.⁴

The Hefei City God Temple District is a useful case because it combines several roles that are often separated in heritage policy: it is a religious and architectural landmark, a long-standing commercial area, a site of local memory, and a daily urban destination. The district lies in the core of Luyang District's old urban area and is bounded by Anqing Road, Huaihe Road, Huoqiu Road, Lu'an Road, and Mengcheng Road, covering approximately eighteen hectares (Figure 1). It contains the Luzhou City God Temple, Sihui Tower, market buildings, commercial streets, and nearby residential areas. These layers make the district a compact laboratory for examining how revitalization reshapes the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of historic urban life.⁵

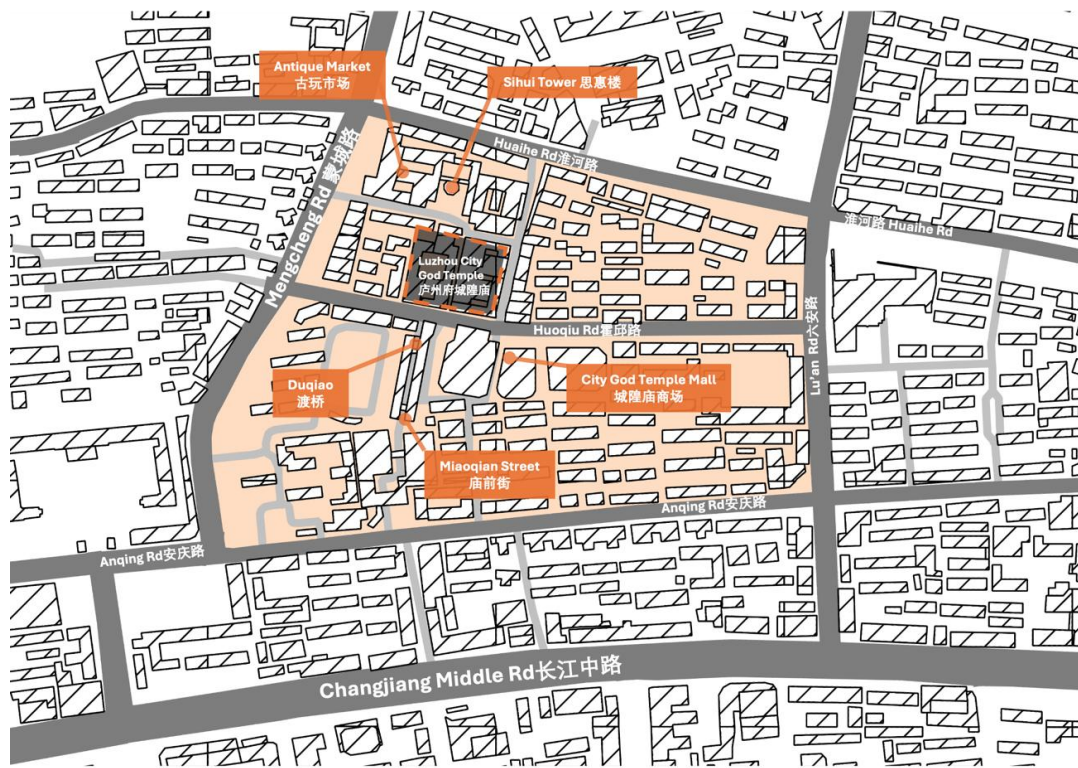


Figure 1: Research scope of the Hefei City God Temple District in Luyang District (Source: Author).

Before revitalization, the district was remembered by many local respondents as noisy, crowded, affordable, and commercially specialized. After revitalization, it became cleaner, better paved, more visually ordered, and more legible as a tourist destination. The central question is therefore not whether revitalization improved the district in a general sense, but how it redistributed vibrancy among different groups and practices. The paper asks how cultural, social, and economic dimensions can be integrated into an assessment of vibrancy; which evidence and indicators are useful for evaluating revitalization; and how residents, tourists, and workers perceive the changing life of the Hefei City God Temple District.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

The research adopts a three-dimensional framework that links cultural, social, and economic vibrancy (Figure 2). Cultural vibrancy refers to the conservation of historic fabric, the continuity of cultural activities, and the representation of local identity. Social vibrancy refers to public space use, informal and formal interaction, and perceptions of liveliness. Economic vibrancy refers to commercial diversity, consumption, income stability, and the spatial distribution of business activity. The framework intentionally combines measurable

indicators with lived experience because revitalization outcomes are rarely captured by either spatial metrics or interviews alone.

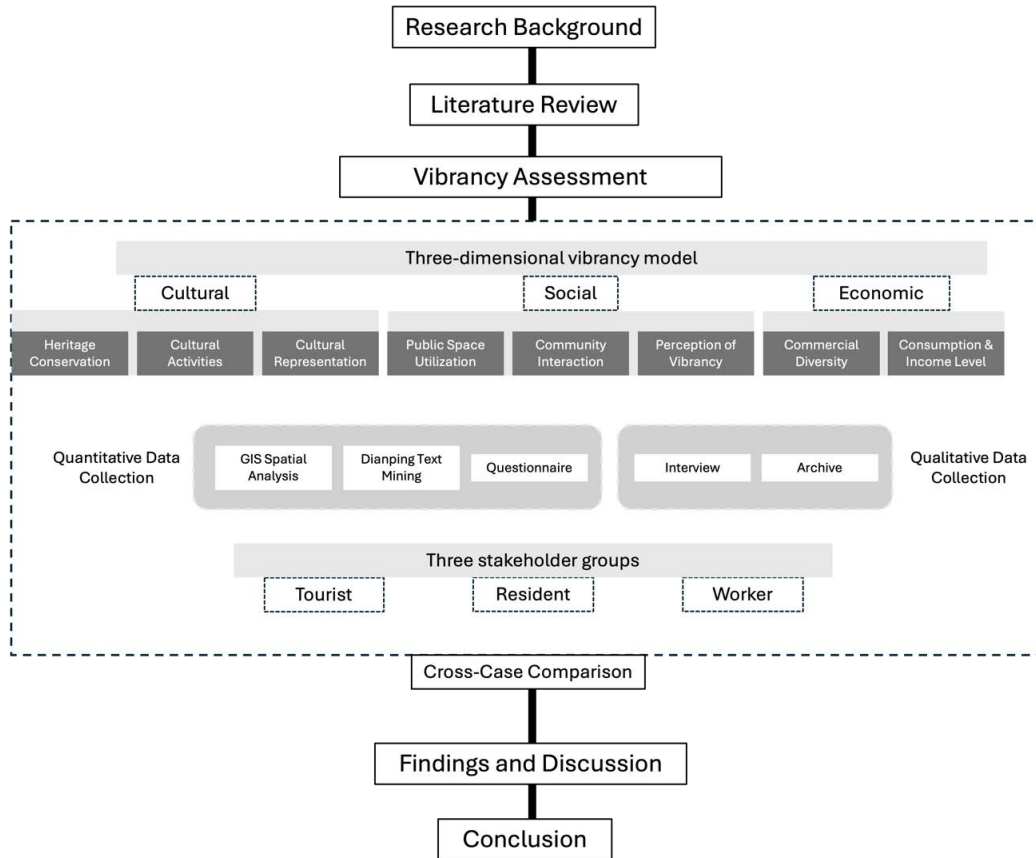


Figure 2: Conceptual framework linking research background, literature review, vibrancy assessment, and cross-case comparison (Source: Author).

The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis first identifies broad patterns in district change, while qualitative evidence then explains the mechanisms behind those patterns. Spatial data were collected with QGIS and Baidu Maps API to map road network density and points of interest before and after revitalization. Questionnaire data were collected from more than eighty respondents, stratified among residents, tourists, and workers. Semi-structured interviews with ten participants provided narratives of changing routines, memories, and business conditions. Dianping review data from before 2016 and after 2024 were mined to assess changing cultural representation. Historical images, policy documents, and field observations were used to cross-check the findings.⁶

Table 1 summarizes the indicators. The model draws on recent vibrancy studies that measure social integration, public space performance, street-level activity, and multi-source spatial data.^{7, 8} However, the

Hefei case required a modification of standard urban vibrancy methods. In a historic district, vibrancy cannot be reduced to density, mobility, or consumption. A district may become more accessible while becoming less socially open; it may attract more visitors while losing the crafts, services, and religious or festive practices that gave it local meaning. The assessment therefore reads quantitative change and stakeholder perception together.

DIMENSION	SUB-DIMENSION	INDICATOR	MEASUREMENT SOURCE/METHOD
CULTURAL	Heritage Conservation	Change in number/condition of historic buildings	Archive data, questionnaire
	Cultural Activities	Frequency of cultural events	Archive data, questionnaire
	Cultural Representation	Volume on social media (Dianping)	NLP analysis, interview
SOCIAL	Public Space Utilization	Road network density and pedestrian flow in public spaces	GIS heatmap analysis, field observation, historic photos
	Community Interaction	Frequency of neighbor interactions	Questionnaire
	Perception of Vibrancy	Perceived vibrancy	Questionnaire
ECONOMIC	Commercial Vibrancy	POI density	POI Data, GIS spatial analysis
		Consumption level	Questionnaire, Interview
		Income level	Questionnaire, employer interviews

Table 1: Variables of the three-dimensional vibrancy assessment model (Source: Author).

The research has three limitations. First, pre-revitalization data are incomplete, especially for points of interest and pedestrian activity around 2014. Second, the tourist questionnaire relied partly on convenience sampling, which may overrepresent younger and more digitally connected visitors. Third, Dianping reviews reflect only platform users and therefore underrepresent older residents and non-consumers. These limits are addressed through triangulation, but they also point to the need for long-term monitoring of historic districts before, during, and after revitalization.

3. FINDINGS: UNEVEN VIBRANCY AFTER REVITALIZATION

The first finding is that physical conservation was more successful than cultural transmission. The Luzhou City God Temple is the only legally protected heritage building in the district. It was designated as a municipal key cultural relic in 1985 and as a provincial key cultural relic in 2012. Revitalization restored and repurposed parts of the temple complex, including exhibition spaces, the ancient opera stage, side chambers, and visual elements designed to strengthen heritage identity. These interventions improved the recognizability of the temple and made the district more legible for occasional visitors.

Questionnaire responses show that this improvement was unevenly perceived. Among occasional tourists, 40.82 percent rated conservation outcomes as good and 55.10 percent as average, while only 4.08 percent rated them as poor. Regular tourists were generally more positive. Workers, however, were more divided: 66.67 percent of daily workers considered the conservation effect poor, while occasional workers were more moderate. Residents gave the most favorable evaluations. This pattern suggests that the perceived success of conservation depends on the user's relationship to the district. Occasional visitors recognize visual order; daily workers compare the renovated district to a richer former commercial ecosystem (Figure 3).

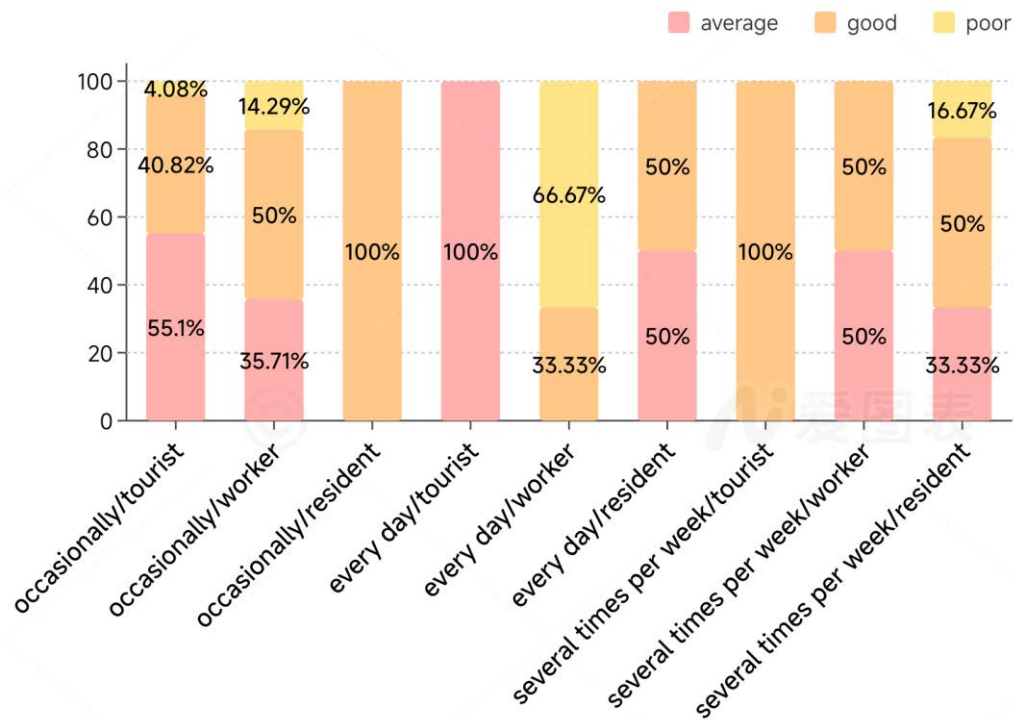


Figure 3: Perceptions of heritage conservation effectiveness across stakeholder groups (Source: Author).

Interviews explain the gap. Many tourists spent most of their time on Miaoqian Street and in commercial areas rather than in the core temple precinct. Several respondents recognized that the district looked more traditional, but they had little knowledge of the specific heritage value of the buildings. One expert respondent criticized the use of generalized Huizhou-style architectural elements, arguing that they did not fully represent Hefei's own Luzhou traditions. The result is a symbolic heritage landscape that is visually coherent but culturally thin. International heritage charters have long emphasized that heritage value includes setting, continuity, and authenticity, not simply monument repair.⁹

Cultural activities also expanded but became less distinctive. Before revitalization, the Spring Festival temple fair and the Weekend Stage were the most important recurring events. After revitalization, the activity calendar grew to include Qixi Festival events, Mid-Autumn programs, night markets, intangible cultural heritage products, and cross-regional performances. This increased opportunities for public participation, especially during holidays. Questionnaire data show that 60.38 percent of tourists, 63.16 percent of workers, and 71.43 percent of residents participated occasionally in cultural activities; 24.53 percent of tourists and 21.05 percent of workers reported never participating. Residents were the most engaged group.

Yet expansion did not automatically create deeper cultural vibrancy. Most interviewees associated cultural participation almost exclusively with the Spring Festival temple fair. Several cited inconvenient timing, parking problems, competition from other entertainment districts, and weak official communication as barriers to participation. All interviewees learned about events through social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu or Douyin rather than through district-level channels. The cultural program therefore reached users episodically, but it did not consistently anchor daily cultural life.

Dianping review mining confirms this shift in representation. Before revitalization, review terms were dominated by market language: wholesale market, bargaining, small goods, snacks, crowded conditions, and shabby buildings. After revitalization, reviews more frequently mentioned Huizhou-style architecture, photographs, Spring Festival atmosphere, New Year ambiance, and ancient atmosphere. The change indicates a move from everyday commercial memory toward staged heritage imagery (Figure 4). While this improves tourist legibility, it also risks flattening the district into a generic photo-worthy historic street.



Figure 4: Dianping review word clouds before and after revitalization, showing a shift from market terms to heritage and image-making terms (Source: Author).

The second finding concerns social vibrancy. Infrastructure upgrades made the district safer, cleaner, and easier to navigate. Huoqiu Road was repaved, illegal parking was reduced, street vending was removed, and signage was standardized. These interventions improved the formal quality of public space. Residents especially valued the changes, and 64.29 percent reported a significant increase in interaction with neighbors, often because improved lighting and traffic management made evening walks more comfortable.

However, the same spatial regularization reduced informal public life. Historic image comparison and field observation show that street vendors, temporary seating, and dense pedestrian clusters once created a strong but messy social atmosphere. After revitalization, wider and cleaner passages often appeared less socially occupied (Figure 5). Workers and long-term visitors repeatedly described a loss of spontaneous conversations, chance encounters, and low-cost services. A tailor who had moved from a street stall to a rented shop explained that the new arrangement reduced daily contact with old customers. The issue is not that order is undesirable; rather, excessive order can remove the small frictions and informal practices through which public life is produced.

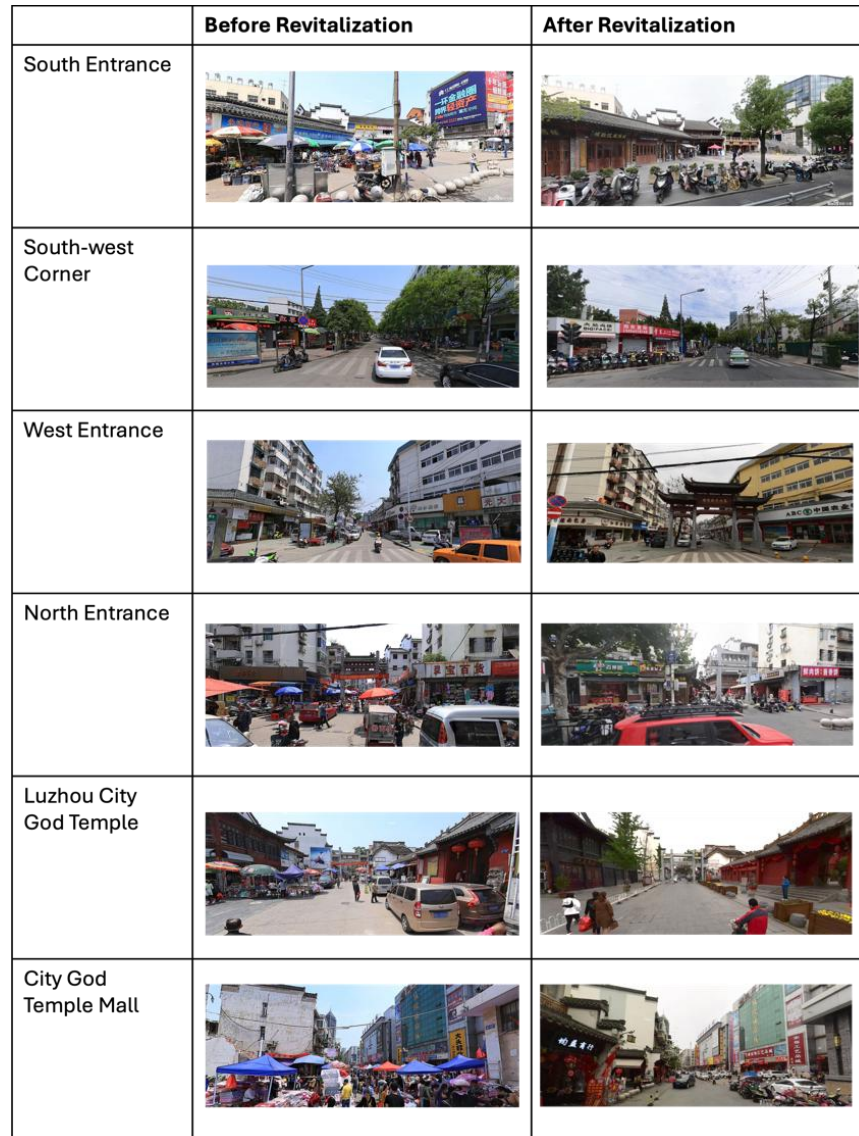


Figure 5: Historical image comparison of main entrances and exits, showing the loss of informal street occupation after revitalization (Source: Baidu Street View).

The perception data capture this trade-off. Among tourists, 58.49 percent felt the district had become quieter; among workers, 47.37 percent reported the same. Residents were more conservative: 57.14 percent reported no difference, and only 21.43 percent considered the district either quieter or livelier. These differences reflect user priorities. Residents valued safety and cleanliness. Workers and frequent visitors were more sensitive to lost foot traffic and the disappearance of informal commercial activity. The same physical intervention therefore produced a social gain for one group and a social loss for another.

The third finding concerns economic vibrancy. POI mapping shows that commercial activity became more

evenly distributed after revitalization. In 2014, activity was concentrated in Miaoqian Street and major intersections. By 2025, the distribution spread toward shopping malls and previously underused areas, while Miaoqian Street and the temple area remained important hubs (Figure 6). On paper, this indicates a broader commercial geography and an improved ability to disperse visitors.

Stakeholder perceptions of commercial diversity were nevertheless mixed. Occasional tourists and occasional residents generally evaluated business diversity positively, while daily workers were more critical. Among daily workers, 66.67 percent considered business types limited and 33.33 percent rated them as average. Interviews identified three recurring problems: homogenization around clothing, festival goods, and low-end retail; the decline of specialized markets such as antiques and stationery; and underused space, including vacant shops on Miaodong Street and Huoqiu Road. Commercial activity was redistributed, but its distinctiveness weakened (Figure 7).

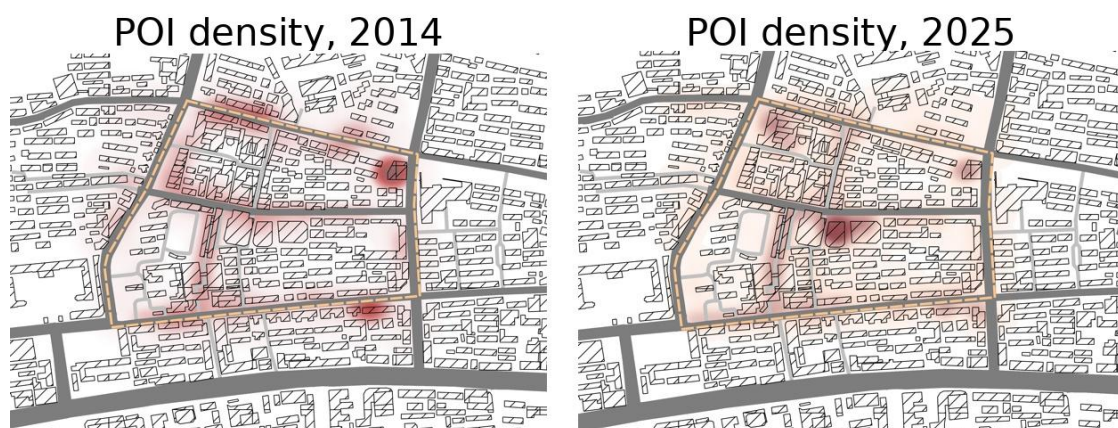


Figure 6: POI density in 2014 and 2025, showing the redistribution of commercial activity after revitalization. (Source: Author).

Consumption and income data reinforce the unevenness. Among visitors, 43.40 percent reported spending more after revitalization, 33.96 percent spent about the same, and 22.64 percent spent less. Among workers, 68.42 percent reported no income change, 16.32 percent reported higher income, and 15.26 percent reported lower income. These findings suggest that revitalization did not produce a simple economic boom or decline. Instead, it created stratification. Established businesses with stable premises adapted more easily, while tenants faced higher rents, online competition, and weaker repeat visitation. The district gained a more polished retail environment but lost part of the specialized economy that once differentiated it from other commercial streets.

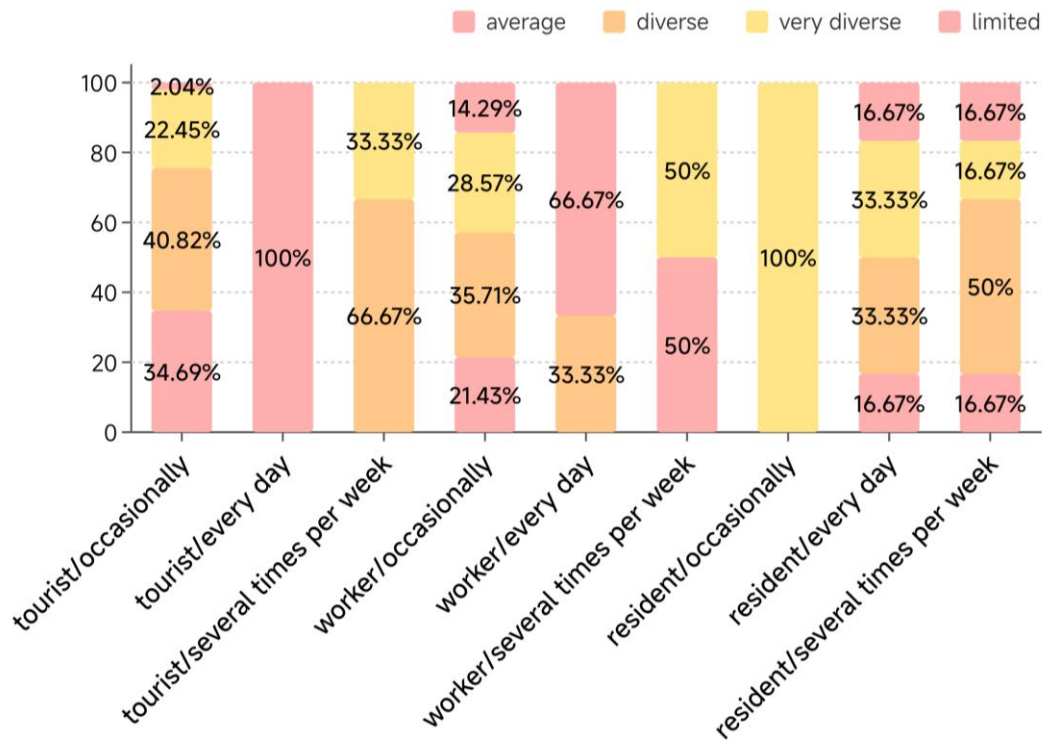


Figure 7: Perceptions of commercial diversity across stakeholder groups and visiting frequencies (Source: Author).

4. DISCUSSION: WHY HARDWARE UPGRADES CAN ERODE VIBRANCY

The Hefei case reveals a paradox common in historic district revitalization: the interventions that solve visible physical problems can also weaken the less visible sources of vibrancy. Infrastructure repair, facade control, traffic management, and standardized signage are necessary when districts suffer from congestion, safety risks, and physical decay. Yet these interventions can unintentionally reduce informal contact, displace affordable services, and replace layered local identity with a simplified design language. In Hefei, the outcome is not failure, but imbalance.

Culturally, the district demonstrates partial success in tangible conservation but weaker success in intangible continuity. The opera stage, temple buildings, and renovated facades have become more recognizable, while local cultural practices and specialized commercial traditions have become more fragile. Socially, the project improved safety and formal interaction for residents, but it reduced spontaneous social life for workers and frequent visitors. Economically, business activity spread more evenly, but rising rents and homogenized retail undermined long-term distinctiveness. These findings challenge the assumption that physical upgrading automatically generates cultural, social, and economic vitality.¹²

The cross-case comparison helps explain why. Nanjing Confucius Temple suggests that a culture-led model can sustain long-term vibrancy when heritage interpretation, traditional brands, festivals, small businesses, and public space are coordinated. Shanghai City God Temple shows the advantages and risks of market-driven revitalization: high tourist revenue and strong visual branding can coexist with resident displacement, rent pressure, and a sense of over-commercialization.¹⁰ Xi'an Capital City God Temple offers a contrasting model in which religious continuity and community participation preserve authenticity, although they may limit commercial diversification.¹¹

These cases indicate that no single model should be transferred wholesale. Hefei's challenge is not to become Shanghai, Nanjing, or Xi'an, but to identify which parts of its own identity are non-substitutable. Its value lies in the combination of Luzhou-style memory, temple culture, affordable markets, daily services, and centrally located public space. If revitalization privileges only one of these layers, especially photogenic heritage or tourist consumption, the district will remain recognizable but lose depth.

A second implication concerns policy and practice. Chinese revitalization projects often evaluate success through visible and quantifiable outputs: restored facades, upgraded paving, traffic order, visitor numbers, and new business types. These indicators are important, but they do not measure whether old social relationships survive, whether workers can afford to remain, or whether cultural events are meaningful beyond holiday spectacle. Public satisfaction studies and social sustainability research suggest that the public's experience of renewal should be built into evaluation rather than treated as a post-project reaction.¹³

For Hefei, a more balanced approach would use design regulation selectively. Street vending and informal seating should not simply be banned or romanticized; they should be managed through time, location, hygiene, and safety rules that allow everyday social exchange to continue. Traditional crafts and specialized markets should be subsidized or protected from rent escalation, not because every old business is automatically valuable, but because the district's economic identity depends on more than generic retail. Cultural programming should combine festival-scale activities with smaller, regular events rooted in Luzhou opera, local foods, temple rituals, and neighborhood memory.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the impact of revitalization on the vibrancy of the Hefei City God Temple District across cultural, social, and economic dimensions. The research shows that revitalization improved the district's physical environment, visual order, and perceived safety, but produced uneven results for the

everyday practices that make a historic district lively. Cultural vibrancy was strengthened through architectural restoration and event expansion, yet weakened through homogenized representation and the decline of traditional commercial culture. Social vibrancy improved for residents who valued safety and cleanliness, but declined for workers and frequent visitors who depended on informal public space. Economic vibrancy spread spatially, but it became less distinctive and more vulnerable to rent pressure.

The central lesson is that a vibrant historic district is not a finished image. It is a living arrangement among buildings, businesses, rituals, memories, and everyday users. Revitalization therefore should not be judged only by the quality of repaired surfaces or the number of new attractions. It should be assessed by whether cultural authenticity, social cohesion, and economic inclusiveness can survive the transition from old urban disorder to managed heritage space.

Several practical principles follow. First, intangible cultural heritage should be treated as infrastructure, not decoration. Regular support for local opera, crafts, traditional food, temple-related practices, and community-led events would give the district a cultural rhythm beyond seasonal festivals. Second, urban design should preserve controlled spontaneity by making room for seating, shade, small vending, and low-cost social use. Third, governance should include residents, workers, religious stakeholders, and small businesses before and after construction, especially when rent, stall relocation, and event programming are decided. Fourth, economic management should protect locally distinctive enterprises through rent regulation, targeted subsidies, or phased leasing policies. Finally, the district should establish long-term monitoring of foot traffic, POI change, business turnover, social media perception, and stakeholder satisfaction.

The Hefei case contributes to broader debates on historic district renewal by showing that hardware upgrading and vibrancy are not the same thing. Physical repair is essential, but it is only the beginning. The future of historic districts depends on whether revitalization can translate tradition without replacing it, and whether old-city life can remain adaptable, ordinary, and shared.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

FROM RAIL TO TRAIL: URBAN REGENERATION, INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE, AND THE DILEMMAS OF TRANSLATING THE TRADITION IN CHICAGO 606 TRAIL

Zixuan Zheng

FROM RAIL TO TRAIL: URBAN REGENERATION, INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE, AND THE DILEMMAS OF TRANSLATING THE TRADITION IN CHICAGO 606 TRAIL



This paper analyzes Chicago's 606 Trail as a critical case of translating industrial infrastructure into contemporary urban redevelopment. Formerly known as the Bloomingdale Line, this railway was a nineteenth-century elevated freight viaduct that supported Chicago's manufacturing and logistics economy by connecting the Clybourn industrial zone (on the North Branch of the Chicago River) to the Midwest suburbs of Chicago. The line ceased operations in 2001 and was acquired by the City of Chicago in 2013 as part of a broader national movement to repurpose disused rail corridors. The 606 Trail exemplifies how industrial traditions—rail-freight infrastructure, viaduct construction, linear mobility corridors, and working-class cultural diversities—are selectively translated by urban planners, community activists, and landscape architects through the repurposed design guidelines and planning strategies. These processes materialized in both preserved urban morphology and industrial cultural heritage, producing a renewed city infrastructure that maintains the existing urban texture of Chicago's massively constructed railroad corridors, while interpreting the use of new life of a public space in the historical industrial corridor.

Methodologically, the study draws on archival planning documents, historical drawings and maps, and university study reports to demonstrate the prolonged impact of the 606 Trail on the adjacent neighborhoods. The review metrics include property values, median housing incomes, demographic variations, and housing price changes. The paper also examines the accessibility equities after the urban regeneration process. The number of trail entrances, public transportation, commercial businesses, and public amenities of the trail will be evaluated to determine the impact of the translation of a traditional rail industrial zone.

Findings show that the 606 preserves viaducts, bridges, and elevated structures as legible reminders of the industrial corridor, while simultaneously reframing them through arboretum planting, multi-modal circulation, and recreational programming. Yet the special and social outcomes are uneven. Geographically, the resource and park management are distributed unevenly. More urban infrastructure, businesses, and activities are located on the east side of the trail, whereas the west side is often used as an extension path from the east. Socially, the regeneration pressures intensify most sharply within the immediate edges of the corridor, contributing to rapid property appreciation, tenure shifts, and heightened displacement vulnerability in adjacent neighborhoods, particularly among renters and long-term minority communities.

The paper highlights the improvements of the reuse of existing railroads and their distinctive translation of city history. Yet on the other hand, the rising problems of the trail development demonstrate the potential harm and damage of "environmental gentrification", whereas the geographical and ethical challenges of translating industrial landscapes into public infrastructure. Such a challenge exposes the tensions between heritage-informed design practices and the uneven realities of urban change.

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II era (1945 and forward) brought significant transformations from urban structure to transportation systems in the United States (U.S.). The legislation of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 promotes the automobile industry and the construction of interstate highways, and it reaches its peak in the 1960s.¹ With such a transportation model shift from the entire society, the railroad system—the spine of logistics transportation and passenger transport in its heyday of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—inevitably declined. The structure of the railroad lines, however, still exists in the urban

area and largely shaped the city's early morphology when it originally formed. These unused tracks become vacant, rotted, and unwelcoming for a period when the city expands into the outskirt area.

In recent decades, as urban regeneration and adaptive reuse have emerged as design strategies to cope with the issues that emerge from the deterioration of the urban core, the redevelopment projects of abandoned rail corridors have received more attention both in academia and in practice. Rather than treating these remnants as obsolete, such projects reinterpret the original linear texture of the rail lines as a form of contemporary urban space. Transforming the rail to trail becomes the new norm, as such projects do not require massive land acquisition, maintain the original city texture, and provide more public space to residents.² This process can be understood as a translation of traditional urban form, in which the historic logic of connectivity, continuity, and movement inherent in rail infrastructure is rearticulated into pedestrian-oriented green corridors. By preserving the spatial continuity of the rail alignment while introducing landscape interventions, these projects transform formerly inaccessible and mono-functional spaces into active public realms for recreation, mobility, and social interaction. The integration of green space not only improves environmental performance but also re-establishes a human-scaled spatial experience, juxtaposing qualities associated with ecological urbanism. Among these projects in the U.S., leading projects include the BeltLine (2008) in Atlanta, High Line Park (2009) in New York, and Bloomingdale Trail ("The 606 Trail," 2015) in Chicago, which demonstrate how the translation of inherited infrastructural forms can generate new public space, reinforcing both urban identity and ecological resilience in contemporary cities.³

The new paradigm of Rail-to-Trail is off to a successful start, and both communities and residents enjoy this enhanced green space and additional activity area within the urban core. The city planning department is also leaning on this model of revitalization, as community-led and private investment reduces its pressure to advocate public wealth. The model of this new paradigm of understanding urban design looks ideal, however, the scale of living equity and mobility justice starts to lean towards the privileged side rather than the other. One of the significant and most direct impacts is the housing gentrification issue. The rocketing value of the housing market not only drives up sales prices but also increases tenants' rents. More families and individuals are forced to relocate or move out permanently to mitigate their living costs. It is not a unique phenomenon but a national issue in American cities.⁴

Thus, this paper takes the 606 Trail as an example to examine the prolonged impacts. By reviewing its past as a freight rail corridor to its current life as a walkable green belt, the paper acknowledges the importance of tradition and cultural inheritance that the 606 Trail brings to the city of Chicago, while revealing the challenges of social issues that such regeneration progress could harm the city in the long-term perspective.

2. BLOOMINGDALE LINE: ITS PAST, ITS LIFE, AND ITS BOND TO COMMUNITIES

2.1. History of the Bloomingdale Line and Chicago Rail System

The city of Chicago plays a crucial role in shaping its spatial and social structure through the railway and highway networks. In the nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of railroad construction positioned Chicago as a central hub for commodity transportation. As multiple rail lines converged in the city, Chicago emerged as the primary industrial and logistical center of the U.S., facilitating the movement of goods, raw materials, and labor across regions.⁵ Factories, warehouses, and stockyards were strategically located adjacent to railway corridors to maximize efficiency in production and distribution, reinforcing the economic boost of Chicago, which was later recognized as the “Third Coast” in the U.S.⁶ This extensive rail infrastructure established a distinctly linear and corridor-based industrial belt, and its morphology still can be witnessed in the current city morphology—a dense metropolis with rigid orthogonal street grid integrate with radiant railway corridors from the downtown core near the Lake Michigan. (Figure 1).

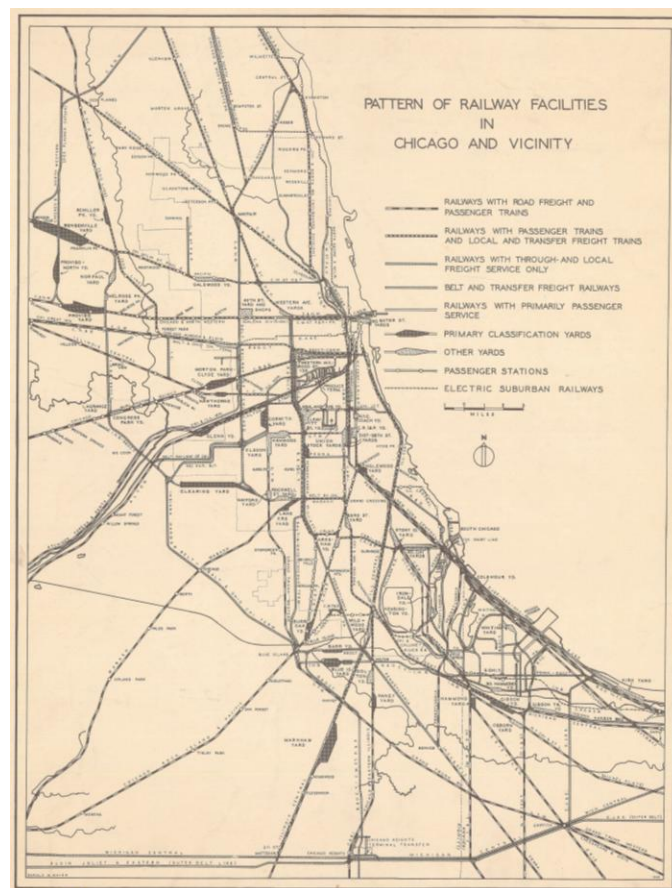


Figure 1: Harold M. Mayer. Pattern of Railway Facilities in Chicago and Vicinity, 1943. (Source: University of Chicago Library, accessed on April 05, 2026).

Over time, these railway corridors not only structured economic functions but also shaped patterns of spatial organization, contributing to the buildings in the industrial districts and working-class neighborhoods. The Bloomingdale Line, first constructed in the 1870s at ground level, was the last freight railroad that connected Chicago and Rock River as part of the Chicago and Pacific Railroad system.⁷ Soon, in 1880, the line was merged into the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railway (known as the Milwaukee Road), continuing its service from Chicago to the nation. However, the line became increasingly hazardous as urban density grew, leading to numerous accidents at street crossings. In response, a major grade-separation project in the early 1910s elevated the tracks onto an earthen embankment and steel viaduct, eliminating conflicts with road traffic and improving efficiency. More than 300,000 yards of concrete were used to build this approximately 13-mile retaining wall, including the 38 viaducts and 71 subways to avoid ground traffic.⁸ In 1914, according to the report from Engineering News, the road completed the key 2.4-mile-long elevation project, from Ashland Avenue to Lawndale Avenue (the latter 606 trail's location), which functioned as a vital industrial spine, directly serving adjacent factories, coal yards, and warehouses through a series of spur tracks⁹ (Figure 2).

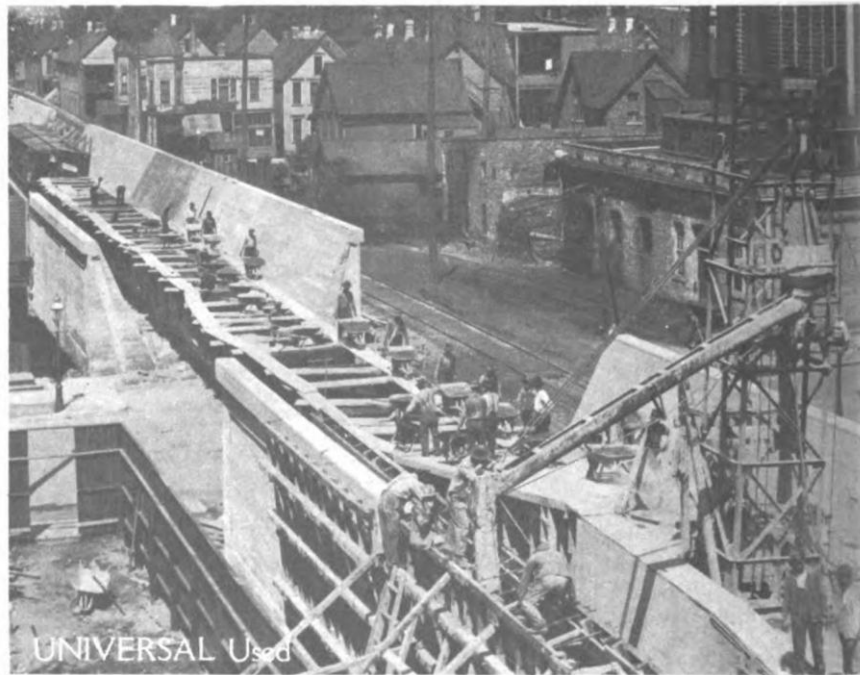


Figure 2: Construction Trian and Tower Elevator for Chuting Concrete, *Universal Bulletin*, August 1914, p. 144. (Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, accessed from HathiTrust Digital Library on April 10, 2026).

The impetus of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 (FHA) changed the logistics model in the U.S., particularly influencing the rail freight service. With the automobile thrive and the massive interstate highway construction, truck service on road graduate replaces the rail-based one. In addition, the expansion of the

urban area and the distribution of the global industrial chain also reduce the amount of freight commodities nationwide. Old railway corridors are decaying, lots of lines are stopping their service, and the warehouses, factories, and service amenities near the rail lines are gradually abandoned. By the 1970s and 1980s, traffic based on the railroad had significantly declined, while maintenance costs rose as infrastructure aged, and tons of rail freight companies encountered huge financial pressure. The Bloomingdale Line also suffered in this drastic transportation shift. Over the decades, the owner of this freight line changed several times, but none of the property owners changed this declining situation.¹⁰ The final owner of the Bloomingdale Line, the Canadian Pacific Railway, terminated the service in 2011 but continued using it as a parking yard to store freight cars. The termination of the rail use marks the end of the Bloomingdale Line's role as a logistics rail line, but the physical morphology remains.

2.2. Revitalizing the Bloomingdale Line and Public Access

After freight service on the Bloomingdale Line ceased in 2011, the corridor entered a period of vacancy that drew the attention of residents and planners. As early as the 1990s, there was discussion among the neighborhoods about converting the vacant rail line into a public trail. This idea formally came on the plan after the non-profit grassroots organization—Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail (FBT)—was founded in 2003.¹¹ The primary goal of FBT is advocating for the adaptation of the abandoned Bloomingdale railroad into a multi-functional, elevated linear park, which is also included in the Burnham Plan Centennial Green Legacy Project (2009), introducing more green space to the city of Chicago.¹² FBT's proposal aligns with the wider urban policy within the City of Chicago to expand green infrastructure and improve neighborhood connectivity on the Northwest Side. Beginning in 2004, the city initiated negotiations with the railroad owner. It secured federal support through programs such as railbanking, enabling the corridor to be preserved for interim public use while retaining its legal status as a transportation right-of-way.¹³ This process culminated in the city's acquisition of the line in phases by the late 2000s, followed by the development of formal planning documents—such as the Bloomingdale Trail Framework Plan—that proposed transforming the former industrial corridor into a continuous public open space, reflecting a shift from freight infrastructure to community-led urban redevelopment.¹⁴ (Figure 3) The ambition of this project is to reconnect the nearby four communities of Logan Square, Wicker Park, Bucktown, and Humboldt Park, and release the tension between the condensed urban residential districts and the shortage of natural access.¹⁵



Figure 3: The full-size proposed trail and park map from the Bloomingdale Trail and Park Framework Plan, 2015, pp. 118-119. (Source: The 606 Trail website, <https://www.the606.org/final-design-plans/the-framework-plan/>. Accessed in April 2026).

At the same time, the detailed design scheme was also going through during the land acquisition phase. Led by the City of Chicago, the project drew heavily on input gathered during the 2009 framework planning phase, which emphasized connectivity, accessibility, and neighborhood integration. The City of Chicago commissioned Ross Barney Architects' Framework Plan as the blueprint, and Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates led the landscape design, cooperating with Collins Engineering and other city agencies for this new trail and park.¹⁶ The framework plan developed a linear park with characteristic Midwest landscapes, paved recreational tracks, multi-functional spaces, and expanded platforms for additional leisure and activities.¹⁷ The sequence of access points enhances the ramp access and walkability through the involved communities. Instead of imposing a uniform design, the trail incorporates with the city and communities with different themes of exhibitions and activities to recall the connection with the old, historical industrial corridor to the new, civic public space.¹⁸ This rail-to-trail project not only transformed the abandoned infrastructure into a valued social space but also preserves the existing urban texture as a recognized rail-based city.

The former Bloomingdale Trail was officially rebranded as "The 606 Trail" in 2013 during the final stages of design. The name 606 was inspired by Chicago's zip code prefix (606xx), emphasizing that the trail connects multiple neighborhoods across the city.¹⁹ On June 6, 2015, this 2.7-mile-long trail opened to the public, announcing its adapted service from commercial to residential. It was highly documented on social media and architecture websites during the first opening, and the trail was heavily used by the citizens and tourists, as it was a new experience to live in the city of Chicago. A survey (Lindsey et al., 2019) pointed out that there was a decline in usage, around 11.9% from 2016 to 2018.²⁰ Yet, as the trail serves as a community park, it has become an important urban public space where residents can meet their needs and engage in everyday activities.

3. DISCUSSION

The trajectory of the Bloomingdale Line reveals that a former industrial heritage was rescued and transformed from the old freight corridor to the pedestrian green belt. The regeneration process not only preserves the existing urban texture of the rail line but also revitalizes the site as a new economic boost point in the urban area. Yet, as several news reports and investigations point out, the challenges in the surrounding neighborhoods still exist. To some extent, their current living conditions are even more pressing than before. It brings new questions that need to be addressed—the balance of living justice and urban growth, and how successful it has been in translating from history.

3.1. Revitalizing the Bloomingdale Line and Public Access

The photocopy of the acquisition of property document from the Office of the Chicago City Clerk in May 2012 (Fig. 4) demonstrated how the Bloomingdale Line was adopted by the city council. The Depiction of Real Property in the attachments illustrates the boundaries of the site, the square footage of the property, and the legal agreement for the land sale details.²¹ Although the city only pays a little to acquire the land, the total investment, including cleaning, designing, construction, and landscape design costs, is over \$95 million.²² Such massive investment triggers the housing pricing rise, juxtaposed with the broader gentrification issue citywide. In fact, the property value rise tied to the improvement of green space has been witnessed as the “Environmental Gentrification” (Checker, M. 2011) in the early 2010s.²³

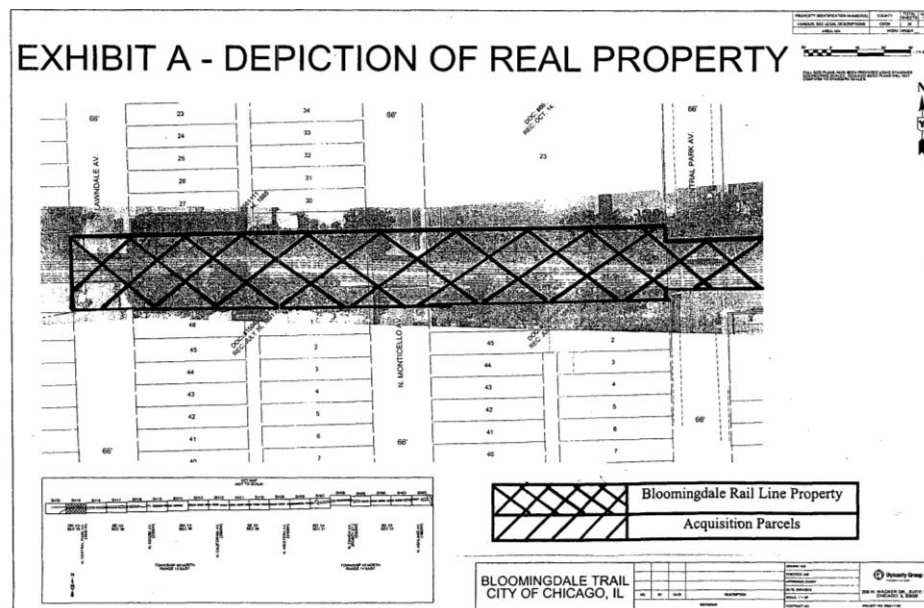


Figure 4: Excerpt page from the City Council Document Tracking Sheet showing the acquisition progress drawing sheet (Sheet 19 of 20) of the Bloomingdale Line. Office of the Chicago City Clerk, document number: O2012-3341, May 2012. (Source: Public domain, 2026).

For the residents who live near the 606 Trail, there was a large increase in both median rent and household price between 2010 and 2016, compared to the average price of the city.²⁴ While housing prices rise due to improvements in access to green space, an imbalance has also been found in the rate of increase between the west and east sides of Chicago (divided by Western Avenue). According to a report released by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University in 2016 (Tables 1 and 2), the west side of the trail was experiencing a more drastic increase in housing prices. The median household income was around \$50,000, whereas the median single-family sales price was almost \$450,000, and the poverty rate from 2010 to 2014 was 25.5 percent, more than five times the rate on the east side.²⁵

KEY DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC DATA (2010-2014)	WEST SIDE	EAST SIDE
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME	\$ 49,701	\$ 115,924
POVERTY RATE	25.5%	4.8%
RENTER SHARE	61.5%	41.5%

Table 1: Key Demographic and Socioeconomic Data from 2010-2014 (5-year survey) of the 606 trail surrounding neighborhoods. Data and tables are adapted from the report conducted by the Institute for Housing Studies (IHS) at DePaul University. (Source: IHS, *Measuring the Impact of The 606*, DePaul University, 2016, p. 7).

KEY HOUSING MARKET DATA	WEST SIDE	EAST SIDE
SHARE OF PROPERTIES IMPACTED BY FORECLOSURE 2005-2015	24.1%	7.1%
MEDIAN SINGLE-FAMILY SALES PRICE, 2015	\$ 450,000	\$ 815,000
INVESTOR SHARE, 2015	20.7%	4.8%
PRICE CHANGING, 2000 TO 2016 Q2	139.7%	113.4%
PRICE CHANGING SINCE TRAIL OPENING, 2015 Q2 TO 2016 Q2	9.4%	4.3%

Table 2: Key Housing Market Data adapted from the IHS Report. (Source: Ibid, pp. 7, 9).

From the economic perspective, the adaptation of the 606 Trail was a success, as it not only gave a rebirth to a deteriorated rail corridor but also boosted the community's economy by bringing large pedestrian flow and real estate development. The severe gentrification issue, however, triggers the broader discussion on social and spatial justice. As the statistics of housing prices demonstrate, many working-class and minority groups, primarily Latin families on the west side of the 606 Trail, struggle to maintain their housing, and a lot of them are forced to relocate because of the mismatched living costs and income rates. The vision of the original plan to create an accessible park and rebuild the bond with the communities has been achieved. Still, it also reveals a shortage of mechanisms to secure the original residents' right to live and to obtain the same opportunities in green space and social resource accessibility. The dilemma of the development model of the 606 Trail does

not stand alone. The green space in the city has been empowered in political discourses in the U.S., where underprivileged communities remain marginalized, or even worse, because of the introduction of new green spaces as an economic growth point, the housing price rises for the improved built environment. This development model has been pointed out as “Environmental Gentrification,” as many minority neighborhoods are still suffering from the housing price spillover.²⁶

3.2. Challenges of spatial translation

As the framework plan of the 606 Trail proposed a continuous, vibrant, and diverse public space in Chicago's north side, it is vital to examine the quality of the design scheme. The “Collage City” (Rowe. C and Koetter. F, 1995) provides a research method to understand the relationship between the existing urban texture and the new plan.²⁷ Using the Figure–Ground diagram, the 606 Trail can be analyzed by mapping the relationships between the solid (site and built form, shown in black) and void (street and open space, shown in white) across the corridor and its adjacent neighborhoods associated with the green space (shown in green).

The upper diagram (Figure 5) shows the status quo of the urban morphology of the trail neighborhoods in June 2010. There are several parks within the community, and Humboldt Ave is the major landscape-based avenue that connects Humboldt Park in the south to the Logan Square green belt in the north. In general, the diagram shows a heavily residential living district of the city. The lower diagram (Figure 6) shows the current urban form after the 606 Trail was completed. There is a clear green corridor lying in the middle of the community base, with several minor green spaces added that are associated with the new entrances from the trail design framework. It can also be witnessed that there are enlarged parks and more open spaces, which also contribute to the goal of trail development, that are introducing more landscape and open space to the communities



Figure 5: Figure-Ground drawing of Bloomingdale Line neighborhoods existing urban form in September 2010 from the historical satellite imagery. The diagram base map captured from GIS data from the City of Chicago. (Source: City of Chicago ArcGIS, 2026).

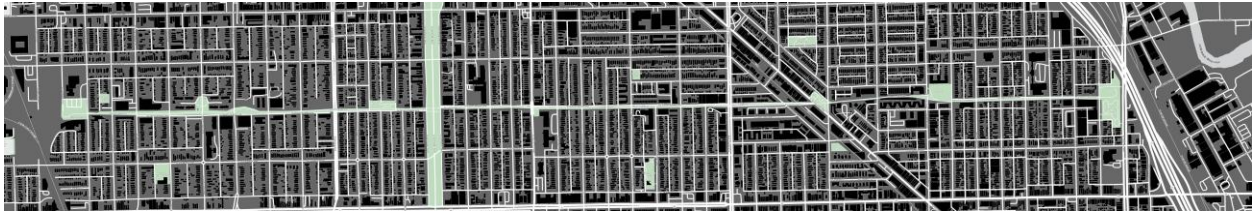


Figure 6: Figure-Ground drawing of the 606 Trail with additional green space constructed on top of the existing rail line in the current situation. The diagram base map was captured from GIS data from the City of Chicago. (Source: City of Chicago ArcGIS, 2026).

Yet, the diagram draws a clear issue with this space transition, in that it focuses on the rail line itself rather than considering the surroundings as an organic entity. On the one hand, the trail prioritizes breaking the geological barrier and enhancing the walkability. The design strategies thus are centered around this key concept. Rather than touching the root of community engagement, the trail lies on the superficial level of fixing the accessibility issue. There are several important intersections between the ground and the trail traffic that are not well designed, and the enlarged public spaces are limited within the railroad boundaries. On the other hand, the physical connection didn't break the cultural barrier. As one of the highlights of the design, the whole project was a community-led development. The scope of the design is limited to the involved communities, but not with the bigger image of the city planning, which is a factor that neglects the potential social problems after the trail is constructed.

Thus, the Figure-Ground diagrams reveal the limitations and shortcomings of such rail-to-trail design. While translating the traditional city spatial character into modern life, how many adaptations should it be modified (quantity), what scale it should be (quality), and how deep the spatial transformation should go (design depth), remains a question to be examined, whether on other projects or the future development of the 606 Trail.

4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Bloomingdale Line into the 606 Trail demonstrates the potential of rail-to-trail projects to reinterpret obsolete infrastructure as valuable public space, reconnecting fragmented neighborhoods while preserving the historical logic of urban form. As this paper has shown, the project successfully translates a former industrial corridor into a continuous green spine, reinforcing connectivity, enhancing environmental quality, and contributing to local economic growth. At the same time, however, this transformation exposes critical tensions embedded within contemporary urban regeneration practices. The rise in property values and the uneven distribution of benefits reveal that such projects can exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities, challenging the initial ambition of inclusive, community-oriented development.

Through the analysis of Figure–Ground diagrams, the 606 Trail can be understood not simply as a designed object, but as a spatial intervention that reconfigures the balance between built form and open space. While introducing a linear green belt through community-led development enhances permeability and mobility, it also encounters the limits of design strategies that prioritize formal and physical continuity over deeper social integration or the lack of integrated management at the municipal level. The trail’s emphasis on the corridor itself, rather than the broader urban texture, reveals a partial translation of the existing city—one that successfully adapts form but insufficiently addresses underlying social structures and emerging housing issues.

As the key case study of this paper, the 606 Trail suggests that the future of rail-to-trail development depends on moving beyond spatial transformation alone. A more comprehensive approach must integrate design with long-term social policies, existing living obstacles for the residents, and a mechanism to distribute the resources, ensuring that the benefits of regeneration are equitably distributed and that existing communities remain integral to the evolving and organic urban form. Only by reconciling the relationship between physical design, economic forces, and social justice can such projects fully realize their potential as inclusive, diverse, and sustainable urban interventions.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

WHY ARE PARTICIPANTS ABSENT? INTERROGATING SPATIAL GENTRIFICATION AND THE LOSS OF AGENCY IN THE RENEWAL OF T LAKE'S CULTURAL RITUAL SPACE

Xiaoyue Zhang, Yuebing Liang, Jun Shan

WHY ARE PARTICIPANTS ABSENT? INTERROGATING SPATIAL GENTRIFICATION AND THE LOSS OF AGENCY IN THE RENEWAL OF T LAKE'S CULTURAL RITUAL SPACE



This paper examines a typical renewal of the ritual space associated with T Lake's (anonymous) traditional lake-sacrifice ritual and the surrounding villages, addressing a commonly central paradox: although project organizers have continuously invested in reconstructing the lakeside landscape and festival venue, local participation has declined markedly. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to answer why local participants absent from the local traditional culture ritual space after the renewal. Research questions are first derived through fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with project managers. Then qualitative hypotheses are then developed through theoretical interpretation and spatial mapping of the actual built environment. Finally, these hypotheses are tested through a questionnaire survey. The results show that the former waterfront space, once a composite of livelihood, production, and ritual, has been reconfigured into a much narrower photographic spectacle. Tourism-oriented renewal strengthens cultural symbols through a lakeside boulevard, viewing platforms, themed plazas, and landmark installations, while fishery production has been relocated into enclosed aquaculture zones and off-site bases, dismantling the integrated chain of fishing, trading, and nature.

Based on built-environment analysis, the paper identifies three mechanisms. First, festivalization and place branding enlarge scale, harden boundaries, and separate front-stage from back-stage space, thereby undermining the everydayness that traditional space should possess. Second, shoreline control, the relocation of work sites, and the standardization of facilities generate a form of productive gentrification that weakens residents' right to remain and make a living in traditional space. Third, the separation between tourist commercial streets and the real fish market creates a mismatch in sales space, disconnecting fishing from fish selling both spatially and operationally. In this sense, the absence of participants reflects not only a shift in industrial structure, but also a renewal logic that treats cultural space as a detachable landscape object. The paper therefore proposes an analytical framework linking institutional change and the built environment, in order to support more sustainable renewal of traditional settlements.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background and Core Paradox

In recent years, under the combined agendas of rural revitalization, heritage protection, and cultural-tourism development,¹ many traditional festive spaces, waterfront settlements, and productive landscapes in China have entered processes of renewal and redevelopment. For rural settlements that combine folk traditions, festival value,² and ecological resources, renewal has increasingly moved beyond infrastructure improvement³ toward comprehensive spatial reconstruction driven by landscape reshaping, image-making, festival planning, and brand communication.⁴

Such renewal is not merely physical improvement. It also entails a profound reorganization of spatial order,⁵ rights of use, and social relations. Although many places have gained cleaner waterfronts, more visually appealing ritual venues, and stronger recognizability, these gains are often accompanied by the relocation of

traditional production, the compression of everyday social space,⁶ the decline of local residents' spatial agency,⁷ and the transformation of community-based cultural practices into performances for display and tourism.⁸ Renewal therefore reshapes not only space itself, but also who may use it, how it may be used, and which activities are deemed worthy of preservation.

Due to the political sensitivity of the matter, this paper analyses the Lake T case using anonymized case studies. The renewal of T Lake's lake-sacrifice ritual and surrounding fishing villages vividly illustrates this problem. Because of the Once embedded in a composite system of livelihood, production, and ritual, the ritual was supported by sacrifice, fishing, trading, gathering, waterfront labor, and village life. In recent years, however, organizers have invested heavily in lakeside boulevards, viewing platforms, themed plazas, and landmark installations to create a more attractive festival image and tourism interface. Meanwhile, fishery production has become corporatized and moved into designated aquaculture zones, dismantling the original spatial chain linking fishing, selling, gathering, and viewing, while weakening local residents' ability to access and use the core waterfront space.

This produces a central paradox: why, when the festival landscape, space, and image are continually strengthened,⁹ are local participants becoming fewer and less willing to attend? Authorities even recruited over 200 local volunteers to pose as participants at the event in recent years.¹⁰ This suggests that renewal may preserve the festival in form while weakening its productive base, everyday relations, and community subjectivity. The absence of participants is therefore better understood not as cultural decline, but as the result of spatial restructuring, production relocation, and the redistribution of rights of use¹² rather than through heritage or tourism perspectives alone.¹¹

1.2. Literature Review: Ritual-Space Renewal, Tourismization, and Spatial Gentrification

Research on the renewal of traditional ritual spaces, festival sites, and rural cultural revitalization has focused on three main concerns: the value of ritual space within settlements, the planning strategies introduced through culture-led tourism, and the social impacts of such interventions on rural communities. Durkheim argued that ritual distinguishes the sacred from the profane and sustains collective belief and social order.¹³ In architectural and settlement studies, scholars such as Qiuzi Jin¹⁴ and Meng Ren¹⁵ have analyzed the relationship between traditional ritual space and settlement structure, emphasizing that ritual space forms the spiritual core of local production and everyday life, carries important research and aesthetic value, and should be critically examined in the context of globalization and commercialization. Qingjie Zheng¹⁶ further argues that traditional ritual activities can strengthen rural social cohesion. Shutan Zheng¹⁷ reviews ritual-space studies from 2004 to 2024 and finds that social order, identity formation, and rural revitalization have become major themes, while interventions in both virtual and physical space have become central concerns. Yang

Liu,¹⁸ drawing on Richard Schechner's environmental theatre theory, treats the whole village as a theatre of interaction between humans and deities, and suggests that this perspective offers a new way to understand rural heritage protection as a shift from static preservation to ritual-driven living transmission.

However, the cultural and social value of ritual space often does not directly solve villagers' livelihood problems. For this reason, culture-led tourism revitalization has become a common strategy for activating traditional ritual space. As intangible culture represented by ritual has acquired diversified uses, ritual has increasingly become a tool for tourism marketing, packaging, and branding, thereby contributing to income growth. Chunyan Zhang et. al,¹⁹ studying the Tianzhu Mountain scenic area, show that tourism-driven development can transform forest-region rural landscapes from fragmented and marginalized spaces into central tourism fields, while also strengthening residents' local identity. They propose a reconstruction strategy based on the coordinated development of ecological, productive, and living spaces. Ying Ding,²⁰ focusing on northern Shaanxi, outlines four design principles for integrating regional culture into rural tourism landscapes: conservation, aesthetics, public participation, and sustainability. Guiqin Wang et. al,²¹ from a planning perspective, develop a three-level framework of settlement, space, and building, advocating integrated co-governance through brand, infrastructure, and built form, together with coordinated development across ecology, life, and production.

With the deepening implementation of rural revitalization, gentrification has become an increasingly important issue. First proposed by Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the entry of the urban middle class into working-class neighborhoods,²² the concept has since been extended to rural studies. In China, because of its specific political system, rural spatial renewal more often takes the form of government-led public intervention²⁴ through tourism development,²³ which differs significantly from Western critiques of class invasion. Xingyi Wei²⁵ and colleagues review research on rural gentrification in China and argue that although population replacement may appear effective under conditions of rural decline, its negative implications for social equity require caution. Yi Qin²⁶ similarly reflects on both the internet-celebrity transformation and gentrification of rural areas, proposing a permaculture-based rural system that coordinates ecological, economic, and social benefits.

Overall, traditional ritual spaces are an important component of rural locality and possess considerable potential for helping rural areas adapt to social change and increase income. Yet important gaps remain: scholarship has not reached consensus on fairness in rural gentrification, and insufficient attention has been paid to resolving the contradiction between rural income growth and the sustained participation of original residents.

1.3. Research Questions and Methods

This paper asks why, despite the continual intensification of festival landscapes, construction of spatial facilities, and promotion of local images, local residents are gradually withdrawing from the cultural field that once belonged to them.¹⁰ It focuses on the spatial and institutional mechanisms behind this phenomenon.

The study raises three related questions. First, how has the traditional ritual space of T Lake and its surrounding fishing villages been transformed through renewal, and how has the former composite space of livelihood, production, and ritual been reorganized into a landscape oriented toward display, viewing, and consumption? Second, how have spatial relations, rights of use, and forms of participation changed among residents, organizers, business actors, and tourists? Third, does the current renewal logic preserve the festival in form while replacing its social basis, productive basis, and community subjectivity?

Methodologically, the paper adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative analysis and quantitative verification (Table 1). Fieldwork documents the changing forms, activities, and everyday uses of ritual and village spaces. Semi-structured interviews with project managers and other actors examine renewal logic, management goals, and contrasting perceptions of spatial change and participation. Historical materials and spatial mapping are used to analyze route organization, node distribution, functional composition, and boundary shifts, identifying how traditional composite space has been transformed into a more front-stage, exhibition-oriented, and consumption-oriented landscape. Finally, questionnaire data are used to test these qualitative findings and compare perceptions of everydayness, authenticity, participation, economic relevance, and local belonging across different groups.

METHOD	OBJECT	QUANTITY	ANALYTICAL GOAL	DATA TYPE	COLLECTION METHOD
Fieldwork	The lake-sacrifice ritual space of T Lake and its villages	15 days	Baseline conditions and current problems	Images	Photographed by author
Spatial Survey	The ritual of T Lake and related spaces	3-4 drawings	Analysis of spatial organizational mechanisms	Plans	CAD
Semi-Structured Interviews	Organizers of the T Lake ritual	12 people	Current problems and preliminary conclusions	Interview records	On-site interviews
Questionnaire Survey	Local residents related to the T Lake ritual	69 people	Validation of conclusions	Questionnaire data	Questionnaire distribution

Table 1: Research methods and analytical framework (Source: Author).

2. CASE BACKGROUND AND THE PROCESS OF SPATIAL RENEWAL

2.1. The T Lake Lake-Sacrifice Ritual and the Traditional Spatial Structure of Livelihood-Production-Ritual

The T Lake lake-sacrifice ritual is one of the oldest ceremonial traditions of the local ethnic minority communities. For generations, these communities lived by the water, relying on pastoralism and fishing, while regarding T Lake as both the source of life and a divine presence. The ritual emerged as lakeshore tribes organized collective offerings to the lake before moving uphill for seasonal pastoral migration¹⁰. Its purpose was to worship heaven, earth, and the lake deity, give thanks for nature's bounty, and pray for ecological abundance. In this traditional structure, livelihood, production, and ritual were causally and spatially interconnected. The event was usually initiated informally by the local temple abbot and relatively affluent village elites.¹⁰

To clarify the composite spatial structure that sustained the ritual, this study conceptualizes it as a relational system made up of both spatial elements and operational mechanisms (Figure 1). Spatially, the lake itself functioned as the central carrier of the system, linking ritual space, productive space, and settlement space into a continuous chain from lake to production zone to village. T Lake was simultaneously the ritual site, the water source for pastoral activities, and the resource base for fishery production. Livestock and fish catches then flowed back to the lakeshore and surrounding settlements, entering systems of distribution, consumption, and daily life.

Within this spatial chain, the ritual operated as a process with a clear sequence. First, before pastoral or fishing activities began, residents performed the lake-sacrifice ritual to pray to the deity believed to govern the outcomes of their labor. Second, they entered the productive process centered on herding and fishing. Third, livestock and fish catches were transported back to the village, where they supported wealth transfer, subsistence, and social reproduction. Ritual, production, and harvest were therefore not separate functional domains, but parts of a continuous process organized within the same spatial system.

At the level of mechanism, this system involved three interrelated dimensions: a symbolic mechanism centered on belief in the lake deity, which rendered uncertain natural production intelligible and legitimate; a productive mechanism based on cooperative labor, through which natural resources were transformed into concrete outputs; and a reproductive mechanism oriented toward community livelihood, through which the harvest sustained both everyday life and social relations. These mechanisms were linked in a cyclical relation of prayer, production, harvest, and feedback.

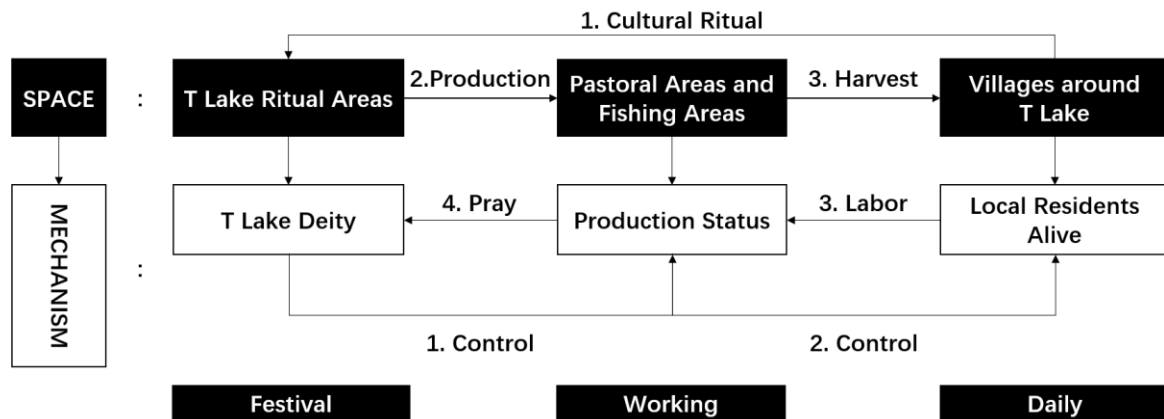


Figure 1: Relationship between T Lake's traditional lake-sacrifice ritual and livelihood production. (Source: Author).

The key to T Lake's traditional ritual system lay not in any single element, but in the closed relationship among spatial nodes and mechanisms. The lake provided both resources and the object of worship; ritual gave production meaning and legitimacy; labor transformed resources into output; and the harvest returned to the village to sustain the community. It was this overlap of spatial continuity and functional closure that enabled the ritual to simultaneously embody livelihood, production, and ritual life.

2.2 The Implementation Process of the Renewal Project and Its Spatial Restructuring

Over roughly the past twenty years, the event has been officially organized by the relevant organization and divided annually into a winter fishing lake-sacrifice ritual and a summer lake-opening ritual. The summer ritual carries a form of nature worship and ecological belief rooted in pastoral and agricultural culture; ritual actions such as chanting, blessing, sprinkling food, and launching a ritual boat are closer to the historical worship of the lake by pastoralists and represent a continuation of spiritual belief. The winter fishing ritual, by contrast, is a younger festival activity intensified and ritualized on the basis of traditional fishing techniques in order to suit modern tourism. Its central purpose is to pray for blessing before winter ice fishing, and it is more production-oriented and spectacular. Public reports indicate that this traditional winter fishing method has a history of several decades at T Lake.

Historical maps and unstructured interviews indicate that the environmental conditions and ritual routes of the T Lake lake-sacrifice ritual changed across four typical periods, as shown in Figure 2.

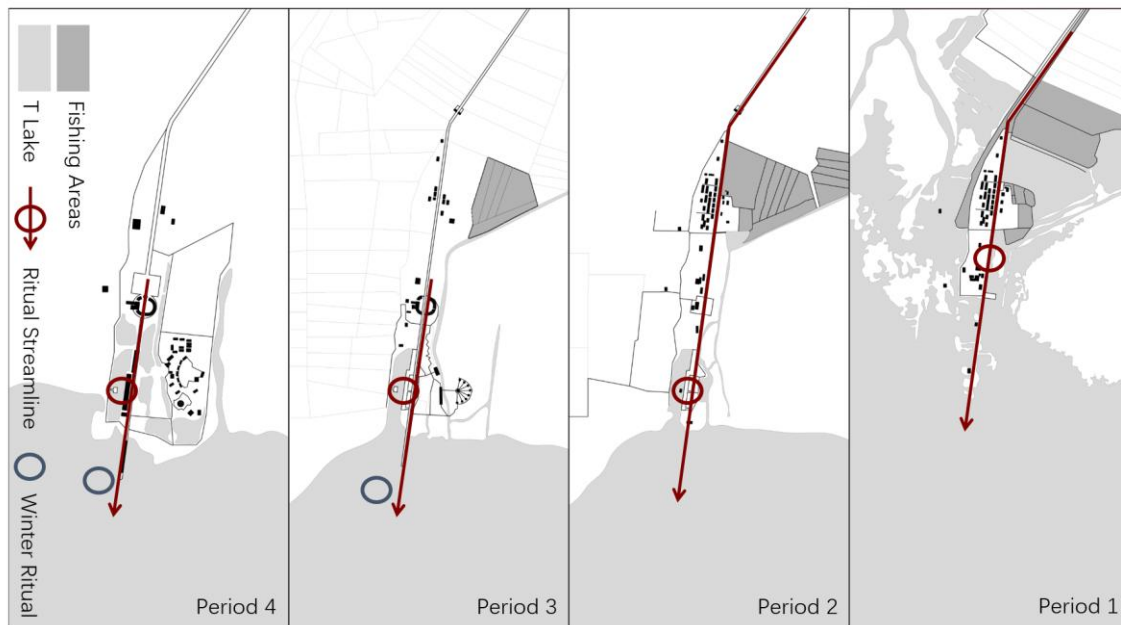


Figure 2: Schematic diagram of the ritual environment in four typical periods (Source: Author). Anonymous schematic illustration. Scale bar, north arrow, and other identifying information are omitted. The built environment shown is schematic rather than a precise survey; the same applies below.

In the early period 1, the ritual passed through the main street of the fishing village adjacent to the lake and led into the water. As port-related cultural and tourism entertainment facilities were gradually constructed, the original fishing village was relocated and restored to farmland, while the formerly public port area began, from Period 3 onward, to build a scenic gate, add large numbers of entertainment facilities, and introduce admission charges. Beginning in Period 2, the responsible departments built a dedicated venue for ritual performance and participation, replacing the earlier, relatively long offering route with a shortened ritual route confined within the park. In Periods 3 and 4, to increase the attractiveness of winter tourism, the authorities further transformed what had originally been a simple household prayer followed by individual winter fishing on the frozen lake into a collective winter fishing ritual usually held on the ice.

2.3 Changes in Stakeholders and Spatial Relations of Use

In the traditional operating logic of the lake-sacrifice ritual, the spaces around T Lake were mainly constituted by three groups of actors: local producers and dwellers centered on fishers and nearby residents; folk ritual practitioners involved in the sacrifice, blessing, and related activities; and local market actors engaged in the trading, distribution, and consumption of fish catches. In this structure, local residents were not merely spectators, but direct bearers of the productive base, ritual order, and continuity of community life.

Participation therefore meant more than presence: it included labor, organization, ritual performance, circulation of catches, and community reproduction.

In the traditional ritual, the abbot and village elites who initiated the event carried multiple roles and participated throughout the entire process. Because the ritual was closely tied to local social responsibility and productive life, its time and location could shift across different villages and shoreline nodes. It followed a linear experiential logic, whose core act was the collective launching of a small boat carrying offerings into the lake.

In the contemporary ritual, however, both stakeholders and spatial logic have changed substantially. Fixed organizing personnel and fishery companies now serve as the annual executors, while the formerly composite role structure has been divided into managers, hosts, actors, and volunteers. The economic income of these participants no longer bears a direct relation to the ritual outcome. Space and time are fixed at a designated harbor, and decision-making is concentrated in the hands of managers rather than those engaged in productive labor. The ritual is increasingly organized according to a photographic logic centered on framed viewing.

This transition from a community-embedded structure to a stratified performative structure marks a fundamental transformation of T Lake's ritual space from a composite social space into an exhibition-oriented landscape. Organizers, performers, and consumers become separated, continuous space gives way to partitioned display space, and local residents shift from ritual and productive subjects to marginalized participants. Their absence is thus closely linked to the restructuring of spatial rights and role relations.

	TRADITIONAL LAKE-SACRIFICE RITUAL		CONTEMPORARY LAKE-SACRIFICE RITUAL	
	MAIN ACTORS	USE OF SPACE	MAIN ACTORS	USE OF SPACE
Initiators	Temple abbot, village elites	Non-fixed villages	Professional departments, fishery company	Fixed offices
Target groups	Pastoralists, fishers	Shared food required	Outside tourists	Food provided
Performers	Temple abbot, designated villagers, other villagers may participate	Offerings delivered in ethnic dress	Fixed village actors	Offerings delivered in ethnic dress
Hosts	Temple abbot	Procession, chanting, route guidance	MC / host	Fixed stage
Primary users	Mainly pastoralists and fishers, with tourists as supplement	Non-fixed harbor	Mainly tourists	Fixed harbor

Table 2: Comparison of stakeholders and spatial use in the traditional and contemporary lake-sacrifice rituals (Source: Translated by the author).

3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: HOW DID THE RITUAL SPACE LOSE ITS LOCAL PARTICIPANTS?

3.1. From Composite Space to Exhibition Space: The Weakening of Everydayness

As Figure 3 shows, the spatial logic of T Lake's lake-sacrifice space differs sharply across periods. In the traditional stage, ritual routes, productive routes, and village-life routes overlapped to a high degree. The ritual unfolded along the shoreline and remained continuous with fishery work lines and the village main street. Fishers, villagers, and other participants moved within the same spatial system, so that ritual, production, and daily life formed an integrated composite structure. Space was not pre-divided into functional zones; instead, it was dynamically organized through repeated use, movement, and everyday practice.

By Period 4, however, this structure had been significantly reorganized. Originally overlapping routes were compressed into a single axis, ritual activities were concentrated at fixed nodes, and productive routes gradually withdrew from the core area. The once continuous chain of fishing, transport, and trade was no longer fully present on site. Meanwhile, the village main street and market routes were dissolved and separated from ritual space. The overall structure thus shifted from a multi-line intertwined system to a partitioned system dominated by nodes and axes.

The key change lies not simply in fewer routes, but in the altered relationships among them. In the traditional structure, different routes were spatially nested, allowing participants to carry out labor, ritual, and social interaction within a single process. In the contemporary structure, ritual routes, tourist routes, and market routes are explicitly separated. Spatial use shifts from overlap to division, different actors move along separate paths, and intersections among them are greatly reduced. Accordingly, traditional space was route-centered, with meaning generated through repeated everyday use, whereas contemporary space is node-centered, with meaning increasingly produced through concentrated display and short-term events.

T Lake's ritual space has therefore shifted from a route-based composite space to a node-based exhibition space, weakening everydayness and laying the spatial foundation for productive gentrification and participant absence.

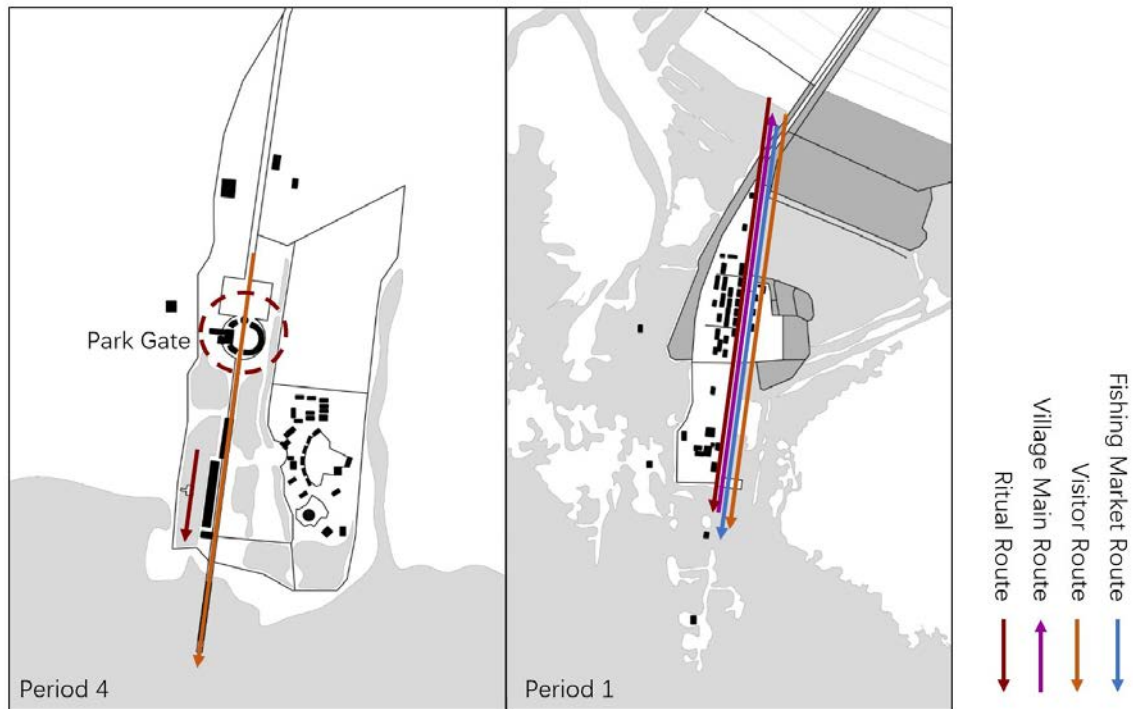


Figure 3: Analysis of changes in the spatial character of the lake-sacrifice ritual across periods (Source: Author).

3.2. Productive Gentrification: Reorganization of Productive Rights and the Loss of Popular Production under Spatial Control

As Figure 4 shows, the evolution of T Lake's lake-sacrifice ritual space is not merely a matter of formal adjustment; it also represents a restructuring of productive rights and forms of spatial control. In the traditional stage, both the lake-sacrifice ritual and fishery production were embedded in local social structure, and their organization and implementation depended on the authority system within the villages. Different village elites and temple abbots rotated the responsibility for initiating and organizing the ritual, ritual sites remained highly mobile and could unfold along different shorelines and nodes, and rights of aquaculture and fishing in the lake area were relatively dispersed rather than monopolized by a single actor. Under this structure, ritual space and productive space were not strictly separated, but were jointly embedded in an open body of water used by multiple villages.

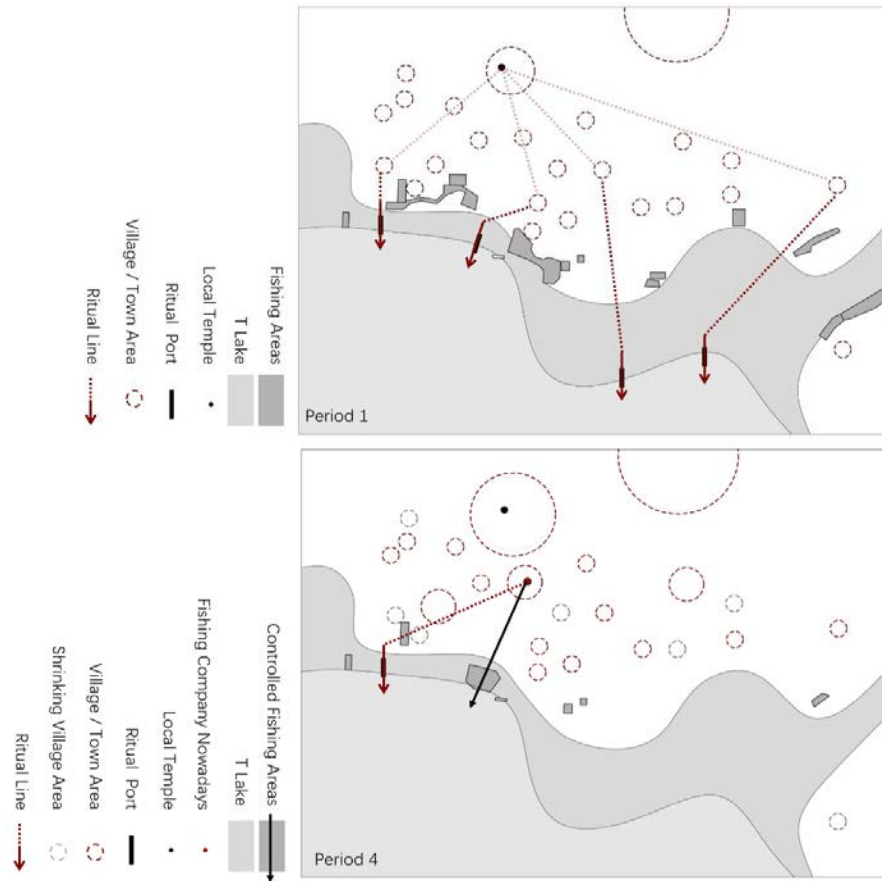


Figure 4: Comparison of fishery production and the control of ritual space across periods. (Source: Author).

In the contemporary stage, this structure has changed substantially. Rights of fishery aquaculture have gradually been consolidated under fishery companies and collective cooperatives, while productive rights once dispersed among villages have become centrally managed. Correspondingly, the lake area has been divided into controlled aquaculture and fishing zones, and entry and use are now institutionally regulated. As Figure 4 shows, this marks a clear shift from open water to controlled space.

At the same time, the lake-sacrifice ritual has moved from mobility to fixity. Ritual routes that once unfolded across different shoreline nodes and villages have been compressed into a single pre-set location, namely the purpose-built ritual stage. Ritual therefore no longer unfolds alongside production, but has been extracted from the productive process and transformed into a display activity independent of it.

Together, these changes constitute what may be called productive gentrification. Its essence lies not in the disappearance of traditional production, but in the redistribution of productive rights and spatial-use rights. Resources once dispersed within the local community are concentrated in organized entities, while access to

space shifts from open sharing to institutionalized control. Local residents may still participate as laborers or performers, but their role as subjects of production and ritual has been weakened.

As a result, production becomes a controlled rather than embedded presence, ritual becomes fixed display, and the composite space once sustained by production, ritual, and daily life is further dismantled.

3.3. From Immediate Exchange to Sales Displacement: The Decoupling of the Service Market and the Agricultural Market

As Figure 5 shows, one of the most significant changes in T Lake's ritual space is the reorganization of economic trading space and its separation from productive space. In the traditional structure, fishing, exchange, and consumption formed a spatially continuous process. After fishing, catches were traded and distributed immediately on the shore or in nearby villages, creating an agricultural market centered on the fish market. This market was not only a place of commodity exchange, but also an important site of local social interaction and value realization, closely connected to fishery activity and ritual demand.

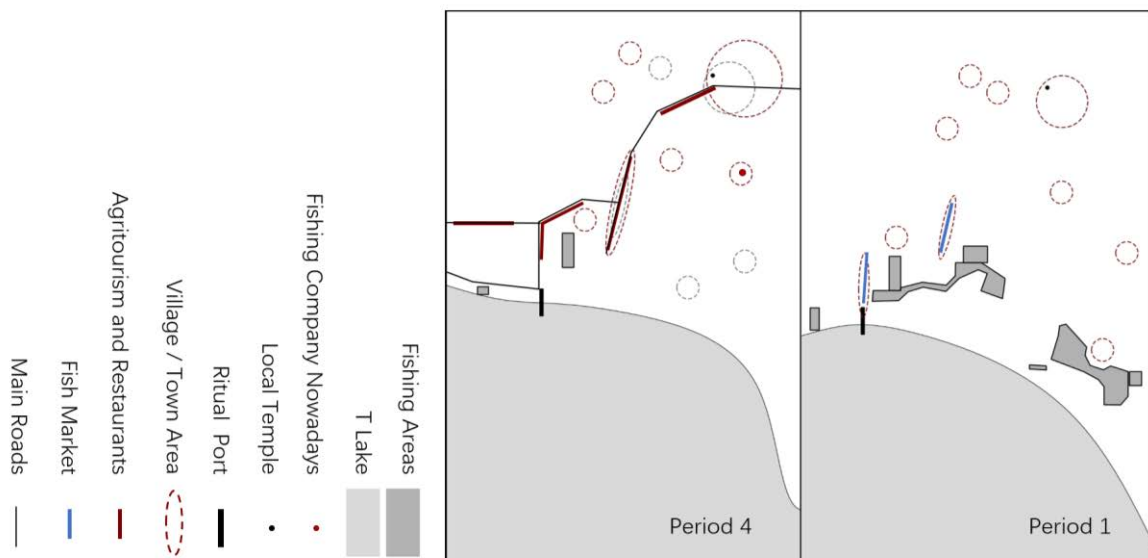


Figure 5: Types of economic markets and their spatial relations in different periods (Source: Author).

In the contemporary stage, this production-trade chain has been restructured. The traditional fish market has gradually weakened or disappeared, no longer serving as the direct continuation of production. Instead, new commercial space is dominated by auctions of unusually large fish, farm stays, restaurants, swimsuits, and cultural-tourism consumption, forming a relatively independent service market within the village or scenic

area. Although fish remain the theme, the market's core function has shifted from the exchange of primary products to processing, display, and experiential consumption.

Spatially, this change appears as a separation between agricultural and service markets: the former was tied to fishing nodes and productive space, while the latter has moved toward tourist roads and gathering areas. As a result, the site of production and the site of value realization are now clearly disconnected.

This mismatch is not merely a locational shift, but a transformation in the mechanism of value realization. In the traditional model, the value of fish catches was realized mainly through direct exchange, and the link between producer and consumer was relatively immediate. In the contemporary model, however, value is increasingly reproduced through services, experiences, and cultural packaging, with fish becoming part of a staged consumption scene rather than a direct product.

For local residents, trading space once embedded in production has weakened, and economic participation has shifted from direct exchange to indirect involvement in service-sector chains. For tourists, what they encounter is no longer a market synchronized with production, but an organized consumption landscape. Space is thus restructured into two relatively separate systems: productive space and consumption space.

4. DATA-BASED VERIFICATION

4.1. Questionnaire Design and Sample Description

To test the mechanisms identified above in the transformation of T Lake's winter fishing space, the study designed a questionnaire around three dimensions—space, rights, and market—and focused on five core questions:

- (1) whether the data support the claim that local willingness to participate in the lake-sacrifice ritual has declined;
- (2) whether the data verify the argument that the everydayness of ritual space has diminished;
- (3) whether the data verify the argument that productive rights in ritual space have been gentrified;
- (4) whether the data verify the argument that the market-trading structure of ritual space has become decoupled;
- (5) whether the decline in willingness to participate is correlated with the three mechanisms above.

The first question is addressed at the end of this subsection; Questions 2 to 4 are examined in Section 4.2; and Question 5 is examined in Section 4.3. The questionnaire contained 25 items and four main groups of variables: background information on respondents (such as place of residence, relation to winter fishing, and sources of income); perceptions of production and spatial rights (such as opportunities to participate in fishing and restrictions on spatial use); cognition of ritual and spatial form (such as exhibition, zoning, fixity,

and willingness to participate); and perceptions of market and consumption relations (such as access to fish markets and separation of the supply chain). A total of 69 valid questionnaires were collected. The sample covered groups with different degrees of connection to T Lake, including local residents, fishery-related workers, and general participants (Figure 6), allowing the study to reflect differences in the perception of spatial transformation across multiple actors.

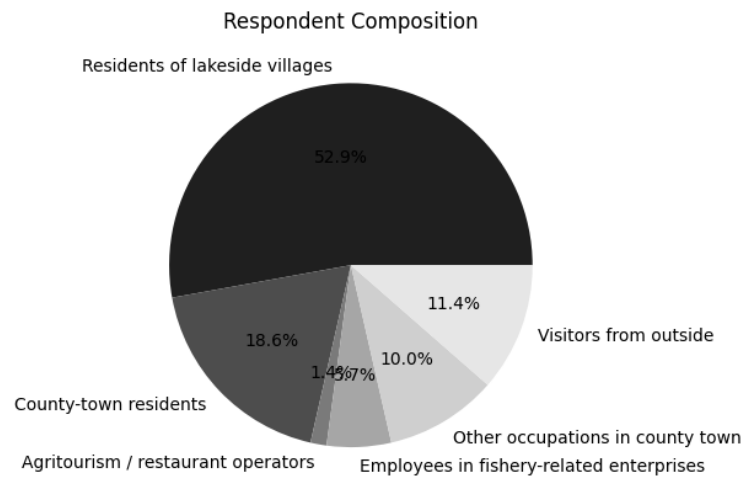


Figure 6: Attributes of questionnaire respondents (Source: Author).

The reliability of the scaled items in the questionnaire was tested, and the results show a Cronbach's alpha of 0.922 (Table 3), which is well above 0.8. The questionnaire can therefore be considered to have good quality and reliability and to provide an adequate basis for mechanism identification and trend judgment.

SAMPLE SIZE	NUMBER OF ITEMS	CRONBACH'S ALPHA
69	6	0.922

Table 3: Reliability analysis of the questionnaire.

With respect to willingness to participate, among the 8 outside visitors, 7 expressed unwilling or neutral attitudes toward visiting the lake-sacrifice ritual, accounting for 87.5%. Among the 61 local residents, 67.21% reported that before the establishment of the fishery company, members of their households went to the lake to fish, and 74.07% reported maintaining a certain frequency of participation in the lake-sacrifice ritual, indicating relatively strong participation in the earlier period. In the question on future willingness to participate, however, the proportion who actively selected willing to go fell to 43.48%, showing a clear weakening trend.

4.2. Data Verification of Diminished Everydayness, Productive Gentrification, and Market Mismatch

The questionnaire results reveal clear structural associations among variables, supporting the mechanisms proposed above from the three dimensions of space, production, and market, as shown in Figure 7.

First, at the level of space and ritual, the distributions for the two indicators *the on-site space is more suitable for photography and viewing than for local everyday use* and *the ritual process, routes, and nodes have become more fixed* are identical across response categories, with an agreement rate of 62.32% for both. This high degree of consistency indicates that respondents do not treat the two as independent phenomena, but rather as two manifestations of the same process—namely that the exhibition of space and the fixation of ritual occur simultaneously. This empirically supports the argument in Section 3.1 that the ritual space is shifting from a route-based composite space toward a node-based exhibition space, accompanied by the structural weakening of everydayness.

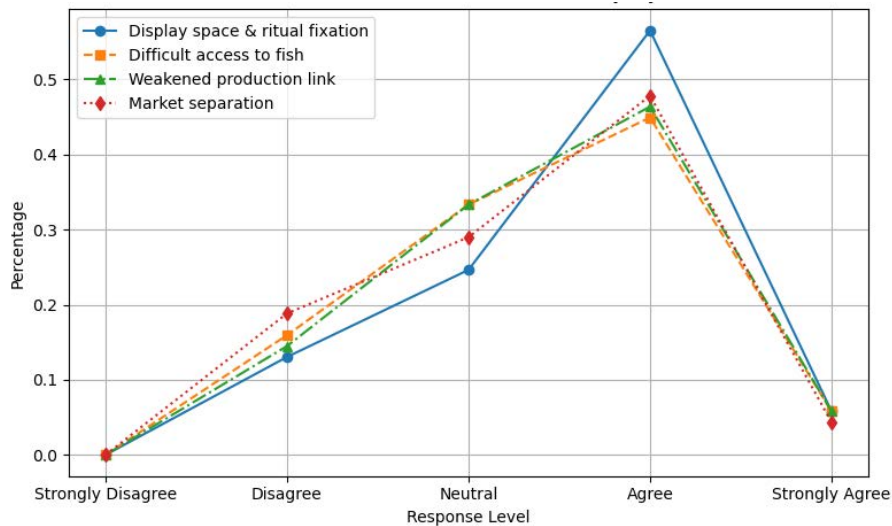


Figure 7: Analysis of selected questionnaire items (Source: Author).

Second, at the level of production, the indicator *the link between the ritual and real fishing production has weakened* also shows a relatively high degree of agreement (52.18%), and its distribution follows the same pattern as the two spatial indicators above, peaking in the agree category. Moreover, 85.25% of respondents believe that in recent years the benefits related to fishing have been captured mainly by a small number of local villagers and fishery companies, while only 6.56% believe that the majority of local villagers still have fishing opportunities. This indicates that respondents not only perceive changes in spatial form, but also recognize a weakening connection between ritual and production and a simultaneous decline in their own fishing rights. The

evidence thus supports the analysis of productive gentrification in Section 3.2, according to which production gradually retreats from the core space and is replaced by institutionalized and centralized management. Third, at the market level, the two indicators *it is difficult to conveniently obtain trustworthy local fish in daily life* and *consumption in scenic areas or commercial streets is separated from the real fishery supply chain* also show relatively high agreement (50.73% and 52.18%). The market-separation item is perceived even more directly, while neutral responses remain comparatively high (approximately 30%), suggesting that market-level change has been broadly sensed but remains somewhat more indirect than the changes in space and ritual. This accords with the sales-space mismatch discussed in Section 3.3, that is, the spatial separation of the place of production from the place of value realization.

Overall, the exhibition of space and the fixation of ritual constitute the most direct and most consistent perceptions; the weakening of production functions as an intermediate layer reflecting the effects of institutional and rights-based restructuring; and market decoupling appears as a relatively indirect but directionally consistent consequence. This structure indicates that the transformation of T Lake's winter fishing space is not an isolated change, but the result of the coordinated evolution of spatial structure, production relations, and market mechanisms.

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Based on the questionnaire data at the individual level, this paper uses Spearman's rank correlation coefficient to analyze the correlations among the indicators. This method is suitable for ordinal categorical data such as Likert scales and avoids the normality assumption about variable distributions.

The formula for Spearman's rank correlation coefficient is as follows:

$$\rho = 1 - \frac{6 \sum_{i=1}^n d_i^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}; \quad d_i = R(x_i) - R(y_i)$$

ρ : denotes Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, with values ranging [-1,1];

n : denotes the sample size;

$R(x_i)$: denotes the rank of sample i on variable X ;

$R(y_i)$: denotes the rank of sample i on variable Y .

The numerical coding of the questionnaire variables is shown in Table 4.

ORIGINAL OPTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NETUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Numeric value	1	2	3	4	5

Table 4: Numerical coding of questionnaire variables (Source: Author).

Analysis of the questionnaire data reveals (Table 5), firstly, that there is a very strong correlation between *spatial visualisation* and *ritual fixation* ($\rho = 0.865$), indicating that the two are highly consistent at the level of individual perception and can be regarded as different manifestations of the same structural process.

Secondly, a strong correlation is also evident between *spatial visualisation* and *weakened production links* ($\rho = 0.823$), suggesting a close link between changes in spatial structure and shifts in production relations. By comparison, the correlation between *market separation* and *spatial variables* ($\rho \approx 0.73$) and its correlation with production variables ($\rho \approx 0.6$) remain strong, indicating that changes at the market level also influence the willingness to use space. Furthermore, a very strong correlation ($\rho = 0.845$) was observed between *difficult access to fish* and *market separation*, suggesting that, in terms of perception, the two represent different expressions of the same issue.

QUESTION 1	QUESTION 2	SPEARMAN ρ
spatial visualisation	ritual fixation	0.865
spatial visualisation	difficult access to fish	0.775
spatial visualisation	weakened production links	0.823
spatial visualisation	market separation	0.732
ritual fixation	difficult access to fish	0.796
ritual fixation	weakened production links	0.843
ritual fixation	market separation	0.758
difficult access to fish	weakened production links	0.596
difficult access to fish	market separation	0.845
weakened production links	market separation	0.592

Table 5: Correlation analysis based on Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (Source: Author).

In summary, the relationship between these variables is not merely a simple correlation; rather, they exhibit a distinct hierarchical structure: spatial and ritual changes form the strongest layer of association, whilst the decoupling of production relations from the market represents a relatively lagging variable, albeit one that remains strongly correlated. This structure further validates the chain of mechanisms proposed in this paper, namely that spatial reorganization, through the restructuring of production relations, ultimately transmits to the market level.

5. MECHANISM DISCUSSION: THREE CONVERSIONS IN SPATIAL RENEWAL

The transformation of T Lake's winter fishing and lake-sacrifice space is not a single act of landscape adjustment or festival expansion, but a continuous process in which ritual space, productive space, and everyday market space change together (Figure 8). In the traditional condition, ritual, fishery production, and

village life formed a relatively closed operating mechanism: ritual gave production order and legitimacy, productive space sustained local livelihoods through labor and harvest, and village space supported the distribution, consumption, and social reproduction of the catch. Festival, labor, and everyday life were thus nested within the same spatial chain.

During renewal, however, this continuous system was gradually split into three related but functionally separated subsystems. First, ritual space was extracted from production and shifted to the festival front stage, becoming fixed, autonomous, and visualized. Second, productive space was absorbed into centralized management and organizational control, weakening local productive rights and generating productive gentrification. Third, the everyday market organized around real fish trade was replaced by culture-tourism consumption and farm-stay markets, marked by the decline of the real fish market and the growth of derivative service industries.

Together, these changes weakened local residents' substantive position in ritual, production, and market, producing participant absence.

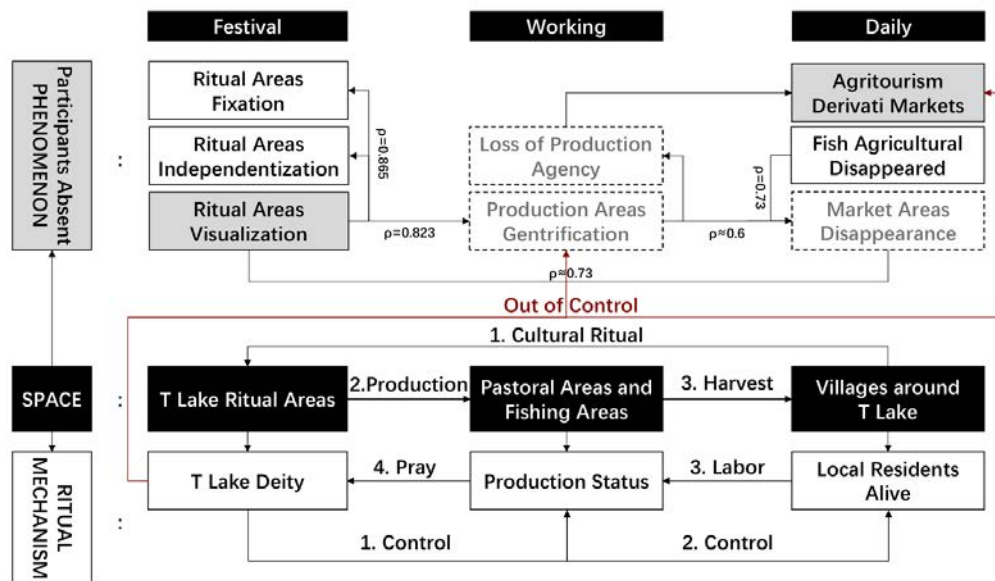


Figure 8: Re-mechanism diagram of the T Lake lake-sacrifice ritual, related production, and daily life (Source: Author).

5.1. The Fixation, Decentralization, and Visualization of Ritual Space

The lake-sacrifice ritual was never an autonomous festive stage; it was a prior ritual embedded in the productive system of the lake region. Sacrifice, prayer, blessing, and the subsequent acts of fishing and pastoral movement followed a clear temporal sequence. Its significance lay not only in cultural symbolism,

but also in its practical role of giving order, blessing, and legitimacy to the labor about to begin. Accordingly, ritual space was not a fixed site, but a continuous spatial system linking shorelines, docks, village routes, and points of productive departure. Its meaning emerged from its close integration with production and everyday community life.

After renewal, this relationship changed in three ways. First, ritual space became fixed. It was gradually anchored to preset venues, stages, and front-stage areas designed for organized viewing. What had once unfolded along fluid routes across different shoreline nodes and village settings was compressed into a repeatable, schedulable, and photographable scene. Routes, nodes, and performative forms became stable rather than responsive to the productive rhythms of the local community.

Second, ritual space became decentralized. Ritual, fishing, and market exchange had once shared the same spatial setting, but ritual was increasingly detached from production and exchange and turned into an independent opening ceremony, cultural performance, or tourism node. It no longer relied on real production for meaning, but could circulate independently as a festival resource. Ritual thus shifted from being part of the order of production to becoming front-stage festival content.

Third, ritual space became visualized. Space was reorganized around being seen: it became more suitable for photography, viewing, and brief stays, while routes became more oriented toward spectatorship and media circulation. As a result, the core value of ritual space shifted from sustaining community order to providing a consumable festival landscape. Once ritual became fixed, decentralized, and visualized, it no longer primarily served the local community, but instead prioritized event management, tourist spectatorship, and local image-making.

5.2. The Gentrification of Productive Space and the Loss of Subjective Agency

In the traditional condition, productive space around the lake was not merely a site of fishery labor, but an open system composed of villages, shorelines, docks, grazing areas, and fishing grounds. Rights of entry, organization, and use were relatively dispersed among villages, households, and local authorities. Despite internal differences, productive space remained largely accessible and closely tied to the local community. During renewal, this open structure was gradually replaced by a controlled one. Rights of aquaculture, fishing organization, and spatial use became concentrated in fishery companies, cooperatives, and other professional entities. The lake was divided into regulated fishery zones, and formerly flexible productive space was redefined as an area requiring permission, organization, and management. Local residents were not entirely excluded, but the conditions under which they could enter production space and benefit from it changed substantially.

The gentrification discussed here is not a typical real-estate replacement of residents. Rather, it is a productive form of upgrading and control. Productive space has not disappeared; instead, it has been more intensively organized, regulated, and visually ordered. Yet this reordering serves manageability, displayability, and integration into external systems rather than strengthening local productive capacity. As a result, local residents are pushed into subordinate roles.

The most direct consequence is the loss of productive subjectivity. Residents no longer occupy the lake area as full productive actors, but increasingly appear as employees, temporary volunteers, or performative fishers. They may not lose work outright, but they lose the power to define productive space, organize it, and control its rhythm. Once this productive subjectivity is weakened, ritual also loses practical meaning for them, making productive gentrification a key mechanism behind participant absence.

5.3. The Derivatization of the Everyday Market and the Decoupling of Real Exchange

The route through which harvest once flowed back into the village's everyday market has been fundamentally restructured. In the traditional condition, fish catches entered local society through fish markets, shoreline exchange, acquaintance networks, and daily consumption. Production, exchange, and consumption were spatially continuous, and local residents were at once producers, traders, and consumers. The traditional market was therefore not a separate commercial system detached from production, but the final link in the continuous chain from lake to village, converting harvest into livelihood, food, and local social relations. After renewal, this relation changed sharply. On the one hand, the real agricultural market centered on the fish catch gradually weakened or disappeared. Fish still remained present, but they no longer entered everyday circulation through the traditional fish market or shoreline exchange. On the other hand, the market shifted toward farm stays, restaurants, tourism consumption, and derivative service industries. The market thus did not disappear, but its function was transformed: instead of facilitating the immediate exchange of real catches, it increasingly organized fish-themed consumption scenes, dining experiences, and tourism revenues.

This derivatization means that value realization no longer revolves around agricultural labor itself, but around the representation of production and the consumption of local culture. As a consequence, even though local residents still live around T Lake, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to derive stable and direct meaning from the festival and production system through the traditional chain of production, exchange, and consumption. Market space therefore becomes the final link in participant absence: when residents neither control production nor dominate the market, their connection to festival space is reduced to watching, assisting, or being represented by others.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Answering Why Participants Are Absent

Fieldwork, interviews with officials, and questionnaire results all indicate a clear decline in local residents' willingness to participate in T Lake's winter fishing and lake-sacrifice ritual. This decline is not merely a reduction in attendance frequency; it reflects the gradual loss of local residents' position as subjects of ritual, production, and market, as well as the weakening of the links among these three spheres. The fundamental reason is that spatial renewal at T Lake has not restored the social life of traditional space. Instead, under the logic of protection, display, and development, it has weakened the practical basis for local participation through the reorganization of ritual, productive, and market spaces.

First, ritual space has shifted from serving the everyday order of the local community to serving festival display and external spectatorship. Participation has thus moved from natural presence to arranged presence. Second, the rights to organize and use productive space have become centralized. As fishery companies, cooperatives, and managerial actors consolidate control over aquaculture, fishing, and production space, local residents increasingly appear as hired workers rather than full productive subjects. Third, market value realization has shifted from internal community circulation to tourism consumption and derivative service industries. Real fish markets and everyday trading spaces have weakened, replaced by restaurants, farm stays, and scenic-area consumption.

Participant absence, therefore, is not the result of a single factor or merely cultural decline. It is produced by the combined effects of spatial exhibition, the de-subjectification of production, and the derivatization of the market.

6.2. Practical Implications for the Renewal of Traditional Settlements

The T Lake case shows that renewing festival and ritual space does not automatically amount to cultural protection. When renewal primarily serves landscape display, event operation, and tourism consumption, while failing to preserve the local community's substantive control over ritual, production, and market space, local people may instead become marginalized. The key to renewing traditional settlements is therefore not simply to display culture, but to sustain its real use, production, and regeneration within local society.

First, ritual space should not be reduced to an isolated festival node, but re-embedded in local production and everyday life. What requires protection is not ritual content alone, but also the spatial relations and logics of use that sustain it. Second, productive space must be brought back into collaborative planning. Once productive space is extracted, local residents lose their most practical link to the festival. Renewal should

therefore not trade de-production for landscape order, but should preserve residents' real productive identities in key spaces. Third, value realization should not rely entirely on derivative service industries, but should retain channels of real exchange and benefit return in which local society can participate.

In short, the core of traditional-settlement renewal lies not in improving visibility, but in preserving local rights of spatial use, production, and benefit, so that renewal can support the continuation of social life rather than mere landscape preservation.

6.3. Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single case, so its conclusions remain highly contextual and require further testing through comparative studies of other lake festivals and traditional settlements. Second, its analysis relies mainly on fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires, which reveal local perceptions but offer limited insight into long-term institutional change and benefit distribution. Third, the questionnaire sample is relatively small and partly dependent on retrospective recall. Future research should incorporate longitudinal data, multi-case comparison, and finer institutional and economic evidence.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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THE MECHANISM OF PLACE ATTACHMENT IN PUBLIC SPACES OF RURAL-TO-URBAN RESETTLEMENT COMMUNITIES AND DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR RENEWAL AND DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF CHANGSHA CITY

Yunfeng Chen, Yipeng Tan

THE MECHANISM OF PLACE ATTACHMENT IN PUBLIC SPACES OF RURAL-TO-URBAN RESETTLEMENT COMMUNITIES AND DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR RENEWAL AND DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF CHANGSHA CITY



China's rapid urbanization over the past decades has profoundly reshaped traditional rural settlements and their spatial environments. The accelerated construction of physical infrastructure, while addressing immediate needs, has also generated a series of urban development challenges, including haphazard building practices, the fragmentation of traditional settlement patterns, and tensions between urban and rural cultures. These issues are further exacerbated by the absence of a "bottom-up" perspective in planning, with insufficient attention given to residents' actual spatial needs and the continuity of traditional practices. Against this backdrop, this study selects rural-to-urban resettlement communities in Changsha as the research focus. Drawing on place attachment theory, it systematically examines the "human-place relationship", emphasizing the spatial elements that foster residents' attachment to community public spaces, the mechanisms through which these attachments are formed, and their implications for bottom-up approaches to public space renewal. Three representative resettlement communities are analyzed, corresponding to distinct stages of policy implementation: the initial formation period (2000–2009), the development period (2010–2020), and the maturity period (2021–present). This temporal framework enables a comparative analysis of how evolving institutional contexts have influenced the layout, functions, and vitality of public spaces. Field investigations, combined with spatial distribution mapping, typological analysis, and heat maps of activity intensity, are employed to identify key public spaces, the activities they attract, and the underlying reasons for residents' place attachment. Further analysis of active scenarios reveals the spatial elements that support diverse activities, as well as the pathways through which spatial characteristics shape behavioral patterns and strengthen attachment. On this basis, a theoretical model of the mechanisms of place attachment in resettlement community public spaces is constructed and empirically validated. The model demonstrates the pathways and effects through which specific spatial elements foster attachment, thereby informing design strategies for community renewal. The findings highlight that the renewal of public spaces in rural-to-urban transition communities must integrate both functional adaptation and emotional connection. A layered design approach is proposed to address differentiated needs, enhance residents' sense of belonging, and promote the continuation of local traditions and cultural practices. This research explores the continuity and transformation of traditional elements in resettlement communities for displaced farmers across temporal and spatial dimensions, and contributes to bridging the gap between the physical environment and residents' emotional demands, offering empirical evidence for public space renewal under Changsha's "Liang-An Land Use" policy. More broadly, it provides methodological insights for advancing people-centered urbanization and supporting sustainable community development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 20th century, rapid economic development has significantly accelerated the process of urbanization. The expansion of urban areas has steadily encroached upon farmland at the urban-rural interface. Rural agricultural land has gradually been replaced by urban construction land, leading to profound transformations in both physical and social spaces and the disappearance of traditional public spaces. Many traditional rural areas have gradually transformed into urban zones, resulting in a large population of farmers who have become urban residents due to land expropriation. To properly resettle this rural-to-urban population and achieve “in-situ urbanization”—the on-site transition from rural to urban living—the government typically implements measures to rebuild communities in place. Traditional rural settlements are restructured into resettlement communities for the rural-to-urban population. These resettlement

communities differ significantly from traditional rural communities in terms of their functional structure, aligning more closely with the characteristics of urban communities. Within a relatively short timeframe, the physical space has undergone a transformation driven by extensive planning and design.

The transition to urbanization involves not only changes in public spaces and their functional uses but also the restructuring of residents' social relationships, lifestyles, and cultural identities. As a vital component of community spaces, public spaces serve as key venues for residents to engage in daily social interactions, entertainment, and leisure activities. They not only fulfill residents' needs for gathering, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging but also, to a certain extent, reflect the community's daily life and organizational structure. The primary users of resettlement communities for rural-to-urban migrants are residents who have retained traditional agricultural production and lifestyle habits; consequently, their lifestyles and social interactions continue to exhibit certain characteristics of rural communities. However, in the practical implementation of related projects, because public spaces often fail to meet the specific functional needs of residents' daily lives and livelihoods, a phenomenon has emerged where residents spontaneously remodel and repurpose these spaces. At the same time, the mismatch between spatial functions and residents' needs has also led to a lack of attachment to and a sense of belonging toward community spaces.

Based on this, this study aims to explore strategies for the renewal of public spaces in resettlement communities for rural-to-urban migrants from the perspective of place attachment. It analyzes how spatial optimization can address residents' functional and emotional needs, thereby providing guidance for strengthening residents' sense of place attachment in such communities.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW OF THE PEOPLE-PLACE RELATIONSHIP IN PLACE ATTACHMENT

The theory of place attachment is an interdisciplinary concept that explores the deep emotional bonds between individuals and specific places. Originating from the concept of "topophilia" proposed by humanistic geographer Duan Yifu in 1974, it also builds upon the philosophical reflections of existentialist phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is used in human geography to describe people's affection for specific places. In architectural research, Norbert Schulz's "spirit of place" is often cited as a primary theoretical reference for place studies, and its phenomenological perspective is regarded as providing a human-centered research methodology.¹ The "attachment" dimension, on the other hand, focuses on the "human" aspect.² The formation of attachment is influenced not only by physical spatial elements but also significantly by individual factors such as one's own psychological experiences and social experiences.³ In summary, place serves as the vehicle for the generation of attachment and constitutes its material foundation;

attachment, in turn, is the connection formed through the accumulation of continuous interactive experiences with a place and the superimposition of conscious and emotional bonds.

2.1. People

In the three-dimensional model of place attachment theory, “people” are the central focus of study. From the perspective of the human body, people’s sense of place attachment stems from the sensory perceptions provided by the body; the body serves as the link between consciousness and the material world, and it is through the body that people come into contact with the world and experience it. From the perspective of the individual and the collective, personal experiences—including life events, significant occurrences, and the pursuit of self-actualization—all influence the development of place attachment; similarly, groups sharing common historical memories and religious beliefs tend to develop convergent outcomes in terms of place attachment.

2.2. Place

“Place” serves as the physical vessel and sociocultural container for the emotional attachment projected onto a location. In a three-dimensional model, “place” refers not only to its physical environment and spatial structure but also encompasses the social functions, cultural significance, and symbolic value it embodies.⁴ Physical attributes—including spatial layout, scale, facilities, ecological environment, and aesthetic qualities—directly influence the comfort and convenience of use; Sociocultural attributes, on the other hand, include the site’s historical context, symbolic meaning, community atmosphere, and the perceptible “spirit of place.”

2.3. Process

In the three-dimensional model of place attachment, “interactive bonding” serves as the core process and dynamic link connecting “people” and “places.” It emphasizes that feelings of attachment do not arise out of thin air, but are constructed through sustained, multi-layered interactions between individuals or groups and places.⁵

3. SURVEY OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PLACE ATTACHMENT IN COMMUNITY PUBLIC SPACES

3.1. Background of the Construction of Resettlement Communities for Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Changsha

Over the past two decades, urbanization in Changsha has led to a significant expansion of urban construction areas and the establishment of numerous resettlement communities for farmers transitioning to urban residents. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of resettlement communities that were completed and handed over for use in the five districts of Changsha between 2000 and 2019.⁶ According to incomplete statistics, there are a total of 157 resettlement communities across the five districts, including 27 in Furong District, 47 in Yuelu District, 39 in Yuhua District, 19 in Tianxin District, and 25 in Kaifu District. Due to limitations in data sources, the actual number of completed projects may exceed this figure.

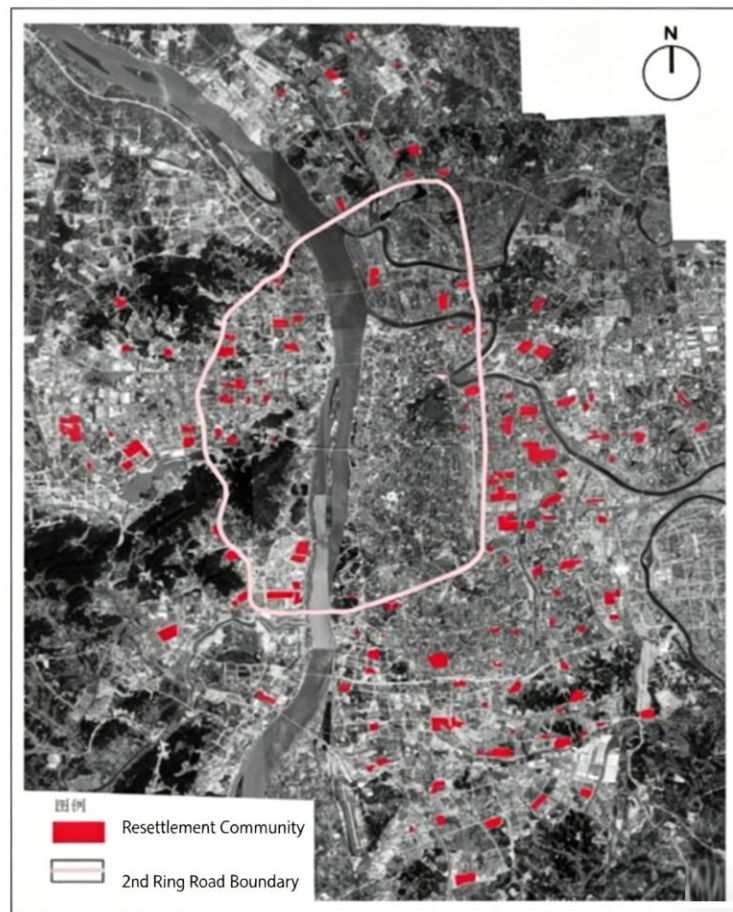


Figure 1: Distribution of Resettlement Housing Complexes in Changsha (Source: Yang Zhang. Study on the Development Path and Management Strategy of Informal Economy in Changsha Resettlement Area, 2020).

3.2. Stages of Development for Resettlement Communities for Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Changsha

3.2.1. Formative Period (2000–2008)

The concept of “land for two types of security” was first outlined in the “Order No. 60.” Subsequently, to simplify terminology, governments at all levels gradually standardized the term to “land for two types of security.” These projects were primarily led by village collectives and involved agreement-based land transfers, with partners typically consisting of local small companies or individuals, resulting in a low degree of marketization. From the issuance of “Order No. 60” in 2000 to the issuance of “Order No. 103” in 2008, the foundational framework of the “Liang’an Land” policy was established.

Communities developed during this formative period were rapidly constructed to address housing shortages. As they emerged during a phase of policy exploration, their planning was relatively unsophisticated, and supporting facilities were inadequate. At the macro level, building layouts were highly uniform, primarily featuring orderly, grid-like arrangements. Spacing between buildings strictly adhered to the minimum standards of sunlight regulations, resulting in parallel and dense arrays. Floor area ratios were relatively low (≤ 1.8), and land utilization rates were low. While this layout ensured construction efficiency and housing capacity, it led to monotony and repetitiveness in the community’s spatial form, causing the community to lack distinctiveness.

3.2.2. Development Phase (2009–2020)

On July 29, 2009, the General Office of the Changsha Municipal People’s Government issued the “Opinions on Further Strengthening the Resettlement of Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated” (Changzhengbanfa [2009] No. 16), which further refined the requirements for the use and development of land designated for resettlement and relocation, as well as the management measures for land operations. At the same time, this document helped standardize the management of land designated for resettlement and relocation, promoted the transition from traditional negotiated land transfers to the “tender-auction-listing” system, propelled the development of such land into a new phase, and gradually advanced the optimization of resettlement construction.

Community planning and design during the development phase became more standardized, with a gradual emphasis on the provision of public service facilities, reflecting the transition of resettlement community construction from an extensive to a refined approach. In terms of architectural layout and individual buildings, the most significant change in communities during the development phase was the upgrade in

development formats and architectural forms. To meet the requirements of centralized resettlement, the plot ratio of communities was significantly increased to 2.5–3.0. Although building layouts continued to be dominated by efficient row-and-column configurations, there was a shift from low-rise to high-rise residential models in terms of building height, reflecting the evolution from early low-rise brick-concrete structures to later high-rise elevator buildings. At the same time, the introduction of property management laid the preliminary foundation for standardized community management.

3.2.3. Maturity Phase (2021–present)

Data from the **Changsha City Urban Renewal Special Plan (2021–2035)** shows that as of 2021, there were a total of 210 Nong'an communities within the six districts and one county of Changsha City that required urban renewal, involving 104,800 households, 6,958 buildings, and a total floor area of 14.7591 million square meters. The “Guiding Opinions on the Planning, Construction, and Management of Centralized Resettlement Housing for Villagers Regarding Functional Zoning, Separation of Commercial and Residential Uses, and Separation of Rental and Ownership Housing,” issued in 2022, states that, in accordance with the principle of functional zoning, planning leadership will be upheld and strengthened. The quality of centralized resettlement housing projects for villagers will be comprehensively enhanced in terms of project design, facade design, public spaces, landscaping, facilities and equipment, and long-term management. In the context of urban development in the new era, the government has strengthened oversight to promote the refined and intensive supply of construction land. Centralized land allocation proceeds in parallel with urban renewal, and resettlement construction has entered a phase of high-quality development.

Mature communities prioritize the development of public spaces, featuring well-designed traffic flow patterns and recreational facilities. These communities emphasize people-centered development and enjoy relatively high levels of resident participation. In terms of architectural layout and individual buildings, mature communities utilize high-rise structures with a high floor area ratio (3.5–4.0) to maximize land efficiency. All buildings are modern high-rise elevator-serviced residences, with structural integrity, materials, and facade design meeting the standards of commercial residential properties. Professional property management is universally implemented to ensure long-term maintenance quality and service standards within the community.

3.3. Overview of Field Research Case Studies

When selecting case studies, we first limited the construction years of the rural-to-urban resettlement communities to the period between 2000 and 2020. Since these communities have exhibited relatively stable characteristics over the past two decades, with distinct patterns and unique features, we narrowed the scope of the case studies to those in their formation and development phases. This approach facilitates the

development of representative and targeted renewal strategies for community public spaces. Additionally, the case studies must exhibit the typical characteristics of rural-to-urban resettlement communities. Four rural-to-urban resettlement community cases were ultimately selected, covering virtually all periods and types of such communities that meet the requirements. Among these, three are located in Yuelu District and one in Furong District, with their locations shown in Figure 2.

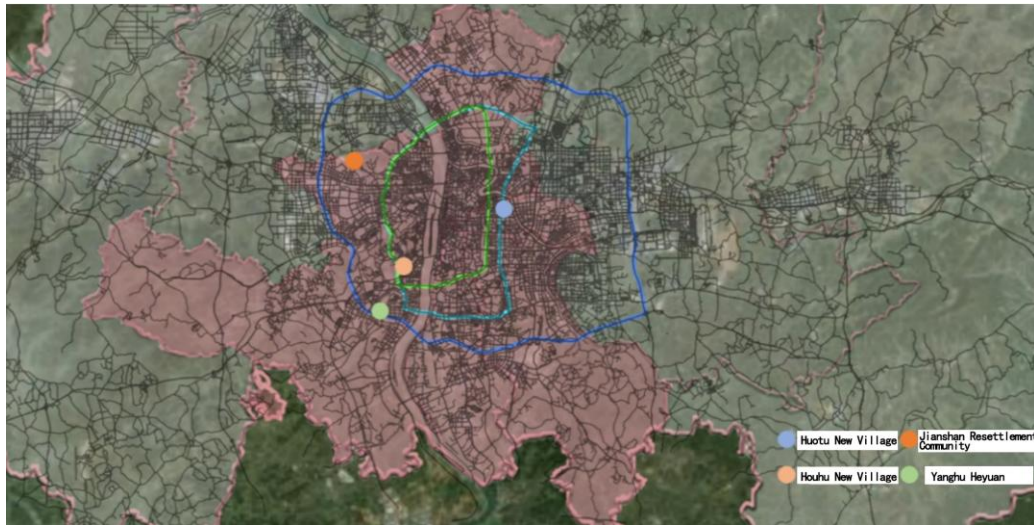


Figure 2: Map of Surveyed Communities (Source: Illustrated by the author).

4. ANALYSIS OF PLACE ATTACHMENT IN PUBLIC SPACES WITHIN RESETTLEMENT COMMUNITIES

The behavioral expression of place attachment in actual community public spaces can be summarized as residents' construction of attachment to these spaces. Based on their own daily needs and emotional preferences, residents engage in "alternative uses" of space, transcending the limitations of its original planned purpose, and endow the space with personalized emotional value by redefining its functions. Demand-driven spatial transformations have spurred the emergence of "informal public spaces." These spaces, though not included in official plans, are autonomously created and maintained by residents, serving as central venues for daily interaction and emotional exchange. The synergy between these two factors drives residents' active engagement with and emotional empowerment of community public spaces, representing a classic manifestation of how place attachment is translated from a psychological and emotional level into concrete spatial practices. Classifying public spaces in resettlement communities for rural-to-urban migrants by scale facilitates a systematic analysis of the patterns of residents' alternative uses and the morphological characteristics of informal public spaces. Scale, as a fundamental perspective in spatial research, effectively reveals the degree of connection between spaces at different levels and residents' daily lives. Based on the

distance between the space and residents' original living environments, as well as the scope for functional adaptation and utilization, this study classifies community public spaces into three types: micro-scale, small-to-medium-scale, and large-scale (as shown in Figure 3).

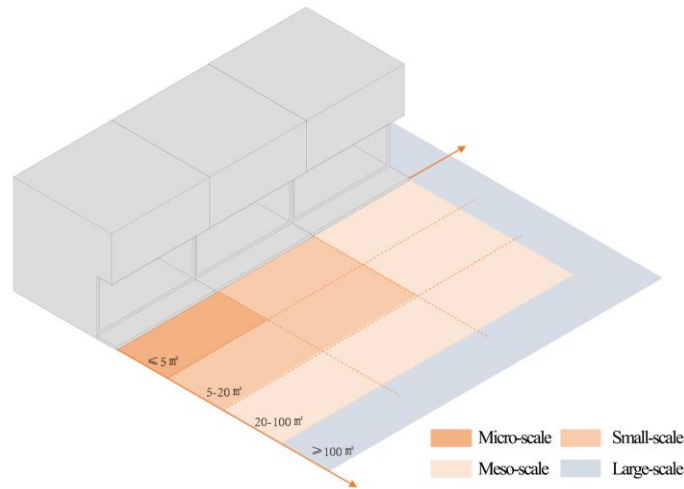


Figure 3: Diagram of Scale Categories for the Diverse Uses of Public Spaces (Source: Illustrated by the author).

4.1. Adaptation of Individual Household Demand at the Micro Level

Micro-scale spaces refer to semi-private areas adjacent to residential units that are deeply integrated into residents' daily lives. Their functional adaptations and utilization are limited in scope, typically serving the immediate needs of individuals or small groups. At this scale, the manifestation of place attachment is primarily reflected in residents' additions and alterations to the building structure itself, as well as the addition of new structures, exhibiting distinct adaptive characteristics.

Residents' modifications to micro-scale spaces primarily focus on residential entrances, the areas beneath ground-floor windows, the outer edges of balconies, and the transitional zones between residences and the street. Although these areas fall within the realm of public space, their unique proximity to private residences creates a gray zone between public and private domains. Based on their daily needs, residents functionally adapt the building's facades by installing awnings, laying simple steps, mounting handrails, and setting up storage racks. Simultaneously, they add structures to these micro-scale spaces for storing objects—such as placing storage cabinets, stacking farm tools, setting up clotheslines, and positioning plant stands—thereby transforming the corners of public spaces into extensions of their private lives.

4.2. Spatial Heterogeneity of Community Clusters at Small and Medium Scales

Small- and medium-scale public spaces encompass two levels: small-scale and medium-scale. While these two levels differ in their formation logic and spatial characteristics, they generally manifest as the collaborative use and adaptation of space by groups of residents or communities based on shared needs.

Small-scale public spaces range in size from 5 to 20 square meters and are located in areas such as public passageways around the ground floor of buildings, street corners, and the edges of small green belts. They are primarily found on sidewalks beneath mixed-use residential and commercial buildings, at small intersections within communities, and in areas extending from the entrances of shops. The formation of this type of space stems from the convergence of needs among multiple households or businesses, shifting from an extension of individual living spaces to shared use by small groups. The core logic lies in the efficient utilization of public corners, reflecting the collaborative use and adaptation of space by small groups.

The physical manifestations of these spaces typically take the form of linear or clustered point-based arrangements, composed of interconnected or adjacent micro-spaces. They lack a uniform, regular shape, often appearing as irregular blocks that dynamically expand or contract according to usage needs; their boundaries are semi-ambiguous, defined primarily by the visual arrangement of facilities rather than rigid physical boundaries. Facility elements are primarily semi-public, including commercial extension racks, folding table and chair sets, and temporary stalls. Some facilities are fixed while others are movable, and they share a degree of communal use. Element density is medium to high, with a noticeable tendency for facilities to be stacked or placed side-by-side; capacity limits are set to meet the shared needs of small groups.

4.3. Functional Self-Exploration of Idle Spaces at a Macro Scale

Large-scale public spaces should have an area of no less than 100 square meters. These are typically unplanned vacant lots within or adjacent to a community, unused mezzanine levels, large parking lots, or open areas at the community's periphery. They are primarily located on the ground floors of high-rise buildings, vacant plots at the community's edges, large surface parking lots, vacant lots left over from demolition, and junctions between the community and external roads.

These spaces consist of large-scale open areas with complete, independent spatial forms that may be regular or irregular. Due to their diverse functions, they exhibit distinct zoning characteristics. Their boundaries are relatively clear, often formed by continuous facilities or natural topography to create enclosed or semi-enclosed perimeters, thereby delineating different functional zones and ensuring orderly use of the space. Facility elements are primarily comprehensive functional facilities of varying sizes; some are movable, while

others are temporary structures, all bearing distinct functional orientations. The density of these elements is flexibly adjusted according to functional zones, with usage limits set to meet the community's overall diverse and large-scale needs.

The formation of large-scale spaces is driven by macro-level functional gaps within the community as a whole. The core logic lies in the large-scale utilization of idle spaces; this process not only fills the void of large public activity venues in the community but also demonstrates the community's capacity for spontaneous spatial governance achieved through autonomous coordination and collective maintenance. Particularly noteworthy is that these spaces accommodate residents' desire to continue agricultural production: some middle-aged and elderly residents cultivate plots of idle land on the community's periphery, integrating traditional farming practices into their new living environment and creating composite spaces that combine productive and recreational functions. This agricultural practice not only meets residents' subsistence needs for home-grown vegetables but also serves as a vital vehicle for preserving rural memories and perpetuating farming culture, allowing large-scale spaces to retain the authentic essence of rural life amidst the backdrop of urbanization.

5. CONCLUSION

This study first traces the evolution of China's resettlement policies for landless farmers, identifying the institutional constraints imposed by monetization and land-retention models on the formation of community spaces. Using Changsha as a case study, the research classifies resettlement communities into formation, development, and maturity phases based on the policy milestones marked by Orders No. 60 and No. 103, revealing the evolutionary characteristics of architectural layout, traffic organization, and public space allocation across these stages. Building on this foundation, four representative cases—Huoju New Village, Houhu New Village, Jianshan Resettlement Community, and Yanghu Heyuan—were selected. By comprehensively employing methods such as spatial surveying, behavioral observation, and heat map analysis, the study conducted research from the dual dimensions of physical space and resident perception.

The study found that public spaces in resettlement communities for rural-to-urban migrants generally face a contradiction between homogeneous planning and heterogeneous needs. Residents transcend existing functional constraints through spatial misappropriation, forming a multi-level path of place attachment that progresses from micro-scale self-adaptation to small-to-medium-scale collaborative sharing, and ultimately to macro-scale functional self-exploration. At the micro-scale, this manifests as residents' personalized alterations and additions to the spaces surrounding their homes, as well as the storage of personal belongings; at the small-to-medium scale, it appears as groups redefining the functions of passageways, corners, and

planned open spaces; and at the macro-scale, it is evident in the community-level, large-scale utilization of vacant land and the integration of diverse functions. These practices represent not only residents' proactive responses to insufficient formal spatial provision but also the core mechanism through which they transform public spaces into emotional anchors.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

THE PARADOX OF PRESERVATION: DISPLACEMENT AS A BYPRODUCT OF HERITAGE POLICY IN SHANGHAI'S JIANYE LI

Zheyi Xi, Katharine Bartsch, Peter Charles

THE PARADOX OF PRESERVATION: DISPLACEMENT AS A BYPRODUCT OF HERITAGE POLICY IN SHANGHAI'S JIANYE LI



This paper examines Jianye Li, a 1930s shikumen neighborhood in Shanghai's Xuhui District converted into the Capella Shanghai hotel. Drawing on Chinese-language policy texts, the existing ethnographic record, and post-conversion site documentation, it sets out the three regulatory instruments enacted between 1996 and 2005, traces their enactment at the site, and reads the sequence as three operations -- Production of Obsolescence, Bureaucratization of Displacement, Commodification of the Shell -- through which preservation became the mechanism of displacement rather than its alternative. The paper concludes with three directions the policy framework does not yet address.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Capella Shanghai opened on the former site of Jianye Li (建业里), a 1930s *shikumen* (石库门, stone-gate lane house) neighborhood in the Xuhui District that had housed Shanghainese families for the better part of a century. Through meticulously restored *shikumen* facades and layouts, and by reviving the architectural vocabulary of Republican-era *lilong* to suit contemporary use, this project has been held up by the Shanghai government as a model of preservation. Yet the community that had inhabited these lanes had been relocated between 2003 and 2005 under the compensation provisions of the 2001 Implementation Rules on Urban Housing Demolition Management. The families who had shared cooking in the *tianjing* (天井, light well), raised children in the branch lanes, and woven their daily lives into the dense sociality that Shanghainese call *renqi* (人气, lit. “human breath” or “human energy”; the felt density of human presence and everyday activity that animates a place) were dispersed to peripheral housing estates. The lanes were subsequently gated and converted into a luxury hospitality complex, accessible only to hotel guests and villa residents.

This disjunction between the preservation of architectural form and the removal of the social life it once sustained is the subject of this paper. The question is not whether residents should have remained or whether the buildings required intervention, both of which involved genuine material exigencies, but rather how a regulatory framework whose stated purpose included “improving citizens’ living conditions” and “effectively preserving historical character”¹ arrived at an outcome in which the two goals became mutually exclusive. The disjunction raises a question for heritage practice beyond this specific site: when preservation keeps the building and loses the community, what has actually been preserved? The paper does not treat the Jianye Li outcome as evidence of policy failure; the instruments it examines each addressed legitimate and pressing administrative concerns, from housing safety to equitable compensation to heritage protection. What is traced, instead, is how the specific sequence and articulation of these instruments combined to a structural

effect that none of them individually intended.

Shanghai's *lilong* neighborhoods have been the subject of substantial scholarship on the relationship between heritage intervention and residential displacement in the city's central districts. Shenjing He and Fulong Wu have documented the socio-spatial impacts of property-led redevelopment, identifying patterns of displacement and incipient gentrification, including the relocation of over 1,950 households from the Xintiandi (新天地) redevelopment area alone.² He has subsequently proposed the concept of "new-build gentrification" to describe the Shanghai-specific pattern in which heritage sites are demolished and rebuilt as premium commercial products, producing gentrification through construction rather than through the gradual market-driven process described in the classical Western literature.³ Non Arkaraprasertkul has examined how heritage preservation paradoxically drives gentrification in Shanghai's lane-house districts, a dynamic he terms "gentrification from within," in which the very designation of a neighborhood as historically significant accelerates the displacement of its residents.⁴

Xiaohua Zhong and Xiangming Chen have traced the shifting modalities of heritage intervention in Shanghai between 1990 and 2015, distinguishing demolition, rehabilitation, and conservation, and documenting how each approach was applied to specific *lilong* sites including Xintiandi, Tianzifang (田子坊, a comparable *lilong*-based adaptive-reuse district in central Shanghai), and Bugao Li (步高里).⁵ Esther H. K. Yung, Edwin H. W. Chan, and Ying Xu have examined Tianzifang as a contrasting case in which a community-initiated process of adaptive reuse produced a model where residents participated in and benefited from the commercial transformation of their neighborhood, though they note that rising rents and changing demographics have progressively eroded the original community's presence.⁶ Valérie Laurans has specifically documented the Jianye Li site prior to its conversion, examining how the discourse of "modern conveniences," particularly the absence of individual plumbing, was deployed as a justification for residential displacement in a neighborhood where the physical conditions, while genuinely poor, were shared by large swathes of the city's housing stock.⁷

After 1949, egalitarian housing allocation subdivided these dwellings that were once designed for the elites into five to eight households per house, producing a second stratum of *lilong* life: a multi-household collective form of living. This stratum was generated under conditions of privacy loss, overcrowding, and inadequate sanitation; it was not a romantic form of collective life. It was, however, a tradition in its own right. Much of the civic culture of Shanghainese today has roots in its mid-century consolidation, and contemporary vernacular vocabulary retains terms from its collective-dwelling infrastructure, such as *laohuzao* (老虎灶, lit. "tiger stove"; community hot-water shops).⁸ When this paper describes what Jianye Li lost between 2003 and 2005, the referent is this post-1949 stratum, not the pre-1949 form that the subdivision had already replaced.

Jianye Li is treated here as a critical case in a specific sense: it is a site at which all three regulatory instruments examined in this paper operated in full sequence, making it the most complete worked example of the pattern this paper traces. This paper does not claim that Jianye Li is typical or representative; such claims would require comparative data the paper does not have. What distinguishes this analysis from existing literature is its focus on how three regulatory instruments articulate with one another, and on the spatial-social byproduct that emerges when they are read as a sequence rather than separately. Existing scholarship has examined either policy outcomes or the cultural dynamics of gentrification. This paper instead draws on Chinese-language sources that rarely analyzed directly in English-language literature, to show how the specific texts of three instruments together constitute the administrative conditions under which resident displacement and heritage commodification unfold as a continuum rather than as alternative trajectories. The contribution lies in showing how a sequence of separately motivated instruments acquired, in combination, an effect none of them individually intended. Through Jianye Li, the paper traces a three-stage process – housing classification, resident relocation, and heritage reclassification – and asks what is lost when a socio-spatial practice is removed and only its architectural form is retained.

The paper proceeds in four sections. Section 2 examines each of the three regulatory instruments — the 365 Plan, the 2001 Implementation Rules, and Notice No. 31 — in the order they were issued, drawing on the Chinese-language texts. Section 3 traces the enactment of each instrument at Jianye Li, in the order of Section 2 and across the overlapping timeline of the site between 1996 and 2005. Section 4 reads the case as a single analytical sequence, naming the three operations the sequence performed: the Production of Obsolescence, the Bureaucratization of Displacement, and the Commodification of the Shell. Section 5 turns to the limits of preservation that the case exposes within the present policy framework, and to the directions the regulatory system does not currently address.

2. THE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE (1996–2005)

Between the mid-1990s and 2005, three regulatory instruments shaped the trajectory of Shanghai's *lilong* neighborhoods, each addressing a distinct dimension of the city's housing transformation but operating in sequence to produce cumulative effects that exceeded their individual scope. This section examines each instrument in turn, drawing on the Chinese-language texts of the original policy documents.

The first instrument is the 365 Plan, named for its target: the demolition, by 2000, of 3.65 million square meters of housing classified as dangerous or substandard (*weipeng jianwu* 危棚简屋). The target was set by the Sixth Municipal Party Congress in 1992. In 1996, the Shanghai Municipal Government issued Document No. [1996]18, forwarding the Municipal Construction Committee's recommendations on accelerating the

programme.⁹ The document reported that by the end of 1995, approximately 1.797 million square meters of the target had been demolished, representing 49.2 per cent, and acknowledged that the remaining housing stock was “scattered across third, fourth, and fifth-tier land parcels” characterized by “high residential density, low land-value differentials, and high renovation costs.”¹⁰ Under Shanghai’s administrative land-tier system, districts are ranked 1 (most central) through 6 (most peripheral), with the tier determining both land-use fees and compensation scales; the parcels identified in the 1996 document were thus the more peripheral of the central districts.

The document outlined a package of administrative incentives. Fee exemptions were granted across several categories of demolition-related charges, including household-registration transcription and public-housing demolition compensation fees.¹¹ Land-use fees were reduced depending on land tier, and developers of 365 Plan sites were exempted from the standard requirement to contribute 20 per cent of newly constructed housing to the municipal affordable-housing pool.¹² For sites involving more than 300 households, district governments could submit consolidated applications to the Municipal Housing and Land Bureau, which would delegate both land-use and demolition approval authority to the district level in a single batch.¹³

Weipeng jianwu originally named self-built squatter structures, the improvised tin-roofed and timber-framed accretions that had accumulated along Shanghai’s waterways and railway verges during periods of in-migration. *Weifang* (危房, dangerous housing) was a broader structural-condition category applied to any housing stock whose maintenance backlog placed it below contemporary standards, and by the mid-1990s it was being extended to Republican-era *lilong* built by commercial developers. Under the 365 Plan, the two categories were brought within a single administrative object: once a building was classified *weifang*, its architectural pedigree no longer determined its administrative trajectory.

The second instrument was the Shanghai Implementation Rules on Urban Housing Demolition Management (上海市城市房屋拆迁管理细则), adopted at the 110th executive meeting of the Shanghai Municipal Government on 8 October 2001 and effective from 1 November of that year.¹⁴ The rules comprised sixty-nine articles across five chapters and established a standardized legal framework for residential demolition and compensation that replaced both the 1991 implementation rules and the 1997 regulations on substandard housing demolition compensation.¹⁵ Article 1 stated the purpose of the rules as “strengthening the management of urban housing demolition, safeguarding the lawful rights and interests of parties to demolition, and ensuring the smooth progress of construction projects.” Article 4 established the governing principle that urban housing demolition “must conform to urban planning, be conducive to the renovation of old urban districts and the improvement of the ecological environment and protect cultural relics and historic sites.”¹⁶

The rules defined three compensation modes for residential demolition (Article 32): monetary compensation, value-standard housing exchange, and area-standard housing exchange.¹⁷ Article 33 set the calculation for monetary compensation at the “real estate market assessed unit price” of the demolished property, with a minimum floor at “the average market unit price of transacted public housing in the same district”; valuations were conducted by agencies accredited by the Municipal Housing and Land Resources Administration, with the assessment date fixed to the date of demolition permit issuance (Article 53).¹⁸ For residents of “old-style lane houses” (*jiushi lilong fangwu* 旧式里弄房屋), Article 39 provided area-standard exchange in which the floor area of the replacement dwelling was enlarged according to a graduated scale based on the land-tier differential: 30 per cent for relocation from tiers one through three to tier four, 60 per cent to tier five, and 100 per cent to tier six.¹⁹ The provision meant that residents of central-district lane houses who accepted replacement housing in peripheral areas received proportionally larger dwellings but at substantially greater distance from the urban core and from the social networks their original neighborhoods had sustained.

The rules also formalized the enforcement side of the relocation process. Article 17 authorized demolition permit holders to commission accredited demolition implementation units (*chaiqian danwei* 拆迁单位) to carry out the relocation, and prohibited district housing and land bureaus from acting as either permit holders or commissioned units.²⁰ Articles 25 and 26 established the procedural finality of the process: compulsory execution was authorized where residents did not vacate within an adjudicated period, and municipal construction projects proceeded on the principle of “demolition and site clearance first, dispute resolution second.”²¹ The effect was to transform what had been a series of ad hoc clearance processes into a codified legal framework of standardized compensation, accredited appraisal, and formalized enforcement. The 1990s pattern of locally negotiated, often contentious demolitions gave way to a procedural framework in which each step, from permit issuance through valuation to relocation, followed a prescribed administrative sequence.

The third instrument was Notice No. 31 (沪府发〔2004〕31号), issued on 11 September 2004 under the title “Notice on Further Strengthening the Protection of Historical-Cultural Landscape Areas and Excellent Historic Buildings in This Municipality” (关于进一步加强本市历史文化风貌区和优秀历史建筑保护的通知)²² The notice strengthened the implementation of the Shanghai Regulations on the Protection of Historical-Cultural Landscape Areas and Excellent Historic Buildings, adopted by the Standing Committee of the 11th Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress in July 2002.²³ It opened by situating Shanghai’s historic architecture within a national narrative of cultural significance: “Since modern times, Shanghai has been an important window for the meeting of Chinese and Western cultures... Shanghai’s rich historical culture is an

epitome of modern Chinese historical culture, possessing unique historical value and commemorative significance.”²⁴ The notice called for “the strictest and most scientific protection system” under the principle of “comprehensive planning, holistic protection, active utilization, and strict legal management” (全面规划, 整体保护, 依法严管).²⁵

Section 2 expanded the scope of protection to include “pre-1949 garden residences, apartment buildings, contiguous new-style lane houses, distinctive *shikumen* lane houses, and residential buildings with historical and humanistic value,” as well as “industrial buildings, shops, warehouses, workshops, and bridges representing different historical periods.”²⁶ Section 3 directed planning departments to compile detailed regulatory plans for each of the twelve approved historical-cultural landscape areas, specifying core protection zones and construction control zones, and to determine the “demolish, renovate, or retain” (*chai, gai, liu* 拆, 改, 留) status of every building within these areas.²⁷ Section 4 stipulated that “without the approval of the municipal competent department, buildings within the scope of protection may not be demolished or renovated.”²⁸

Section 5 introduced the pilot program for “integrated area preservation” (*chengpian baobu shidian* 成片保护试点), specifying a collaborative model of “government coordination and support, expert guidance, enterprise operation, citizen participation, and societal cooperation,” with the stated dual goals of “effectively preserving historical character” and “improving citizens’ living conditions.”²⁹ Section 6 addressed the financial framework of preservation. It directed municipal and district fiscal authorities to establish dedicated preservation funds for “preliminary turnover costs of integrated preservation” (前期周转费用, i.e. interim rehousing costs during the renovation period) and instructed relevant departments to “formulate corresponding policies to provide land specifically designated for constructing resettlement housing for residents of integrated preservation areas, and to advance integrated preservation through market-oriented operation.”³⁰ The notice thus built the regulatory scaffolding for a heritage-designated, commercially operated, publicly subsidized form of preservation.

Two features of this notice proved salient for the trajectory of *lilong* neighborhoods in the years that followed. First, Notice No. 31 extended categorical protection to *shikumen lilong* by name for the first time. The 2002 Regulations had relied on generic qualitative criteria without enumerating residential typologies.²³ With Notice No. 31, the residential typology that the 365 Plan had targeted for demolition entered the typological scope of heritage protection. Second, the notice’s language of “active utilization,” “enterprise operation,” and “market-

oriented operation” supplied a regulatory basis for converting these buildings into commercial heritage assets through state-enterprise partnerships.

These three instruments did not coordinate. Each was issued by a different organ, the Municipal Construction Committee, the Municipal Government, the Municipal People’s Congress Standing Committee—each addressing its own administrative problem: substandard-housing clearance, compensation regularization, and heritage classification. What linked them was a handoff. Each instrument’s output became the administrative object on which the next operated. The 365 Plan classified central district *lilong* as weifang, and that classification was the eligibility category through which the 2001 Rules’ compensation provisions applied at sites like Jianye Li. The 2001 Rules emptied those sites. Emptied sites, in turn, were the kind of asset that Notice No. 31 could enroll in “integrated area preservation” through public-private partnership. Each instrument was issued without the next in view, and it is this reactive character that makes the cumulative effect at sites where all three operated hard to attribute to any single decision. The purpose of this case below is to illustrate this point.

3. JIANYE LI: A CASE STUDY

A note on sources and methods before the case begins. The site reconstruction that follows draws primarily on Laurans (2005), whose fieldwork at Jianye Li in the early 2000s remains the most detailed pre-conversion documentation available in any language. For the conversion itself the paper draws on independent scholarship, particularly Zheng Shiling’s 2018 account in *Built Heritage*. Where developer and operator materials are cited, they are attributed in-text rather than treated as independent verification. Contemporary site conditions and post-conversion spatial logic are informed by direct observations and photographic documentation conducted by the lead author during a site visit in December 2025. Translations of the Chinese-language policy texts in Section 2 are by the lead author, with terms of art retained in pinyin and glossed at first use.

This section shows how each of the three instruments examined in Section 2 was enacted at Jianye Li. The operation was not a clean sequence in time. The Xufang-Portman renovation of the site began in 2003 under the 2001 Rules, before Notice No. 31 would formalize in September 2004 the public-private partnership model the site was already enacting. The three instruments are treated below in the order of their introduction in Section 2.

Jianye Li was constructed in the 1930s by the Fonciere et Immobiliere de Chine as twenty-two rows of *shikumen* houses in the Xuhui District, organized around a spatial hierarchy of main lanes (主弄, *zhulong*, for

vehicular access) and branch lanes (支弄, *zhilong*, for pedestrian circulation) (Figure 1), with each dwelling centered on a *tianjing* (a forecourt enclosed by the *shikumen* gate and flanking wings, distinct from the inward-facing courtyard of northern Chinese house types).³¹ The *shikumen* typology, a hybrid of Western terrace-house planning and Chinese courtyard-house logic developed in the foreign concessions to accommodate rapid in-migration, produced a calibrated gradient from public street to semi-public main lane to semi-private branch lane to private dwelling.³² That gradient, over decades of dense cohabitation, generated the social texture of Shanghai's *lilong* neighborhoods, the layered spatial organization on which the social life of the *lilong* was constructed.

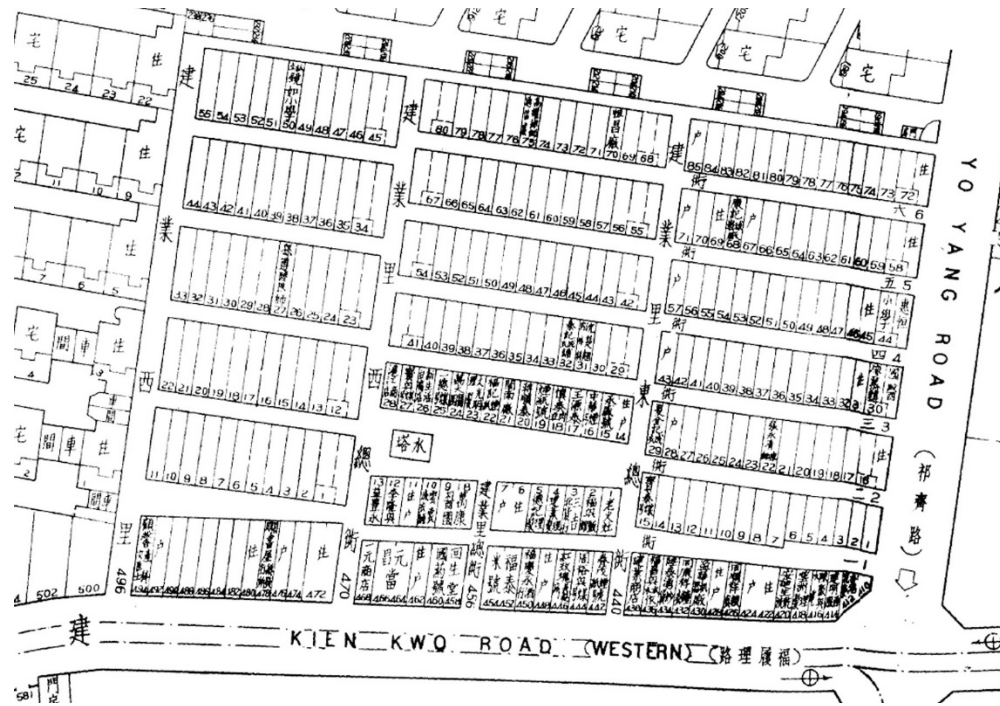


Figure 1: Site plan of Jianye Li, c. 1947, showing the twenty-two rows of *shikumen* houses organized along a north-south main lane running parallel to Yo Yang Road, with east-west branch lanes providing access to individual dwelling units. (Source: *Shanghai Street Directory* (上海市行号路图录), 1947).

At the scale of the individual dwelling, the *tianjing* provided light and ventilation while serving as a semi-enclosed forecourt – open to the sky and overlooked by the upper floors of the same dwelling and, across the narrow branch lane, of those opposite (Figure 2). At the scale of the lane, the narrow branch passages, typically three to four meters wide, brought the thresholds of opposing houses into close proximity, so that daily activities in the doorways and courtyard edges of adjacent dwellings were mutually visible and mutually audible. The main lanes connected the *lilong* to the surrounding street grid while maintaining an enclosure that set the interior apart from the public city outside. A pedestrian entering from the street passed through the

stone gate, itself a threshold between public pavement and semi-communal territory, before encountering the progressively narrower passages.

The first of the three instruments, the 365 Plan, acted at Jianye Li through the *weifang* classification that placed the site within the administrative category from which clearance subsequently followed; the clearance itself was carried out between 2003 and 2005 under the 2001 Rules, treated below. Laurans, who studied the neighborhood in the early 2000s, documented the conditions under which the classification applied.³³ The original single-family design had been subdivided to five to eight households per house, a pattern common across Shanghai's *lilong* stock following the socialist-era redistribution of housing. Residents relied on *matong* (马桶, chamber pots) and communal sanitation facilities, and the housing lacked modern plumbing, individual heating, and fire-safety provisions that met contemporary building codes. These conditions were not unusual for Shanghai's surviving *lilong* stock; Lu Hanchao has shown that the subdivision of single-family *lilong* into multi-household occupancy, together with the resulting strain on shared sanitation and circulation, was a city-wide condition across Shanghai's central districts by the late socialist period.³⁴



Figure 2: Downward view into a *tianjing* at Bugao Li, the surviving sister *lilong* of Jianye Li (demolished 2002–2005). The photograph serves as a visual proxy for the vertical density and layered intimacy of *shikumen* domestic space prior to displacement. (Source: Photograph by the first author, December 2025).

At Jianye Li the entanglement of physical deterioration and communal life took concrete form. The site's

physical deterioration and its communal life shared a single cause: the post-1949 subdivision of dwellings designed for one household into accommodation for five to eight or even more. Subdivision compressed each family's effective floor area, displacing cooking into the shared *tianjing*, domestic gathering into the branch lanes, and electrical service into improvised wiring grafted onto a building never engineered to power multiple sub-units. The same act of redistribution that produced the conditions later named *weifang*: strained load-bearing walls, fire-safety hazards, sanitary inadequacy, etc., also produced the *renqi* that residents describe as inseparable from the lanes. The *weifang* classification, however, registered only the first half of this dual outcome. The 365 Plan framework offered no instrument for treating the two independently, and its effect at Jianye Li was to place a socially constituted site into a clearance category defined on physical terms alone.

The second instrument, the 2001 Rules, governed the relocation of residents from Jianye Li between 2003 and 2005. The post-clearance renovation of the site was undertaken by a joint venture led by Portman Holdings and the state-owned Xufang Group (*Xufang Jituan* 徐房集团) of the Xuhui District.³⁵ The partnership structure divided responsibilities in a way that Notice No. 31's Section 5 would later formalize as the "government coordination and support, enterprise operation" model: Xufang held the land rights and ran the resident relocation through the district's demolition implementation apparatus, while Portman provided development capital and the design vision for a luxury mixed-use project.³⁶

Residents were dispersed to peripheral districts under Article 39,³⁷ scattered across Pudong, Minhang, and comparable locations. The housing that received them was, for the most part, the high-rise apartment estate typical of the resettlement stock of the period. Enclosed units, reached by elevator, without the branch lanes or shared courtyards through which the daily encounters of the original neighborhood had been sustained. The relocation was completed between 2003 and 2005. By the time the last residents departed, the site was entirely emptied, a precondition the renovation required in order to proceed with the structural interventions planned for the eastern and middle lanes. At Jianye Li, the 2001 Rules produced the material transaction that removed the residents from the site and placed the site itself into the condition the third instrument would require.

The third instrument, Notice No. 31, arrived after the relocation was underway but before the physical renovation was complete. Before Notice No. 31 was issued, however, the Shanghai Municipal Urban Planning Administration Bureau had already addressed Jianye Li at the site-specific level. On 21 May 2004, the bureau issued Document No. 沪规景〔2004〕463号, titled "Opinions on the Requirements for the Protection and Renovation Planning and Design of Jianye Li" (关于建业里保护整治规划设计要求的意见), setting out four conditions for the project.³⁸ The second of these bears directly on the argument: after protection and renovation, the land "should maintain its original use nature, primarily residential, continuing

Shanghai's *lilong* residential culture” (保护改造后，该处土地应该保持原有的使用性质，以居住为主，延续上海里弄居住文化). However, after the relocation of the original residents was already in progress under the 2001 Rules, “continuing” could no longer denote continuity of inhabitants but only of residential typology. The completed project can be read as having satisfied this condition, but only through a substitution that reveals the operative elasticity of the directive's language. “Primarily residential” (*yi juzhu wei zhu* 以居住为主) was fulfilled by hotel suites and serviced apartments. “*Lilong* residential culture” (*lilong juzhu wenhua* 里弄居住文化) was fulfilled by the architectural vocabulary of the lanes, which are cultural in their referential capacity but not in the lived practice they once sustained. The directive's two key terms were each met at the level of typological designation while the substance to which they had originally referred, the multi-household collective dwelling and the dense sociality of shared courtyards and branch-lane life, had already been removed under the 2001 Rules. Document No. 463 thus illustrates categories through which planning language specified what should be preserved were broad enough to accommodate precisely the semiotic operation that the third stage of the model describes, in which the form is retained as a sign and the social content it once indexed is replaced.

Notice No. 31's broader effect at Jianye Li was to provide the heritage-designation framework under which the emptied site could be reworked as a commercial asset. The renovation divided the work between two firms along the site. Kokaistudios took the western lane, which was structurally retained: original load-bearing walls were preserved where feasible, and the buildings were converted to hotel use while maintaining their external appearance and lane-level spatial configuration. Portman Architects took the eastern and middle lanes, which were demolished and reconstructed.³⁹ The new construction incorporated a reinforced-concrete frame, two basement levels for parking, contemporary mechanical and seismic systems, and brick cladding externally to reproduce the *shikumen* appearance (Figure 3).⁴⁰

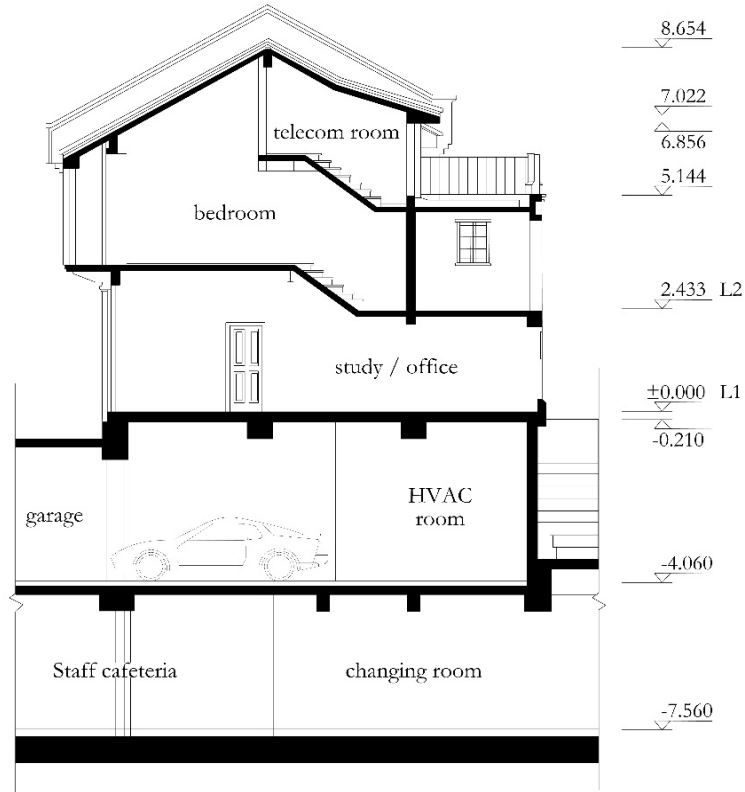


Figure 3: Cross-section of a reconstructed villa unit in the eastern/middle lanes, showing the retained *shikumen* roof profile above the new basement structure: B1 for parking and HVAC plant, B2 for staff cafeteria and changing rooms. (Source: Redrawn by the first author from project documentation (personal communication) and adapted to show spatial proportions).

The basement excavation is the feature critics have identified as the point at which the site's historical substance was removed. Ruan Yisan of Tongji University, a leading voice in Chinese heritage conservation, has dismissed Jianye Li's reconstructed lanes as "fake historic buildings with no value"; his colleague Wang Weiqiang has argued that "real cultural heritage" was replaced with "fake relics" in the name of preservation.⁴¹ Portman, by contrast, described the completed project as a "cultural preservation project" in which "the heritage *shikumen* buildings were painstakingly restored" to create "a modern, luxury hotel that pays tribute to the glamour of old Shanghai."³⁵ Notice No. 31's categorical inclusion of all *shikumen* neighborhoods, as "distinctive *shikumen* lane houses" in Section 2 of the notice, is the provision that permitted the completed project to be positioned as heritage conservation rather than as commercial redevelopment.

The three-part regulatory sequence at Jianye Li was thus completed by 2005, but the commercial opening did not follow for another twelve years. Capella Shanghai opened in 2017. The site was under walled construction from 2007, and Chinese press accounts described it as a "ghost community" in the mid-2010s.⁴² The developer consortium was restructured during this period, from the original Portman-led joint venture to sole development by Xufang's Hengfu Investment before completion.⁴³ The twelve-year gap between regulatory

completion and commercial opening is analytically useful here, as the regulatory sequence produced the administrative conditions for commercial conversion, but the conversion itself required further circumstances, including market timing and operator selection, external to the regulatory apparatus.

The physical outcome of the intervention is most legible when the pre- and post-intervention conditions of the site are compared directly. Prior to 2003, Jianye Li functioned as dense residential housing with organic community structure, produced by decades of cohabitation. After completion, the site functioned as a gated hospitality and residential enclave. Access was restricted to hotel guests and villa residents; the demographic composition had been entirely reconstituted; the spatial logic of the lanes, physically retained at the streetscape level, now produced exclusion rather than encounter, since the gates that controlled access had reversed the social function of the spatial configuration. What appeared from the street as a *shikumen* neighborhood was, in the eastern and middle lanes, a twenty-first century reinforced-concrete construction beneath the brick cladding. The western lane retained more of its original structural fabric, but even here the conversion to hotel use had transformed the interior spatial organization.

A visitor to the restored site today does not enter through the public sequence that had structured *lilong* life. Arrival is typically by car into basement parking rather than on foot from the street. The *tianjing* is now either attached to a single suite or folded into a villa's interior, with the openness to overlooking windows closed off by fenestration designed for privacy rather than exposure. A guest in the courtyard is not observed; a resident in the courtyard had been. The spatial configuration that had produced encounter was retained at the visual level but reorganized to produce exclusivity (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Post-conversion spatial logic at Capella Shanghai. *Left (4a)*: The restored architectural vocabulary of a branch lane, now depopulated and functioning as an exclusive hospitality corridor. *Right (4b)*: An access-controlled entrance gate restricting public access, reversing the historical permeability of the *lilong* threshold. (Source: Photographs by the first

author, December 2025).

4. FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: A THREE-STAGE READING

This section treats the regulatory measures and implementation processes traced in Section 3 as a unified analytical sequence: a translation of codified text into spatial ramifications at the site, in which the classification of the buildings, the relocation of the residents, and the reclassification of the emptied shell were each effected through a specific operation. The three operations the sequence performed and the choices made in each are the subject of what follows (Figure 5).

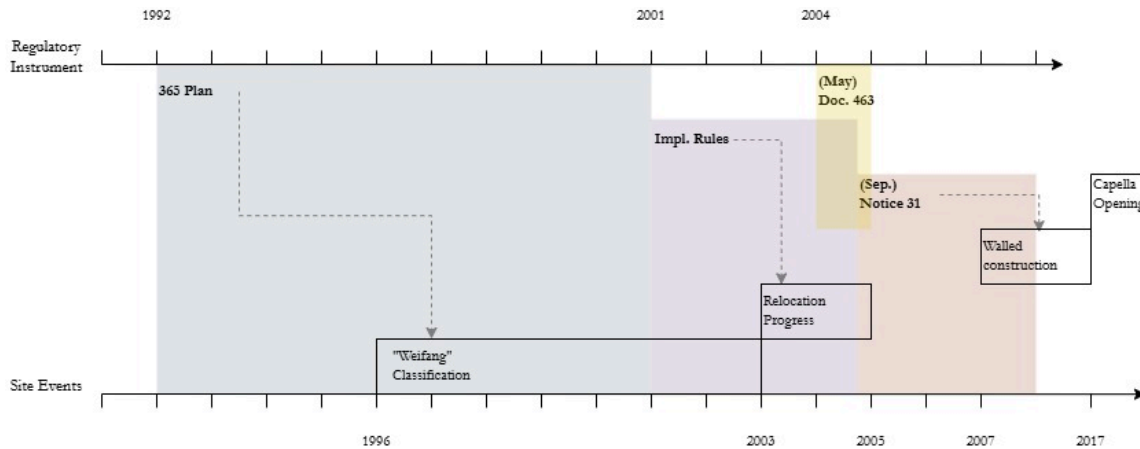


Figure 5: Schematic timeline of the three regulatory instruments in relation to site events at Jianye Li. (Source: Drawn by the first author).

The first stage, the Production of Obsolescence: the designation of a site as a place from which something must be removed before anything can be preserved. The 1996 notice’s own language, “high renovation costs” in districts of “high residential density,” described a state of the buildings whose origins lay in the same municipal system that would now remove them.⁴⁴ Obsolescence, in this sense, was a condition produced by one arm of the institutional apparatus and then taken as the administrative basis for action by another. The physical and the social were separated here, at the outset: the building was made a proper object of intervention on the basis of its measurable deficit, while the community whose presence was inseparable from that deficit was deferred to later instruments.

The second stage, the Bureaucratization of Displacement, describes the operation that removes what cannot be retained. *Renqi* itself had no cell in the formulae. Section 2 has laid out this legal architecture in detail; what matters analytically is the shape of what it was built to recognize. Compensation categories addressed the material dimension of relocation with real specificity. They did not address the social dimension, and were not designed to. The mutual-aid networks and shared domestic rhythms that Laurans documented at Jianye Li had no line item in any compensation table, and displacement produced as its spatial signature larger housing

at greater social distance. A relocation framework of this kind processes displacement as a transaction between material assets, and what is social about a community falls outside its categories because it is not the kind of thing those categories were built to hold. The residents' non-participation in the subsequent reinterpretation of the site was thus a direct byproduct of this framework, not incidental to it. The 2001 Rules ended their relation to the site at relocation, leaving no measure for their voice in the conversion design that followed.

The third stage, the Commodification of the Shell, completes the translation by turning the retained material vocabulary into an object of heritage value. Once the site is emptied and the typological scope of protection redrawn to include the *shikumen*, the shell becomes available not as housing but as a gesture. What circulates is the *lilong* as an image of historical continuity, detachable from the social arrangements that once inhabited it; the commodification is therefore semiotic before it is economic, and that detachment is what makes the form a commodity. The changes that make this semiotic work possible are architectural and interior at once: the external form is repaired and reproduced, and the dwelling type and the form once named is emptied and recomposed. What the Capella Shanghai markets, in its invocations of heritage and of the glamour of old Shanghai, is the form as an architectural sign detached from the social practice it once indexed. Notice No. 31's Section 5, which authorized enterprise operation within a protected area, is the institutional expression of this semiotic operation;⁴⁵ heritage policy in this mode treats the symbolic work of the emptied shell as sufficient.

This outcome suggests that the three-instrument sequence operated with a cumulative force that a single directive could not counteract: its enforcement apparatus extended to verifiable land-use parameters but not to the social-practice register its own text invoked. The 365 Plan made the material basis for intervention available by classifying the housing stock as substandard; the 2001 Rules codified the procedural means through which residents were relocated; Notice No. 31 enabled the heritage-designated commercial reuse that the emptied site could then host. What the sequence preserved at Jianye Li was the architectural fabric and the formal vocabulary of the lanes. What no instrument in the sequence was equipped to preserve, because no category in the apparatus indexed it, was the multi-household collective dwelling and the *renqi* it sustained.

5. THE LIMITS OF PRESERVATION WITHIN POLICY

The three instruments examined here address the demolition—compensation—reclassification axis: what to do with existing substandard housing stock. They do not exhaust Shanghai's housing-policy field. Other instruments operating in the same period pursued the supplementary aim of housing supply, including affordable-housing construction and the resettlement-housing programs that received the relocated residents. What this case exposes are the limits of that axis, not of housing policy as a whole.

Within that axis, the three-stage sequence at Jianye Li was institutionally complete: each instrument carried out the function its classification system was built to perform, and together they produced a site that retained its architectural fabric but arguably lost its social fabric. Three directions for approaching these limits follow, each addressing a register that current instruments do not yet cover.

The first direction is typological. The post-1949 multi-household collective dwelling has been read in the regulatory record largely as a transitional or degraded state of the *lilong*. Treating the typology instead as a substantive dwelling tradition with its own spatial logic and its own genealogy of inhabitation is a scholarly argument that has been raised in the field, but one the regulatory system does not advance on its own behalf.

The second is methodological. This paper has worked from the regulatory side of the case and has deliberately set aside the resident-experience dimension. The 2001 Rules' silence on residents' voice in the conversion design that followed relocation is, however, the gap that most visibly calls for this dimension to be brought into policy analysis. What residents themselves identified as inseparable from the lanes is recoverable as evidence; integrating that evidence with the institutional reading attempted here is a direction the field is increasingly equipped to take up.

The third is conceptual. Reconfiguring the category of heritage to hold social-practice continuity alongside material vocabulary is the design question the Jianye Li case leaves behind. As a contrasting case, Tianzifang produced a markedly different trajectory within the same municipal context through a community-initiated process. This indicates that the relation between preservation and displacement is shaped by the institutional configuration through which preservation is pursued, rather than being inevitable. Heritage-led displacement is not confined to Shanghai or to Chinese urban renewal, though cross-national comparison is a research direction this paper does not undertake.

What the Jianye Li case reveals is narrower, and the narrowness is what gives it its edge: when the system has no classification for the social substance of the form it preserves, what the system preserves is the form alone. Whether heritage practice can hold more than that is the question the case leaves with the field.

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44. 365 Plan (note 9 above).
45. Notice No. 31, Section 5.



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