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Heritage, values and gentrification: the redevelopment of historic areas in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impacts of heritage-led urban redevelopment on local communities and the associated consequences of gentrification. The instrumental role of cultural heritage in urban governance presents an underdeveloped research field on gentrification. Especially in fast-developing countries like China, redevelopment is often associated with urban beautification that favours the interests of the affluent middle classes while disregarding the needs of the urban poor and migrants. This paper uses Qujiang New District in Xi'an and Taipingqiao in Shanghai as cases for examining the impacts of heritage-led redevelopment on the urban landscape and social fabric of Chinese cities. Following a qualitative approach based on built environment analysis and observation, together with in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study shows how cultural heritage becomes an effective tool for governance in the context of urban redevelopment. The values generated by cultural heritage and its associated ideas, including urban beautification, high culture and economic benefits, legitimise state-dominated spatial reconstruction and the resulting gentrification and social fragmentation. Heritage-led urban redevelopment in China produces new spaces for social interaction, where the state's control over its citizens is reinforced. These spaces support investor and upper-high class interests of capital accumulation and leave limited room for the development of alternatives.

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Introduction

This paper explores the impacts of heritage-led urban redevelopment on local communities and the associated consequences of gentrification. Since the 1960s, discussions on gentrification have focused on the critique of urban policy, immigration, housing and citizenship (Dikec 2002; Purcell 2013). Particularly in Western contexts, these discussions often revolved around the dynamics of state-society relations advocating for collective and democratic management of public resources, such as art galleries and parks (Harvey 2008). This paper focuses on cultural heritage as one form of public resource. By cultural heritage, this paper not only refers to ancient sites, objects and practices, but also to dominant heritage discourses that institute practices of documentation, intervention and dissemination by scholars, practitioners and officials (Smith 2006). Amidst the wide variety of studies, we contend that the role of heritage in gentrification, as a tool for urban governance, remains critically unassessed and needs to be further addressed.

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The study of this phenomenon in China is particularly pertinent due to the active role of the entrepreneurial state in urban redevelopment (He and Wu 2005). For this reason, we consider that the analysis of heritage and gentrification in China can, on the one hand, contribute to understanding other countries in contexts that share similar prerogatives of developmentalism. On the other hand, such study can also reveal the multiple roles adopted by the state as a unique feature of gentrification in China. China is a hotbed for urbanisation, with its heavy focus on infrastructural development, resulting in exponential renewal, growth and emergence of hundreds of cities competing to attract investment. In addition to infrastructure building, city governments have incorporated cultural heritage as an essential component in city beautification and the production of urban space by means of officially sanctioned dominant heritage discourses. According to such discourses, heritage conservators, architects and urban planners redesign the architectural and urban legacy of critical periods in their past (Zhu 2018a).

When associated with urban redevelopment, this re-design favours a few powerful actors (the local state, urban elites and enterprises), promoting a dramatic transformation of historic landscapes that increases land prices, leads to gentrification and stratifies local societies (Harvey 2008; Herzfeld 2015). By studying recent experiences in Shanghai and Xi'an, this paper examines the relationship between cultural heritage and urban redevelopment in China. Choosing a central urban area in Shanghai and a suburban location in Xi'an, both determined by highly significant heritage assets, the paper aims to illustrate the official production of dominant heritage discourses and the associated shift in aesthetic, economic and political values of heritage in urban redevelopment and gentrification in China. In detail, it raises the following questions: what values are created through urban redevelopment? What impacts does such heritage-led redevelopment have on local communities? What are the roles of heritage in such processes?

Many other Chinese historical cities are also active in heritage-led urban redevelopment. However, this paper limits its scope to Shanghai and Xi'an to articulate the strong links between the use of heritage and urban gentrification in greater detail. Despite their different social and political contexts, both cities show similar patterns in the social impacts of urban redevelopment. The ideas evoked by heritage, such as the discourse of 'beautification', are favourable to the Chinese public, enabling the government bodies to smoothly establish consensus in support of their development objectives (Zhu 2020).

The paper starts with a review of heritage and gentrification with focus on the Chinese context. The second and third sections examine the processes involved in heritage-making in Xi'an and Shanghai and the associated impacts on local neighbourhoods. The fourth section discusses the values created by heritage-making in both examples and the political implications of heritage-led gentrification in urban development. Learning from both examples, the paper argues that in a context of developmentalism and state control of urban planning and cultural policies, city governments use heritage as an active tool to legitimise gentrification of historic environments. Specifically, heritage contributes to the state governmentality of urban areas by employing the discourse of 'cultural improvement' (Tomba 2017, 513) and 'beautification', and the shaping of new official paradigms of a civilised city inhabited by civilised individuals.

We argue that the centralisation of control in the redevelopment of the historic environment enables a shift of values and capital absorption to a process of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2004, 74). This is officially supported by improving living conditions in historic areas catering to the interests of social elites, and providing the original inhabitants access to the housing market. As a result, cultural heritage has become a powerful governance strategy to reinforce state control over the production of space and the functioning of society.

Literature review

Heritage, values and gentrification

We use the term ‘gentrification’ to characterise the physical and social upgrading of urban areas associated with the increase of real estate prices resulting from public or private capital investment. Even if urban social change happens constantly, gentrification ultimately characterises a political-economic process that is frequently linked to dispossession and displacement. Gentrification was first used by Ruth Glass (1964) to describe the initiative of affluent individuals moving to derelict central urban areas in London, and has since become an ‘ambitiously and systematically planned’ global process (Smith 2002, 439). The extended reach of gentrification goes hand in hand with the increasingly complex classification of diverse gentrification types (residential; commercial; new-build; state-led, etc.), and the multiplicity of gentrification’s stakeholders and their interests (Zukin et al. 2009; Janoschka, Sequera, and Salinas 2014). New discussions have introduced a number of nuances to the generally malign perception of gentrification, for instance; the acknowledgement of gentrifiers’ rights (Schlichtman and Patch 2014); the role of ‘self-gentrifiers’ inadvertently beginning a process of profiteering (Herzfeld 2015); and the positive effects of gentrification in community revitalisation (Ryberg-Webster and Ashley 2018).

Tomba (2017) studies gentrification using a notion of an ‘increase of value’ that is consubstantial with a heritage-focused analysis of the processes involved. As De Cesari and Dimova (2019) stated, the ‘valorization’ of historic areas implies social, aesthetic, infrastructural and economic changes brought by redevelopment, all of which can be intimately linked to the notion of heritage. According to this interpretation, the historic environment cannot be simply conceived as a neutral battlefield where the power clashes of gentrification occur. Much to the contrary, when heritagization is said to ‘promote neighbourhood improvement, social cohesion and a communal affirmed sense of place’ (Cheong and Fong 2018, 5), discussions frequently omit the inherent conflicts between the residents’ dispossession and newcomers’ re-appropriation. Heritage action, therefore, actively takes sides. This was also expressed by Wang and Lau (2009, 58) when reflecting on the price paid for what is frequently called the ‘redemption’ of historic environments: becoming a sanitised amenity devoid of spontaneity and informality (Janoschka, Sequera, and Salinas 2014; Jou, Clark, and Chen 2016) to enable capital accumulation by the retail, tourism and real estate industries (Smith 2002; Ryberg-Webster and Ashley 2018).

This study aims to analyse the associated, and sometimes contested, values of heritage in urban gentrification as a social, economic and political process. Considering that cultural heritage is a value-laden concept and practice (Kuutma 2013), this analysis is inevitably rooted in a value-based approach. When studying the effects and roles of heritage in gentrification and urban redevelopment, we particularly focus on various forms of value that are associated with heritage. The aesthetic, social and economic values created by heritage can shape the ways people act and think.

These processes are surrounded by conflict, contestation and negotiation as different groups of people develop on their own interpretations of meanings and values. Such conflict is summarised by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) in the concept of dissonant heritage. This idea is useful for examining how heritage-making practices often indicate friction between groups’ values and meanings. In the urban redevelopment context, the application of top-down value systems created by authorities and planners is often misaligned with those belonging to the original residents, provoking the separation of communities from places. Therefore, the process of heritage-led gentrification commonly results in various forms of resistance and negotiation, especially from local communities (Skoll and Korstanje 2014). It should be noted that residents may also participate in the shift of values from the social, historic and cultural to the economic and political, by acting both as benefactors and instigators of gentrification (Shin 2010; Arkarapraserntkul 2018).

Heritage and governance in Chinese gentrification

The study of value creation in urban redevelopment in contemporary China exemplifies the complex evolution of the gentrification's definition. Chinese gentrification refers to contexts in which gentrification not only aligns with the developmental dictates of the entrepreneurial state (Pendlebury 2013), but where urbanisation itself becomes an 'extremely large and systematic gentrification project' (Tomba 2017, 515). Recent debates about gentrification in China have revolved around the adequacy of these terms in describing the massive urban redevelopment of the last three decades. They resonate with discussions on the so-called 'conceptual stretching' of gentrification to understand social and physical urban change in non-Western contexts (Ley and Teo 2014; Ghertner 2015b; Smart and Smart 2017). Much of the discourse references the work of Ley and Teo (2014, 2020), who questioned the validity of gentrification as a notion to address issues of social inequality in urban China. These issues centre on differences in the definition of 'space' (types of land tenure, and the means of urban governance) and the complex power balance between the state, the market and civil society highlighted by authors like He (2019). From this perspective of state-sponsored developmentalism, the state's involvement in fields of economy, urbanisation, culture and media allows gentrification to be portrayed as a beneficial process (Song and Zhu 2010; Liu et al. 2019). In some cases this can even lead to the term disappearing from public discourse (Ley and Teo 2014).

One of the main issues addressed in this debate is an alleged social leniency towards gentrification. Authors like Wang (2011) demonstrate how the controversy around gentrification in China is muted by confluent factors such as 'urban restructuring, rising affluence, [and] the formation of a globalised property market'. These factors are set within socio-economic expectations of development, shared by the government, private companies and the population. These expectations are formed in the specific context of a developmental state, where 'the goal of urbanization is gentrification' (Tomba 2017, 508), and economic and cultural purposes of state action are deeply intertwined. Accordingly, the inherent rise of real estate value brought by redevelopment may appear as an obvious target, particularly when land leasing forms between 30% and 70% of district and municipal revenue in China (Ren 2014).

The alignment of state control in cultural production and the guidance of urban planning has made heritage a political priority (Zhu and Maags 2020). In the context of China's 'heritage fever' (Zhu and Maags 2020), the 'cultural capital' of historic environments rose to occupy the core of official discourse on 'harmonious society' in the Hu Jintao era (Wang and Lau 2009; Zhong 2015), and is central to ideas of 'excellent traditional culture' in the Xi Jinping era (Kubat 2018). Therefore, heritage has become part of state action on governmentality in China, and has come to signal the 'moral superiority of the middle classes and their exemplary role in preserving social stability' (Tomba 2017, 513) as a legitimisation of the social cleansing of derelict historic areas.

The state's complex and multifaceted nature means its position regarding gentrification may not be coherent or fixed. However, as discussed by Cheng and Zhang (2021) in their study of Laochengnan in Nanjing, this uncertainty does not prevent decided action leading to deep social change in historic areas. In some cases, actions of resistance from either local residents or intellectual groups have ultimately altered the course of redevelopment towards conservation of the historic environment. Nevertheless, even these few cases the prevailing values of the state remain uncontested (Zhang 2017; Cheng and Zhang 2021).

Research Methods

The research uses case studies and a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth investigation of value changes in heritage-led urban redevelopment. We use a mixed-method approach of data collation and analysis that includes built environment analysis, online searches on real estate portals and in-depth interviews with stakeholders. The mixture of methods provides a complete picture of the shift of values in heritage-led urban redevelopment and their impacts on neighbourhoods.

To examine heritage-led urban redevelopment and gentrification as a process, the authors have conducted multiple visits to the selected sites in between 2014–2020.¹ These fieldworks included collecting secondary sources (city maps and recent heritage and urban policies documents), site surveys and participation in various cultural activities. In the site surveys, the authors photographed the built environment to capture evidence of the presence of beautification. This evidence includes environmental and functional upgrades, such as greening, new materials, roads, residential and commercial buildings (Hwang and Sampson 2014). The combination of these visual forms contributes to the aesthetic, economic and political value analysis of historical sites, and their relationship with gentrification.

To complement the field observations, both authors conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with local governmental officials, architects, urban planners, scholars and local residents.² Interviewees were selected for their roles in the design, planning and implementation phases of development and regeneration. Interview questions referred to the changing cultural policies and the roles of different stakeholders in designing, mediating and implementing heritage-led urban redevelopment. The study also considers the voices from local affected original communities to understand the impacts on and responses from the urban redevelopment in both places.

Case 1: Xi'an and the redevelopment of Qujiang

The city of Xi'an, the resting place of Emperor Qin Shihuang's Terracotta Army is an important cultural centre in northwestern China. First established in 582 BCE by the Sui emperor under the name Daxing, the city has served many imperial dynasties (most significantly the Tang dynasty from the 11th century BCE – renamed to Chang'an in Chinese: 'eternal peace') and been host to significant trading, commercial and pilgrimage routes since this time. During its early days under the Sui emperor (581–605), the city was divided into several sections; the Imperial City, the Palace and civilian section. This basic layout persisted across multiple dynasties and served to situate the city as a central hub along the Silk Road. These cultural aspects ultimately became an intrinsic part of the cultural heritage of the city.

Today, Xi'an is considered one of China's megacities, with over 10.2 million people as of 2019 (Xi'an Bureau of Statistics 2019). In contrast to earlier plans that focus on industry-oriented urbanisation, the recent Master Plan (2008–2020) – endorsed by the Department of Urban Planning and the Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage – is a network of projects designed to reconstruct the urban landscape in conjunction with the organisation of various heritage activities (Xi'an Municipality 2005). As summarised in an interview with an official from the Provincial Planning Department, the masterplan has three main aims; to promote and differentiate Xi'an as an economical and administrative centre in the northwest region, to develop the city into a new commercial centre by capitalising on tourism, cultural industry and real estate, and to highlight the city's heritage with its rich historical traditions (personal communication, 23 March 2015).

One particular area targeted for redevelopment in the city was the Qujiang New District. Located in the southern suburbs of Xi'an, the Qujiang New District is a 51 sq. km. area that was historically a cultural and leisure destination of Tang emperors and officials. Before redevelopment, Qujiang was a suburban wasteland with many urban villages, and home to a large population of migrant workers, due to low rents. Nowadays, this history has been subsumed beneath the more elite history of the emperor's retreat.

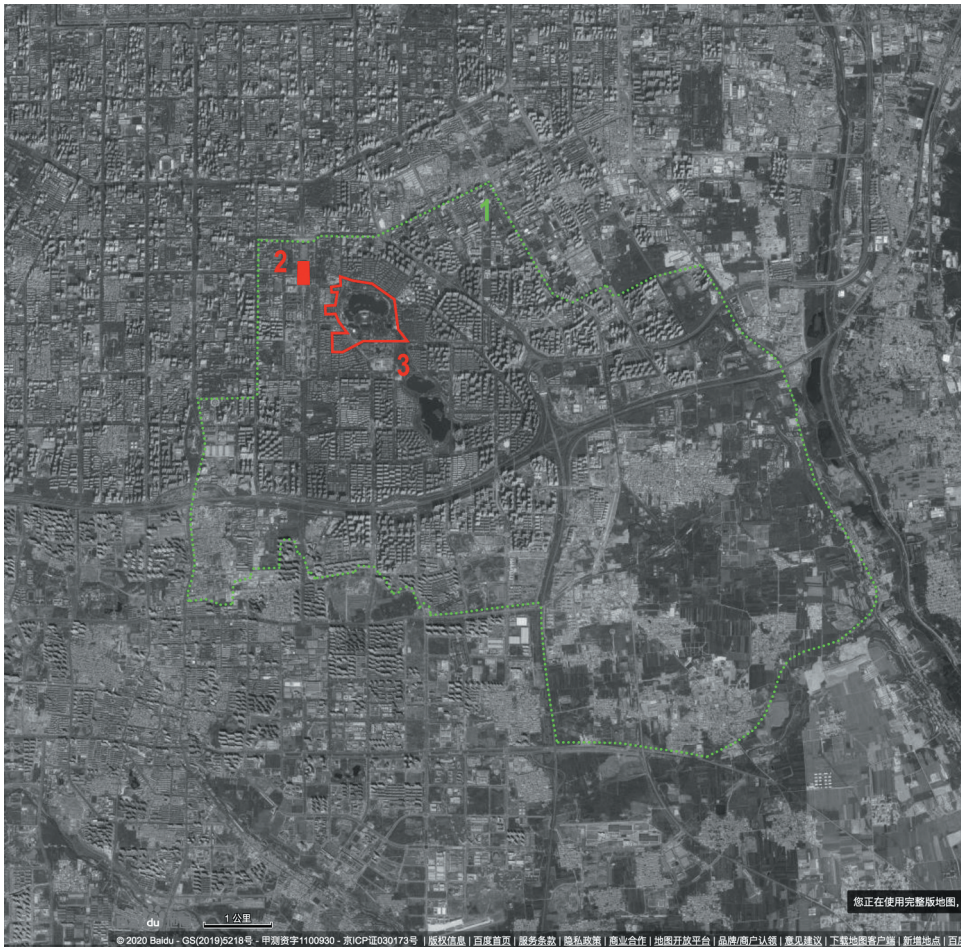


Figure 1. Satellite view of the Qujiang New District (1), the UNESCO listed Wild Goose Pagoda (2) and the Qujiang Lake (3). Source: the authors/Baidu Maps. the authors / Baidu Maps

In 2000, the Qujiang New District Administration Committee started to redevelop the area based on the cultural and leisure history of the Tang dynasty. As the key stakeholder of the city redevelopment, the Qujiang Committee is one of the Xi'an municipal government's branch offices in the district. This administration is responsible for planning, transferring and approving land rights in the area. At the same time, the Committee engages with the Qujiang Cultural Industry Investment (Group) Co. Ltd to create investment and business opportunities for the newly transferred and designated lands.

In the past two decades, the Qujiang committee has undertaken several stages of redevelopment of the district. Some projects have focussed on the restoration and reconstruction of local archaeological sites, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Site Wild Goose Pagoda and the Tang city wall. These sites are considered heritage, whose information and knowledge are closely reflected from local folktales and archaeological findings. Other redevelopment projects include the reconstruction of new heritage parks and public amenities, such as the Cold Cave Heritage Park and Qujiang lake (Figure 1). They are constructed to reflect an imagined imperial garden and waterways where the emperors and their families went for summer in Tang dynasty. Here, cultural heritage is simply a branding tool for district redevelopment promoted through brochures, documentaries and films.



Figure 2. Luxury hotel in the heritage park surrounding with high rise buildings. Source: the authors. the authors

To build these heritage parks and its surrounding environment, in 2007 the Committee demolished several villages surrounding the core area of redevelopment. One of the villages, for instance, was Beichitou village that originally covered over 500 hectares and accommodated 1200 families, 5,300 residents. As part of the rebuilding plan, a compensation agreement was reached of 150,000 Yuan (about 225,000 US Dollars) per villager. In addition to this sum, each villager received a 35 square metre resettlement housing (*anzhifang*) package on the original site (personal communication, 5 November 2020). Resettlement on the original site was essential to these villagers as they have a strong sense of belonging to these places.

In the meantime, the Qujiang Committee used 400 hectares of the land for real estate and green amenity surrounding the parks. They sold the land to private investors and real estate companies who took charge of the commercial redevelopment. For instance, Zhonghai (Group) Co. Ltd, one of the key investors, bought 68 hectares of the land and turned it into luxury high-rises neighbourhood. As shown in [Figure 2](#), these newly-built luxury buildings and apartments were erected around archaeological ruins, ethnic theme parks, restaurants, bars, tea houses and high-end hotels. This development reflects a modernisation pathway and a transformation of the environment and class stratigraphy that focuses on leisure and investment.

Projects such as the demolition of villages and the construction of the heritage parks reflect business collaborations between various state and private stakeholders. These include; local governments (the Qujiang Committee), local state-led companies, and external developers and real-estate investors with financial support from Chinese banks. The estimated cost of developing the parks was 140 billion yuan, which included contributions from development companies approximating 105 billion yuan, and bank loans of 12 billion yuan (Hsueh 2015). As agreed between the Committee and investors, once the external developers completed the construction of cultural and heritage parks, the Qujiang Committee granted them the land development rights to develop the surrounding area to generate revenue from real estate industry. As one of the officials from the Qujiang committee indicated:

As the local government, we are responsible for the redevelopment of the area for a better built environment and infrastructure. We first retrieve the land from the original residents, of course with compensations according to our policies. Then we can transfer land property rights from rural collectives to the state. By drawing in capable developer for land lead sales in exchange for funds, we can turn these lands to cultural and commercial purposes. Some of them have been turned to public parks, museums and musical hall, and others become high-end residential areas (personal communication, 24 March 2015).

A consequence of this elaborate heritage approach is the gentrification of the New District's residential areas and the rise in real estate values. As Hsueh (2015) has shown, the district's average land price dramatically rose from 3 million RMB per hectare in 2002 to 90 million RMB in 2009. Consequently, Quijiang's low-income district past is being transformed to accommodate middle-upper class residents from nearby districts, including Shaanxi province. The official of the Quijiang Committee confirmed the gentrification of the urban renewal in Quijiang:

Many people who came to buy the properties here were the rich. Some of them are owners of mining enterprises of Shaanxi, and they have the purchasing power. Yes, Quijiang now is a district for the rich. Every country has a district for the rich. In such a way, we aim at improving the city brand of Xi'an (personal communication, 24 March 2015).

Indeed, these redevelopment programs are designed to attract new residents that can afford luxury housing and leisure activities, feeding capital into the local economy. In the meantime, the state's successful business model has attracted more external developers to participate in these cultural and business projects. For instance, since 2011, the number of programmes that participated in the redevelopment of Quijiang new district has increased from 28 to 84 in 2018 (Xi'an Bureau of Statistics 2019).

Unlike other cities in China, these redevelopment projects do not create large scale displacement. As explained by one villager at affected neighbourhoods,

This is our land, and it is important that we can return to where we live for generations. Over 90 per cent of villagers returned to their original site and live in resettlement houses. While some rented out their new houses for increased rent, few villagers sold their new settlement houses and moved to other cities. As we do not have the certificates of the titles of these settlement houses, we cannot sell them through the official market, and the selling price is much lower. (Personal communication, 5 November 2020)

The removal and resettlement for these villagers in the newly gentrified areas have been met with various attitudes of acceptance, complacency and resistance. While many villagers complained about the resettlement houses' quality, others are unhappy with the compensation they received. This is particularly pertinent for those who received compensation at a lower rate during the earlier stages of development, compared to those of the later stages.

However, the redevelopment of the district has still resulted in a dramatic increase in social stratification. As said by one villager, 'the pretty park is for outsiders, not for us'. (Personal communication, 5 November 2020) This is evidenced by the transformation of the surrounding resettlement environment, which is now dominated by these resettlement neighbourhood heritage spaces or upper-middle-class built environments – a world these villagers traditionally did not encounter.

Case 2: Shanghai and the redevelopment of Taipingqiao

Located in the Low Yangtze River Delta, Shanghai's history as active trading county drastically changed after the treaty of Nanjing (1842) allowed the establishment of international settlements. Heavy industrialisation, real estate and finance positioned Shanghai as one of the economic centres of the East and the most cosmopolitan city in China. This cosmopolitanism made Shanghai a node for the spread of novel political and cultural movements including the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1921, and the origin of the so-called *haipai* (Shanghai style), which is representative of the westernisation of Chinese arts and culture.

As a city subject to multiple interpretations of its recent past, the Shanghai Municipality has changed its position towards the historic environment many times to reflect the fluctuating course of events. The Master Plan of Shanghai 1983–2000 aimed to modernise the city's obsolete historic urban environment, favouring massive redevelopment and new-built structures without any consideration for heritage.³ The Master Plan of Shanghai 1999–2020 substantially altered this course, incorporating directives for the 'Comprehensive Conservation of the Historic City' which included

the definition of 12 protection areas under the supervision of the Committee for the Conservation of Historic and Cultural Featured Areas and Outstanding Historic Buildings. This committee was responsible for producing guidelines for conservation projects (Zheng 2017) that would heighten the touristic profile of China's most populous city.



Figure 3. Satellite view of the Taipingqiao redevelopment (1) and Xintiandi (2). Source: the authors/Google Maps. the authors / Google Maps



Figure 4. The Founding Site of the Communist Party of China in Xingle Road, Xintiandi. Source: the authors. the authors



Figure 5. Re-created *shikumen* gate in the Lakeville Regency community, in the re-developed Taipingqiao area. Source: the authors. the authors

Within the framework of the entrepreneurial state, urban heritage conservation in Shanghai has been highly experimental with the Taipingqiao case as one of its ground-breaking examples. Located in the core of the former French concession in Luwan district, the Taipingqiao redevelopment started in 1996. As shown in Figure 3, it comprised 23 city blocks of *lilong*⁴ set for demolition and included an element of utmost historic and political value: the Founding Site of the Communist Party of China, a nationally listed element located in Xingle Road in the northwest part of the development (Figure 4). The significance of this site was central to an agreement between the developer, the Hong Kong based Shui On Group, and the Luwan district government to spare the two blocks adjacent to Xingle Road from demolition. These two blocks then became today's Xintiandi, one of the most well-known tourist destinations in the city.

Taipingqiao stands out for the developer's purposeful use of the area's historical features of to guarantee its commercial success, in a pioneering case of heritage-led redevelopment in China (He and Wu 2005). Testimonies from the designers involved highlight how the developer's vision was initially met by the scepticism from the Luwan district government. Approval of the project required internal support from key officials who showed 'sensitiveness' towards conservation (personal communication with the chief designer of Xintiandi, 31 January 2018). The intervention in the two heritage-laden blocks of Xintiandi was highly invasive, including substantial demolitions to create open European-inspired pedestrian spaces that were foreign to the traditional *lilong* layout. The project also demanded the demolition of the wooden interior structures of the old houses, merging residential plots to create new commercial structures built in concrete.

The architecture of the *shikumen* became re-signified (Ren 2008) according to the aura of Shanghai in the 1920s, which blended cosmopolitanism and the origins of Communism in China (González Martínez 2019, 2020). Our inquiries show how, despite the extent of the changes, the developer argued in favour of the site's authenticity by referring to the 1994 Nara Document (personal communication with the chief designer of the Shui On Company, 1 November 2015). They argued that authenticity would rest on the historic atmosphere (*fengmao*) which, as the sole element conserved, could be materially upgraded to enable social stratification.

An important disparity with established people-based perspectives in urban conservation arises when considering the displacement of the 70,000 original inhabitants in the Taipingqiao area in exchange for alternate accommodation and monetary compensation. Over the 25 year course of the project, the process of negotiation with the residents evolved significantly. Initial resistance from residents in the 1990s was due to the perceived failure of street office leaders to fully convey the

neighbourhoods' concerns or proposals in the handling of resettlement (Wai 2006). But the political significance of the site motivated a swift pursual of a non-confrontational management style, including improvements in the compensation offered. Interviews with residents demonstrated how a great proportion of them moved to suburban areas where compensation would be more profitable (personal communication, 11 November 2020), yet other residents stayed in the blocks neighbouring Taipingqiao to benefit from the central location at the expense of continuing the poor living conditions of the *lilong* (personal communication, 17 May 2021).

The evaluation of Xintiandi from the scholarly sphere has been twofold, revealing certain institutional loopholes. Ruan Yisan, a leading heritage scholar of Tongji University, signalled how even if the final outcome may be aesthetically accurate ('Xintiandi makes use of historical factors, and we regard it as the original protection of a historical city, but in fact it is too far away from the original'),⁵ the conservation approach betrayed the popular character of the site by excluding the former inhabitants. Considering that the Design Institute of Tongji University itself participated in the project as heritage consultant, a gap between conservation theory and its application is revealed and shows how dominant heritage discourses emerge as legitimators of gentrification.

This division in scholarly debates, as well as between academia and practice, echoes official positions that refer to heritage in a predominantly material dimension. The former head of Luwan District, working during the early development of Xintiandi, employed the notion of 'residents' in an abstract way as exchangeable social strata, implying the lack of controversy around gentrification in official discourse:

... the promotion of the whole project has made a good tacit understanding and interactive result between our government and enterprises. Everyone aims at the same goal which is to make a unique project here. This project can not only improve the living conditions of residents and the appearance of the urban area, but also create some new business models, including the overall improvement of urban culture, urban architectural style and some humanistic environment. Now it seems that we have achieved this goal. (Xintiandi Forever 2021)

The local government's acritical stance on gentrification seems overwhelming, as planning officials were openly supportive of the environmental and social upgrade offered by gentrification, a view implicit in recurrent rhetoric:

'What's the problem with gentrification? This concept may be critical in a Western context, but in a Chinese context it implies a neat improvement in the quality of places and the solution to conflicts among their residents. We need to think differently about it when we are in China' (personal communication, top official of Shanghai Municipal Planning Department, 20 November 2014).

Taipingqiao is a manifestation of the outcomes of residential gentrification with high-end heritage inspired features.⁶ Re-developed with isolated high-rise towers, lush gardens and communal facilities in the new gated communities are framed with the 'historic scent' of re-created *shikumen* gates and brick walls (Figure 5). The names of residential compounds like 'Lakeville Regency' are demonstrative of how a whole section of the original population were unable to relocate on site. Our research confirms these developments lead to a steep rise in housing prices, reaching between 8,000 US\$ and 20,000 US\$ monthly rental in 2020.⁷ Furthermore, the historic significance of Xintiandi in Taipingqiao overwhelms any alternative interpretations, particularly considering the current celebrations for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China. Indeed, the recent change in official denomination of the area on transportation maps of the city from Xintiandi to 'Site of the First CPC National Congress – Xintiandi' (*yidahuizhi-xintiandi*) is representative of how the initial entrepreneurial momentum has been absorbed by political meaning in a culturally self-confident China.

Discussion: Heritage Values in Gentrification

This study's contribution is situated in the interaction between heritage politics and the social dissonance arising from gentrification in an urban context. Although the cases presented have different scopes and contexts, both show similar patterns of urban redevelopment, resulting in comparable consequences of gentrification and social stratification within historic cities. Our discussion mainly focuses on three issues that refer to gentrification as a political process: value creation by heritage-led urban redevelopment; impacts on and responses from local communities; and the political roles of heritage in gentrification.

Value creation

In both places, older and poorer neighbourhoods were replaced with recreated heritage structures, parks, and modern public spaces that showcase historical aesthetics and political significance. This form of heritage-led urban redevelopment reflects a process of constructing aesthetic, economic and social-cultural 'values' that are associated with the past.

First, the redesign of Xi'an and Shanghai into historical cities reveals the aesthetic values through the transformation the urban landscape (Zhu 2018b). For the two cities (Xi'an being presented as an ancient capital and Shanghai framed as a cosmopolitan city), these images are constructed to produce an 'aesthetic space of representation' (Lefebvre 2003, 88). The urban renewal projects in Qujiang and Taipingqiao demonstrate processes of beautification in which sites (such as city walls and vernacular houses) are turned into heritage spaces for display.

Heritage-led urban redevelopment in both areas results in the radical transformation of living environments – spaces that were previously privately or publicly owned – into new gentrified environments. Informal settlements are replaced by formal spatial orders and infrastructure (Wu 2016). This process of spatial transformation reflects what Michael Herzfeld (2006) dubbed 'spatial cleansing' in his study of city redevelopment in Greece, Italy and Thailand.

Second, the process of spatial transformation goes beyond the issues of visual appearance and beauty. The aesthetics of gentrification focuses on the spatial production of desire and seduction through neoliberal consumerism (Jager 1986; Linder and Sandoval 2021). As shown in the urban redevelopment of these two cities, developers' interest in the recreated aesthetically pleasing spaces generated new forms of commercial activity and economic consumption (Ghertner 2015a; Ning and Chang 2021). In Xi'an, for instance, the urban beautification and commercial development of the district attracted a large number of middle-class people. The land price rose to over 25,000 RMB per square metre, far beyond the average price for the city in 2020 (12,000 RMB per square metre),⁸ Consequently, the previously densely populated areas have been transformed into sites suitable for consumption by heritage tourists and middle-class residents.

Third, cultural heritage-led redevelopment generates socio-cultural value. Heritage sites, such as the archaeological parks in Xi'an and museums in Shanghai, associate with an idealised image of the local past in which local communities can find a sense of belonging and cultural identity. These newly built heritage spaces become material representations of local cultural customs and traditions and in doing so encourage widespread public acceptance and support (Zhu 2020, 98).

Furthermore, heritage and its related high culture have played an additional educational role. In both cases, heritage-led urban redevelopment is associated with a broader Chinese civilisation campaign that endeavours to transform the moral and social conduct of China's urban residents (Tomba 2017). Both the Chinese civilisation discourse in Xi'an and the origins of the Communist Party in Shanghai evoke a sense of local and national pride in visitors to the sites.

Local state-society interaction

Yet what is the cost of these heritage-led urban redevelopment projects on local communities? This form of urban redevelopment often involves physical destruction and, sometimes, the displacement of the urban environment and its residents (Meskell 2019). In redeveloping Xi'an and Shanghai's urban spaces, existing areas that did not align with the newly developed heritage narratives and values were demolished in the name of 'culture' and 'development' (such as the villages in Qujiang, and old neighbourhoods in Shanghai's former French Concession).

The official promotion of the heritage industry in both cities can be understood as 'accumulation by dispossession', which lies at the core of capital development and urbanisation (Harvey 2004, 74). Local governments achieved the goal of feeding the real estate industry both in Xi'an and Shanghai by introducing large tracts of society living in public housing to the free property market. Such a strategy prioritises capital accumulation over the social ties of original communities, many of whom had lived in these areas for some time (Daher 1999). Through privatisation of land and cultural resources, heritage-led gentrification gives space to wealthier social classes while using a mix of enforcement and persuasion to provoke the physical displacement of less affluent groups of people (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015).

Accordingly, in Shanghai, the redevelopment project displaced and separated lower socio-economic communities while bringing in investors, tourists and migrants who favoured the consumption and commercially oriented uses of heritage. Unlike the redevelopment of Taipingqiao in Shanghai, the redevelopment of the Qujiang district in Xi'an did not involve large scale displacement. The villagers were keen to return to the original site of their home village after the redevelopment. However, Qujiang district still went through a similar process of self-inflicted gentrification that resulted in radical shifts in real estate value and the transfer of property rights.

As shown in both cases, resident communities are not passive recipients of these changes; they have diverse responses to heritage redevelopment projects. While some are eager to move out the area and benefit from the compensations, others complain about the inequality between their economic gain and that of the developers, as well as the loss of social capital in their relocated properties (Ren 2008; Xu 2020). Recently, the decline of traditional newspapers and the development of the internet allows local communities to build new forms of public debate and resistance. The Xi'an villagers, for instance, disseminated and expressed their complaints through online platforms. They complained about the quality of resettlement houses and unfair treatment regarding their compensations.⁹ However, and as Cheng and Zhang's (2021) study on Nanjing has also shown, the impetus behind their acts of resistance was temporary, and largely concerned with immediate, often personal, interests and goals. Community resistance does not engage with nor directly resist the values and benefits associated with heritage stewardship that is promoted by the redevelopment projects.

Heritage values in legitimacy

The use of heritage discourses and narratives in urban transformations becomes an essential political mechanism in legitimating urban redevelopment. Within this context, the heritage industry is promoted to encourage consumption, form identities and fulfil the governmental pursuit of modernisation and progress (Chan 2011; Oakes 2012; Svensson and Maags 2018). In legitimising these objectives, local and national governments employ heritage discourses, albeit in a reinterpreted form, that make heritage support the centre of their economic goals. As citizens contend with their local culture, the governance employed by local authorities reflects the necessity of economic development and the need for social stability (Qian, Feng, and Zhu 2012; Zhu 2016).

Operating as landowner, developer, sponsor and interpreter of the past, the state argues using purposes of social improvement and the improvement of individual citizens to foster the acquisition of cultural capital and access to the real estate market (Tombs 2017). In both cases in Xi'an and

Shanghai, ideas of 'redevelopment' and 'relocation' are also pervasive among the displaced population, who may ultimately see heritage intervention as a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to substantially improve their quality of life, even though it meant they had to relocate afar' (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 78).

As a result, in both cases the public agrees with and supports heritage discourses of the redevelopment, regardless of their resistance against displacement (Harms 2012). The mask created by the values of cultural heritage and its associated ideas, such as beautification, high culture and economic benefit, legitimise the state-dominated urban redevelopment (Ghertner 2015a; Herzfeld 2017; Tomba 2017). In other words, heritage successfully evokes a set of shared and supposedly desirable values, which encourage political consensus and make it difficult for civil groups or individuals to articulate dissent or resistance against gentrification (Zhu 2020).

Similar to debates concerning the function of modern architecture and urban planning in legitimising social change during the twentieth century, cultural heritage and its associated values become a tool of legitimacy used to regulate populations through spatial management and the reproduction of state power and sovereignty in the 21st century (De Cesari 2010; Oakes 2019). This is reflected in the testimonies from scholars, who adhered to specific heritage knowledge and discourse to question the means of gentrification but not the ultimate social change it promoted, thereby supporting state action and policies of urban governmentality (Zhang 2017).

Conclusion

This paper contributes to understandings of the role of heritage values in urban redevelopment and gentrification. Our research demonstrates how local governments, together with developers and specialists, actively use heritage as a soft, but powerful tool of governance in urban redevelopment. The study highlights the particular effects of heritage in legitimising urban gentrification; economic and aesthetic values created by heritage discourses serve to legitimise urban redevelopment projects, particularly when they provide direct economic benefit to communities and governments. Yet these redevelopment projects do not only focus on urban aesthetics and consumerism; heritage products are also associated with narratives of cultural identity and historical significance. These shared values make it difficult for people to resist redevelopment and search for alternative meanings and values.

We criticise and question the consequences of such heritage-led urban redevelopment, particularly its social impact on local communities. Both cases demonstrate that gentrification is an economic and political process. Beyond the abstract official understanding of 'residents', heritage-led reconstructions are made accessible to new social elites and the middle class and prioritise capital accumulation over the living conditions of host communities, who have often occupied the spaces for many years (Daher 1999). This process also ignores marginalised social groups such as the elderly and low-class migrant workers. The Shanghai and Xi'an cases approached the relocation of original residents differently; while many original communities moved to other areas of Shanghai, the original residents of Qujiang returned to their newly built modern villages. The transformation of the urban landscapes through heritage discourse in both places reinforces state control over its citizens, while supporting the interests of capital accumulation for investors and the upper-high class.

As shown in the recent redevelopment of Delhi (Ghertner 2015a) and New Saigon (Harms 2012), heritage also becomes an object of cultural consumption that supports social distinction and stratification in other parts of the world. In both Delhi and New Saigon, local governments worked with archaeologists and embraced a nationalist ideology about the material past (Herzfeld 2006; Bloch 2016). A combination of method selection in the conservation of heritage assets and inspiration for new urban environments gained from these assets is representative of the symbolic orientation and political aims of urban redevelopment. Indeed, similar forms of governance can be

seen in the slum clearances in Western Europe and the USA of the 1960s to 1980s, in which modern urban planning necessitated the removal of specific areas for while promoting specific idealised narratives (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015).

Our criticisms and discussion ultimately point to the overarching issue of the ‘right to the city’, as expressed by Lefebvre (1968), and later developed by Harvey (1989) and Smith (2002). The key question here is whose rights should be considered in the process of urban redevelopment? In some countries, administrators’ political decision-making is awarded to them by national governments as a form of democratised governance (Crook and Manor 1998). For instance, a co-management, multilevel and bottom-up strategy that considers the social value of heritage is being used in the urban redevelopment of Córdoba (Redaelli 2019). However, in countries like China, the state exerts a manifest influence on the production and beautification of historically-inspired social environments, where the presence of history is always customised to support broader developmental aims. Due to the power disparity between the dominant state and the weak civil society, governance practices should be regarded as an exercise of a ‘state-centred mode of sovereign power’ (Oakes 2019, 258). In this way, mechanisms designed to enable citizen engagement or local decision making are limited.

We do not intend to celebrate the Western narrative of democracy or argue that China is an exceptional social environment and completely separate from the Western discourse. Many key problems in Chinese cases can also be found in other countries under a similar shadow of the market economy, globalisation and neo-liberalism. That is to say, all of these broader socio-political contexts facilitate the development of neoliberal ethics of individualism, which discourage collective forms of social action (Duckett 2020). As our current study has shown, heritage-led urban redevelopment does not necessarily transform urban space into a meeting point for building collective life, as proposed in Lefebvre’s idea of ‘the right to the city’. Nor does such redevelopment contribute to social equality and well-being, as claimed by official discourse. Conversely, a new wealthy, powerful class becomes the benefactor of environmental and infrastructural upgrades, with cultural heritage functioning to conceal the uncomfortable shadow of urban redevelopment.

Notes

1. The first author visited Xi’an, China in June–August 2014, March 2015 and July 2017; whereas the second author performed nine site visits in Shanghai between November 2015 and January 2020.
2. In Xi’an, 17 interviewees (ten males, seven females) were selected based on their occupation: officials from different municipal government departments (Bureau of cultural heritage; Bureau of tourism; Bureau of urban planning), managers of heritage/theme parks, and residents of the affected neighbourhood. In Shanghai, 8 interviewees (five males, three females) were selected, including chief officials of the Bureau of urban planning, designers and managers of heritage areas, scholars and residents who were directly affected by the redevelopment.
3. The Shanghai Municipality’s ‘365 Plan’ enabled for the demolition of 365 hectares of derelict *shikumen* housing in the inner city, and the widening of streets as a solution for traffic congestion (Ren 2008).
4. Residential neighbourhood type that results of a combination of small scale pedestrian lanes and the mixed Western-Chinese housing type of the *shikumen*.
5. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_63a60aae0102wl6n.html.
6. The redevelopment includes a central public space called Taipingqiao Park; exclusive hotels, offices and shopping malls; an international public school; a 360-m skyscraper currently under construction; plus, the Museum of the Centennial of the Communist Party of China, just completed in 2021.
7. This approach has generated considerable controversy. The World Bank highlighted its model role blending economic development and the material conservation of architecture (Wang 2016); whereas the UNESCO has criticised how Xintiandi’s success triggered the gentrification of historic neighbourhoods (UNESCO 2016). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245999>.
8. <https://xa.anjuke.com/sale/qujiangxinqu-q-xadtfr/>.
9. https://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2019/07/blog-post_16.html. This report investigates the letter sent to the Qujiang New District Administration Committee by local residents of Beichitou village in protest against the displacement plans initiated by the committee.

Research

This paper explores the impacts of heritage-led urban redevelopment on local societies and its associated consequences of gentrification. A review of the literature on gentrification shows the motivating role that historic environments play in the process, but still lacks a deep inquire on the use of heritage as a tool for urban governance.

Building upon previous research on urban heritage by the authors published in *Cities* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2016.05.026>; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.06.017>); the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347886>; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.991935>; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1557235>); as well as in recent books (Zhu, Y. & Maags, C. (2020). *Heritage Politics in China: The Power of the Past*. London: Routledge), this article aims to advance towards the characterization of the uses of heritage as a tool for urban governance. Acknowledging the importance of concepts like ‘accuracy’ and ‘beautification’ in the heritage redevelopment of urban areas in China, the authors assess the instrumental role of the regeneration of historical areas in the imposition of sanitized versions of the past and the achievement of purposes of economic growth and social cultivation in Xi’an and Shanghai.

This research connects with the aims and scope of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* as it specifically addresses issues like gentrification, urban regeneration, urban heritage and urban theory. It aims to contribute to current debates being held at the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, and specifically on the Special Issue edited by Chiara de Cesari and Rozita Dimova in 2019 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjhs20/25/9?nav=toCList>), offering a perspective from the official purposes of gentrification. This, in our opinion, complements the view from China that Arkaraprasertul offered in that Special Issue. Being now one of the major forces that now operate in the contemporary Chinese city, heritage-led urban redevelopment is attracting rising attention and offers a controversial field of discussion suited to the interests of the readers of *International Journal of Heritage Studies*.

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