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The ‘preservation by relocation’ of Huizhou vernacular architecture: shifting notions on the authenticity of rural heritage in China

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ABSTRACT

The practice of ‘preservation by relocation’ is representative of China’s ‘heritage fever’. It is the source of a controversial debate regarding heritage conservation, and it remains understudied from a critical perspective. This paper addresses two cases of ‘preservation by relocation’ of Huizhou-style vernacular architecture, rebuilt as part of mixed hotel and residential developments on the outskirts of Shanghai and Shaoxing in China. Through this paper we will argue how the practice of ‘preservation by relocation’ stretches different notions of authenticity. Our research will show how relocations lead to a shift in the value of vernacular architecture, as it is used for the production of new identity for tourist and real estate developments in China. Using grounded theory based on site visits and semi-structured interviews, this paper proposes that originality and verisimilitude merge to become an authenticity-on-the-making, under the cover of dominant heritage discourses in China. This pursuit determines the heritage conservation practices of relocated assets, as they serve entrepreneurial interests and contribute to wider official narratives about the past in China.

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Authenticity; huizhou style; preservation by relocation; rural heritage; verisimilitude

Introduction

This paper studies the practice of ‘preservation by relocation’ (*yidi bǎohù*, 异地保护 in Chinese) in tourist and real estate developments in China. Produced amidst a mix of policy limitations, entrepreneurial initiatives and public interests, ‘preservation by relocation’ illustrates the current process of heritage production in China, which has been characterised by authors like Zhu and Maags (2020) as ‘heritage fever’. Architectural relocations are a widespread phenomenon that has received sustained scholarly attention in Western countries from a critical perspective. Its evaluation has been based on Western notions of authenticity, which frequently clash with those used in other cultures. Applied to China, this critical approach has focused on conventional typologies like open-air museums and theme parks, but it has yet to address hotels and real estate developments.

These studies, frequently carried out by Western scholars (Weiler 2017; Ludwig and Wang 2020), have argued how preservation by relocation stretches the notion of heritage authenticity. But they have elided the process of construction of authenticity which, as a negotiated notion, is subject to continuous re-formulation due to the interests of diverse stakeholders. In a context of growing global nationalism, the study of the incorporation of heritage in the consumption-driven markets of tourism and real estate in China has experienced a steady development. Nevertheless, these studies

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have not explored the specific issues that arise when the relocated elements continue accommodating habitational uses – albeit of a temporary nature – in the shape of heritage themed hotels. Our research aims to fill this gap.

The purpose of this paper is not to assess the legal implications of the practice of ‘preservation by relocation’. Despite the stance taken by international organisations against relocations¹ (ICOMOS 1964; Moolman 1996), a loophole exists when relocations are deemed the last possible resort in order to preserve heritage assets (ICOMOS 1964; ICOMOS Canada 1983; ICOMOS New Zealand 1992; ICOMOS 2003). The *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics*, passed in 1982 and revised in 2002, adheres to international principles²; and documents like the *China Principles* (ICOMOS CHINA 2015) and the *Xi’an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas* (ICOMOS 2005) claim the importance of maintaining the relationship between buildings and their original sites. However, in spite of the fact that recent national³ and local⁴ regulations (CAUPD 2005; Shan 2013) have drastically limited the sale of buildings and building parts, the owners of legally acquired structures still retain the right to rebuild them elsewhere (Sun and Thompson 2013).

In the eyes of the public, relocations are acceptable – as long as they occur within the borders of China – regardless of their purpose (Zhang 2015). Entrepreneurial and touristic examples appear throughout sanctioned international events that have taken place in major cities like Shanghai (Beautiful Shanghai; Wendaoyuan) and Beijing (Beijing Horticultural Expo), all of which contribute to the production of the urban image (De Muynck 2011). In prefecture-level cities such as like Jinhua (Hengdian Town), Quzhou (Minjuyuan), or Bengbu (Hu Shangshen Mingyue),⁵ relocated structures serve as movie sets, open-air museums, or residential uses respectively, which reveals the middle class’s growing interest in history and culture (Chen 2006; Knapp 2010; Weiler 2017). Relocations also happen in rural-to-rural frameworks such as Huanglingcun under the auspices of rural vitalisation policies (Pola 2019). The public and official support that these cases received contrasts with the controversies that arose when other assets were relocated abroad. This happened in 2003, when the Peabody Essex Museum relocated Yin Yu Tang to the USA (Sun and Thompson 2013); and in 2013, when movie star Jackie Chan donated six Huizhou-style houses to the Singapore University of Technology and Design.⁶

As Mills (2007, 118) states, ‘relocated buildings can be used to explore not just the world of those who originally built them, but the concerns of those who relocated them’. To these concerns we would like to add those of a rapidly developing country like China. To name a few, ‘preservation by relocation’ reveals the limitations of heritage policy, to begin with, the challenge of merely listing the immense amount of heritage assets in rural China. ‘Preservation by relocation’ is symptomatic of the imbalance that exists between rural and urban areas in China, which is further enhanced by this phenomenal transfer of historic substance. ‘Preservation by relocation’ also exemplifies the pursuit of identity in Chinese society, along the lines of official policies that strive to build cultural self-confidence, and especially given the recent official calls against ‘xenocentric’ architecture. Through the cases of Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao and Ahn Luh Lanting, this paper aims to explore these concerns. It will do so by studying the relocation of Huizhou-style historic buildings in high-end mixed hotel and residential enclaves, posing two main questions: What are the notions of authenticity at play in the process? How do these different notions come together to ensure the commercial success of relocations?

Considering that ‘reconstructions ... need the kind of decoding more usually associated with literary works or movies’ (Mills 2007, 116), our research adopts a qualitative methodology of discourse analysis. It focuses on architectural, urban and landscape design features of relocations, building upon Rapoport’s (1982) approach to the built environment as conveyor of meaning. The author visited the two sites on two different occasions: to Zhujiajiao and Shaoxing in November 2016, and again to Shaoxing in October 2020. During these visits the author studied the sites by direct observation, collecting pictures and notes, plus available information brochures. Visits were guided by staff of the Qinsen Group, which acts as

a developer, and the Ahn Luh company, which operates the hotels. The author carried out a series of semi-structured interviews during these two visits, as well as during an additional visit to the headquarters of the Qinsen Group in Shanghai in March 2019. These interviews were conducted in English and lasted between one and a half and two hours. Interviewees from the Qinsen Group included the manager, the lead conservation architect and one researcher from the company. The manager of the Ahn Luh hotel in Shaoxing was also interviewed. In order to address the topic of relocations from an academic perspective, two leading scholars of heritage conservation from Tongji University were interviewed as well.

The paper will begin by introducing the practice of preservation by relocation and the notions of authenticity at play. The direct observation and the interviews with relevant stakeholders of the two case studies will offer empirical evidence. Our analysis will address both the relational and intrinsic characteristics of both cases. The discussion will put forward the notion of ‘originality’ as key factor regarding authenticity, based on the use of ‘original’ artisans, ‘original materials’, and ‘original techniques’. It will also introduce ‘verisimilitude’ as a complementary idea, key for the authentication of the heritage re-creation process. We will argue that the joint action of originality and verisimilitude emanates from and reinforces a dominant heritage discourse in China, legitimised by academia and applied by practitioners.

Literature review

Issues on authenticity and relocations

Authenticity stands at the centre of the theoretical discussion on ‘preservation by relocation’. Its original object-based focus on materiality, which inspired the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964), was first challenged by the non-material, value-based approach of the Burra Charter (ICOMOS Australia 1979). The rise of experience-centred, tourist-related definitions of authenticity (McCannell 1973) widened the discussion from the object to the process of authentication, which is understood as the verification performed by heritage stakeholders. Authors like González Martínez (2019) and Boccardi (2019) point towards authenticity as a concept in crisis, particularly since the Nara Charter (UNESCO 1994) made it ‘a question of judgment, rather than a scientific proposition’ (Boccardi 2019, 6).

Largely inspired by examples of architectural relocation in Japan itself, the contribution of the Nara Charter has been twofold. On the one hand, it has led to a more inclusive and culturally rooted understanding of authenticity. However, on the other hand, Nara’s loose definition of authenticity was especially welcome by heritage stakeholders in the framework of the developmental state in Asian countries. There, the concept is stretched and argued by developers to legitimise wholesale reconstructions of the historic environment for commercial purposes (González Martínez 2019). Ultimately, authenticity functions as a tool for gentrification, as ‘a cultural form of power over space that puts pressure on the city’s lower-middle working class’ (Zukin 2012, xiii).

Despite the multiple interpretations enabled by Nara, the notion of authenticity in heritage debates in China has two main conceptualisations pertaining to our study (Zhu 2017). Firstly, a ‘historical accuracy’ that aims for the return to an idealised, original state that applies to the Chinese notion of *yuánzhēnxìng* (原真性). Such a nostalgic approach involves discarding contributions from what may seem in some opinions as less attractive layers of history, which are acknowledged in the Chinese notion of *zhēnshíxìng* (真实性) akin to the modern principles of the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964). In the practice of ‘preservation by relocation’, these discarded layers include the original location of relocated assets. The motivations for such choices pose a paradox, especially from the Western perspective, that remains unexplored.

Relocations in heritage literature

Mills (2007) shows that relocation is common practice in the history of architecture, associated with social modernisation, urban development, and heritage appreciation. Whereas the residential use of relocated historic structures has seldom been studied, open-air museums are the most frequently debated examples of relocations. As Moolman (1996) states, ‘an open air museum comes into existence when specific museum objects (buildings) are not preserved in situ anymore, but are moved to a new site where they can be better preserved and interpreted’. Corbin (2002) and Gregory (2008) refer to the ‘mixed feelings’ heritage specialists have regarding relocations. On the one hand there is the relief of having found a ‘lesser evil’, preferable to the complete disappearance of historic buildings, and on the other hand, there is a sense of loss due to their de-contextualisation.

Building upon the open-air museum theme, Corbin (2002) mentions how the blend of a sanitised edition of the historic structures, the reduced scale of the relocated ensembles, and their simplified historical narratives have a clear effect in the loss of authenticity from the perspective of heritage values. But as we argue, this reflects a Western standpoint, which is challenged when applied to other cultural contexts. Studying Chinese heritage theme parks, Weiler (2017) and Ludwig and Wang (2020), have highlighted the role of ‘originality’ in the theoretical and practical implications of relocations. According to the requirement for accuracy of *yuánzhēnxìng*, these ‘mixed feelings’ are solved by means of the incorporation of ‘original artisans’ in the process, who use ‘original techniques’ to assemble ‘original structures’ which become ‘authentic replicas’. In spite of this, the relocation of residential structures for hotel purposes poses additional questions beyond tangible originality; namely, the contribution of intangible ‘ineffable qualities’ to the heritage consideration of historic architecture (Jones 2010).

Suburban development and nostalgia in China

The use of historic-inspired architecture in suburban contexts in China is also a rich field of research to which this paper aims to contribute. Recent studies carried out by Western scholars have been attracted mostly to the exotic reproduction of architectural styles in the periphery of Chinese cities. In these suburban settings, the incorporation of ‘foreign’ architecture motivated important debates on authenticity, based on the duelling notions of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ (Den Hartog 2010; Piazzoni 2018). But other studies on suburban identity in China have introduced new issues. Authors like He (2013) have pointed out how Western architectural styles have been gradually leaving room for new classical Chinese architecture and landscaping, all within a context of rising nationalism.

This happens as part of the adaptation of the object-centred, expert-led and nation-building characteristics of authorised heritage discourses (Smith 2006) to the Chinese context. As Yan (2015) and Zhang (2017) have argued, they take the shape of a dominant heritage understanding based on ideas of ‘harmony’ and ‘cultural self-confidence’ coined during the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras, with immediate effects in Chinese culture and society. Consequently, developers have enthusiastically adopted a nostalgic approach to the ancient Chinese civilisation (Douglass, Wissink, and Van Kempen 2012) that evokes imaginaries of old prestige and a so-called ‘new elegant style’ (Huang 2006; He 2013; Liao, Wehrmann, and Breitung 2018). By doing so, they contribute to increasing the class standards that result in the production of social difference, spatial segregation and symbolic consumption (He 2013; Liao, Wehrmann, and Breitung 2018). Although all these studies have focused on the production of historically-inspired architecture, an important void remains to be filled regarding the consideration of the heritage implications of relocations.

Travellers: Huizhou architecture in the Yangtze River Delta

Commonly associated with memories of prosperity due to the trade of tea, wood and stationery since the Song dynasty (Shao, Chen, and Hun 2021), since the 1980s the built environment of the small mountainous Huizhou region has been re-appropriated as representative of a new spirit of entrepreneurialism in China (Wang 2016). Dating mainly from the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the early years of the Republic, the image of Huizhou-style architecture is characterised by high, whitewashed ‘horse-head’ brick walls, topped by black ceramic tiles. Within these perimeter walls, the domestic spaces are arranged around a courtyard, which is normally accessed through elaborate brick and stone archways. The interior structure is made of wooden posts and lintels, and covered by sloping roofs. Beams and pillars are usually decorated with elaborate carvings, patterns which are also used in lattices and ornamental elements in interior walls, windows and doors (Shou 2021).

After the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and despite entering a period of decadence,⁷ the Huizhou region retained symbolic associations with wealth and culture (Gong 2021). These associations actually threatened the integrity of its vernacular architecture after 1949, especially during the Cultural Revolution (Yu 2016). Dereliction intensified amidst the process of ‘rural hollowing’ that started with the Opening Up and Reform, and continues in many cases well until today. Beginning in the early 1980s, collectors have disassembled wooden structures and ornate wood and stone elements, transported away from the ancient Huizhou region and stored them in other locations in China, as a kind of ‘portable architecture’, to use the words of a top scholar from Tongji University (personal communication, 29 September 2020). Even if since 2005, the *Code of Conservation Planning for Historic Cities* prevents the acquisition and relocation of buildings at a national level. However, the owners of historic structures and building elements that are unlisted are still entitled to rebuild them where ever they prefer.

A wide range of entrepreneurs have focused on relocation as key for their business, among which our study focuses on the Qinsen Group. Based in Shanghai, Qinsen is originally a landscape design firm which later expanded its business to hospitality and real estate. It specialises in the preservation of Chinese historic structures and culture and the development of heritage-related hotel and residential developments that blend vernacular architecture and contemporary design. According to its chief conservation designer, from the 1980s to 2005, the company acquired and salvaged around 600 Huizhou-style buildings (personal communication, 20 March 2019) which are stored in the outskirts of Shaoxing city in Zhejiang province. With the goal of ensuring the ‘accuracy’ of their projects, the company manager explains how Qinsen is active in the organisation of activities to train craftsmen, in cooperation with municipal and provincial institutions (personal communication, 14 October 2020). Furthermore, Qinsen has made a name for itself due to its rigorous approach to ‘preservation by relocation’ and the support from top scholars in the field in China. All in all, Qinsen is active in the promotion of vernacular heritage conservation, and is present in major heritage fairs throughout the country. Thanks to its reputation, the company has received important public commissions such as the Anhui Province themed area in the Beijing Horticultural Expo in 2019, among other key state-promoted initiatives.

Our study focuses on two projects by Qinsen located in the Jiangnan region, which is the most economically dynamic of China. The first is Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao, located in one of the most famous water towns that dot the suburban landscape of Shanghai. The second is Ahn Luh Lanting, built in the picturesque valleys that surround Shaoxing, a famous historic town north of Zhejiang province. The original locations of the rebuilt elements incorporated in the two case studies are unknown, but, according to Qinsen, they come from the Huizhou region (personal communication, 20 March 2019). Using Chappell’s (1999) categories for the analysis of architectural relocation, we will focus on the relational and intrinsic characteristics of both developments from a qualitative perspective. Firstly, the ‘relational’ dimension incorporates associational and supportive elements, including the choice of the locations for these reconstruction and urban design determinations, to which the aesthetic relationships that historic structures establish with the environment and new

structures must be added. Secondly, the ‘intrinsic’ dimension identifies tangible elements, including the choice of buildings and building parts, as well as the accuracy of the reconstruction process.

Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao

Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao is located 100 metres away from the north entrance into the Zhujiajiao water town, an AAAA-rated vernacular tourist destination in Shanghai. Located within the Qingpu district, Zhujiajiao has undergone widespread urban development since the Shanghai Municipality chose it as a Tour Site for the 2001 APEC Summit. This development has been especially intense around the northern part of the town, with the planning and construction of low-density, self-referenced residential enclaves.

Qinsen acted as the developer of two plots on the site. The western plot, Linhu Pinzhenyuan, is accessible from the main Zhuxi Road, and it only accommodates residential uses. The eastern plot, Pinzhenyuan Ahn Luh Bieye, the focus of this research because this is where the relocated structures are located, mixes hospitality and residential uses. The design strategy of the eastern plot responds to the visually heterogeneous surroundings. Designers of Qinsen aimed to visually isolate the hotel area (1 and 2 in [Figure 1](#)) by means of two buildings that act as barriers. On the one hand, two two-story commercial buildings along Kezhiyuan Road to the south and Zhuhu Road to the east block the view from the exterior of the enclave. The modern design of the façades of these commercial buildings lacks any historical references (3 in [Figure 1](#)). On the other hand, two rows of two-story villas to the north and the east (4 in [Figure 1](#)) isolate the hotel from the waterways.

The layout of the main lobby and the rooms of the hotel (1 and 2 in [Figure 1](#)), follows the ‘waterside village of Jiangnan’ narrative (personal communication, 3 February 2021). This is revealed from the open square behind the gate on Zhuhu Road, which acts as the entrance into the hotel and where the two relocated structures stand. A massive ancestral hall and a richly ornamented theatre stage, both from the Qing dynasty, are located across from each other



Figure 1. Layout of Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao. Zhuhu Road runs from north to south; Kezhiyuan Road from east to west. Legend: (1) Stage and Ancestral Hall, (2) One-story hotel rooms, (3) Commercial buildings, (4) Residential villas. Source: Google Maps/Plácido González Martínez.

(Figure 2). Landscaping elements such as planting schemes and water features enhance the representativity of the place, which is occasionally used for theatre performances. The ancestral hall, with its two courtyards, acts as reception building for the hotel. The main courtyard, which was rebuilt as it originally stood, is used as a gallery to display classical and contemporary Chinese artworks. The smaller courtyard acts as the actual hotel reception. The two-story wooden structure surrounding it holds the front desk and administration office, whereas the second floor accommodates a library.

The reconstruction of both structures aimed to fulfill the originality principle of *yuánzhēnxíng*: Craftsmen from the company rebuilt them by reassembling the original wooden elements using traditional techniques. Whenever needed, new wooden parts were concealed by applying a technique known as *zuòjiù* (做旧 literally, ‘make old’), which homogenises their colour appearance (personal communication, 14 October 2020). Other improvements aimed at enabling the incorporation of modern functions, such as new water, electricity and other related facilities. The most impacting decision in conservation terms took place in the small courtyard of the ancestral hall. There, the designers of the company incorporated a new glass ceiling, turning what was originally an open space into an enclosed area (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Theatre stage (left) and Ancestral Hall (right) in the entrance courtyard of Ahn Luh Zhujiyajiao. Source: Plácido González Martínez.

The recreation of the two historic structures is supported by the architectural design strategies for the new buildings, namely, the hotel rooms to the west of the historic buildings and the residential villas facing the two watercourses (Figure 3). The one-story structures of the rooms and the two-story structures of the villas are arranged according to modern design principles. Despite the fact that they incorporate gardens that reminisce traditional courtyard houses, the new buildings neither follow traditional layouts plan, nor do they incorporate any original elements or materials. The designers achieved an aesthetic connection with the historic buildings through a variety of means. The most literal are the stone gates that serve as main entrances into the villas: according to the company, these are newly created elements, built according to traditional design principles (personal communication, 14 October 2020). In a less literal way, the rooflines of the hotel rooms and villas are inspired by the awnings of traditional architecture. Furthermore, the harmonisation between the old and new buildings is reinforced through the use of analogous materials: plastered walls, stone, ceramic tiles and wooden elements. No information about the

history of the buildings, nor about their original locations, is displayed on site, this in spite of the fact that the company offers a wealth of details about the relocated buildings in their own website.⁸



Figure 3. Villas in Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao. Source: Plácido González Martínez.

The change of location has brought about another major change, and this despite of the aforementioned physical integration efforts: the social extraction of the new users of both the relocated structures and the new rooms and dwellings. According to the company, the new users include private companies, frequently high-end fashion and automobile brands. These companies rent out the hotel and use the historic buildings for product presentations to customers, using the hotel rooms as courtesy accommodations for company executives or selected clients (personal communication, 14 October 2020). According to Tripadvisor, private clients staying overnight pay 2600 CNY (396 US\$), which triples the rate charged at the second most expensive hotel in Zhujiajiao. As for the villas surrounding the hotel, the company confirmed how the entire development was successfully sold, even though they remain unoccupied as they were purchased mostly by private companies as investment assets. A search in NetEase, a popular real estate website, shows a starting price of 25 million CNY (3.85 million US\$) for the smaller type 400 sqm villas in Ahn Luh, which is ostensibly higher than the average prices of the area.

Ahn Luh Lanting in Shaoxing

Ahn Luh Lanting is located on the outskirts of Shaoxing in Zhejiang province. The site benefits from the natural setting of the Kuaiji hills that surround it to the north, west and south. The height of the hills and the lush vegetation isolate the site from the neighbouring communities and the city itself, with Yangming Road to the east as the only infrastructure connecting with the rest of the city. This natural topography also facilitates the separation between the different parts of the development. The hotel (1 in Figure 4) sits apart from the residential villas (2 in Figure 4) on a different slope and has its own gated access. Both hotel and villas are not perceptible from the road thanks to a cherry tree garden (3 in Figure 4), which serves as a public space for the neighbouring communities.

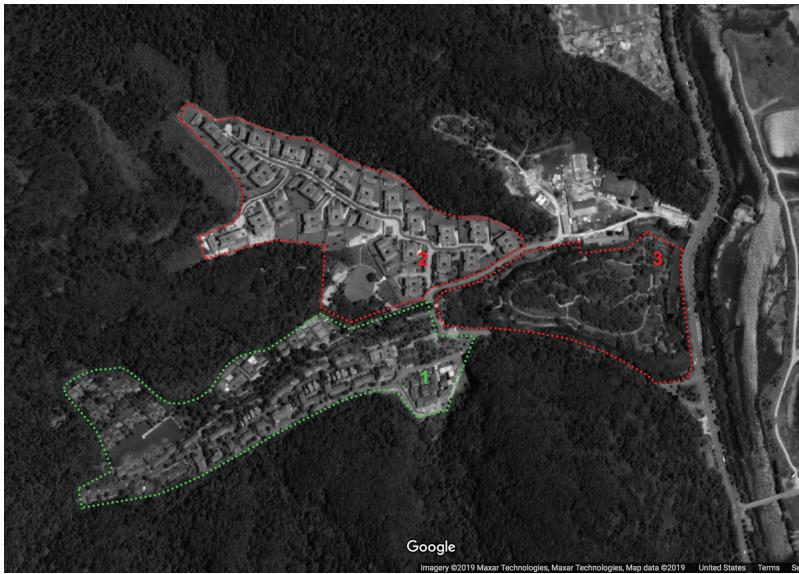


Figure 4. General layout of Ahn Luh Lanting. Legend: (1) Ahn Luh hotel, (2) Residential villas, (3) Cherry tree garden. Source: Google Maps/Plácido González Martínez.

As in Zhujiajiao, the hotel incorporates the relocated historic elements, whereas the residential villas are completely modern buildings with relocated historic building parts. The hotel is composed of scattered buildings that follow an east-west layout, with a central waterway and reservoir as structuring elements of the plan. Symbolically, the designed landscape recreates the traditional and organic relationships between water, agriculture and human settlements of the Huizhou region in the form of an organic ‘Chinese village’ (personal communication, 3 February 2021). Lush vegetation in the area enables the architecture to blend in with its natural surroundings, resulting in a high-quality landscape environment.

The relocated structures accommodate both public and more private functions, from an organisation perspective. The public buildings, namely the reception villa, the spa and the restaurant, are monumental courtyard houses that date back to the Ming and Qing dynasties, and they are located at the eastern end of the site. These buildings stand out for their size as well as their rich materiality and ornateness, offering a lavish welcome to visitors and users. In the reuse of materials, particularly wooden panels, the patina of the original pieces has been respected, even though new elements are concealed by applying the *zuòjiù* technique. Architectural design means are implemented in order to ensure that the users have an authentic experience. For instance, the hotel restaurant is located in a Ming-dynasty house and its historic space is used only for dining purposes. According to our observations, the less visible functions such as the kitchen and restrooms are located in an annexe, in a completely new and contemporary designed building.

The remaining two-story relocated houses, along with an ancient public ceremonial gate, are located to the north of the waterway, in a section that has yet to be completed. As of 2021, the original structures of these buildings have been reconstructed, however their adaptation to their new uses has not been completed (Figure 5). In every case, the original elements of each house have been relocated according to their original position (personal communication, 14 October 2020).



Figure 5. Relocated house in Ahn Luh Lanting. Source: Plácido González Martínez.

The other rebuilt structures are located to the south of the waterway and the reservoir (Figure 6). These are more modest in size and constitute the hotel room area currently in operation. Along the lines of the interventions in the other more monumental structures, these buildings incorporate original features, whereas new elements are also concealed through the practice of *zuòjiù*. Nevertheless, according to the designers of Qinsen, the layout of these buildings results from dividing what were originally larger structures into smaller units (personal communication, 14 October 2020). Therefore, their architectural typology, comprising a courtyard and a single-bay structure covered by a gabled roof, can be considered modern, despite including traditional elements.



Figure 6. Hotel rooms around the central reservoir in Ahn Luh Lanting. Source: Plácido González Martínez.

Here, the incorporation of modern design differs from Zhujiajiao due to more accentuated contrast between the new and the ancient. Scattered among the historic buildings south of the waterway, a group of eight modern villas stand out given their volumes and materiality. These two-story villas incorporate private swimming pools. Clad in dark metal panels, their materiality differs starkly from that of the surrounding historic structures. According to the hotel management, these villas are the most expensive rooms of the hotel, and are frequently requested by users who reject being accommodated in the historic buildings as a personal preference (personal communication, 14 October 2020). The connection with the memories of previous residents poses challenging questions also for Qinsen. According to the company, it has aimed to promote visits of former residents to their reconstructed homes, a purpose yet to be fulfilled (personal communication, 14 October 2020).

As for Zhujiajiao, hotel clients include local and international firms, who rent the public areas for product presentations, and offer stays in the rooms for executives and customers. According to Tripadvisor, individuals who want to be lodged at Ahn Luh Lanting would need to pay 2000 CNY (310 US\$) for a standard overnight stay, which doubles the rate for the second most expensive hotel in Shaoxing city in the same platform. According to Qinsen, the residences next to the hotel, many of them uncompleted, have been sold as investment assets. A search in NetEase, a popular real estate website, show that prices range between 25 and 46 million CNY (3.85 to 7.08 million US\$) for 6 and 8-room villas in Ahn Luh, which is ostensibly higher than the average prices of the area.

Discussion

The study of the two cases sheds light on the complex question of authenticity in China. As Zhu (2017) argues, the adoption of authenticity in the practice of conservation in China is subjected to a twofold requirement: to adhere to the international conventions and to continue delving into the country's own approach. In this sense, our argument is that reconstructions clearly evidence both a response to these international conventions and local formulations of authenticity, constituting a valuable example of a complementary definition, that of verisimilitude, that supports the recreation of past atmospheres. Furthermore, and as Weiler (2017) has argued, once the historic structures are not listed and do not need to follow guidelines from official institutions, relocations are subject to ad hoc definitions of 'authenticity'. This is consistent with the appreciation of authenticity as a matter of judgment, more than of scientific argumentation (Boccardi 2019).

We argue that the decisions regarding the re-assembly of buildings and building parts in both Zhujiajiao and Shaoxing can be deemed legitimate, according to the principles established by the Nara Document on Authenticity. The participation of trained builders and artisans, either for their structural reconstruction or for the conservation and production of new ornamental elements, guarantees the continuity of traditions from the Huizhou area. Furthermore, the cooperation between the company, local governments and entrepreneurs constitutes a valuable effort to recover practices that since the Cultural Revolution had been at risk of disappearing. It also contributes to the development of local economies and is a source of identity, acknowledged both by the government and academia.

The ascription to local formulations of authenticity in China, between *yuánzhēnxìng* and *zhēnshíxìng* (Zhu 2017), is also subject to interpretation. As we argue, the incorporation of original wooden elements with visible traces of time, both in the ancestral hall of Zhujiajiao and in the Ming and Qing houses of Shaoxing, may implicitly acknowledge the layering of time akin to the more dynamic, alternative notion of *zhēnshíxìng*. But our visual analysis and the testimonies from those involved in the relocations show that there is an aim to return to a pristine 'original' state (*yuánzhēnxìng*). The process of disassembling and reassembling the structures implicitly involves a selection the first step of which is to determine what structures and ornamental features are in better condition and worth keeping, and then establish what elements need to be produced in order to replace the more deteriorated pieces and return the whole to a pristine state. Conversations with the designers suggest that the company developed a registry and classification system, however, the

lack of hard evidence regarding the use of this system leaves the door open to the incorporation of parts from other buildings during the reconstruction of the selected structures. Furthermore, the practice of *zuòjiǔ*, mainly for wooden elements, accelerates the process of returning the relocated assets to what once was their original state in the past.

The importance of originality is stressed in Zhujiajiao and Shaoxing as defined by Weiler (2017) and Ludwig and Wang (2020). The analysis of the process confirms how originality is achieved by means of employing ‘original’ artisans trained by the company, who use the ‘original’ materials acquired by the company, according to the ‘original’ techniques that have been researched by the company. This focus on the tangible dimension avoids the challenge of other anthropological or historical aspects present in the ‘past experiences, people and places with which they are connected’ (Jones 2010, 104), such as those manifested in the reconstruction of Yin Yu Tang in the Peabody Essex Museum,⁹ which had both to address the scientific interest of the structure and appease the international dispute surrounding its relocation. In a generally favourable domestic context, the practice of relocations in China still raises controversies among academic circles, particularly in specialists akin to the more restrictive interpretation of authenticity that emanates from Western theories of conservation and the ICOMOS Venice Charter in particular. Despite these diverging opinions, renown heritage scholars in China, like those interviewed for this paper, as well as other relevant voices, consider that this strive towards originality shows that these types of relocations pose a ‘lesser evil’. As we argue, a direct consequence is the expert legitimization of the practice of *yidi bǎohù*, which is fundamental in the characteristic top-down framework of heritage study and practice in China.

This object-oriented discussion needs to be completed with an assessment of the relational dimension, that of the environmental and social issues at play not in the past, but in the current and the future experience of relocations. Zhu (2017), points at how, in practice, decisions are ultimately determined by the intention of different stakeholders, from the visitors who expect to meet pre-defined images, to the developers that enable attaining such an experience. If according to Zhu (2017, 193), ‘it is the Chinese public’s quest for authenticity and the visitors’ imaginativeness that authorise and merchandise’ the reconstruction of historic structures, we conclude that, in the two Ahn Luh cases studied, the design decisions regarding the adaptive reuse of the structures, the way they are set in their sites and their layout, aim to formulate a different kind of authenticity, defined by González Martínez (2019) as ‘verisimilitude’.

As we argue, verisimilitude enables the authentication of the architectural and small-town recreations developed in Zhujiajiao and Shaoxing by residents and visitors, understood as ‘the process by which something is confirmed as genuine, real, trustworthy’ (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 1296). According to Silverman and Blumenfield (2013), for recreation, the physical structures are less important than their narrativization. Much as in historical reenactments, recreation would ‘utilize, dramatize and revitalize selected events, episodes or even atmospheres of the past’ through design, to fulfil an immersive conceptualisation of heritage as experience (Daugbjerg, Eisner, and Knudsen 2014). Given the lack of evidence regarding the original locations or the former inhabitants, verisimilitude would act as a guideline for the recreation of historic atmospheres.

All of the tangible and intangible elements at play in Zhujiajiao and Shaoxing cater to the production of a carefully orchestrated built environment that highlights the ‘small town’ ideal expressed by the designers. And this is done here more intensely than in open-air museum cases, where only historic structures coexist. The use of analogous materials for the new buildings reflects what Logan and Molotch (1987) referred to as the power of material culture as a vehicle for the authentication of the urban landscape. Especially in Shaoxing, the production of a new vernacular type by dividing what were originally larger houses constitutes an outstanding example of verisimilitude, particularly taking into consideration that users will not assess the setting from a scientific perspective. Set in highly qualified environments, the scale of which recalls that of the urban spaces of old towns in the Huizhou region, the blend between the ‘originally’ reconstructed old elements and the ‘traditionally’ inspired design principles of contemporary architecture creates an ideal juxtaposition of the ‘good old times’ and the ‘good new times’.

Last but not least, the continuity of the habitational use adds an additional layer of verisimilitude. References to the lives of those who inhabited the buildings, as developed for example in the reconstruction of Ying Yu Tang in the Peabody Museum, are absent. The lack of success in the attempts to bring the former residents back into the relocated buildings, or the fears of the memories haunting the structures expressed by some customers, speak of the conflicting relationship that exists with the lives of those who inhabited the villas for decades in the past. It also evidences the conscious selection of a specific period in the past, that of the ‘origins’ of Huizhou as a Chinese economic and cultural centre between the 14th and the early 20th centuries. In this sense, we consider that design decisions promote a kind of return of these relocated historic buildings to their ‘monarchical and aristocratic lifestyles’ (He 2013), updated through their juxtaposition with examples of the ‘new elegant style’ of modern architecture. Considering that both cases produce a dual displacement, one that is geographical and another that is social, we contend that the verisimilitude of the new settings of this ‘portable architecture’, also supports a ‘portable gentrification’ of vernacular architecture from poorer rural areas to affluent metropolitan regions.

Therefore, the joint action of ‘originality’ and ‘verisimilitude’ in the heritage recreation in the two Ahn Luh hotels produces an intense shift of values. The historic and social values of this architecture are transformed into enhanced economic and symbolic values. The production of an exclusive status through segregation and symbolic consumption (Huang 2006; Xu and Yang 2009; He 2013; Liao, Wehrmann, and Breitung 2018) appears as a major force driving the commercial success of Ahn Luh, where the ‘appropriate’ aesthetics of classical Chinese architecture and landscaping evokes images of prestige and the good life for potential residents (Huang 2006; He 2013; Liao, Wehrmann, and Breitung 2018).

Therefore, while heritage is adopted for consumption, it is also implicitly producing new heritage narratives related with rural China. In the first place, there is the nostalgia for a modest and traditional way of life in the countryside. This is conveyed by the simplicity of the materials and typological characteristics of vernacular architecture (Zhou, Chu, and Du 2019; Pola 2019), which produces an image of cultivation and sophistication among the Chinese middle classes. Secondly, the appeal to the commercial and economic prosperity of the Huizhou area immediately connects with current official narratives of entrepreneurialism in the Jiangnan region of China, a discourse used by the rural and urban growth machine to legitimise modernisation (Law 2020).

Conclusions

This research shows diverging notions of authenticity at play, which refer to the relocated buildings and the relationships they establish between themselves and the surroundings. Firstly, the quest for originality leads to the implementation of the *yuánzhēnxìng* approach, this is, the return to an original, pristine state. In turn, it also entails choosing a specific historical timeframe, which in these cases is the glorious period of the old Huizhou area during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the rejection of other periods belonging to the more recent past. Moreover, the search for originality by working with ‘original’ artisans and with ‘original’ materials all according to ‘original’ techniques, is in accordance with the loose definition of authenticity of the Nara Document. In this sense, the key aspect lies in the transmission of knowledge, which is now managed by the company. This happens with the support of academic circles, who legitimise new approaches to heritage conservation and therefore establish a dominant understanding of heritage ideas in the Chinese context. Consequently, a new notion, that of ‘verisimilitude’, is revealed as a crucial idea for the definition of the relational qualities of both cases. The recreation of an atmosphere of a small town is key for the authentication of the relocations, which become immediately accessible thanks to the continuity of habitational uses.

Furthermore, the relocation of buildings in Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao and Ahn Luh Lanting is not bound to any of the principles that could apply to statutory protected buildings. Therefore, the

different notions at play, either of originality or of verisimilitude, are decided from an entrepreneurial standpoint with the ultimate goal of being authenticated by hotel customers themselves. By jointly ensuring the originality of the historic items and the verisimilitude in the recreation of a historic atmosphere, the transfer of historical values is enabled, along with newfound and enhanced economic and symbolic values. Such values are capitalised by the company as a result of the investment, as well as by the users in the shape of narratives of personal refinement and entrepreneurship for the educated, affluent middle classes that find solace in the new suburbs of the Yangtze River Delta region of China. Therefore, this relocated Huizhou architecture represents an idealised vision of the Chinese countryside and its heritage, devoid of references to potentially more controversial and entrepreneurially less convenient periods of history and social classes.

Notes

1. 'a monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which occurs' (ICOMOS 1964).
2. Articles 20 to 26 of the Law establish the procedures by which unmoveable cultural relics are subject to potential dismantlement or reconstruction, explicitly stating that 'those using unmoveable cultural relics must observe the principle of keeping the cultural relics in their original state, be responsible for the safety of the buildings and the affiliated cultural relics, and may not damage, reconstruct, extend or dismantle them'.
3. *Code of Conservation Planning for Historic Cities* passed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development of the State Council of China in 2005.
4. in 2009 the government of Huangshan city in the Anhui Province passed the local *Measures for the Protection and Administration of Cultural Relics*, which expressly banned the demolition and sale of historic buildings.
5. Bengbu is the city where the rest of Jackie Chan's collection was finally relocated in 2018; in a development promoted by the entrepreneur Ma Guoxiang.
6. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/jackie-chan-donates-6-historic-houses-singapore-093518541-sector.html> (Accessed 8.19.2019).
7. Furthermore, Huizhou identity experienced a last serious blow after the name 'Huangshan' became more popular and akin to the incipient tourism market in the Opening Up and Reform years, leading to the substitution in 1987 of the name 'Huizhou' for the more commercially attractive 'Huangshan', or Yellow Mountain, as a touristic destination.
8. <http://www.qinsen.cn> (Accessed 5.17.2021).
9. <http://yinyutang.pem.org> (Accessed 5.17.2021).

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