

# Issues in the Trends and Methods of Preserving Historic Districts in Today's China: Case Study of Three Cities

Hsiaoting Yin, Tsinghua University, China

## 1. Introduction

The preservation of urban culture in China formally started in 1982, when the first batch of historical and cultural cities was released. In 1986, when the second list of cities was published, the concept of historical and cultural district has been noticed. Until 1990s, a great emphasis has been placed on preserving cultural and historical inheritance of cities. Preservation of historic districts initially started twenty years ago and in recent years we have seen a great growth in research in this area. The preservation of historic districts has been in place for decades, and research on historic districts has been more and more popular since 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are different ways of preservation, but most of them were regenerating cities. The motivation and reasons of these types can be considered as the result of consumerism and city marketing. Furthermore, there are some new aspects such as public participation and combination of development and conservation that have been studied recently. This paper studies three well-known cases to illustrate how those new ideas affect preservation and regeneration of historic districts, and conclude the trend in today's historic district preservation in China.

The first case takes San Fang Qi Xiang of Fuzhou City as a typical example to show how the preservation usually works in China recently. This section also describes how a historic district becomes a famous brand while the concept of city marketing is popular. The second case is about the influence of consumerism on regeneration, which takes Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi of Chengdu City as an example to illustrate it. The third case is Tian Zi Fng of Shanghai City, which starts adopting public participation, and may be a new trend in preservation of Chinese historical districts in the future.

## 2. Culture Preservation - San Fang Qi Xiang

### 2.1 Culture Preservation and City Marketing in Chinese Historic Districts

Because of the understanding of urban culture, the research, operation, and the complementarity of preservation related policies have been established in decades. Now

there are strategies and measures for conservation from historical and cultural city to historical and cultural relic. As hardware tools have been implemented with economic growth in recent years, the soft power has been emphasized. To achieve this goal, historic district became one of the most important cultural and spatial carriers; different methods of preservation and reuse have been attracted lots of attention.

Since 1990s, Urban Management has become a popular concept in China. Local governments started to use methods of market-oriented economy to operate and manage infrastructures, resources, environments etc. City culture has become a great tool for governments marketing their cities, and historic districts have been the best and easiest subject to attract tourists. As city marketing being a factor on regenerating, historic districts can be the brand of a city, and some orientation of projects can represent it well.

## **2.2 San Fang Qi Xiang of Fuzhou City**

San Fang Qi Xiang, which located in Fuzhou City and covers an area of 0.39km<sup>2</sup>, is consisted of three lanes: Yijin, Wenru, Guanglu, and seven alleys: Yangqiao, Langguan, Anmin, Huangxiang, Taxiang, Gongxiang, Jibi. Since over 100 dwelling houses and garden architectures which were built in Ming and Qin Dynasty still remain there, San Fang Qi Xiang is also called “the Museum of the buildings of the Ming and Qing Dynasty”. Its pattern of lanes and alleys shows the essence of South Chinese old cities, and make San Fang Qi Xiang the representative of southern historic districts.

Being in the center of the old city, San Fang Qi Xiang had been the aggregation of aristocrat and scholar-bureaucrat since Tang Dynasty. Until last century, as there were some eminent people living inside, San Fang Qi Xiang greeted its brilliant period. Throughout history, this place absorbed and contained cultural and traditional atmosphere of Fuzhou City, which led San Fang Qi Xiang playing a more important role in cultural representation.

San Fang Qi Xiang once had been renewed as a real estate developing program in 1992, which was the time that government started projects in historic areas conservation, and experts in China just attached importance on historic conservation areas. The whole project was stopped after the first phase because of its controversial redevelopment. Until 2005, when the importance of San Fang Qi Xiang was totally understood; the preservation restarted.

The strategies of preserving blocks are integrated conservation, systematic renovation, and reasonable use. All houses had been examined and measured to distinguish differences of generation and breakage, and methods including conservation, redecoration, rebuilding, and restructuring have been adopted. During the process, planners not only completed the

requirements of infrastructure, but also tried to prevent building all the houses too similar, and aimed to respect variety and continuity of history. The orientation is “The parlor of Fuzhou city”, which aim to show the culture of Fuzhou, such as folk custom museums, former residence of celebrities, and old stores. By culture development and economic growth, many powerful and famous people moved into the district, which could make the district metabolism by itself, and incur redevelopment of ecotype.

### 2.3 Results and Impacts

It has been one of the “Ten historical and cultural streets” since 2009. There are 20,000 visitors every day and 130,000 in midseason. There is a management committee as a mastermind for redevelopment, and a company responsible for all operations. All the investors who want to start their businesses have to be audited to achieve the standard of San Fang Qi Xiang. It keeps the special status of culture, and promotes the value in culture, economy, and society.

	Before	After
Architecture	Houses are old and not renovated. As residents refit houses to adapt new generation in a poor way, these houses didn't follow the old pattern	Preserve 20 cultural relics, 34 protective historical buildings and 97 historical buildings; combine new technology to rebuild the districts like old one.
Pattern	Most of patterns have been reserved, excluding Yanqiao alley, Guanglu lane and Jibi alley which were destroyed to build new streets	Preserve the old pattern, but complete infrastructures, such as fire protection
Residents	150 thousand people lived here, and the density of population is 370 thousand people/km <sup>2</sup> , most of the residents didn't own the house they inhabited	Persuade powerful people move in; relocate and resettle those residents who didn't have ability to buy houses.
Function	Basically for habitation, with some commerce serving for residents.	The parlor of Fuzhou city. Presenting intangible cultural heritage, and developing economy and tourism by using cultural elements

Table 1: Differences after preservation and regeneration

In the case of San Fan Qi Xiang, because there are many relics remained, and the cultural relationship with Taiwan, San Fang Qi Xiang has attracted high focus from government and public. Compared to other projects, San Fang Qi Xiang gets more subventions. It should be

noticed that not all historic districts were given as much attention as San Fang Qi Xiang.

### **3. Consumerism - Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi**

#### **3.1 Consumerism in Chinese Historic Districts**

Because of the production of space and consumerism background, land and culture have become one of goods to sale. Shanghai Xintiandi, located in the center of Shanghai City and built in 1997, could be the best example. There had been traditional buildings called stone gate or “shikumen”, which represent both living and building style of Shanghai. The developing program of Xintiandi preserved fewer traditional buildings and redecorated them. Others had been destroyed and built real estates for residential and commercial uses. This program seemed more profitable than preserving or destroying the whole district. Some people think developing the district is a good way to show historical city culture.

Although some experts consider the mode of Xintiandi ignore genius loci and lost historical significance, being a famous case, Shanghai Xintiandi has been copied in other places in China, such as Nanjing1912, Fuzhou Xintiandi, and Old Bund of Ningbo etc. This phenomenon has already expanded to the field of historic preservation.

Because regenerations need large amount of investment, now this commercial mode seems to be a trend, and can be found in most programs. Some projects use “gentrification” as a method to let historic districts develop themselves in the future. It relocated and resettled original residents to other places and attracted powerful people to move in. This mode could be considered as an inevitable solution now, and Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi might be a good example to illustrate this issue.

#### **3.2 Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi of Chengdu City**

As one of the first-listed in “Plan for the Protection of the Famous Historical and Cultural City”, there are three important historic conservation areas in Chengdu city, and Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi is one of them. Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi, covers an area of 0.32 km<sup>2</sup>, is bounded by the north wall of Chengdu Academy of Painting, Jing Alley, Upper Changshun Street and Lower Tongren Road. It is consisted of Kuan, Zhai and Jing Alleys.

The history of Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi can be traced back to more than 2,300 years, while the Qin State had built the second fortification in Chengdu. There were Greater City and Lesser City. The Lesser City was the predecessor and had been rebuilt in Qing Dynasty, called Man City, which copied the street style of Beijing. There were one boulevard to General’s mansion, eight streets for Baqi Garrison, and thirty-three alleys for soldiers. For its typical pattern of

buildings and spaces, Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi is named “China Lane”.

Nowadays, because of the urbanization, only Kuan Alley, Zhai Alley, and Jing Alley have been remained. First, as it is the only northern constructions in the south, regenerating the material culture inheritance is a top priority. Second, although the economic and social growth has changed people’s life style, inhabitants still keep the custom of drinking tea. This custom is considered as an Old Chengdu representation. Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi is the aggregation of teahouses, which means that preserving the intangible cultural heritage is also important.

On the one hand, because the cost was the main advisement when Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi was built, narrow alleys with dense houses and the lack of infrastructure may cause problems in the future. The preserving program adopted a strategy of authenticity, integrity, diversity, and sustainability. It focuses on conservation and tries to repair the old as old to keep the character of Old-Chengdu.

On the other hand, it adopted a “Xintiandi mode”, which replaced inhabitant to high class business, and provided traditional houses with modern conveniences. By combining commercial and entertaining features to this historic district, it became one of the most favorite places for people’s leisure time. Some of the houses were sold to get funds, others have been rented to increase incomes. All the businesses, interior design, and decoration of appearance are also controlled.

### **3.3 Results and Impacts**

As the result of implementing the program, Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi now is a famous place to be “Metropolis’s Parlor” with functions of culture, commerce, and tourism. As of the need for new generation, houses were restructured in new material for fire protection and other reasons. Most residents had been relocated; stores and powerful people moved in. Most of teahouses and stores are not so typical but just for tourists. The loss of culture carriers, including both people and traditional structures, let the district illuminate less historical information.

Most cases in China shows that there is a stiff procedure of operation such as surveying, definition, and making goals. During this process, fewer researches have been done, and most of the works are inflexible. In Kuan Zhai Xiang Zi, although the structures are valuable, the most important thing should be preserving the teahouse culture. Now it seems that because most of residents had moved out, the culture inside is just artificial and not so true. Even though intangible cultural heritage is part of statutory plan, it is hard to be protected in a spatial project, especially when the time for planner to finish a plan is too short to do more research.

	Before	After
Architecture	Minority of buildings was built in latest generation, others were built in contemporary time.	Define traditional view of buildings which was built in latest generation, and preserved only 40% old buildings and repair the old as old
Pattern	The Man City remainder The only representation of China lane	There are too many new decorations, and the Jin Alley had been destroyed to rebuild; both of which make the district unable to present the historical information
Residents	-	Most of residents had been relocated and resettled to another place
Function	Basically for habitation, with some catering and culture function. The culture of teahouses is an Old-Chengdu representation	As the orientation is “Old Chengdu’s Film, Metropolis’s Parlor”; culture, commerce, and tourism are the main functions

*Table 2: Differences after preservation and regeneration*

As the need for local government to get profit from historic district or other cultural carriers, the regeneration is usually in a commercial way. It sometimes makes historic districts lose their own character. Furthermore, it may ignore genius loci and historical significance. This case also shows a gentrification result; the high consumption is not affordable for most people. On one hand, historical inheritance should be shared with public, and on the other hand, it should be known that “people” or “residents” should be important participants while regenerating and preserving historic districts.

#### **4. Public participation - Tian Zi Fang**

##### **4.1 Public Participation in Chinese Historic Districts**

Since the economic growth in China, most of old areas have been redeveloped to new residential courts and gardens. They consist of high-rise buildings, big yards, and enclosing walls. It brings up the question if this residential mode could be called “community”, or just a symbol which represents a cool and modern generation when property management has replaced the role of community. Different from this pattern, traditional living mode in China was highly connected community with strong neighborhood relationship. It could be illuminated by narrow alleys and social spaces. Even though residents have changed with time passing, the spatial patterns remain. These remainders could be a basis for public participation while regenerating historic districts.

Ping-Jiang historic district of Suzhou can be seen as a pioneer. A lot of attention was paid to the traditional relationship between patterns and communities while planning. Considering that the basis of urban traditional form is coordinating the relation of material environment and social network, planners of this project adopted a concept of sustainable development. To maintain the neighborhood relationship, they moved 50% of residents out and only 20% of old houses were destroyed. Although orientation of the district changed into tourism, 80% of houses are still habitable. Ping-Jiang historic district is a successful case which balances preservation and development; emphasizes public participant, and shows how government regenerated a historic district gradually.

Some experts and planners noticed the importance of relationship between space and people, and have done a lot of experiments to find better methods, such as Ju-er Alleys in Beijing. But most of those methods were “from top to bottom” structure. If Suzhou is a governments’ leading example, then artists’ leading mode might be the other one to enter public participant in China. In other words, it is a “from bottom to top” structure. One of the famous cases is Beijing 798 Art District, which initially was an industrial zone and artists reused it to be an art zone. Tian Zi Fang has similar redeveloping process, but besides several workshops, it was more like a historic district.

#### **4.2 Tian Zi Fang of Shanghai City**

Tian Zi Fang, surrounded by Taikong, Jianguo, Sinan, and Ruijin roads, is clusters of cultural and creative Industries in Shanghai City. At the beginning, Tian Zi Fang was Alley 210 of Taikong Road. Now it has been expanded into a residential part and industrial part. Consisting of old traditional architecture called “Shikumen”, Tian Zi Fang not only represents the Old Shanghai style, but also shows changes by the influence of French concession.

The name “Tian Zi Fang” means the place that artists gather, which point out Tian Zi Fang’s special feature. There had been factories inside, but they were deserted and unoccupied in 1980s because of finance, while transferring of both city and industry. Since 1988, when the first artist set his studio in Tian Zi Fang, the cultural and creative Industries have flourished there. It has helped the public participant in growing process of the district.

During 1990s, Tian Zi Fang have faced risks of redevelopment several times. The original plan was a real estate development, but the opposition from residents and experts stopped this project. The plan of redevelopment on a large scale had turned to be a preservation and regeneration in a progressive way. There is a “from bottom to top” situation in different groups including residents, governments, experts, and real estate developers, which forces the development process toward their goals..

### 4.3 Results and Impacts

Now Tian Zi Fang has become a good practice of historic district that residents presided and local government assisted. There is an art committee, which is organized by government, controlling the type of entering business; an owners committee, which consisted of residents, undertakes affair of houses' leases. Tian Zi Fang has grown in this decade with a process of solving problems, but there are still some conflicts.

	Before	After
Architecture	Traditional "Shikumen" buildings for habitation, and some factories in lanes	Preserve all buildings. First floors of houses for business and catering usage, and reuse factories for artists' studios.
Pattern	Typical Shanghai style of alleys and lanes (main lane and offshoot) (lane-houses)	Preserve the pattern of lanes and alleys without new structure or development
Residents	-	Most of residents stay inside. Because of tourists and new functions, the quality of living is worse
Function	Basically for habitation and languishing industry (manufactories in alleys)	Cultural and creative Industries, with some catering Old structures cannot afford new functions, which make some problems, such as drain and fire protection

Table 3: Differences after preservation and regeneration

On one hand, as the new function been put into old structures which originally were poor, there is no doubt that the district cannot afford more and more tourists and caterings. That is why in most of regenerations, planners did big movements in infrastructure for safety, landscaping, and cleanness. In this case, because it's not a traditional type of superincumbent mode, planners were not designing from scratch but rather helping to make the area better. Issues such as fire protection, adopted the strategy of "using protection replaces fighting". Drainages were also controlled by limiting stores. These questions had not been answered in one step like in other cases, so it looks like still many problems remained and should be settled gradually by software but not hardware.

On the other hand, as more stores were built and more tourists were attracted, the balance between visitors and residents has been sloping. The space is limited and most of it has been

occupied by stores and visitors. Stores including pubs and restaurants have later business hours, which also exacerbate dissatisfactions from inhabitants. Although the rents could assist, they only profit the owners of first-floor, and residents in other floors have bad living quality without income. This case shows that all the valued appeal could not be identical, and the main work of government or planners is to harmonize them.

As the bottom-up way, Tian Zi Fang preserve both buildings and residents, which seemed like a better mode on both cultural and intangible cultural heritages. But learning from Beijing 798 Art Zone or other cases, it shows that artists usually enter with low rents but leave when the area is too famous and commercial. Tian Zi Fang has expanded and become more and more noticed. The truth is that people focused more on other businesses than art. Tian Zi Fang have to learn from experiences and adopt every strategy seriously.

## **5. From Past to Present: the Trends and Methods in Today's China**

Most old houses in historic districts were with bad quality and lack of infrastructure, and with the time passing by, the residents in historic districts were often not the owners. This complex ownership and poor living quality made the inhabitants build new structures to accommodate demands of new generations without order. Those reasons made fire protection become a risk, and the deficiency of infrastructure become a problem.

In last century, the primary consideration for residents and local government was to improving living quality and rebuilding the deteriorating area. As this area often located in the center of a city, which had better social web and livingness, real estate developers could get more profit there than from new-developed areas. When the conservation of historic districts started to be noticed and there were not so many policies in this field, many valued districts had been destroyed and new buildings were going to be developed.

With the evolution of researches and operations, preservation of historic districts has been emphasized in 1980s and 1990s. On one hand, because of the lack of infrastructure and the risk of fire protection, local governments and planners prefer reconstructing or combining new material to rebuild new structures with the same design of old ones to replace original structures. As the requirement of fire protection, most of spatial patterns had been destroyed to meet standards. On the other hand, as the misunderstanding of authenticity and integrity, the old one was rebuilt to be a fake one for the purpose of being glamorous sometimes. Otherwise, houses built in different generations were destroyed and rebuilt counterfeits to make the district integrated.

After these constructive destructions, Shanghai Xintiandi seems to have a breakthrough. It uses a cultural-consumed method on regeneration, and has been cloned everywhere in China. There is going to be a stable regenerating way such as archaize streets and commercial tourist-centered town; the method has still been popular.

In the context of globalization and consumerism, urban cultures and the evolution they lead in cities have been changed. For instance, Xingtiandi mode is driven by economic profit, and symbolizes a consumption space which focuses on specific group of people to create specific cultural environment. The essentiality is production of space to make profit, but not a truly preservation of historic district. This phenomenon has emerged in most cases and been called "using culture to set up the stage, and the economy to put on a show." This mode also impels an area being gentrification. As houses in historic districts became high class restaurants and stores, not only the original residents have been relocated, but also the exhibitions of urban culture have been closed to public.

	Past	Present
Local government	Destroying old districts to rebuild city image and function	Developing old districts to preserve and show historic culture
Experts	Preserving focus on cultural heritage (cultural relics: building-city-district)	Preserving both cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage
Residents	Aspiring to better living quality	
Real estate developers	Getting lands with good location and urban energy to develop and make profit	considering culture as a symbol and develop it

*Table 4: Differences after Shanghai Xingtiandi built*

Today, the understanding of preservation and regeneration is insight. Although there are still many issues to be explored, the concept of authenticity and integrity are recognized; new methods and technologies have been adopted. Take fire protection for example, now most programs adopt a positive and flexible strategy such as placing fireplugs and enhancing fire drills. With this method, supplement of infrastructure and cultural preservation could be coordinated.

Besides the trends and methods mentioned above, Tian Zi Fang presents a new way on preservation, which is public participation. Regeneration of historic districts should be a dynamic process with consideration of public participation. Now information is given and polls are taken, but people do not have rights for decision-making and judging. As public

participation should be a necessity in the future, there should be a platform and policy consisted by residents, led by local governments, guided by experts, and judged by public to use resource efficiently.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to express her thanks to prof. Yin Zhi, the head of Beijing Tsinghua Urban Planning and Design Institute, for his helpful comments of this paper.

### **References:**

- Feng, Lu (2002) "Xintiandi: An Extreme Urban Phenomenon of Heterotopias", Time + Architecture, Vol.5
- Zhang, Jie (2009) "Clone of urban cultural heritage in the context of consumption on culture", City Planning Review, Vol. 6
- Luo, Xiaowei (2001) "Xintiandi, one of the mode of urban revitalization", Time +Architecture, Vol. 4
- Zhang, Jingxiang (2009) "On the Forming of Consumer Space in Modern Urban Historical & Cultural Areas—An Analysis from the Perspective of Spatial Production Theory", Urban Planning International, Vol. 1
- Ma, Wuding (2008) "Culture Shapes Space: City Spirit in the Semantics of a Consumer Society", Planners I, Vol.11
- Li, Yingtao (2009) "Preliminary Study on the Relationship between the Complete Conservation and the Renewal for Historical Block—based on analysis of the Renewal of Kuanxiangzi Historical Block in Chengdu", Urban Studies, Vol. 4
- Liu, Boying (2010) "Conservation Tactics for Chengdu Historic Culture Conservation Area of Wide Lanes and Narrow Lanes", Architectural Journal, Vol. 2
- Chen, Liang (2008) "Historical Preservation Concept—A Case Study of Sanfang-Qixiang Conservation Plan of Fuzhou City", Planners, Vol. 8
- Wu, Xin (2007) "Regain Energy-Primary Analysis of Historical Area Protection and Renovation Mode be the example of Three Alleys and Seven Lanes in Fuzhou", Huazhong Architecture, Vol. 4
- Zhang, Ying (2009) "Ecological development of the "Three Communities and Seven Lanes" Cultural Resources", China Ancient City, Vol. 9
- Zhang, Ying (2006) "Study of the Conservation for the "Three Neighborhood Communities with Seven Alleys" Based on the Theory of "Concrescence"", Architectural Journal, Vol. 12
- Li, Tingting (2010) "From Critical Regionalism to Reflexive Regionalism: Comparison between Xintiandi and Tianzifang", World Architecture, Vol. 12
- Chen, Qingchang (2012) "Talking about the Regenerative Mode of Tianzifang", Chinese & Overseas, Vol. 3

Huang, Jiang (2011) "Research on Urban Renewal From Below: Based on Institutional Vision—A Case Study of Tianzi Fang in Shanghai", Architecture & Culture, Vol. 6