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The Conservation of China's Historical Sites under Rapid Urbanization in the Case of Xixing District

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Abstract

During the rapid growth of the nation in the last half-century, China has experienced extreme urbanization and class polarization. As a result, historical districts and cultural centers are rapidly vanishing. To survey the question of how to conserve historical monuments in the midst of cities' fast development that can protect the community, preserve significant memories, and promote the authenticity for future generations. This paper will examine a specific case study in Hangzhou's Xixing historical district in China that advances through historical research, field study, residential interviews, suggestions in governmental policy, and revitalization proposals. Through a one-week intensified investigation in the neighborhood under the collaboration of Zhejiang University, University of Tokyo, and Chulalongkorn University, I was honored to participate in this international academic event, "Learning from Place." Through a series of surveying and mapping, drawing and modeling, planning and designing, and under the guidance of professors and team collaboration, we students involved in a discussion of the current city issues and organized primary solutions to the problems. The conclusion we have come to an agreement is that it is possible to achieve a compatible environment that incorporates modern facilities into historical conditions, in which harmonizes urban development and cultural conservation, and balance economic advancement and social benefit.

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Keywords

Historical District; Urbanization; Conservation; Revitalization; Authenticity

1. Introduction

From 1949, the establishment of the Republic of China, to nowadays, China's percentage of urbanization increased from 10% to 58%. (Gao, 2017; Hishimura, 2004; Ma, 2004; Shi, 2010) During this era, China's modernization has accelerated comprehensively, which is especially evident in the nation's expanding economy. Because of the rapid speed of China's development, cities have received tremendous pressure from a large inflow of people from the countryside and the replacement of traditional houses with modern apartments. Under such condition, the development of infrastructure did not always match with the advance of modernization. Because of the lack of conservative implementations, most of the old districts that failed to catch up with the modern generation were forced to face abandonment, oblivion, and sometimes even demolition.

As if time has stopped at the 1980s, Xixing remained its conditions of the last century without major renovation conducted by professionals or government intervention. The houses vary in their appearances, since some of the



Figure 1. Street views of Xixing District, taken by the author.

buildings are reconstructed by the residents, and some of the buildings are left as original. Therefore, the result of the community is a complex hybrid that does not have a coordinated system that unifies the street. Xixing needs a harmonizing force that can better preserve the heritage and amplify its value to the city of Hangzhou. It is a pity as well as a chance, since most of the authenticity of the culture has been kept, and this will allow for room for improvement. Therefore, the prosperity of city life largely comes with the cost of decay of historic sites.

2. The History and Transformation of Xixing

However, forgetting history will be a betrayal of our culture. (Hishimura, 2004) What needs to be done is to maintain the authenticity of the heritage, keep the valuable sites for the citizens, and adapt them to modern society. Furthermore, the price of modernization shall never be the loss of cultural heritage, instead, a nation's globalization should always have the company of vernacular uniqueness. Local climate, geography, and beliefs formalize the spiritual values and living behaviors of civilians, which also shape the civilization and townscapes. Xixing Street, having a long history since two thousand and five hundred years ago, the district has experienced significant transformations. Starting around Tang dynasty, Xixing district functioned as a transfer station for public transportation and post office. Because there was a water-height difference between Qian Tang River, a major canal in the eastern part of China, and Xixing Canal, people at the time needed to carry the cargo down at Xixing District and reload them onto Qian Tang River. Since then, Xixing became a crucial connecting distribution center. Gradually, Xixing thrived in the bustling city serving passengers (Shi, 2010)

Unfortunately, as modern transportation developed, Xixing's significance slowly declined and the role of its canal faded away during the 1900s. Now, the past splendor only exists in local elders' memory. Additionally, starting from the end of 20th century, Xixing's surrounding area grew with a large number of new constructions, including present-day condominiums, shopping centers, and water-bank parks. For example, since the year 2000, nearby households increased by approximately 10,000 in various high-rise and middle-rise apartments. In contrast to these blooming communities, as our team surveyed Xixing District, its condition was nothing near ideal.

3. Issues of the District

There are numerous problems in Xixing which are worthwhile to be studied. The first image of the district when we first entered Xixing street was a narrow alley with continuous one- or two-story traditional houses adhering to each other along on both sides of the road. Most of the houses have multiple courtyards and compartments hidden in the back of the facades, leading to the canal or other streets. There are spontaneous openings between houses that lead to even narrower alleys that reveal a peep of how the inner courtyards are structured. Furthermore, the street was crowded with electric motorcycles and lots of residents' clothes were hanging in the public space



Figure 2. Geographical and historical analysis of Xixing District, provided by the program organizers.

waiting to be dried in the sun.



Figure 3. Inner valleys of Xixing Street. (a) Electric motorcycles parking everywhere, (b) clothes hanging in the sun. Pictures taken by the author.

Furthering the survey, my teammates and I discovered more underlying issues relating to local residents' daily lives. For instance, not every family has a toilet or a shower room. Since many houses are divided up and rented to different tenants, not every room comes with life-essential facilities. Though there are installations of public toilets, many households live inconveniently far away from those spots. Moreover, we found that there was a lack of infrastructure. For example, there still exist direct plumbing without any filtration or separation in the drainage system. Also, the main Xixing Street was unexpectedly long, about one kilometer, without having regular outlets. Later on, we learned that there were various small alleys attached to the Xixing street, but they were flexuous and bumpy, and therefore, Xixing Street is incompatible with large traffic.

Thus, it was inevitable for many residents in Xixing, who possessed enough economic power and looked forward



Figure 4. Study of surrounding real estate development of Xixing District, mapped by our team.



Figure 5. An example of nearby modern apartment, taken by the author.

to a more convenient modern life, to emigrate to areas with better conditions. Currently, only about fifty percent of the residents in Xixing are originally dwellers, the other half of the population is comprised of newly moved-in, low-income households and outside workers coming from other cities. Over 35% of the residents are over 60 years old who were born here and are reluctant to move out. Rather than saying the habitants are living in a valuable historical neighborhood, in my opinion, they are compelled to reside in an inconvenient place out of its inexpensiveness or a diminishing nostalgia.

4. Investigation and Analysis

Because of these diverse reasons, Xixing's is being undervalued as a cultural heritage. From a busy town with residents living peacefully with satisfaction, to an area lagging behind the present era. Only the original old residents still remember the history of the district and care for its situation, the outsiders implied that the place

would be fine as long as the rent remained cheap. (Ma, 2004) During our conversations with the local people, despite their complaints about the existing problems, the elders all expressed their love for the place and wished for governmental involvement in revitalizing Xixing. They paid attention to the harmony of the environment, including the lost vernacular temples and craftsmanship, and disappearing connection to the Xixing canal. The elders like to gather at crossings of streets in order to look at the passing cars and pedestrians, sometimes complain about the remoteness of clinics and markets, and pay attention to unseemliness of pipes and tubes in different colors with the buildings. They also pity the demolition of the cultural Guan Di Temple and the loss of lantern craftsmanship. However, the elders still expressed that it had been a good life for them living in Xixing since the start of their lives. From this, we students saw a group who yearned for an improved life, in the need of more influential publicity of the district in order to revive it.

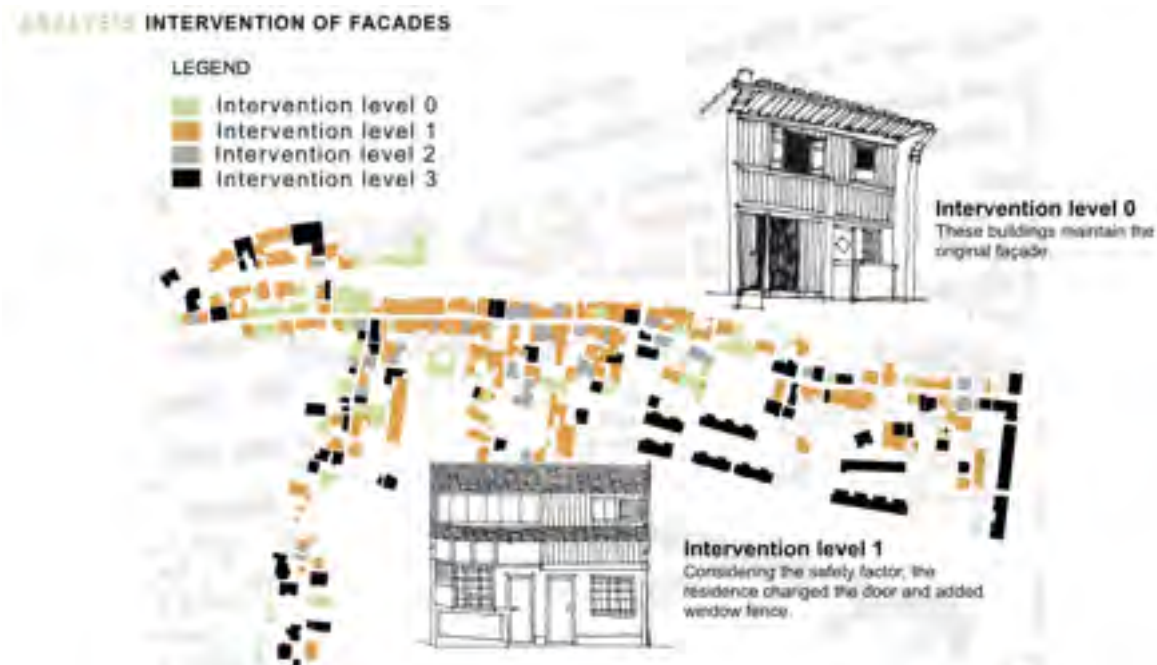


Figure 6. Intervention level analysis in Xixing District, drawn by teammates.

To accomplish the conservation of a historic district, we must save its authentic essence and overturn the unhealthy situations. What carries and will continue the value of the heritage is the interactions among people, architecture with cultural characteristics, and convenient streets supporting daily lives. From our observation, in addition to the local residents who involve themselves in the area every day, there are nearby apartment-dwellers who like to take after-meal walks along Xixing Street. Furthermore, although in a very small number, there are tourists visiting the site for its historical value. Thus, there exist diverse groups of people who have contact with Xixing regularly. Yet, the available activities that can offer people to remain inside for a period of time instead of only passing by are very limited. All the outside visitors can do in the district is to walk down the street, because other than private houses, there are only small convenience stores, fortune-tellers, and burial goods. What we can do about this place is to improve the street condition and facilities for better interactions.

5. Conservation Proposals

Firstly, governmental policies regulating the renovation of internal infrastructure and hygiene need to be reformed. The district requires supporting funds to establish and refine the spots that are life necessities, such as road lamps, shower houses, separated drainage, reconstruction of Guan Di Temple, and so on. Only the lives of the residents are improved can enable the flourishing of the district's value.

Going more specifically to the reconstruction of infrastructure, it is not only beneficial to the preservation of cultural

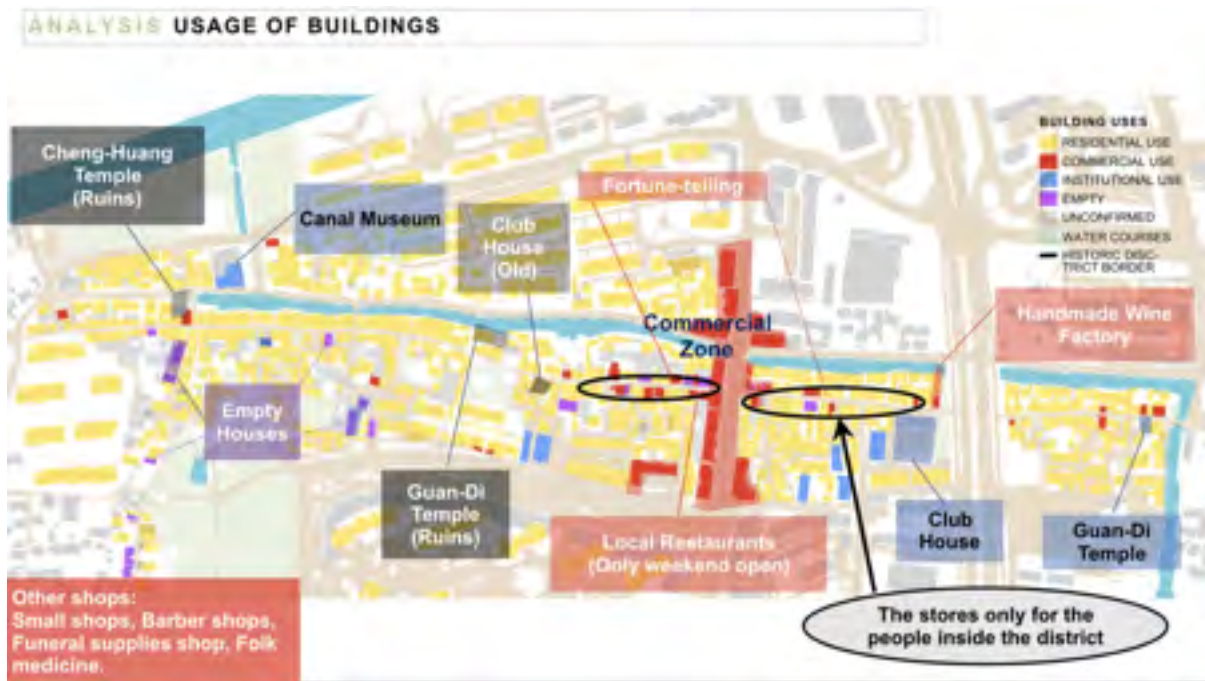


Figure 7. Analysis of the usage of buildings in Xixing District, drawn by teammates.

heritage, but also more accommodating to the local residents. The key to keep the authenticity of the community is to maintain the original residents who embody the spirit of the community and give true care for its history. Therefore, in order to better the lives of the residents, new facilities need to be installed and life-necessary building structures. For example, as observed in the Xixing Street, there needs to be a renewal of the sewage system in which every house can drain the dirty water properly into the city drainage system, instead of letting out the water directly to river in the back of the houses. This will improve the street's hygiene and not only make the residents lives healthier, but also more appealing to outside visitors.

Moreover, since not every house has a bathroom, there needs to be a careful rearrangement of the interior space of the houses. This reconstruction will heed to the original outer structure of the houses, but will make some minimal changes to the internal space so that it can serve the daily lives of the people in a more convenient way. This action bears the idea of modernizing the inside while maintaining the originality of the outside, so that both the needs of modern activities will be satisfied while adhering to the preservation of history.

Last example of the renovation project will be damp-proofing the ground inside of the houses. Due to the high humidity of Hangzhou's weather, starting in late spring to summer, the air is very moist and houses tend to get mold. In addition, the high temperature will cause the surface of the ground hotter, however, the indoor underground earth is still cool due to its depth beneath the surface, this causes a problem of a difference in temperature of the two touching grounds. A liquidation will happen between the floor and the earth, and the indoor will feel exceptionally moist and make the hot weather even hotter. This phenomenon is very common in the historical houses, and people will feel uncomfortable in such conditions. Furthermore, in the old houses of Xixing, windows are small so that sunlight can hardly get into the house and the grounds are made of bricks directly inserted into the ground without a separation between the underground and house's floors. These features lead to a lack of daylight and heightened moisture of the indoor, which is severely bad for the health conditions of for the residents, and damaging to the conditions of the houses. Thus, new floors with an extra moist-proof layer is required for the sake of the houses and the beneficial living conditions. The original floors need to be removed first, and after installing the separating structure to prevent liquidation of the hot air meeting the cold underground, the brick floors can be layered back again to preserve the original appearance of the house. This also echoes the notion of "old skin, new skeletons."

Continuing on, public participation is vital to the conservation plan. With agreements with the owners and tenants of the district, they need to be encouraged to plan and work for the revitalization. The locals can start new types of



Figure 8. Examples of restructuring the interior of Xixing's traditional houses for modern usages that improve functions.
Drawn by the author.

small commercial business and educational institutes teaching traditional crafts. The incorporation of recreational modern facilities will offer the outsiders plentiful chances to spend more time in the district and learn more about the place. For example, nearby residents will be able to purchase commodities from the district's shops, send their children to the extracurricular academies after school, and spend their spare time in the public pavilions. Visitors can experience the district culture by going to the temples and tea houses, and learn to make local handicrafts. Moreover, the locals who are most familiar with the area can promote the culture of Xixing to the public for with their knowledge. Consequently, people will engage their lives closely with Xixing District and gain a strong connection with the environment.

Along with scientific skills in establishments, the adaptation of historical districts can let it catch up with the modern time and make it possible for a greater number of people to discover the meaning of the historical district, and become interested in researching and conserving. Through this way, the significance of Xixing will become more influential.

6. Conclusion

In essence, as the scholars and researchers prepared a large number of primary and secondary sources that explored Xixing district comprehensively for us, we participants were able to quickly touch the core of the issues. Through practicing a thorough methodological approach to studying the place, we learned from field surveys, listening from local residents, collecting data, and devising conservation plans. We not only benefited from a memorable experience, our practice also enabled a hopeful future for the local community.

7. Acknowledgment

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