Urban morphology and local citizens in China’s historic neighborhoods: A case study of the Stele Forest Neighborhood in Xi’an

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This paper analyzes the role of local citizens in the morphological transformation of China’s urban historic neighborhoods. With a focus on ordinary neighborhood properties, this research explores how local citizens have consumed different types of properties, and critically investigates socio-spatial problems that arise from such consumptions. By the case of the Stele Forest Neighborhood in Xi’an, the study argues that both the local state and local citizens recognize heritage resources as an important source of profit and that the competition for exchange values between the two has contributed to historic neighborhood physical patterns. Local citizens’ resistance against and dissent from local government’s conservation policies are manifested through passive bargains and tolerated illegalities, and are eventually reflected in their neighborhood morphological forms. Morphological pattern-related decision-making and subsequent actions in China’s neoliberal urban setting are no longer monopolized by the local state, but shared by the local state and non-state actors.

1. Introduction

China’s spectacular economic reform has tremendously transformed its urban historic landscape. Historic neighborhoods, often occupying premium locations, have become a significant component of land-driven territorialisation. A formulaic practice of state-led large-scale demolition, displacement, and new construction in historic neighborhoods has recently been replaced by more subtle conservation approaches (Qian, 2007; Zhang and Li, 2016). Many public- or state-owned properties, amenities, and services have been privatized with reduced governmental intervention, and the local state’s role has shifted from assisting local citizens to improve their housing and living conditions, to facilitating market principles. In the meantime, non-state actors such as local citizens have assumed an increasingly critical role in the booming heritage commodification process (Chen, 2011; Zhai and Ng, 2013). Heritage resource-related regulatory frameworks and conservation practices are crucial for different groups and social classes but are never neutral – they have tended to prioritize some interests over others (Su, 2015; Yan, 2017). However, in scholarly research on the morphological transformation of China’s urban historic neighborhoods, the social dimension is often either completely neglected or understudied compared to its physical and spatial counterparts (Chen, 2012; Lin et al., 2011). In particular, the socio-spatial relations between the morphological transformation of a historic neighborhood and its local citizens have attracted insufficient scholarly attention. This has contributed to an underestimation of the importance of local citizens in China’s historic neighborhood morphological pattern development.

Similar issues have been long explored in western literature. The conventional focus on the role of the state and the market in the transformation of urban historic neighborhoods has been extended to recognize the significance of ordinary local citizens, who have been a critical stakeholder in the making of urban historic space. Commentators (e.g. Habraken, 2000; Rapoport, 1969; Sassen, 2013) claim that heritage built environments have never been solely controlled by the state or professionals, but rather, in many cases, they have been a result of transformation without planners or architects. A historical neighborhood is an outcome of a dialectical interplay between local government’s official planning efforts and local neighborhood residents’ everyday activities (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000). Historic neighborhood morphological patterns can be understood as an observable expression of the collective aspirations, efforts, and products of a neighborhood (Conzen, 1960; Schwind, 1951). These accounts resonate with the nexus between historic neighborhood physical forms and local citizens in the Chinese context where neoliberal urban strategies have been taken by cities as one of their main tactics for urban growth and competitiveness. While local government’s planning intervention typically aims at grandiose, and often lucrative, redevelopment or regeneration, local citizens seek to mitigate practical spatial...
problems and/or increase household revenues from various sources. Local community members compete for power and resources and pursue their lives based on the consumption of space in the context of official heritage spatial policy formation and implementation. The processes and outcomes of historic neighborhood morphological transformation demonstrate the resilience of an inherited built environment in response to the engagement of these agents in Chinese cities.

A research field introduced to China about two decades ago, urban morphology can be interpreted in various ways. One widely accepted definition is the study of urban form of a city as human habitat (Moudon, 1997). The value of the physical fabric of a city and its substantial environmental role in societies make urban morphology an important field of research (Whitehand, 1977). With its study scales ranging from metropolitan area, city, town, to neighborhood, the subject focuses on the tangible formations, transformations, and results of social and economic forces. At the neighborhood level, analytical tissue comprises coherent neighborhood morphology such as public spaces, buildings, and lanes, and functions such as human and agency activities. In traditional Chinese cities, besides spatial-economic aspirations, the social and political ideologies as well as social attitudes embedded in local citizens' traditional philosophies and cultural customs contribute to a historic neighborhood's morphological transformation and preservation (Friedmann, 2005). Traditional and vernacular structures are believed to carry direct and unconscious translation of philosophical beliefs and cultural values, and more importantly, provide variations to suit individual families and sites (Chen and Thwaites, 2013). Different from an official city plan that is much more resistant to change, micro-scale neighborhood building forms and property usages change faster, where the dialogical interaction between the state and local citizens effectively determines the speed and magnitude of neighborhood morphological changes (Whitehand et al., 2011).

Existing studies on the evolution of historic neighborhood physical form in Chinese cities either overlook the everyday life of local people or disconnect from ordinary local citizens. However, under both the socialist state dominance and the current post-socialist market-driven urban boosterism, local citizens have acted as agents in transforming neighborhood physical patterns, informally or even illegally, and to varying degrees (Whitehand et al., 2011). Moreover, empirical studies argue that the notion of strong local governments and cooperative but weak private sectors is recently under constant challenges from resourceful neighborhood residents and empowered private interests (Ren, 2008). A more inclusive approach grounded in a synthesis of the dynamics of historic neighborhood physical form and interventions by local citizens would generate debates on spatial cohesion and social equity. Historic neighborhood morphological patterns, which reflect changing cultural and societal values, need to be interpreted in specific political and socioeconomic conditions. The interpretation of the relationship between urban morphological transformation and local citizens against the backdrop of China's emerging civil society under the market economy will inform planning and conservation practice in China's historic neighborhoods.

This paper analyzes how local citizens' activities in their spatial consumption have transformed the morphological form of an urban historic neighborhood in the context of China's burgeoning markets for heritage tourism, real estate and capital. It aims to diversify and advance the critical understanding of dialectic and discursive relationships between ordinary local citizens and the morphological transformation of their historic neighborhood. With a focus on ordinary local neighborhood properties, this research explores how local citizens have consumed different types of properties, and critically investigates socio-spatial problems stem from such consumptions. The study probes several questions: 1) How have the changes in public and private property rights influenced historic neighborhood properties' morphological transformations and defined their property boundaries? 2) How have historic neighborhood spaces and structures been consumed by local citizens who use their agency to meet spatial, social, and economic needs and expectations? 3) How have the morphological changes exerted different influences on three primary local citizens - original residents, migrant renters, and small business owners? By addressing these questions, this research sheds light on how ordinary local citizens cooperate with, or resist against, the morphological transformation of their historic neighborhood in a speculative market characterized by urban boosterism.

This study examines the Stele Forest Historic Neighborhood, one of the three officially listed national historic conservation neighborhoods in Xi'an. Because of its interior location in China, Xi'an retains many of its historically significant ancient capital city components. Hyper-urbanization has affected and transformed this city much less than eastern coastal cities, as the pace and magnitude of Xi'an's post-reform urbanization is much slower and less intense. This is sometimes considered an advantageous condition because it is still possible to interact with urban morphological transformations accumulated over hundreds of years within the city. Rehabilitation, redevelopment, and historic structures are all visible within Xi'an's historic neighborhoods. The analysis of the Stele Forest Historic Neighborhood illustrates local people's everyday lives in relation to the transformation of the built environment under urban heritage industrialization, and the response of these ordinary local citizens to the ubiquitous logic of heritage resource commodification. It delves into the delicate relations that have jointly produced morphological transformations in the historic built environment.

2. Urban morphology and society-space relations

To city authorities in the West, the conservation and promotion of urban heritage can improve 'overall structural competitiveness' (Jessop and Sum, 2060: 2311) and secure 'place-specific locational advantages' in relation to other cities (Brenner, 1999: 440). Grounded in the premise that 'human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2007: 22), the neoliberal urban strategy suggests deregulation with a reduced role of the state to maximize entrepreneurial freedoms and minimize state interventions in markets. The role of local non-state actors and localized political and social relations then become increasingly critical (Raco and Gilliam, 2012). This questions the research that has tended to conceptualize local social relations as subordinated to a neoliberal logic of urban entrepreneurialism and treat local citizens as passive recipients of this logic (Hall and Hubbard, 1998). Meanwhile, the de-statization of the neoliberal political system leads to an increasing engagement of non-state actors in a range of urban projects, all of whom attempt to secure the conditions for the continued existence of their spaces of dependence (Gordon and Goodwin, 1999). Local citizens may try to interpret or redirect policies to their advantages in pursuit of their goals, and subvert or circumvent rules that clash with their interests. Abundant supply of heritage sites in contemporary tourism scenes means it would be more common to see the mixture of heritage sites and ordinary residences in urban neighborhoods (Jenkins, 1992). Increasing emphasis on the heritage of ordinary citizens, marginalized groups, and dilapidated communities has challenged dominant and conventional understandings of heritage conservation and planning (Park, 2014; Smith et al., 2011). The dynamic relationship between historic neighborhoods and ordinary local citizens involves a wide range of factors including building and neighborhood morphological types, structure materials, property rights and historical socioeconomic changes, all of which should be taken into consideration in evaluating and planning historic neighborhood conservation (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000).

In Chinese cities, divergent strategies recently pursued by the local state and non-state actors lead to hybrid forms of institutional change, which are embodied in spatial restructuring processes (Hsu and Hsu,
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