



Fragilities of Historical Settlements Targeted by Heritage Tourism: Comparison and Ex-Post Assessment of Two Water Towns in the Qingpu District of Shanghai

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ABSTRACT

Heritage tourism in Chinese historic sites has gained importance and has become a widely adopted development strategy that uses architecture and urban ensembles to sell cultural experiences. These sites, immersed in heritage settings or traditional ambiances, embody an extraordinary dimension of Chinese tangible and intangible culture, which call for in-depth studies and critical understanding. This paper discusses how a condition of fragility has materialized under the aegis of economic boosts. The impact of cultural tourism on historic sites is assessed by considering two similar water towns expressing exceptional cultural values, Zhujiyajiao and Liantang. The methodology envisaged ethnographic tools to highlight how development strategies have altered local communities, discussing the consequences on physical authenticity and sociocultural equilibriums.

Keywords: fragility, cultural tourism, development, water town, China, authenticity

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1. INTRODUCTION: FRAGILITIES AND UNCERTAINTIES

Since the Open-Door policy implementation in 1978, domestic tourism in China gained constant impulse from the new economic system based on state-oriented capitalistic mechanisms. Immersed in a heritage setting or traditional ambiances, a growing number of historical settlements have witnessed development strategies where tourism played a fundamental and guiding role. In many cases, despite such plans having envisaged grotesque forms, materialising threats and losses to the consistency of tangible and intangible local culture, the tourism industry has also revitalised local economies by generating new job opportunities and attracting outside capital. In this context, both the traditional architectures and built fabrics, conceived as economic assets and places of consumption, have become the destination of financial fluxes targeted to maximize profits and amplify visitors' experiences.

The problematic relationships between the significance of original historical artefacts and the potential offered by their economic exploitation put the fields of design oriented to cultural valorisation in a delicate dimension, where disciplinary and academic dogmas often conflict with the demands expressed by agencies pursuing local development [Figure 1]. At the elbow of the millennium, Cheng posed the question of whether the absorption of Western canons was the unique possible route towards the modernization of Chinese society ^[1], fuelling a debate that attracts scholars' attention to the present days.

This research grafts on this contended domain and investigates how heritage tourism has impacted and could impact two comparable historic sites, Zhujiajiao and Liantang water towns, differing in one substantial characteristic: the fact that it is or have already been the target of tourism-led development strategies. By observing the current conditions of these two historical



Figure 1. Aerial view of Zhujiajiao (top) and Liantang (bottom) water towns. Source: Elaboration by author on a satellite image from Bing Maps

settlements, the paper discusses the controversial modalities of mass tourism development implemented on historical sites, where conflicting political, cultural, and socioeconomic forces reclaim spatial resources. To be negotiated is the physical appearance of buildings and sites, and the less visible, but no less impactful, social tissue that manifests in everyday communities' relationships, epitomising a condition of fragility. This complex notion addresses the multiple and intersecting connotations of a broad process of fragilization of the space-society relationships, considering different vulnerabilities from environmental to social, economic, and political ^[2] ¹. In this case, a dilemma of former residents and demolition-relocation dynamics emerges, sharpening the problem of conjugating socioeconomic improvement with the valorisation of cultural inheritance. This study addresses fragility as weakening the bonds between sites and communities: a process generating a lack of care, alienation, and loss of identity. As in the selected case studies, in many traditional settlements, how to include heritage assets in a long-term sustainable development plan

¹ The definition is inspired by the research project "Territorial Fragility" enacted by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies and funded by the Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) for 2018-2022 as part of the Departments of Excellence initiative (Law no. 232/2016).

entails a crucial question against the backdrop of current policies and practices, especially in contemporary times when cultural industries play relevant geopolitical roles ^[3-5].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CHINESE HISTORICAL SETTLEMENTS

The literature review addresses three aspects: heritage management, tourism development, and the interferences between the two.

2.1 Heritage sites in China as a tool of contemporary narrative

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) marked a problematic era in Chinese heritage-led policies, with historic relicts appointed as feudal and backward legacies not fitting in with the political ideology ^[6]. Denise Ho observed that the display of historical objects was “meant to spark political awakening, to create a revolutionary narrative that included the viewers and to motivate them to participate in the realization” ^[7], identifying a moral engagement in the leadership’s priorities. With the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a new political cycle started, promoting alternative paths to the realization of the Communist State, grafting capitalistic mechanisms into a state-driven economy. In concert, a more laical approach to the objects and symbols inherited from the past was embodied and coupled with the attempt to limit Western culture’s influences, which were increasingly popular in China at that time. The recognition and valorisation of Chinese traditional culture became part of a broader process of national identity-building and branding ^[8]. In addition to maintaining social cohesion ^[9], the heritage discourse contributed to paving the road for a profound process of rediscovery of pre-revolutionary roots, ancient traditions, and local folklore ^[10]. As a process that is still ongoing, it is placing the country in a dimension of continuity with its past, forging a distinctive national identity and opening new economic possibilities in underdeveloped sites, sometimes conceived as exotic experiences. Blumenfield and

Silverman have detected an intensification of the “heritage fever” as a polysemic instrument to serve economic and political projects ^[11]. The “Belt and Road Initiative” embodies physically and spiritually the vision for also a “cultural diplomacy” ^[12] where cross-national exchanges strengthen the geopolitical position of Beijing in the global arena. Beyond building a legitimizing political narrative, at the same time, the heritage-making process has served local administration to implement cultural-oriented development strategies instrumentally ^[6]. A similar interpretative key was put forward by other studies, which have drawn on how Chinese heritage policies have been shaped to “serve the interest of the present”. Through the process of “value appropriation,” development agencies have financially valorised common cultural practices, inducing residents and institutions to “selectively and strategically appropriate values developed at another, often higher scale” ^[12,13].

From this angle, the instrumental role of heritage as a “service of the newly envisaged futures” ^[14] led some scholars to identify an unbridgeable distance between acknowledged cultural patrimony and history, intended as a true sequence of facts. For many authors, these gaps materialize a complex negotiation of conflicts ^[15] between cultural positions, political ideologies, economic interests, and local identities.

In the Chinese domain, the questions posed by the development of heritage sites have attracted lively debates on policies’ formulation and practices’ implementation. Zan stigmatised the dilemma between cultural protection and economic development, explicating that “the principal problem for China’s tangible cultural heritage is economic development, whose effects can be devastating on the valued physical environment and problematical for the in situ social one” ^[16].

Since 2000, a cooperative project aimed at devising a set of principles to manage Chinese heritage, was internationally co-participated by the Getty Conservation

Institute, the Australian Heritage Commission, ICOMOS International, ICOMOS China, and the State Administration for Cultural Heritage. The experience blossomed in the Conservation and Management Principles of Cultural Heritage Sites in China, subsequently labelled “The China Principles”^[17]. These documents have embodied remarkable advancement in heritage stewardship, fixing canons to address concepts like historical condition, authenticity, integrity, minimal interventions, cultural traditions, and appropriate technology^[18].

2.2 The tourism industry as a developmental tool

Chinese cultural resources have experienced alternating fortunes since the proclamation of the People Republic of China in 1949. Su and Teo^[19] provided a sharp picture of tourism’s condition under the leadership of Mao Zedong, which was a “collective provision (...) that served mainly the domestic elite: namely Chinese compatriots or foreign delegations from socialist countries” and was mainly a “top-down political task” deprived of market outlets^[20].

After the difficult days of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when tourism stagnated, the travel industry gained recognition as one of the market’s engines^[21, 22], shifting from epitomising a political status, during Mao’s era, to an “integral part of Chinese lifestyle”^[19]. At the dawn of the 1990s, Oakes commented on how China was absorbing and reproducing modernity in his book addressed as “false”, his word remarked the tight ties running between tourism and economy: “tourism remains one of the most powerful forces through which the Chinese state, and Chinese capital, seek to dominant popular narratives of ‘modern China’”^[23]. The rising leisure industry never divorced from the task of fuelling a magnificent image of the country and, at the same time, vigorously joined the opportunities offered by an expanding market. This strategy contributed to building a selective narrative of the past in front of both foreign and domestic

observers. The tourism industry was introduced as a developmental factor by Xu in 1999, portraying its theoretical and empirical backgrounds, the growth and structure of tourism demand, its infrastructural development, and its economic effects^[20]. More recently, Mimi and Wu have provided a more updated picture of the tourism industry condition, remarking that case study analysis still represents the main object of scholarly investigation.

The concept of commodification epitomises the most visible link between the tourism industry and local development. With the term “commodification,” it is referred to, using Goulding’s words, as “the process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value in a context of trade”^[24]. This process has been addressed in plural ways by scholars: as a sociocultural opportunity^[25], as a denigrating agent^[26], or as a mix of the two with commodification as an agent injecting new meanings into local cultures^[28].

Since the late 1970s, the tourism boom in China has been seen by policy-makers also as a “spiritual modernization” and “as a two-way civilizing tool, capable of producing positive change in tourists as well as ‘tourees’”^[29,30]. Visitors’ agendas have influenced the selection criteria of sites appetible for tourists^[19], making sightseers’ habits decisive in shaping tourism politics and related spatial settings^[31]. In more recent years, the tourism industry has constantly diversified and increased its impact on policy formulation and heritage management, assuming several roles in local developments, such as targeting poverty alleviation, building a historical narration, innovating the leisure sector, or invigorating economic growth^[32,33].

2.3 Heritage tourism: A contested domain

Reciprocal influences between the tourism industry and Chinese historical sites have been widely examined, mostly in terms of causal effects and socioeconomic outputs^[34-39]. Most researchers have agreed that heritage-led tourist development triggered lively debates among local players, where

conflictual interests created the conditions for permanent contestations that did not always get ahead with mediations^[40]. Negotiating values, assets, cultures, identities, and profits have become a common dividing aspect of heritage tourism^[41].

In the last decades, the tourism industry has created favourable conditions for the redemption of cultural assets, from built artefacts to entire landscapes^[42], becoming a significant agent of urban renewal and economic revitalization. On the other side of the coin, on-field observations have also revealed worrying threats embedded within tourism-led development paths, such as commodifications of culture^[43] or urban gentrifications^[44]. Of particular interest for this paper is the “creative destruction” model put forward by Mitchell, proposed as a re-interpretation of the theory enucleated by Joseph Schumpeter^[45], according to whom cyclical periods of growth and decline characterize capitalistic economies. When Mitchell and other scholars observed some historical Chinese towns, they argued that traditional urban atmospheres were seen as profitable settings to instil touristic and commercial activities. These new economies required adaptation of both spatial layouts and ranges of services to attract visitors to consume, implementing unbalanced design approaches and local communities’ relocations. Yang defined this body of practices, including buildings’ overall demolition, residents’ relocation, houses’ expropriation, and commercial developments, as “destructive reconstruction”^[46]. The main idea was that the value of authenticity in historical relics could be re-defined and re-proposed stylistically to evoke a sense of a precise past.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDIES SELECTION

The research methodology is based on case-studies analysis, entailing phases of fieldwork and deskwork. Fieldwork was carried out in

July 2018 for Zhujiajiao, and in December 2016 for Liantang. The selection criteria for the two case studies included the presence of comparable historical significance, in this case, related to the relationship between water systems and built forms, the similar geographical position, the similar size of historic fabrics, and the presence/absence of tourism-led development programs. Ethnographic visits permitted detailed explorations of the settlements’ built characteristics and encounter with inhabitants and visitors of the two water towns^[47]. Non-structured interviews were performed orally, fielding a participant observation approach, and were supported by iconographic apparatus. Subsequent analyses were implemented through critical comparison between the two built environments, with urban morphologies intended as vectors of cultural instances^[48]. The work by Jeremy Whitehand^[49,50], who revisited the Conzenian studies on Alnwick^[51], represents a methodological working reference, synthesising the complex relationship nourished by sites and communities living on them. Urban morphology’s studies provided the ideal theoretical framework for looking at urban materials’ ensembles, including groups of buildings, open spaces, street networks, and composing meaningful wholes. Whitehand’s studies for Beijing and Guangzhou constitute compelling precedents to address the question of design in evolving sociocultural contexts^[52].

4. RESULTS

The two water towns are situated in the Qingpu District of Shanghai, some 12 km away from each other by car. They are located in the southern region of the Yangtze River Delta, between three important water systems: the Lake Tai basin, the Grand Canal, and the Huangpu River, the watercourse crossing Shanghai [Figure 2]. Since the Grand Canal was enlisted in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014², human habitats connected to its

² UNESCO World Heritage List. The Grand Canal. Available online: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443> (accessed 20 July 2022).

shores experienced a growing interest by institutions and administrations which are eager to exploit the new cultural status. Despite this favourable condition, experts noticed that relatively little attention had been directed to the settlements' overall patterns and morphological features ^[53], mainly relegating the heritage domain to single monuments or episodic artefacts. This developmental approach caused disharmonic transitions between traditional ambiances and surrounding fabrics, readable in the physical relationships between the old and the new in the community's social structure, with the marginalization of certain citizen groups.

4.1 Water towns in the Southern Yangtze River Delta

Water towns in the southern Yangtze River Delta are unique artefacts in China that represent an outstanding balance of natural and cultural environments ^[54-56]. They are situated in a complex and multi-scalar water system whose main arteries, the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, regiment a fine-grained canal network, covering the area between Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and the Lake Tai. Philip Ball argued that “there could be few locations of more strategic importance to China's water transport network than the junction of the Yangtze with the Grand Canal” ^[54].

Water towns were lively economic centres in pre-modern China. As manufacturing and trading hubs, they attracted entrepreneurs, literati, and retired officials, who invested in mansion constructions to showcase their social emancipation ^[57]. The symbiotic relationship between the watercourse and the surrounding environment was the principal element structuring the formal qualities of the settlements' fabrics. Its importance in Chinese urban culture led German sinologist Karl Wittfogel ^[58] to coin the term “hydraulic civilization” to address the “intimate link between environmental authority in the form of water control and political power” ^[59].

Many water towns in the Lake Tai Basin have already been included in the lists of historic and traditional settlements compiled by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Over the last decades, their distinctive built environments have been seen as a lucrative ambience for mass tourism consumption, activating a process of heritage commodification [Figure 3]. Their Historic Urban Landscapes' spatial experience ^[60] underwent a process of fragmentation with the introduction of activities and spaces dedicated to visitors, such as souvenir shops run by a new class of merchants or turnstiles and gates where entrance fees are collected ^[61].



Figure 2. Location of Zhujiajiao and Liantang water towns in relation to Shanghai and to the Yangtze River Delta. Source: Elaboration by the author on a satellite image from Google Earth



Figure 3. Entrance gate to Mingyuewan Historic Village, located in the south of Xishan Island in Lake Tai. The settlement is designated as a historical and cultural village, and a national agricultural tourism demonstration pilot project. Source: Photo by the author, 2017

4.2 Case one: Zhujiajiao Water Town as a developed historical settlement

Zhujiajiao, which means “Zhu Family Corner” [62], is a famous historic water town in Qingpu District. It is situated about 50 km from downtown Shanghai, easily accessible to its large population. Records of Zhujiajiao history date back to the Song dynasty (960–1279) [57, 63] since the water town became an important regional market site. However, the characteristics of the built form forged during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties and continued to the present day without traumatic changes, crossing a flourishing age in the 1930s due to its bustling market. Over the centuries, Zhujiajiao has preserved its traditional built fabric, entering the new millennium’ with an almost entirely intact cultural legacy of local historic architecture and urbanism. The settlement’s historic centre is still a maze of small lanes, gardens, and mansions, generating a unique built environment [Figures 4 and 5]. Renee Y. Chow [64] realized the detailed representations of Zhujiajiao’s urban tissue, compellingly analysing the settlement’s latent morphological structure. In particular, she revealed how the two orders of relationships and movements- related to tourists and inhabitants- take place daily in two different and transversal ways, rarely overlapping.

According to Chow, the location of temples and other important buildings is

another significant feature: they are incorporated into the urban fabric, but they can be seen as both “distinctive from and integrated into the field” [64, 65]. Chow also remarked how the recent constructions in the outskirts of Zhujiajiao followed alien schemes, generating incongruent and imbalanced relationships with the historical parts.



Figure 4. A typical lane of Zhujiajiao water town. Souvenir shops pullulate along the touristic path, representing an example of heritage commodification. Source: Photo by the author, 2018



Figure 5. Elevation along the canal of Zhujiajiao. Souvenir shops pullulate along the touristic path, representing an example of heritage commodification. Source: Photo by the author, 2018

In the past, Zhujiajiao had 36 bridges, but only 20 of them have survived today. The most important one is the Fangsheng Bridge, which was designated as “Liberate Living Things” by Ronald Knapp ^[62]. The structure, built in 1571, is a 72m long, five-arch stone structure, rising 7.4 m above the Caogang River, and is considered as the largest of this type in southeast China [Figure 6].



Figure 6. Fangsheng Bridge in Zhujiajiao. Source: Photo by Giulia Setti, 2018

Since the early 1990s, the possibility of tourism development started circulating among local administrators under the aegis of the general plans formulated by Zhujiajiao Central Township and Qingpu District Governments ^[57]. In 1997, the two authorities endowed the Zhujiajiao Central Town Development Coordination Group to supervise the project. The transformations started with public investments and incentives, such as the 3-year zero-rental policy released by the local government in 1997, which stimulated private entrepreneurs to create new activities in the food and commerce sectors, giving impulse to building renovations or reconstructions ^[57]. Additional and decisive funding arrived with the well-known general plan for Shanghai of 2000, named “One City, Nine Towns.” Zhujiajiao had to face

substantial development focusing on tourism economy and preserving its traditional characteristics.

Plans followed, among which were the “Zhujiajiao Central Town Strategic Plan (2004)” and the “Zhujiajiao Control Plan (2005),” structuring three areas with different functions. Fostered by a robust advertising campaign, the tourism industry increased rapidly, reaching a peak in 2002, when a million visitors came to Zhujiajiao. Facilities and services proliferated, financed by public funding allocations and private initiatives, and, in 2004, Zhujiajiao was enlisted as a top-level tourism destination ³. In 2016, it was appointed as one of the “Characteristic Towns in China” ^[57], and the number of tourists to Zhujiajiao rocketed from one million in 2002 ^[57] to more than seven million in 2018 ^[66]. Entrance gates to facilitate fee payments were introduced [Figure 7], consecrating the historical settlement to a touristic consumption experience. The unexpected pandemic outbreak severely impacted visitors’ fluxes. Although specific data on Zhujiajiao are still unavailable, China’s Statistical Yearbook registered less than half the number of domestic tourists in 2020 compared to 2019, while foreign arrivals were not yet reported [Figure 8] ⁴. In 2021, a dedicated website appeared to illustrate all the services



Figure 7. One of the gates of Zhujiajiao where, until 2008, entrance fees were charged to visitors. Source: Photo by the author, 2018

³ More detailed information is available at <https://www.shqp.gov.cn/english/investmentclimate/20180824/278620.html>. Accessed August 24, 2022.

⁴ China Statistical Yearbook 2021. See: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2021/indexeh.htm>. Accessed August 24, 2022.

provided by the company in charge of stewarding the tourist industry. A virtual tour also appeared with basic information such as prices, visiting hours, special offers, and related complementary activities [Figure 9]. Whether this digital section is a response to movement restriction implemented by the zero COVID policy, or is part of a rooted

program to digitalize cultural heritage, is hard to say. Nevertheless, investments have not ceased, and a new Visitor Center designed by Wuyang Architecture was inaugurated in the same year⁵. At present, despite the COVID-19 crisis, the water town is still expanding its leisure industry as one of Shanghai's most important tourist attractions⁶.

17-9 Main Indicators of Tourism

Item	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of Travel Agencies (unit)	27939	29717	37309	38943	31074
Number of Star-rated Hotels (unit)	11685	9566	8962	10130	8423
Number of Overseas Visitor Arrivals(10 000 person-times)	13844.38	13948.24	14119.83	14530.78	
Foreigners	2815.12	2916.53	3054.29	3188.34	
Chinese Compatriots from Hong Kong and Macao	10456.26	10444.59	10451.93	10729.01	
Chinese Compatriots from Taiwan Province	573.00	587.13	613.61	613.42	
Overnight Tourists	5926.73	6073.84	6289.57	6572.52	
Number of Chinese Outbound Visitors(10 000 person-times)	13513.00	14272.74	16199.34	16920.54	
For Private Purpose	12850.00	13581.56	15501.69	16211.43	
Number of Domestic Visitors (100 million person-times)	44.35	50.01	55.39	60.06	28.79
Tourism Earnings					
Earnings from International Tourism (100 million USD)	1200.00	1234.17	1271.03	1312.54	
Earnings from Domestic Tourism (100 million yuan)	39389.82	45660.77	51278.29	57250.92	22286.30

Figure 8. Available data on tourism indicators. Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2021



Figure 9. Zhujiajiao Virtual Tour. Source: <http://www.zhujiajiao.com/en/vr/>

⁵ See: <https://www.archdaily.com/977415/zhujiajiao-tourist-center-wuyang-architecture>. Accessed August 24, 2022.

⁶ Zhujiajiao is National AAAA Tourist Attraction according to the unofficial touristic portal stewarded by the Shanghai Zhujiajiao Historic Town Tourism Development Co., Ltd. See: <http://www.zhujiajiao.com/en/>. Accessed August 24, 2022.

4.3 Case two: Liantang Water Town as an undeveloped historical settlement

Liantang is a water town of about 1,000 inhabitants with more than 1,100 years of history. The settlement is situated in the Qingpu District, on the Shi River banks, a watercourse insisting in the south-western canal network of Shanghai. Originally, it was called Zhangliantang, and was known as “a land of fish and rice” and as “a land of water bamboo” because of the rice market that flourished at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The town has more than 100,000 sqm of historic buildings dating from the Ming to Qing dynasties, with two sites listed as provincial and municipal culture relict protection areas.

Liantang urban space is organized according to the shape of the Yangtze River’s canal network, which was the principal infrastructural system for goods and people to circulate. As in other famous water towns, wares arrived on small boats and were stored on the houses’ ground-floor spaces along the canal. The trading spaces were on the other sides of these residences, where narrow alleys pullulated with market activities [Figure 10]. The historic commercial lanes, with repeated sequences of small shops and laboratories facing each other, embody the typical public space of Ming and Qing water towns. On their back, the mansions were organized as elongated systems of open and built forms, spreading perpendicularly to the river. Here, courtyards enclosed by pavilions and side walls have constituted the morphotypological structure of past family life [Figure 11]. In these compactedly built areas, the formal characteristics of local urbanism, encompassing low-rise density and traditional ornamental apparatus, have been layered over time, surviving to this day in recognizable forms. A series of stone bridges, among which Chaozhen Bridge and Shunde Bridge, have historical significances [Figure 12] and contribute to shaping Liantang’s historic atmosphere. Chen Yun’s former residence

and primary school are the main attractions to visitors. A monument named “Memorial Hall of Former Residence of Chen Yun & Revolutionary History of Qingpu” was built in 2000 to commemorate his life and service to the country as a hero of the revolution [Figure 13]⁷. He lived in an old-fashioned Jiangnan-style residence with brick walls and timber carpentry. Liantang also has the oldest art museum in Shanghai, showcasing calligraphy and painting works and an ancient tree.

In the fringe areas, the urban environment abruptly loses its traditional connotations. Medium-rise condominiums have been erected in repeated arrays, determining a generic urban environment [Figure 14]. Despite these modern presences, the integrity and distinctiveness of both the settlement pattern and the architectural form make Liantang an original historical site, expressing tangible and intangible forms of heritage^[67].



Figure 10. Old market street of Liantang. Source: Photo by the author, 2016

⁷ More information is available at <https://www.shqp.gov.cn/english/travellingroutes/20181121/313403.html> and <https://www.shqp.gov.cn/english/scenicspots/20181121/313401.html>. Accessed August 24, 2022.



Figure 11. A resident of Liantang reporting about the difficult living conditions and the preoccupation of losing her house after government-led renovation works. Source: Photo by the author, 2016



Figure 12. One of the stone bridges featuring the traditional ambience of Liantang. Source: Photo by the author, 2016



Figure 13. Memorial Hall of Chen Yun in Liantang. Source: Photo by Luca Maria Francesco Fabris, 2016

The local government promoted renovation actions in 2016, but, unfortunately, the bulldozers turned down several historic buildings, leaving Liantang in problematic physical and sociocultural conditions: lacunas within the built fabric and people evictions [Figure 15]. This unexpected episode stimulated investigative works to document the historical values of Liantang and to propose strategies for sustainable sociocultural development.

4.4 The impact of heritage tourism on the two historical water towns

The architectural and urban features of Liantang and Zhujiajiao show significant parallelisms in the relationships with the canals, morphological patterns, building typologies, architectural style, structural technologies, and ornamental apparatus [Figure 1]. In particular, along the canals, comparable built fabrics were found, given by similar urban grains with dense combinations of courtyard residences and tiny lanes, as well as the same systems of primary and secondary pedestrian circulations.

Nevertheless, the massive tourism-led development that occurred in Zhujiajiao filled the built fabric with leisure facilities, substantially altering its spatial experience. As confirmed in other research [68, 69], the ethnographic campaign revealed that the pervasive substitution of old houses and workshops with souvenir shops, restaurants, and tourist facilities, in general, has altered the social tissue, eventually compromising the site's sense of place. It has to be remarked that such a controversial development strategy has met the appreciation of many urban citizens, as emerged from conversations held on-site. For instance, in the perception of a middle-aged Shanghaiese woman, periodically visiting Zhujiajiao represents a convenient way to spend free time, immersed in a relaxing cultural environment far from the frenetic, congested,

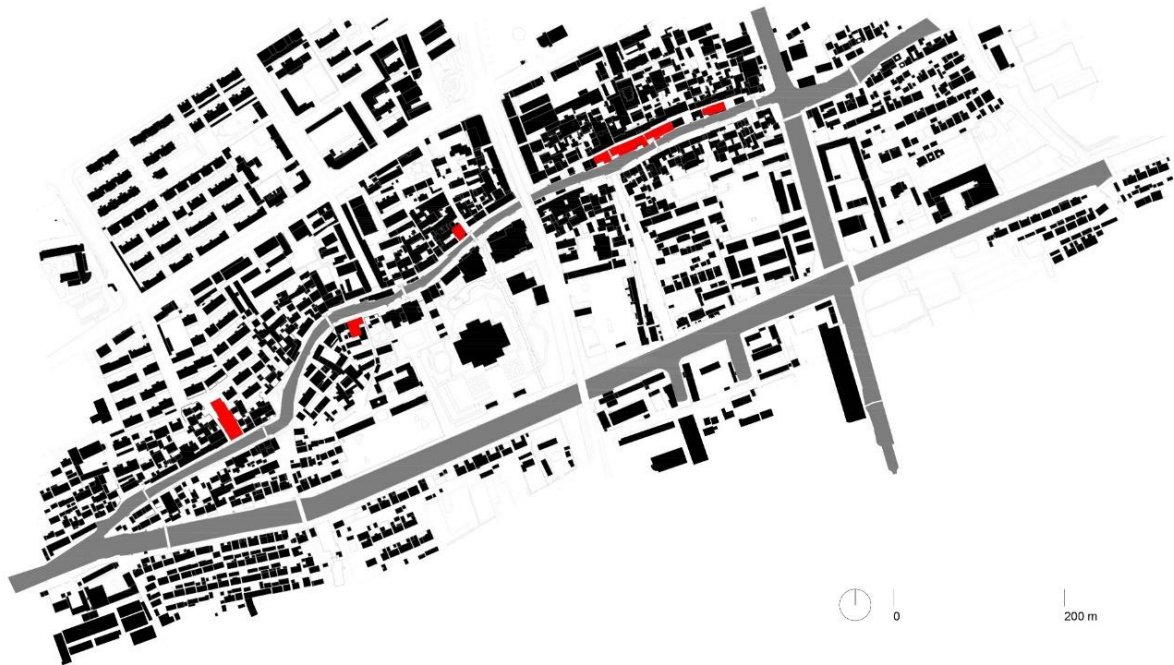


Figure 14. Figure-ground diagram of Liantang: the demolitions in red occurred in 2016. Source: Elaboration by author



Figure 15. Unexpected demolitions found in Liantang. Source: Photo by Luca Maria Francesco Fabris, 2016

and hyperdense environs of Shanghai⁸.

Despite the similarities highlighted in the built attributes, the absence of commodification mechanisms ensured Liantang to preserve its sociocultural atmosphere, exposing, on one side, the hardships of economic stagnation and, on the other side, the aura of authenticity breathable in sites not targeted by markets' impulses. Currently, it is easy to find utensils tipped

upside down along the edge of walkways and inhabitants taking water or doing laundry on the lower steps of the stairs, diving in the canals.

The presence of a plurality of well-developed industrial sectors induced some observers to argue that Zhujiyajiao features a more harmonic sociocultural environment compared to Liantang^[70]. They pinpointed that Liantang's traditional agricultural

⁸ Conversations held in July 2018.

production prevailed over the other economic sectors, resulting in an incomplete industrial development. Contrary to Liantang, Zhujiajiao's comprehensive development strategy has grounded on the "romantic consumption" ^[71,12] of its spatial experience as an engine for multisectoral growth. The tourism industry has been intensively instilled, following a "creative destruction" approach, as detected in several recent works ^[57,72], undermining the sociocultural authenticity of the whole settlement ^[41].

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Zhujiajiao's creative destruction between economic opportunities and social fragmentations

The alteration of the water town's social and spatial relationships, triggered by the tourism-led commodification process of its historical parts, has impacted Zhujiajiao's resident community, mainly in two ways: the inhabitants' perception of recent transformations and the relocation of inhabitants as a consequence of heritage status recognition ^[6].

When applied to Zhujiajiao, Mitchell's model of "creative destruction" ^[73], has revealed that tourism development impacted both physical and social attributes of its built fabric, altering the values and the allures of the original artefacts in their appearances and spatial structures. The rejuvenation of historical parts, which occurred selectively on those elements "easiest to commodify" ^[57], turned Zhujiajiao into an "en-plein-air" shopping mall featured by traditional ambiances. This romantic consumption ^[71] compellingly expresses the controversial relationships generated by exogenous forces on fragile ecosystems. Regarding the site's authenticity, tourist-oriented commodification has jeopardized cultural patrimonies, creating distances and separations between urban spaces and residents. Indeed, Zhujiajiao's fast-paced transformation required the relocation of part of the local community ^[74, 57, 66]. Although many families which have been evicted out of their properties have received generous

compensations, such as two or three new apartments in the outskirts of the town, many residents have declared to resort to memories to reconnect with the past. Cao and Wu ^[74] argued that the feeling of community among Zhujiajiao's inhabitants had survived in residents' collective consciousness, activated by remembrances and interpersonal relationships. They discovered that the robust transformations that occurred with the introduction of the tourism industry triggered contrasting feelings among the population, including a "sense of pride" ^[74]. They advocated that the social and demographic changes had stimulated the formation of new interactions between former residents and newcomers, and that most of the interviewees reacted positively since the recent changes raised the quality of life and service provision. Their study supports the argument that sites abruptly transformed into tourist destinations may maintain attractiveness to the local community, notwithstanding social ties' fragmentation, mainly because their historic aura can be exploited to instil opportunities for economic strengthening.

Other authors contested that the Zhujiajiao community only partially and "indirectly" benefited from the tourism industry ^[75]. This unequal mechanism generated further asymmetries given by different capacities and possibilities of participating in the market's system. Indeed, a recent study demonstrated the willingness of residents to participate more in the tourism-led development process ^[66], probably attracted by the possibility of engaging more with the market industry. Lastly, tourism development has increased wastewater pollution, stressed by the overuse of the hydraulic network ^[76], raising environmental concerns for the stability of such delicate ecosystems.

5.2 The fragilities of historic sites targeted by heritage tourism

The notion of fragility was earlier introduced as weakening the bonds between sites and communities, ultimately eroding local identity, sense of belonging, and grassroots

engagement. In Zhujiajiao, a condition of fragility has emerged from the negotiation involving the connotations of authenticity and originality, a process that has undermined their semantic integrity ^[77-81, 41].

Long-term settled families were replaced by a new class of merchants, mainly dealing with tourist activities. Their presence turned the settlement into an amusement park and provided all desirable services. The visiting experience became an act of consumption that is gradually eroding the town's cultural dimension, tangible and intangible. Indeed, beyond the physical adaptation of buildings to host souvenir shops and welcome guided tours, the populace's socioeconomic structure also changed significantly with the arrival of extraneous workers whom are naturally more interested in the financial potential of the site rather than its inherited essence and soul. Tourist agencies ensured that the visitor's experience was not corrupted by the diversified social extraction of indigenous people. This form of relocation induced by exogenous factors finds correspondences with phenomena of gentrification led by urban renewal in central districts worldwide. In China, it assumes a peculiar character driven by state capitalism, the main force orienting development plans and transforming entire neighbourhoods. Xintiandi embodies the allegedly most famous Shanghainese historical district gentrified in the last decades and illustrates how economic impulses have sacrificed urban inclusion, diversity, multifaced identities and authenticities on the altar of cultural and rhetoric commodification. Here resides fragility's ontology: the sneaky promise for political and socioeconomic profits simultaneously leads to the erosion of the cultural status, for which a site is acknowledged. Recognizing some cultural status is increasingly becoming the tag identifying the most accredited places of consumption and threatening the same characteristics of authenticity and originality, "the very landscape" ^[57].

In most cases, the meanings and values epitomized in the notion of "destructive

reconstruction" ^[46] present ontological and disciplinary issues, such as the idea that an identified historical moment could be frozen and re-proposed out of its time-space coordinates. While Western heritage discourse has recognized historical layering as an expression of material originality, and therefore has excluded this approach, practitioners in other contexts have, on some occasions, considered that authenticity "is often related with tradition rather than tangible materiality" ^[43], often due to the widespread use of different construction techniques and materials. The diverse lifespan of building components created the conditions for considering formal symbolism beyond material originality as a vector of identitarian values ^[82]. Forms have offered vehicles to convey messages with immediacy and, regardless of the contingent attributes featuring their material originality, have often carried important sociocultural values. The reproducibility of forms and the legitimation of their symbolic capacity led copies, imitations, and replicas to be appreciated as parts of a cultural inheritance, capable of creating spatiotemporal continuities with traditions, either extinguished or alive. Messages, or the semantic, have gradually prevailed on the authenticity of their vector or their syntactic, assuming identitarian connotations valid "per se."

In a sense, Zhujiajiao represents a benchmark toward which many water towns, such as Liantang, are moving by leveraging cultural assets to negotiate values of material and social originality with those of economic prosperity and political narration. Notable examples in the same region are Xitang, Wuzhen, and Tongli, recalled by Philip Ball as sites where "you can still hope for a taste of what life on the Grand Canal might have been like before it was plied by oil-drinking barges and crossed by highways on great concrete arches" ^[54]. A few lines below, commenting on the impact of mass tourism, he remarked "True, these places are preserved now for tourists, and in high season you can hardly walk around the network of little canals without being badgered to buy

identical merchandise — fake-antique coins, overpriced silk shirts, bamboo toys but on a quiet day the atmosphere of tranquil contemplation, with not a honking car in sight, gives a sense of why poets and artists sought out the waterside”^[54], exhuming that sense of nostalgia — or connection with the past — on which is natural to indulge.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper observed two comparable historic environments to address the controversial aspects of tourism-led development. The interdisciplinary concepts of fabric morphology, site’s distinctiveness, material authenticity, and local identity were recalled to discuss how one historical town has responded to tourism-led cultural commodification. The comparison with an analogous underdeveloped cultural environment led to an assessment of physical and sociocultural impacts, identifying a condition of fragility that features an epistemological dimension. As synthetic results of coevolutionary historical courses, the two built fabrics have shown the capacity to resist or be vulnerable to abrupt changes in local socioeconomic regimes. Nevertheless, the elements forging Zhujiajiao’s touristic success, mostly related more to the presence of a traditional atmosphere, have been stressed with predatory behaviours fielded by intemperate development strategies based on mass tourism.

Episodes of eviction were also reported by Liantang residents in 2016 as part of a top-down urban renewal plan. Such incidents might represent the first steps of a broader strategy to exploit the tourist appeal of the water town’s charming ambience. The author criticizes these issues of social inclusion and urban justice, which, as a result of broader developmental aims, threaten communities’ heterogeneity and site authenticity. A more balanced interaction of market impulses on local economies could be advocated to let communities and fragile cultural sites be part of a sustainable development process that considers built fabrics as semantic units^[83]. Such an equilibrium is still under scholarly

debate. Shepherd and Yu, for instance, posed the balance between “preserving the past with improving the material realities” as an insurmountable dilemma^[6]. Zhu and González Martínez pointed out several contradictions in the redevelopment of Chinese historical sites, questioning “whose rights should be considered in the process of urban redevelopment”^[44]. After 20 years, Cheng’s preoccupation with absorbing Western canons as the unique possible route towards the modernization of Chinese society^[2] proved to be only partially well-founded. Chinese development model displays emancipated forms and follows its own political and socioeconomic rules. The technological gap has been levelled, if not inverted, and the frontiers of the design in cultural sites put China at the fore in exploring new interactions between fragile heritage and local development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This is a single-authored work.

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