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### **Heritage-led development and governance networks in the historical city of Xi'an, China**

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#### **Abstract:**

Since the 1990s Chinese historic cities started property-led regeneration initiatives to attract new investments and stimulate socio-economic growth. The fourth master plan (2008-2020) of Xi'an – the ancient capital of China – proposed it to become as “a world-famous historical and tourism city”. In particular, since the 2000s to date, an increasing number of large-scale conservation projects have been undertaken by Qujiang New District Management Committee, with the intention to “reconstructing” the city in its Tang Dynasty glory (618-906AD). This has come with heritage commodification and urban dysneyfication for cultural tourism. This paper examines the heritage-based development model in Xi'an (Qujiang New District), seeking to explain how pro-growth coalitions used heritage to stimulate development and historical city branding of Xi'an. Using qualitative data collected from published sources and interview with key stakeholders, the paper investigates the internal policy networks and land management mechanisms in the process of heritage-led development of Xi'an. While Xi'an has benefited from the Qujiang New District development model of land value appreciation and capture, the development process had negative impact on both heritage preservation and local communities. This paper thus calls for more attention to similar processes in heritage-rich areas.

**Keywords:** Heritage-based development, urban conservation, policy network; Xi'an

## **1 Introduction and theoretical framework regarding heritage-led development in China**

Since the 2000s, many cities adopted culture-led regeneration as a strategy to revive former industrial, waterfront sites, and city centers. The projects aim to capture positive externalities of culture production, including to improve quality of life and to stimulate economic outcomes (Kunzmann, 2004; Evans, 2005; Ponzini, 2009; Tang, 2016). Recently, culture-led urban regeneration has expanded from regeneration of culture facilities to a broader research scope, including arts, heritage tourism, creative industry, mega-events and so forth (Evans, 2009; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010; Wang, 2009; Comunian & Mould, 2014; Lees & Melhuish, 2015; McKenzie & Hutton, 2015; Tang 2015). The use of heritage in the process of urban development generally attempts to diverse and complex forms of cultural economy, encompassing production, consumption as well as rebranding, has been notably characterized by the employment of reuse of heritage structures, such as restoration of historical quarters and industrial districts (Ponzini, 2009; McKenzie & Hutton 2015). Research related to the role of heritage in the process of regeneration tend to concentrate on commodification of culture and history environment, which frequent conduct

through maximum economic value (Pendlebury, 2002; Wang, 2009; Delconte, Kline & Scavo, 2016), in this sense, historical buildings contribute to flagship property regeneration projects through stressing quality and space distinctiveness to schemes (Pendlebury, 2002).

During the last decades, China has experienced fundamental transformation after the “open door” policy in 1978, significantly, with the commodification of urban space and decentralization of governance structure (Wu, 2002). Historical preservation is driven by development rather than nostalgia or reverence for history (Ren, 2014: 9). The booming real-estate market and increasing need for leisure space for citizens stimulate culture space production for tourism and real-estate market. Such typical case lies on the world heritage site, Lijiang Town (Su, 2010; Su, 2015), and Xintiandi Redevelopment in Shanghai, a heritage-based development model copied widely in cities like Hangzhou and Foshan (He & Wu, 2005; Ren, 2008; Ren, 2011). These cases revealed the fact that urban conservation has been propelled by local elites using decentralization state power to pursue economic interests through local entrepreneurial strategies (He & Wu 2005; Shin, 2010). The policy networks and land-based interests in heritage-based development has been frequently examined in cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (He & Wu, 2005; Shin, 2010), for instance, the entrepreneurial local governments led pro-growth coalitions in Beijing (Zhang, 2008; Ren, 2011), the public-private coalitions in redevelopment in Taipingqiao and Xintiandi Area (He & Wu, 2005; Ren 2008; Ren, 2014), and the innovation various actors get involved with land value promoting including local villagers in “three old” redevelopment of Guangzhou (Tan & Altrock, 2016). Yet quite limited research covers the policy networks of heritage-led development and the question of how policy networks reshape space through land value capture mechanisms in China.

This paper aims to examine how heritage preservation fuels land-based urban growth in the process of building global heritage tourism city in Xi’an, a historic city in northwestern China. Xi’an has been a struggling city to deal with its rich heritage resources in the urban area and local economic growth. The emerging culture-led events, heritage preservation, even heritage making heavily rely on Qujiang New District, a semi-autonomous government agency has entrepreneurial characters. Therefore, the heritage-based development in Xi’an is also called Qujiang Culture Development Model. The policy networks and land value capture mechanism contribute to a better understanding of the political economy of heritage preservation and benefit distribution in the process. After having touched upon literature in this introduction, and having outlined the method of investigation, the paper concentrates in a case study of Qujiang development model in Xi’an in order to explain the policy networks of the Qujiang New District – a culture and urban development agency. In this case, the land value capture mechanism related heritage preservation and real estate development through a complex policy network across the public and private sectors. More precisely, the paper discusses how heritage preservation fuels the growth through land value capture mechanisms.

## **2 Research Methodology**

The materials used in the analysis include both fieldwork data and secondary sources. Between 2016 to 2018, one of the authors conducted – as part of her doctoral research – a total of three-month intensive fieldwork in Xi’an and about 40 in-depth interviews with the government officials, relocation community committees, urban planners, academics, local residents who knew the development well. Each interview lasted for 40 minutes to 2 hours. The fieldwork conducted in

Xi'an mainly focus on the projects implemented by Qujiang New District with the intervention of heritage preservation. The author attended various culture-related events taking place at heritage-based project area, including Big Wild Goose Pagoda, Daming Palace Heritage Sites, and Tang Imperial City Heritage Site Park to examine how the place experience marketization with these projects. Moreover, the interview with local residents is conducted by groups interviews with local residents in relocation communities of Big Wild Goose Pagoda project in 2016 and the Daming Palace project in 2017 and 2018. The development policy, planning documents, reports, statistics are collected from scholars who have rich knowledge of heritage preservation and urban planning, Xi'an Urban Planning Design and Research Institute, government institutions, internet, and mass media.

### **3 Analysis of the heritage-based development process-Qujiang New District Development Model**

#### **Stage 1: Abandoned urban space with villages and failure ambitious on culture tourism**

During the Tang Dynasty (618AD-907AD) the "Qujiang Pool" was a landscape garden at southeast imperial Chang'an city. It was destroyed in the war in late Tang Dynasty. Before the 2000s, Qujiang was a town in Yanta District with 17 natural villages and 33 thousand people, mostly farmers (Hao 2013). Since the 1990s, with the influence of national land reform, housing reform and tax-sharing reform, the local government of Xi'an infrastructure and housing initiatives for more local revenue. Qujiang addressed the dual goals of new development and culture tourism, due to its rich heritage resources and suburban land potentials.

In 1993, the Shaanxi Provincial government created the Qujiang as Provincial Tourism Resort Area, aiming s at involving investors in developing a leisure and vacation destination in the southeast suburban outskirts of Xi'an. However, unlike the high economic status city of Shanghai, the private developers acquired land and waited for higher returns from land speculation.

#### **Stage 2: From Provincial Tourism Resort Area to National Culture Development Zone**

The failure of the strategy in the 1990s brought the government to try pushing private investments by enhancing land value. In 2002, the national policy of "Strengthening Macro Adjustment and Control of Real Estate Market and Promoting Healthy Development of Real Estate Market" aimed at controlling high rise developments and real-estate market on part of the local government. In the following two years, national policies brought to a halt in development but created an opportunity for Qujiang Management Committee to collect land resources from small developer who were not able to resist to long-term financial pressure. The former vice director of Xi'an High-tech Development Zone Management Committee (XHDZM) who led a successful public-private development for industry and land value capture, was involved in the new heritage-led strategy and its agency. The XHDZM development model inspired the project of Big Wild Goose Pagoda Area, with the difference that culture and heritage became an engine for development. He was soon employed as director of Qujiang Committee with the expectation of enhancing the low land value of the area.

In 2002, the Qujiang Committee announced the “Qujiang Declaration” as policy guidance intend to achieve the goal of “A small change in half a year, a change in the year, a big change in three years(半年一小变，一年一中变，三年一大变)”(Qujiang Committee: 2002). In Qujiang development, the similar land value appreciation was tied closely with the culture and heritage resources, and its tourism potential. Thorough the successful management of the real-estate development in Big Wild Goose Pagoda project, the land value of Qujiang Area has sky-rocketed from 80 thousand RMB per *mu* (*1mu equals 666.67 square meters*) to 3 million RMB per *mu* (IUD China Political Affairs Inspection Center, 2009). In 2003, with the strategic plan of “Xi’an Qujiang New District Strategic Conception and Development Plan”, the Xi’an Municipal Government renamed Qujiang Tourism Resort area as “Qujiang New District” and gave it special development zone powers. Since 2003, the local government has emphasized its crucial role in “Tourism and Recreational District” as a new culture development zone of Xi’an. The Qujiang New District Management Committee was set up to boost land value by environment improvement and heritage revitalization (Ng et al. 2016). From 2003 to 2005, Qujiang New district has succeeded to apply for one Grade AAAAA and three Grade AAAA tourism scenic spots by large-scale projects, rebuilt historical landscape garden Tang Paradise and Never Sleep Grand Tang Dynasty Cultural Tourism District(invested approximately 2 billion yuan (0.3 billion USD)). In 2007, Qujiang New District was selected as the first “National Cultural Industry Demonstration Zone” and as a model for culture-led regeneration.

### Stage 3: Qujiang Development Model: An image of heritage-based development in Xi’an

The heritage-based development model of Qujiang New District was adopted by the local government of Xi’an and the whole Shaanxi Province since 2007. The planning area of Qujiang New District was 15.88 km<sup>2</sup> at the initial stage, it expanded into 47km<sup>2</sup> in the second version of the master plan after 2008, and 51.5km<sup>2</sup> now. The “Qujiang development model” is a government-led, that fosters infrastructure and improvement of the area to attract private real estate and other investments. It plays a role as “Agent of urban transformation in Xi’an” to transfer this historical city into a global metropolitan. The renaissance of historical landscape and culture tourism soon attracts real estate companies (such as Vanke and Jindi) to capture the potential land value around great historic relics, also expected to capture the future economic value of areas around the main cultural attractors.

Table 1 The main culture preservation(tourism) projects of Qujiang New District (In Xi’an)

Year	Project	Investment (RMB)	characteristic
2003	Big Wild Goose Pagoda	0.5 billion	World heritage site
2004	Garden Tang Paradise	1.3 billion	Imitation of Tang Dynasty buildings (No heritage site)
2007	Four Heritage Site Parks and Never Sleep Grand Tang Dynasty	2.8 billion	Heritage site & imitation of Tang Dynasty buildings
2007	Daming Palace Heritage Site	14 billion (only heritage park)	World heritage site
2013	City Wall, South Gate Historical	unknown	Heritage site

	District		
2017	Small Goose Pagoda	10.2 billion	World heritage site

(source: Author synthesis from <http://www.qujiang.com.cn/zjqj/qinj.htm> and interview materials)

In 2014, during the 3-day labor holiday, city wall and south gate culture and historical district cumulative reception of more than 450,000 tourists (Shi, 2015). The tension between urban conservation and rapid development has been managed through Qujiang New District Management Committee, given its responsibility of both urban conservation and economic development. Several critical issues emerged. The project of rebuilding the historical landscape Garden Tang Paradise imitates Tang Dynasty architecture aesthetics. Large-scale redevelopment projects excluded residents who lived near the heritage sites and in the neighborhood. Until 2015, Qujiang New District demolished and relocated 37 villages, involving 0.3 million households and 1 million residents (Xu, 2015). In the Daming Palace Area redevelopment project, 9 billion RMB (nearly 1.3 billion USD) was used to relocate residents at high social costs.

#### **Stage 4: From local entrepreneurial development to state entrepreneurialism?**

In 2017, the Small Goose Pagoda, together with Big Goose Pagoda, Daming Palace, and Xingjiao Pagoda were listed as “world heritage” named as “Silk Road - Chang'an - Tianshan Corridor Road Network”. With a total investment of 12 billion RMB (3 billion investments in 2017), the Small Wild Goose Pagoda Area will be preserved as a new culture growth pole of south Xi’an. The company Huang Qiaocheng Group (that is related to the head of the Qujiang New District director) invested 238 billion RMB to culture and infrastructure projects in Xi’an (Xiong: 2018). In the same year, Xi’an intends to launch 135 crucial development project in Qujiang New Development District, including the Small Goose Pagoda Area, Duling Heritage Site and Southgate-Beilin Historic District and other projects.

### **5 Qujiang Culture development zone: the policy networks and land value capture mechanism**

#### **5.1 Pro-growth coalitions and its internal policy network**

The Qujiang Committee is an autonomous agency of the municipal government that acts as “mediator” between local government and real-estate developers. As a detached government unit, it has the right to manage its planning, land use, real estate, relocation, and relative decision-making, including getting legal planning and land use permissions. Moreover, it also has the right to manage the heritage conservation issue and provide preferential policies to attract developers to get involved in the process. As in many other development zones, this management committee proved to be suitable for entrepreneurial development (Wu & Phelps, 2011). The municipal government does not give funds or staff to this agency that – in terms of personnel appointment, remuneration, and benefits distribution – is managed as a company rather than a government agency (Sou 2011: 241; Hsueh & Chang, 2016). The branches of Qujiang New District are also responsible for “enclaves” that are outside boundary of the core development zone, including Daming Palace Conservation and Transformation Office (Heritage site of Daming Palace), Lingtong National Tourism and Leisure Resort Management Committee (Heritage site area of Terracotta Warriors) and Louguan Taoist

Cultural Tourism District Management Office (Holy land of Taoist Culture). The relevant business sectors include real estate, culture development project, culture tourism, entertainment, film, performance, cartoon, media, publishing, exhibition, commercial, food and others. With the policy support of Qujiang Management Committee, the company has been expanding rapidly. In 2002, the capital of this company was 6 million RMB (nearly 0.86 million USD) (Du, 2012), and it reached 5.3 billion RMB in 2016 (nearly 0.79 billion USD) (Qujiang Investment Group: 2017).

The Qujiang Committee worked as a center of power and investments as the director had various roles in the private and public sector as well as a politician (as vice mayor of Xi'an). Strong partnerships were constituted with national real estate companies, for instance, Jindi Real Estate Company and Vanke Real Estate Company, as they provide capital for the developments (Hsueh & Chang, 2016). The intellectual ancillary group involved in the process includes international design companies, planners, star architects, research institutions, local universities, local planning and construction institutions, and mass media. For instance, in Big Wild Goose Pagoda Area, the Star architect of Xi'an, Jinqiu Zhang, was hired to design "New Tang Dynasty Style" buildings, the style became a model for other projects. Yet the conservationist, both national and local, and local administration of culture heritage are commonly excluded from the policy network. In some heritage-based development, there was one office set up in the Qujiang Committee. In this sense, the public administration was normally excluded from the process, paving the way for ad hoc guidance of heritage preservation and in some cases to damaging archaeological and heritage sites (Han, 2010).

## **5.2 Land value appreciation through culture heritage**

Since the establishment of "Qujiang Tourist Resort Management Committee" in 1996, the municipal government has promoted fifty-two projects within Qujiang. However, the idea of relying on private capital to promote urban construction failed since developers were pursuing benefit merely through transfer of the land use right, not by implementing projects. The land management mechanism among pro-growth coalitions will be explained and the role of how culture and heritage contribute to growth can be exemplified.

In the process of heritage-led redevelopment of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda North Square, the planned investment of this project is 45 million RMB (nearly 7.1 million USD) required the Qujiang Management Committee to expand the target area from 0.01 million km<sup>2</sup> expanded into 0.1 million km<sup>2</sup> to increase the opportunity for land value capture. By using a "deposit" of retail buildings and land from private developers to construct spectacular Tang-Dynasty-style built environment and public space, the agency could push the land value up and sell the land near the heritage site with great returns. The project was set in a fast-track and large-scale mode in order to be financially efficient and this implied the abrupt relocation of local communities. On-site relocation efforts minimized opposition yet the social costs remained quite high.

The promoting of land value is at the center of Qujiang land appreciation mechanism, which is called "Flashback". This procedure ensures that the construction of the planning area is on schedule and enhances the overall value of land as private investors provide capital in order to obtain

favourable conditions from the agency, which as full autonomy in planning and regulation in the special zones (Hsueh 2013: 4-4).

In this model land acquisition, demolition, resettlement, supporting facilities, planning and transfer of land are completed all at once (Daming Palace Conservation and Transformation Implement Programme 2007: 11) in order to limit the time and the financial pressure (Suo 2011: 49). One-time completion of infrastructure construction in the entire area enhances investors' and developers' returns based on value capture (Hsueh 2013: 4-7). By relying on large-scale culture development zone and tourism, heritage-led development and cultural industry investment operation, rentiers have been driving force and continue making new landscape and brand the city in its central heritage attractions.

The establishment of Qujiang Investment Group constituted a financial platform to collecting enough investment from the bank, developers and other channels, related to real estate and cultural-industry investments. Despite questions of authenticity and commodification of heritage, these operations obtain relatively high success in terms of media exposure and tourist attraction.

## **6 Discussion and Conclusion**

Culture and heritage played a central role in legitimizing the transformation of heritage sites and surrounding areas. National real estate developers and local actors could be coordinated thanks to the special agency. The Qujiang model is intended to maximize the benefit for certain interests, while using heritage preservation and even commodification for this purpose. The exclusion of public bodies and curtailing of experts make the network potentially unbalanced, as the intellectual forces involved are mostly pro-growth. The silencing of possible opponents, even among the relocated communities has been made easier by the speed of the development process. These network arrangements and this distribution of power and benefit requires further attention and a more detailed analysis of the implication in terms of the use of heritage and the social costs of the model. The fact that similar models are

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