

Developing the Cultural Value of Historic Districts in the Context of Culture–Tourism Integration

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Abstract: Historic districts integrate architectural heritage, spatial patterns, traditional industries, and community life and are important carriers of urban cultural memory. Culture–tourism integration has expanded opportunities for their cultural presentation and public use but has also created problems such as commercial homogenization, the displacement of residents, and the staging of cultural settings for tourism. On the basis of comprehensive resource surveys and graded conservation, historic districts should develop locally distinctive products, adopt incremental approaches to regeneration, and improve mechanisms for resident participation, business-mix management, and cultural impact assessment. These measures can help coordinate heritage conservation, the continuity of community life, and tourism development.

Keywords: culture–tourism integration; historic districts; cultural value; adaptive reuse; urban regeneration

Introduction

Historic districts are urban areas formed through long-term processes of development that retain a significant concentration of historic buildings, traditional spatial patterns, street scales, and ways of life. Their cultural value is embodied not only in the age, decorative craftsmanship, and spatial form of their buildings but also in interactions among residents, traditional industries, local cuisine, folk activities, and collective memory. Buildings, streets, lanes, and social life are interconnected and together constitute a continuous record of urban history.

Culture–tourism integration has created new conditions for the conservation and use of historic districts. Cultural presentation, tourism experiences, leisure consumption, and public services can be linked within district spaces, while cultural resources can be transformed into exhibitions, educational programs, performances, and experiences of traditional craftsmanship. When development exceeds reasonable limits, however, historic districts may experience excessive architectural renovation, increasingly homogeneous commercial establishments, rising rents, and the displacement of long-term residents. Building façades may be retained while established social relationships and everyday cultural practices gradually disappear, transforming a historic district into a commercial tourist attraction without an authentic foundation in community life.

As of August 2024, China had designated 142 national historic and cultural cities, 312 historic and cultural towns, and 487 historic and cultural villages. More than 1,200 historic and cultural districts had been delineated, and 67,200

historic buildings had been formally recognized^[1]. This substantial body of heritage resources requires differentiated conservation and appropriate use. In the context of culture–tourism integration, the development of cultural value in historic districts should be based on authenticity, integrity, and continuity of everyday life while addressing tourism demand, residents' rights, and the public cultural functions of cities.

1. Components of Cultural Value in Historic Districts

1.1 Historical Information Embodied in Physical Space

The tangible cultural value of historic districts is primarily embodied in their street patterns, building clusters, public spaces, infrastructure, and environmental landscapes. Road widths, courtyard layouts, building heights, and relationships among land parcels record processes of urban formation and reflect the social structures and ways of life of different historical periods.

Individual historic buildings possess chronological, artistic, and technological value, but the spatial relationships among groups of buildings are equally important. Protecting a small number of buildings in isolation while substantially changing the scale of surrounding streets and lanes weakens the overall character of a district. Historic buildings, ordinary traditional buildings, streets, trees, and public spaces collectively constitute the historic environment. Conservation must therefore expand beyond individual buildings to encompass the overall spatial structure.

Physical spaces also contain traces of use. Time-honored shops, traditional workshops, wharves, markets,

and residential courtyards bear witness to local production and everyday life. If renovation pursues visual uniformity, removes traces of age, and standardizes doors, windows, paving, and shop signs, the district will lose its historical layers. The development of cultural value should identify which traces require preservation and which facilities can be improved, avoiding the replacement of authentic heritage with newly constructed imitations of historical architecture.

1.2 Intangible Cultural Value Created through Community Life

Historic districts commonly retain local languages, neighborhood relationships, festival rituals, occupational customs, traditional craftsmanship, and food cultures. These forms of cultural value depend on the daily practices of residents and business operators and are continuously transmitted through families, apprenticeships, and community interaction.

Community memory is another important component of cultural value. Residents' accounts of street names, former building uses, people, events, and changes in everyday life can supplement historical dimensions not fully recorded in archives. Oral histories, old photographs, and household objects can help the public understand social life within a district and provide more specific content for cultural interpretation.

Intangible cultural value is dynamic. Ways of life change over time, and conservation cannot require residents to maintain an unchanging lifestyle. Appropriate adaptive reuse should create viable contemporary conditions for traditional crafts, local businesses, and community activities, allowing cultural practices to continue in everyday life rather than appearing only briefly in staged festival performances.

2. The Impact of Culture–Tourism Integration on the Development of Historic-District Value

2.1 The Tourism Market Expanding Opportunities for Cultural Presentation

Growing demand for cultural tourism provides historic districts with a larger visitor and consumer base. In 2024, China recorded 5.615 billion domestic tourist trips and total domestic tourism expenditure of RMB 5.75 trillion, representing year-on-year increases of 14.8% and 17.1%, respectively ^[2]. Tourists' interest in local history, traditional architecture, distinctive cuisine, and everyday settings creates market conditions for presenting the culture of historic districts.

Table 1. Selected Data Relevant to the Development of Cultural Value in Historic Districts

Indicator	Data	Reference date
National historic and cultural cities	142	August 2024
Historic and cultural towns	312	August 2024
Historic and cultural villages	487	August 2024
Traditional Chinese villages	8,155	August 2024
Delineated historic and cultural districts	More than 1,200	August 2024
Formally recognized historic buildings	67,200	August 2024
Domestic tourist trips	5.615 billion	2024
Total domestic tourism expenditure	RMB 5.75 trillion	2024

Source: Compiled from data on the conservation of urban and rural historical and cultural heritage released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's domestic tourism data for 2024 ^[1–2].

Historic districts can use tourism activities to present architectural art, local history, and community culture. Cultural institutions, traditional shops, interpretation systems, and educational routes can provide multiple levels of explanation, enabling visitors to move beyond viewing building façades toward understanding urban development and local life.

2.2 Diverse Business Activities Enriching Cultural Experiences

Culture–tourism integration encourages historic districts to develop from single-purpose sightseeing spaces into multifunctional areas combining cultural presentation, leisure consumption, social education, and community life. Traditional craft workshops, local cuisine, distinctive bookshops, small museums, and cultural performances can enrich visitor experiences while creating operating spaces for cultural transmission.

The value of a business depends on its connection with the district's culture. Traditional workshops, time-honored

businesses, and local restaurants can express regional characteristics directly. Ordinary commercial businesses can also operate in historic districts, but their number, location, and appearance should be coordinated with the district's overall character. If chain restaurants, generic souvenirs, and repetitive entertainment projects dominate a district, its cultural distinctiveness will gradually diminish.

Culture and tourism products can also connect resources inside and outside the district. Thematic routes can link historic buildings, former residences of prominent figures, traditional markets, cultural institutions, and surrounding communities. Expanding visitor movement beyond a central commercial street to different cultural nodes can reduce localized congestion and broaden the spatial range within which cultural value is presented.

2.3 Urban Regeneration Improving Conditions for Heritage Conservation

Some historic districts face deteriorating buildings, inadequate fire-protection facilities, poor drainage, and insufficient public services. Public investment and social attention generated by tourism development can support building restoration, environmental improvement, and infrastructure upgrades. Improved living conditions may also increase residents' willingness to remain in the district.

The method of regeneration directly affects heritage value. Although large-scale demolition and reconstruction may accelerate construction, they can easily damage the street fabric and established social relationships. Tao argues that the regeneration of older urban areas must shift from prioritizing the economic returns of land development toward socially oriented urban regeneration that focuses on residents' lives, social equity, and cultural continuity^[3]. Historic districts are better suited to small-scale, incremental interventions implemented in stages according to building conditions and residents' needs.

Spatial improvements should also preserve the district's functional uses. Fire protection, drainage, accessibility, and sanitation facilities can be introduced into historic environments through concealed and minimally intrusive methods. New facilities should be compatible with existing buildings in scale, color, and material and should not use superficial historical decoration to conceal unresolved functional problems.

3. Problems in Developing the Cultural Value of Historic Districts

3.1 Commercial Redevelopment and District Homogenization

Some historic-district regeneration projects treat tourism consumption as their primary objective and reduce cultural value to façades and decorative symbols. Different regions adopt similar historicized storefronts, lighting installations, local-snack formats, and cultural and creative shops, producing little regional differentiation. Visitors encounter uniformly designed commercial spaces rather than gaining an understanding of authentic urban history.

Excessive commercialization also changes building uses. Residences, traditional shops, and public spaces may be converted extensively into restaurants, guesthouses, and entertainment facilities, gradually reducing everyday community functions. Commercial operations require substantial visitor flows, while internal renovations, advertising installations, and equipment may exceed the physical capacity of historic buildings.

Social-media popularity can intensify short-term development in particular locations. Business operators may concentrate on photogenic installations and high-density consumption settings while neglecting historical interpretation, public rest spaces, and community services. When tourism popularity declines, commercial projects lacking meaningful cultural content may become vacant, while district maintenance loses a stable source of funding.

3.2 Imbalances among Residents' Lives, Cultural Conservation, and Tourism Operations

Long-term residents of historic districts are both carriers of culture and the people most directly affected by regeneration. Rising rents and living costs, noise, and traffic congestion can reduce their quality of life. Some residents may rent out their homes and leave the district, changing the composition of the community and weakening neighborhood relationships and everyday customs.

An unequal distribution of tourism revenue can also affect resident participation. Large operating companies may obtain the principal commercial spaces, while local residents are limited to low-income service work, creating conflicts of interest. If residents cannot receive reasonable benefits from the development of cultural value, their support for conservation and tourism activities will decline.

Tan et al.'s study of the micro-regeneration of Yongqing Fang on Enning Road in Guangzhou shows that historic-district regeneration must manage relationships among heritage conservation, spatial improvement, industrial introduction, and the interests of multiple stakeholders^[4]. Evaluating development solely through building restoration and commercial leasing cannot adequately reflect changes in community life and cultural transmission.

4. Pathways for Developing the Cultural Value of Historic Districts

4.1 Establishing Cultural-Resource Surveys and Graded-Use Mechanisms

The development of cultural value should be based on a comprehensive survey. Survey subjects should include historic buildings, traditional streets, ancient trees and waterways, public spaces, time-honored businesses, traditional crafts, folk activities, historical figures, and community memories. Sources may include archives, local gazetteers, historical photographs, architectural surveys, and interviews with residents.

After completing the survey, resources should be graded according to cultural value, preservation status, and carrying capacity. Heritage of high value and particular fragility should primarily be conserved, researched, and opened under controlled conditions. Historic buildings suitable for public use may be adapted as exhibition spaces, community centers, or cultural venues. Ordinary traditional buildings can receive improvements to residential and commercial functions while retaining their façades and structural characteristics.

A unified archive of the district's cultural resources should record location, date, ownership, statements of value, restoration history, and current use. Project investment, activity planning, and spatial redevelopment should all consult this archive to reduce the risk that development decisions will damage cultural heritage.

4.2 Developing Locally Distinctive Culture and Tourism Products

Culture and tourism products in historic districts should be designed around local cultural themes. Themes may derive from urban development, commercial history, traditional industries, significant figures, or residents' everyday lives. Once a cultural theme has been determined, interpretation, exhibitions, performances, educational programs, and cultural and creative products should be

connected rather than allowing individual projects to use isolated cultural symbols independently.

District interpretation should accommodate different levels of understanding. General visitors can learn about major buildings through maps, signs, and concise explanations. Visitors seeking greater depth can participate in thematic routes and listen to residents' accounts. Student groups can engage in architectural observation, historical-document reading, and experiences of traditional craftsmanship.

Cultural products should also retain their connection with everyday life. Local cuisine, traditional markets, and community festivals can be opened to visitors while respecting residents' normal routines. Residents' daily activities should not be converted entirely into fixed performances. Tourism experiences should be grounded in authentic community life.

Traditional business operators and craftspeople can receive access to low-rent premises, presentation opportunities, and training support. When businesses generate revenue by using local culture, they should also assume responsibility for cultural interpretation, product quality, and the transmission of traditional skills. Only when businesses with authentic cultural foundations gradually reach a viable scale can a historic district establish a cultural image distinct from that of a generic commercial street.

4.3 Advancing Small-Scale and Incremental Spatial Regeneration

Historic-district regeneration should prioritize the repair of existing buildings and minimize wholesale demolition and historicized reconstruction. Building safety, fire protection, drainage, and sanitation can be improved according to the principle of minimal intervention. Existing structures and materials should be documented before construction, and components capable of continued use should be retained whenever possible.

Wang argues that the regeneration of older districts should integrate historical conservation, community building, and public participation within the same process^[5]. Incremental regeneration can begin with pilot projects involving buildings and public spaces in urgent need of improvement. Plans can then be adjusted according to residents' use and visitor feedback before being expanded gradually.

Public-space improvements should serve both residents and visitors. Seating, lighting, waste collection, public toilets, and wayfinding facilities support tourism and everyday community life. Streets and lanes should not be occupied entirely by commercial stalls; sufficient space must remain for movement, social interaction, and emergency access.

The adaptive reuse of buildings must respect spatial carrying capacity. Small or structurally fragile buildings are unsuitable for intensive restaurant or accommodation operations and may be more appropriately used for exhibitions, studios, or small-scale retail. Matching business functions with building conditions can reduce repeated alterations and safety risks.

5. Support Mechanisms for Developing the Cultural Value of Historic Districts

5.1 Improving Resident Participation and Multi-Stakeholder Consultation

The development of historic districts involves governments, residents, property owners, business operators, tourists, and cultural research institutions. Governments are responsible for conservation planning, public infrastructure, and market regulation. Professional organizations conduct value assessments and provide restoration guidance. Enterprises undertake operational management, while residents contribute lived experience and participate in the transmission of community culture.

Resident participation should extend through the survey, planning, construction, and operational stages. Household interviews and community meetings can be held before plans are prepared to understand needs relating to housing improvement, public services, and business operations. Once proposals have been developed, residents should receive clear explanations of building restoration, rents, transportation changes, and construction impacts, together with accessible channels for feedback.

Benefit-distribution mechanisms must protect residents' rights and interests. Residents can participate in district development through independent businesses, housing partnerships, community employment, and cultural interpretation. When relocation or changes in building use are involved, compensation and resettlement arrangements should be transparent. An appropriate proportion of residential space, food markets, medical services, and

community facilities should be retained to prevent tourism operations from completely replacing everyday life.

5.2 Establishing Cultural Impact Assessment and Dynamic Regulation

Historic-district development projects should undergo cultural impact assessment before implementation. Assessments should consider potential changes to architectural character, spatial patterns, cultural activities, resident composition, and traditional businesses. Projects likely to produce substantial effects should be modified in scale, location, or mode of operation.

Development outcomes should not be evaluated solely through visitor numbers, business revenue, and online popularity. Evaluation systems should also incorporate the preservation condition of historic buildings, the proportion of long-term residents, the number of traditional businesses, the use of public spaces, visitors' cultural understanding, and resident satisfaction.

Management authorities can establish business-admission rules and negative lists restricting noisy, polluting, or structurally damaging activities. Specific requirements should regulate shop signs, lighting, outdoor displays, and equipment installation, supported by regular inspections. When cultural presentation is inaccurate, buildings are altered without authorization, or residents' lives are seriously disrupted, operating arrangements should be adjusted promptly.

Visitor capacity must also be managed dynamically. During periods of excessive holiday demand, reservation systems, timed entry, and route dispersal can be introduced. Public transport, fire-protection systems, and emergency-response capacity should be appropriate to visitor volumes to protect both residents and tourists.

Conclusion

The cultural value of historic districts lies in the integrated relationships among buildings, streets, traditional industries, community life, and collective memory. Culture-tourism integration can create conditions for heritage restoration, cultural presentation, and local industrial development, but it may also generate commercial homogenization, resident displacement, and superficial cultural content. The development of cultural value must establish clear conservation boundaries and should not replace heritage conservation and community-development

objectives with short-term tourism revenue.

Historic districts should establish mechanisms for cultural-resource surveys and graded use, develop locally distinctive culture and tourism products, adopt small-scale and incremental regeneration, and protect residents' participation and reasonable economic interests. Cultural impact assessment, business-mix management, and dynamic regulation should continue throughout the development process. Only when the historic environment is conserved authentically, community life is able to continue, and tourists receive culturally meaningful experiences can historic districts generate stable and enduring culture and tourism value.

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