

Urban Heritage Policy in China: A Case Study of Preservation Systems in Wuhan

Xinyu Li ¹*

¹ Ph.D Candidate, Doctoral School of Geography, University Pantheon-Sorbonne Paris 1, Paris, France

* **Corresponding Author:** komslee@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Balancing the preservation of historical buildings with urban development is a global challenge in the context of rapid urbanization. This study focuses on heritage protection policies in China, using Wuhan as a case study to explore how governmental agencies address this conflict through top-down policy adjustments and planning measures. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates Geographic Information System (GIS) data analysis, field investigations, and semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive assessment of the current state of heritage preservation in Wuhan and the effectiveness of related policies. The findings reveal that while heritage protection regulations are in place, their implementation faces significant challenges, including low public participation, limited funding, and insufficient policy enforcement. By integrating historical buildings with cultural tourism, governments and private stakeholders are working toward a new balance between preservation and reuse, creating economic incentives that support heritage conservation. This study not only highlights the practical challenges of heritage preservation in Wuhan but also offers insights for developing heritage management policies in other cities of the developing countries facing similar issues.

Keywords: Tangible Heritage; Historical Architecture; Reuse of Heritage; Heritage Policies; Wuhan.

INTRODUCTION

The preservation and reuse of historical buildings is a complex and multidimensional process involving factors such as policy, culture, and economics (Ferretti, Bottero, & Mondini, 2014). Policy guidance and innovation play an indispensable role in achieving this goal. The main issue is how to preserve the historical character of these districts while reutilizing this tangible heritage to meet contemporary lifestyles and societal needs (Y. Wang & Bramwell, 2012).

Policy and regulatory guidance play a crucial role in the preservation and reuse of historical buildings, but many challenges still exist in practice, especially in developing countries and cities (Udeaja et al., 2020). In China's second and third-tier cities, although there are relevant historical heritage protection policies, the lack of enforcement or limited resources at the local government level still makes heritage preservation challenging. For example, historical buildings in the main urban area of Kaifeng, Henan, have become dilapidated due to a lack of protection (Wei, 2024).

Balancing urban development with the preservation of historical buildings and neighborhoods during the policy-making process is a longstanding issue. Some cities, in pursuit of economic benefits, have demolished historical buildings to construct new ones that meet modern needs (Wang & Aoki, 2019). For example, in Datong, the ancient city wall was destroyed due to urban development needs and economic development (He, 2023).

The implementation of policies also involves the coordination of interests among multiple stakeholders, including local governments, merchants, and local communities. How to integrate the interests of various parties in policies to attract more private enterprises and social groups to participate in the preservation and reuse of historical buildings, to ensure the sustainability of historical building preservation, is an urgent problem to be

LITERATURE REVIEW

Production of Heritage

It has recently become apparent that cultural heritage has an important contribution to the development processes, and it is not simply a consequence of economic and political forces, but rather one of the most important aspects of the culture and social development (Farrelly, Kock, & Josiassen, 2019). This recognition is particularly important in the case of the global community where heritage has become an instrument against the onslaught of globalization which threatens to make cultures uniform. At the same time, it fosters plurality and enhances the international as well as the pluralistic national identity (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002).

According to Lowenthal (1998), the production of heritage is not just about the past but connects the past with the present through the attempt to revive the fundamental practices in contemporary societies. The production of heritage, in its broadest sense, must be understood in terms of its legal or relevant constructive forces, having been constructed or reconstructed through its application or reapplication in the context. This dynamic is evident in the constant transformation of the concept of a nation, in which the notion of “heritage” evolves from merely commemorating the past to interconnecting the past, present and future (Waterton, Smith, & Campbell, 2006). Lowenthal criticizes this approach, asserting that production of heritage is less of a historical inquiry and more a celebration tailored to the needs of the present (Silverman, 2010).

The production of heritage goes through a number of processes such as selection, justification, conservation, exhibition and most importantly, economic consecration as described by Hugues François (François, Hirczak, & Senil, 2006). This concerns the fact that heritage should not be viewed as an inheritance alone, but rather as the outcome of selections that are sometimes brought about by political, economic and social contexts.

In China, the relationship between cultural heritage and national identity is interconnected. Despite the importance placed on cultural heritage as a tool to strengthen national identity, its practical application raises numerous controversies and problems (Kong, 2007). Dong and Tian (2009) discuss how Chinese consumers use brands to express their national identity, reflecting an internal conflict between the desire for global integration and maintaining local cultural independence, a conflict present both at the individual level and in national policies and cultural practices (Dong & Tian, 2009).

In summary, this process is deeply embedded in a specific political and social framework, underscoring that production of heritage is a significant cultural act and a deliberate human intervention, which must navigate the complex context of social expectations and conservation imperatives (Beardslee, 2016). As for the case of the old Meiguan Road located in Guangzhou, China, the production of heritage proves to be a complex social process involving various interests. The local authority which is one of the key actors in this process has drastically changed the socio-economic domain of the area and its neighboring villages (Wu, Ma, & Zhang, 2022). Such government involvement has transformed the place for political reasons, not for reasons of cultural protection or restoration of historic buildings.

Although the Mufu in Lijiang is a fairly new site of heritage, the local authorities have started using it as a place that represents the level of cultural development and historical significance of the Naxi. This practice illustrates how local authorities exploit heritage to advance economic interests in a commercialized context. It is an instance of the past being utilized for certain ends, economic or political, without much regard for the historical authenticity of the utilization. According to Su (2011), this model has been a source of dissatisfaction and suspicion to most people in the area since they regard the remodeled new Mufu of production processes as a disregard of historical truths and negatively impacts their identity and their attachment to the urban space (Su, 2011). The top-down approach to heritage production has also resulted in a lack of local residents' engagement in heritage preservation, often leading to resistance toward related protection policies. This resistance has, in turn, contributed to a lack of public recognition and support for local heritage conservation efforts (Gao, 2016).

Protection and Reuse of Historic Buildings

As cities develop, the protection and reuse of tangible heritage, especially historical districts and buildings, has become a critical issue, reflecting the challenge of balancing heritage protection with urban modernization (Boussaa, 2017). These heritages are treasuries of urban history and culture; thus, preserving them is not only a respect for the past but also a legacy of collective memory and culture (Harrison, 2015).

Embracing modernization while protecting these tangible heritages often leads to contradictions in multiple aspects. For example, architectural conflicts frequently arise between maintaining historical styles and introducing new modern facilities (Rowlands & De Jong, 2016). In Romania, urban redevelopment projects face the challenge of harmonizing modern infrastructure with traditional architectural styles. Functionally, historical buildings often fail to meet the demands of modern urban life and pose safety risks, such as outdated

infrastructure and inadequate fire protection (Klimaszewski, Bader, & Nyce, 2012). The construction of modern infrastructure often visually and physically obscures these historical districts, gradually erasing the sense of history, cultural richness, and architectural integrity of these places. Although governments have made efforts to protect these areas, these measures often struggle to integrate modern conveniences without compromising the historical integrity of the sites (Alberts & Hazen, 2010).

Like many other countries, China's historical districts and buildings also face the challenge of urban transformation. For example, in Beijing, the restoration project of the famous historical and cultural district, Nanluoguxiang, aims to protect the traditional courtyard houses while meeting the demands of modern commerce. However, due to the lack of effective policy guidance and management, the district has been overtaken by various commercial activities and an influx of tourists. The original residents have moved away, and the absence of community memory has transformed this historic district into a newly constructed tourist attraction (Shin, 2010). On the other hand, the area of an Italian village in Tianjin illustrates the negative impacts of government-led historical district protection and transformation. Originally a residential area, it underwent drastic changes under direct government intervention, displacing residents while completely altering the area's character (Chauffert-Yvart, Ged, Lu, Mengin, & Rousseau, 2020). At the same time, tangible heritage is often seen by developers as a means to increase real estate value, reducing it to a purely commercial tool. This is evident in Hong Kong, where the renovation of historical buildings has led to a significant surge in the prices of newly constructed properties (Luo & Huang, 2023).

The primary issue in the protection and reuse of tangible heritage is balancing the preservation of historical buildings with modernizing these districts to better meet today's urban needs (Boussaa, 2017). To successfully accomplish this task, there must be well-established heritage protection policies and a comprehensive consideration of cultural heritage values during the planning and execution phases of projects. This requires adopting a scientific and rigorous approach and reasonable conservation measures to achieve sustainable development (Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008).

This necessitates multilevel protection measures and planning to ensure that tangible heritage is protected while enhancing its reuse within the contemporary urban framework, thereby making a meaningful contribution to urban development and heritage protection (Kristensen, 2021). The challenge we face is to produce heritage and spaces that reflect history yet meet contemporary needs. Currently, there is a lack of comparative research on the protection and reuse measures for historical buildings and districts in Wuhan at the local city level. Most research focuses on China's coastal and first-tier cities, with very limited studies on policies related to historical districts in central regions.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct an exhaustive study from various angles and under different conditions, we adopted a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. This approach is based on objective literature, and also incorporates rich subjective descriptions. The various research methods were used to analyze the entire region, including analysis of written materials, mapping, field observations, photography, and semi-structured interviews with directors of official institutions.

The analysis of textual materials was identified as a key component of the research. To understand the background of the favored districts, we consulted government public announcements and urban planning archives to grasp the various policies and plans related to historical buildings and districts issued by governmental agencies. By reviewing 14 lists of protected historical buildings published by the Wuhan municipal government, and the cultural heritage protection list issued by the Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism (WMBCT), we gathered and organized data on all officially protected historical buildings in Wuhan, including their names, uses, protection levels, addresses, and coordinates. In addition, we used Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping methods. By using the coordinate data of these historic buildings, we mapped the distribution of the tangible heritage and located the spatial relationships of the historic buildings.

We also conducted field observations to explore the landscape of the historical districts. This included on-site inspections of activities, architectural details, and infrastructure conditions. In the fall of 2024, we undertook a two-month survey, during which we visited 16 historic preservation districts in Wuhan to understand the current uses of these historical buildings. Photography captured the visual aspects of the districts. We recorded images of Wuhan's famous historical districts and buildings and documented the surrounding environments. In addition, we photographed daily life and cultural activities in these districts to reveal the visitor dynamics of these areas.

We conducted a series of half-hour semi-structured interviews with directors of official institutions to understand their interpretations of the policies related to the conservation and reuse of relevant historical districts and buildings, and the challenges encountered in the implementation process. The interviews included open-ended questions, allowing interviewees to freely share their perspectives. These interviewees were specifically invited to participate because they could provide an official perspective on the region's cultural heritage and represent the authorities' attitudes towards these historical buildings (Table 1).

Table 1. List of Interviews

Number	Name	Position	Department
1	Mr. Zhao	Responsible	Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism
2	Mr. Xu	Project manager	Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism
3	Mrs. Qi	Responsible	Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Housing Management
4	Mr. Deng	Staff member	Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Housing Management
5	Mr. Yu	Team leader	Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Natural Resources and Planning

RESULTS

Protection of the Tangible Cultural Heritage under National Law

China's focus on cultural heritage began in the 1960s. In 1961, the concept of a cultural heritage conservation unit was first proposed in China to prevent the destruction of ancient immovable sites, including tombs, buildings, cave temples, stone carvings, murals, compasses, and other significant ancient and contemporary historical heritages, as well as buildings representing modern sites (Zhu, 2012).

The 1982 Chinese Cultural Relics Protection Law represents a significant advancement in the protection of cultural heritage. The enactment of this law marked the formal legal definition and protection of cultural heritage in China. Under this law, two categories of historical buildings or heritages are defined as immovable heritage:

Ancient cultural sites, ancient tombs, ancient buildings, cave temples, and stone carvings, murals with historical, artistic, or scientific value; and modern important historical sites, objects, representative buildings related to major historical events, revolutionary movements, or notable figures, which have significant commemorative, educational, or historical data value (Lau, 2011, p. 24).

The Cultural Relics Protection Law categorizes tangible heritage into three levels: national, provincial, and municipal. Government agencies at each level assess and categorize heritage, then submit it for more detailed assessment by higher authorities. In this designation and protection grading system, the Cultural and Tourism Bureau is seen as a significant authority, responsible for the stringent management and control of these heritages (Chai & Li, 2019).

In 1986, Wuhan was declared a National Historical and Cultural City, marking the beginning of cultural heritage protection. As of 2024, Wuhan has 278 buildings and sites designated as tangible cultural heritage, including 33 at the national level, 106 at the provincial level, and 139 at the municipal level (Cheng et al., 2017). Among these, 119 tangible heritages are located in small villages away from the city center, such as Huangpi, Xinzhou, and Jiangxia. These heritages are primarily ancient villages, historical building sites, and tombs of historical figures. In fact, 130 of the tangible heritages were constructed before the 19th century, and 51 sites were built before the Common Era, as shown in Figure 2. Such heritage planning reflects municipal officials' preference for the preservation of historical buildings. Once designated and produced as heritage, these sites essentially become places and carriers of collective memory for the region, serving as symbols of the area's traditional history.

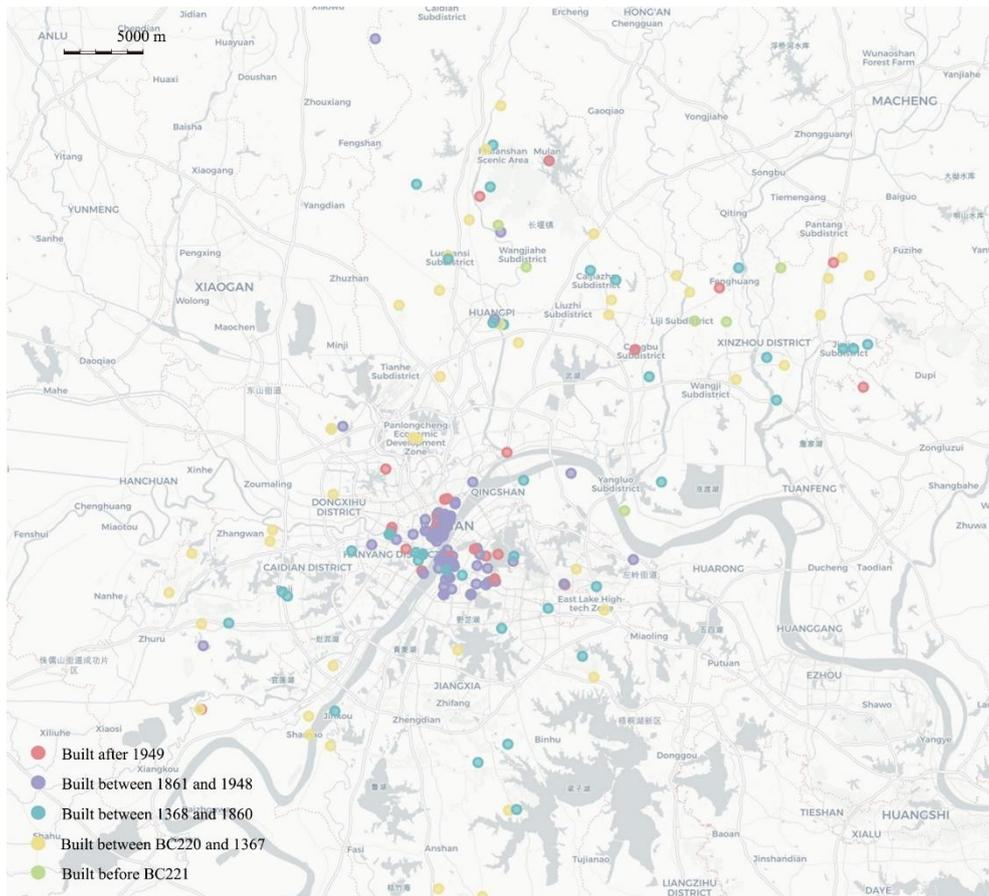


Figure 2. Map of the Distribution of the Tangible Heritage in Wuhan

In contrast, buildings constructed in the 20th century were once overlooked by the authorities, with only a few from this period deemed worthy of protection. Before the 21st century, only 39 buildings constructed in the 20th century were recognized as tangible heritage, and these historical buildings were closely associated with the Communist Party of China, such as monuments to revolutionary martyrs or residences of political figures. In the old center of Wuhan, other 20th-century buildings did not receive sufficient official attention (Y. Nie & Nie, 2021).

In this heritage system, the protection of tangible heritage is closely linked to the construction of political and collective identities. Official agencies have absolute authority and decision-making power, with very limited public participation in discussions. A direct consequence of this was that by the end of the 20th century, as the city developed and the real estate industry boomed, many historical buildings in historical center were replaced by modern office towers and residential buildings due to a lack of attention and protection. It is estimated that over half of Wuhan's historical buildings were demolished because they were not listed as protected heritage (Li, 2024). "A century ago, the center of Hankou, especially the former concession area, was once the most prosperous region in Wuhan. However, these areas were not given sufficient official attention and protection, leading to the demolition of many historical buildings. The existing complete historical districts are relatively small in scale and are scattered in distribution" (Cf. Interview 4). This has led to the fragmentation and disruption of the urban landscape in historical center, with many high-rises damaging the integrity of historical districts.

Promulgation of Supplementary Protective Regulations

Despite the increased focus on tangible heritage, the introduction of the Cultural Relics Law did not fully prevent the widespread demolition of historic buildings in Wuhan's historic districts. In this context, local government agencies began efforts to actively protect the historical architecture in the city center. In 1993, the Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Housing Management (WMBHM) initiated a survey of historical buildings not yet listed as tangible heritage, compiling a list that primarily focused on 20th-century buildings in Wuhan's historical central districts. This list included 102 buildings categorized into hospitals, religious, halls, schools, banks, commercial, office, public, theaters, residential, and industrial types (M. Chen, Tong, Xu, Zhou, & Hu, 2022).

It is important to note that this list of historical buildings was merely suggestive. The WMBHM did not coordinate or collaborate with another bureau, and thus no regulations or protective policies were paired with the list. Consequently, the buildings on the list did not receive effective protection, and there were no regulations to

constrain and supervise the actions of real estate developers or individuals. Around the year 2000, more than ten buildings on the list were demolished and replaced with modern residential buildings or commercial centers. For example, the Racecourse Stands listed on the historical buildings list were demolished in the early 21st century and replaced with a modern Wanda Commercial Center (Yang, Wang, & Zhu, 2023).

To further prevent the extensive demolition of historical buildings, in 2003, the Wuhan municipal government introduced the first local policy for the protection of historical buildings, the "Regulations on the Protection and Management of Ancient City Appearance and Historical Buildings in Wuhan." This policy, formulated as regulations, for the first time explicitly defined the concept of outstanding historical buildings and included relevant protective policies: "*Buildings over 30 years old that meet any of the following criteria may be designated as outstanding historical buildings: architectural style, construction craftsmanship, and engineering techniques that have characteristics of architectural art and scientific research value; reflect the architectural history and cultural characteristics of Wuhan; are representative works of famous architects; are representative of the development history of various industries in our city; or other buildings with historical and cultural significance.*" (Cf. Interview 3)

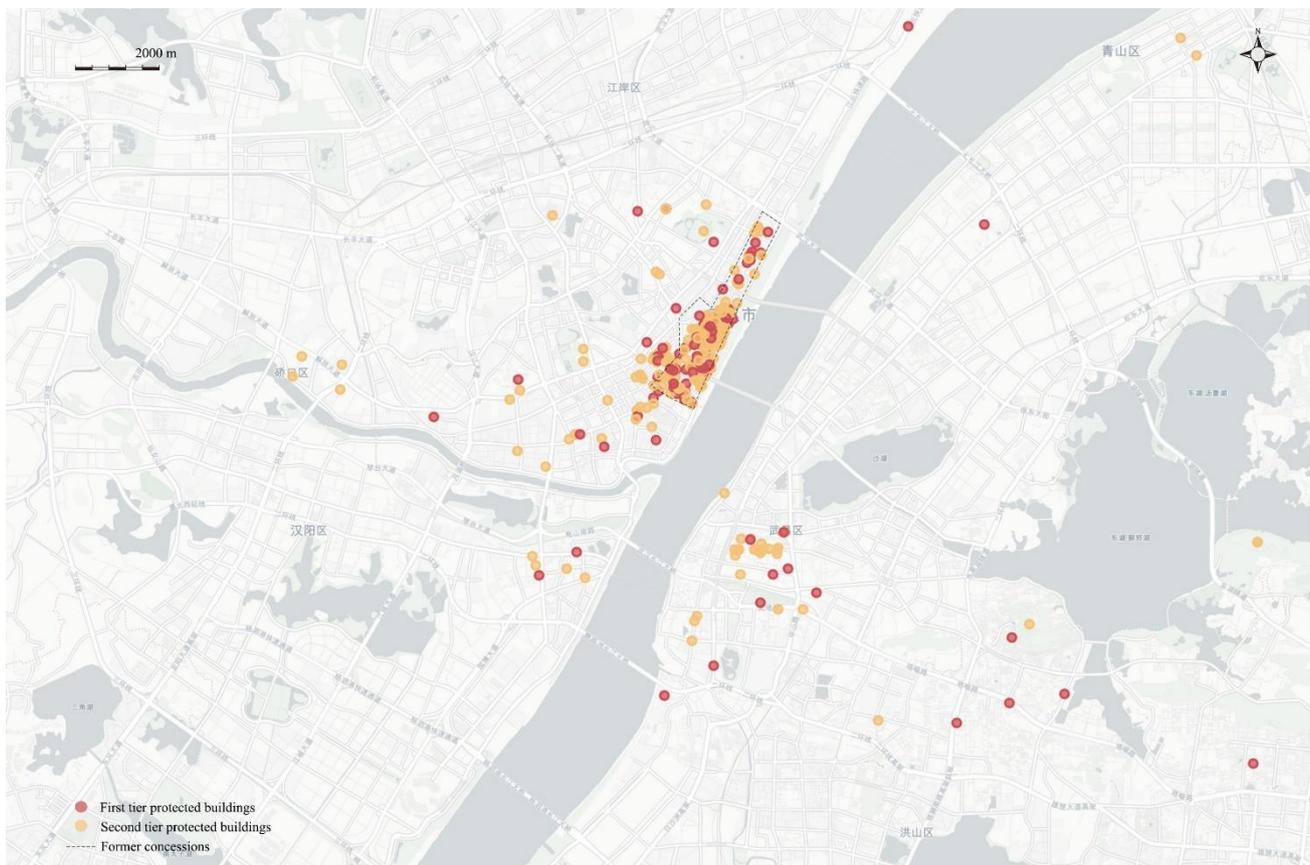


Figure 3. Map of Protected Historic Buildings

By 2024, the WMBHM had released 14 catalogues of outstanding historical buildings, with a total of 307 buildings listed. Most of these historical buildings are located in the city center of Wuhan, particularly in Hankou, where 248 protected buildings are concentrated, accounting for 80% of the total protected buildings, as illustrated in Figure 3. This area had five international concessions in the early 20th century and thus possesses a rich collection of Western-style historical buildings. Concurrently, the protection levels for buildings on the list were divided into first and second tiers. The enactment of this regulation ensured that buildings on the list of outstanding historical buildings received local government protection, strengthening administrative constraints against private damages. Among all outstanding historical buildings, 107 are categorized as first-tier protection, with the remaining 200 classified as second-tier. Compared to second-tier buildings, first-tier protected buildings typically have higher architectural facades and other attractive features, often associated with significant historical and cultural figures and events. However, first-tier buildings are subject to stricter protection and usage regulations, such as restrictions on altering the interior structure and spatial layout of the buildings. Since this protection system lacks financial support, the responsibility for the repair and maintenance of historical buildings rests with the users.

After organizing and analyzing all the buildings on the list (Table 2), we found that the most common types of buildings on the list of outstanding historical buildings are residential and office buildings, accounting for 56% of the total number of protected buildings (93 and 83). These buildings, due to their similar facades and concentrated locations, lack public spaces, thus receiving a lower protection level. Lower levels of protection imply less attention and supervision. In fact, the municipal government's focus on preservation is often concentrated on historically significant buildings with distinctive facades, such as banks, which typically feature Neoclassical or Baroque architectural styles. The users of these buildings are often large corporations and enterprises, whose ample funding means that the protection of these structures is more likely to be effectively implemented and monitored.

Table 2. Historical Building Categories for Each Protection List

Category of building	List of protected buildings														Total
	1st	2nd	3th	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	
Hospital building	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	5
Religion building	11	5	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	25
Hall building	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
School building	3	1	0	0	2	0	3	2	0	2	0	1	1	2	17
Bank building	18	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	23
Merchant building	10	0	2	1	1	3	1	0	1	0	0	2	2	2	25
Office building	21	0	7	7	5	3	4	3	10	2	5	5	5	6	83
Public building	5	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	12
Theater building	3	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	9
Residential building	23	9	8	2	5	4	4	2	18	3	1	5	1	8	93
Industrial building	5	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	11
Total	102	16	20	16	15	12	20	8	29	7	13	16	11	21	306

Moreover, as they are still inhabited by many residents, the official agencies have not extensively intervened in the maintenance of these historical buildings, relying instead on the actions of residents or users. However, these spontaneous protection efforts, due to the lack of sufficient financial support and maintenance guidance, result in these historical buildings lacking systematic protection measures. As a result, many historical residential and office buildings tend to deteriorate.

In contrast, the Shanghai municipal government established a similar protection system for outstanding historical buildings in 2010 (Ifversen & Pozzi, 2020). Under this system, actions to protect such buildings can apply for financial assistance from official sources, which often provides greater motivation for users. However, compared to Shanghai, a first-tier city, Wuhan has a much smaller economic scale. As of 2024, Wuhan's GDP is less than half that of Shanghai's. Consequently, financial resources for official support in preserving outstanding historical buildings are limited. *"We once organized a group visit to the historical districts in Shanghai for observation and study. Shanghai's conservation model involves the municipal government purchasing property rights for entire neighborhood to implement protective measures, yet it does not interfere with the normal lives of the original users of the buildings. They can choose to stay in the apartment or move out of the area. However, in Wuhan, we do not have as extensive a budget to carry out such actions."* (Cf. Interview 3)

During field observations, we noted that numerous historical residential buildings lacked maintenance, with peeling walls and cluttered public spaces. Although regulations have preserved these historical buildings from demolition during urban development, the lack of guidance and financial investment, has meant that these historical buildings have not received adequate maintenance, gradually turning them into decaying and derelict places.

Consolidation of Different Measures and Designation of Protection Areas

Amid a backdrop of inadequate coordination between these protection systems and the government, in 2013, the Wuhan municipal government introduced the "Regulations on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Style Districts and Outstanding Historical Buildings in Wuhan" to improve the local historical building protection

mechanism. This policy formally outlined the relationship between tangible heritage and outstanding historical buildings in regulatory terms (Cheng et al., 2017). Under public, bottom-up recommendations, valuable buildings are first selected as outstanding historical structures to receive legal protection. These protected buildings are then screened top-down by official departments to become tangible heritage, thereby obtaining official protection funding and technical support.

Moreover, the regulation also coordinated the functions between different departments, ensuring that the protection of tangible heritage was no longer confined to the management of any single department but integrated and complemented across different systems. The Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Natural Resources and Planning (WMBNRP) is responsible for the urban planning and delineation of protected areas for historical style districts and historical buildings. The WMBHM handles the routine structural safety inspections and management of building repair projects. The WMBCT is tasked with supervising the use and protection of all historical buildings in Wuhan according to the regulations of the Cultural Relics Protection Law.

Within this regulatory framework, in the same year, the WMBNRP issued the "Planning for Historical Cultural Districts in Wuhan," which divided Wuhan's historical districts into 4 protection historical districts and 16 historical sub-districts. Among the protection zones, 6 are historical event building areas, 5 are industrial and residential building areas, and 5 are Western-style cultural building areas, as shown in Figure 4.

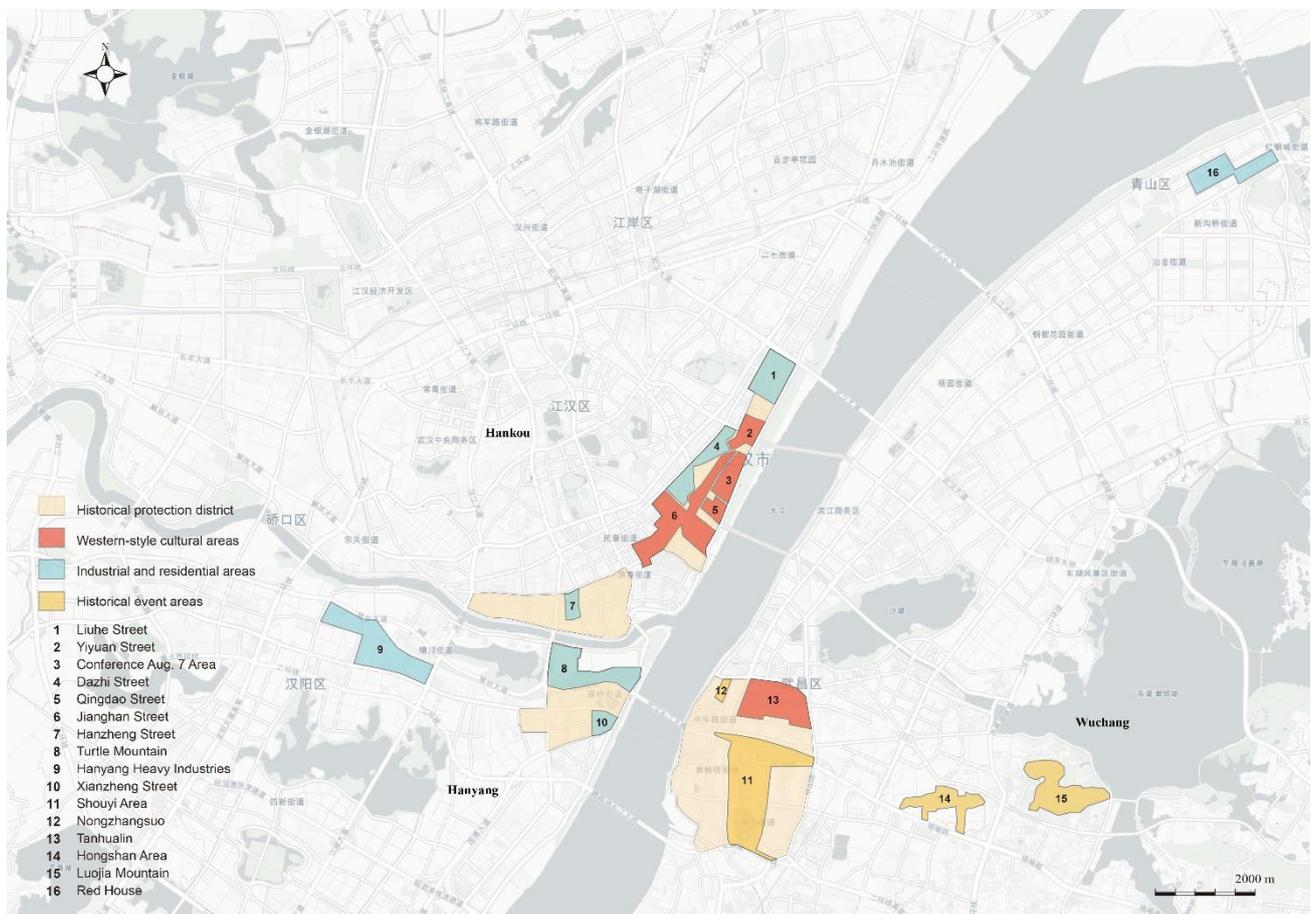


Figure 4. Different Historical and Protected Neighborhoods in Wuhan

Due to the distinct histories of Wuhan's historical districts, these areas possess unique morphological features. For instance, the Wuchang area is dominated by traditional Chinese-style architecture, Hanyang was the national industrial center around the turn of the 20th century, hosting numerous industrial buildings, while Hankou was a concession area occupied by Western countries at the end of the 19th century, characterized entirely by Western-style architecture.

Different historical backgrounds and district morphologies mean that official protection priorities vary for different districts. "The focus in the Wuchang historical district is on preserving the revolutionary cultural memories, as it was the site of many historical events, such as the 1912 Xinhai Revolution; the protection focus in the Hankou historical district is on preserving the Western architectural landscapes of the former concession area, with 4 Western architectural protection zones located in Hankou's former concession streets; the focus in

Hanyang is on preserving the old city's industrial buildings, with 3 industrial building protection zones located in the old Hanyang district." (Cf. Interview 5) Under the management and conception of official agencies, these zones are narrated differently and imbued with distinct collective memories, becoming educational cultural and historical sites.



Figure 5. Protection Building Nameplate for Different Protection Systems and Levels of Protection

Under this policy framework, government departments collaborate, and protected buildings are marked with plaques indicating their protection level and the main responsible government department, as shown in Figure 5. Although this system has improved the efficiency of historical building protection, the protection process still relies on governmental measures and top-down supervision and publicity. Consequently, public participation remains very low, and there is a general lack of awareness among residents about the value of preserving historical buildings. "Often, local residents don't understand why we need to protect these old buildings. For them, these are just old houses with poor conditions. They would prefer that the government demolish these structures to make way for modern, livable residential buildings. Therefore, we need to communicate with them and explain the necessity of preserving these buildings." (Cf. Interview 1)

Reuse of Historic Buildings with the Participation of Private Stakeholders

During the 14th Five-Year Plan, the State Council of China proposed to enhance the protection and revitalization of historical districts and buildings (X. Chen, Shi, & Pan, 2024). In 2022, the Wuhan City Planning Bureau released a long-term plan concerning the urban historical districts. In this plan, the official stance on historical buildings shifted from mere preservation to "revitalization and reuse." Within the protection framework, the reuse of historical buildings and districts to create cultural tourism destinations was proposed. A key focus for officials became how to repurpose and enhance the cultural and economic value of these historical buildings and tangible heritages.

The original 16 historical protection areas in Wuhan's old center were mostly connected by 10 tourist routes and were officially reorganized into 23 different themed tourism districts. The official narrative permeated the entire tourism theme and directly influenced the development strategies for all historical districts (Table 3). For instance, of the 10 tourist routes, 9 relate to the 19th and 20th century history of Wuhan, such as the Red Memory and the Great Tea Route. The pasts of these areas were excavated and represented from an official perspective, beautified and packaged as themed tourism areas for the public.

Table 3. The Connection Between Historic Protection Areas and Themed Tourist Areas

Historic protected area	Theme tour	Themed tourist zone
Liuhe Street Area	Centennial History Tour	Changchun folklore zone
Yiyuan Street Area		Sanyang design zone
Jiangnan Street Area		Jiangnan commercial zone
Dazhi Street Area	Great Tea Route Tour	Nostalgic commercial zone
Conference August 7 Area		Centennial Railway Station zone
Qingdao Street Area		Traces of the tea room zone
		British style area
Hanzheng Street Area	Traditional Chinese Commercial Tour	Lifen residential zone
		Hualou Lifen zone
		Sanmin Road old Brand zone
		Traditional Chinese Medicine zone
Turtle Mountain Area	Industrial Art Tour	Hanzheng Street Salt zone
Hanyang Heavy Industries Area		Cultural and Creative zone
Xianzheng Street Area	Hanyang Ancient City Tour	Qintai Art zone
Shouyi Area	Panoramic View of the Rivers Tour	Hanyang Steel Factory Historical zone
	Poetic Tour	Hanyang Ancient Cityscape zone
	Xinhai Revolution Tour	Ancient City Life zone
Tanhualin Area	Wuchang Ancient City Tour	Minzhu Road Commercial zone
		Revolutionary Memorial zone
		Tanhualin Historical zone
Nongzhangsuo Area	Red Memory Tour	Wusheng Gate Park zone
		Jingxin Academy zone
		Red Education zone

The definition of different themed areas also directly impacted the commercial and community development within the zones. Commercial models related to the theme were attracted to development within the areas, while businesses less connected to the theme were excluded. During the development of the areas, official agencies, especially the WMBCT and the WMBHM, played significant roles. Given the large number of historical buildings and tangible heritage in these areas, any modification to the interior spaces of these buildings, commercialization, and reuse investments and actions required administrative applications to these two departments. *"Public plumbing and electrical wiring, as well as safety facilities in historical buildings often do not meet modern standards. Since individual commercial establishments usually involve only a small portion of the interior space, not all types of businesses are suitable for operating within historical buildings. For instance, traditional restaurants requiring open flames are often not suitable due to the lack of communal flues."* (Cf. Interview 3)

The choice of style for commercial establishments is also crucial. *"For all businesses or individuals applying to open commercial establishments in historical buildings, we require them to submit details about the type of business, as well as floor plans and renderings. This helps us determine whether these entities fit the overall style of the themed area while ensuring their renovations do not impact the protection of the historical buildings themselves."* (Cf. Interview 2) The intervention and screening process by multiple public institutions have led to commercial clustering within the themed areas, with a large number of similar businesses congregating in the districts. For example, in the tea-related themed area in Hankou, there are numerous tea shops and tea rooms. In the culture and art themed area in Hanyang, many art and creative studios have opened.

It is important to note that in this process, the municipal government did not opt for full intervention in the development of the districts, such as expropriating houses and relocating residents. In fact, due to the complex ownership structure of properties in these historic districts, which include private landlords, private companies, and state-owned enterprises, administrative expropriation of properties for development is not the best option. On the contrary, after the release of tourism plans, many merchants recognized potential investment opportunities, thus they directly rented apartments from existing landlords and carried out renovations for commercial purposes. The majority of residents still live in these historic districts.



Figure 6. Engagement of Merchants and Residents in the Restoration and Promotion of Historic Buildings

Private participants are also involved in the protection of historical buildings during this process, adopting a proactive attitude (Tan & Ke, 2024). Although the responsibility for maintaining historical buildings generally falls on the users, for commercial establishments, there is an additional motive. Attractive building facades and spaces often mean more visitors willing to visit and consume, which is one way for businesses to increase potential customers and enhance economic benefits. The related profit incentives motivate these businesses, whether large chains or small private shops, to undertake actions and bear the costs of preserving and beautifying historical buildings, as shown in Figure 6. For instance, in the Hankou Yiyuan Street and Jiangnan Road historical area, as well as the Tanhualin area in Wuchang, we can observe merchants spontaneously decorating and maintaining historical buildings to attract tourists for photography and consumption.

Meanwhile, local community residents have also begun to participate in the preservation of historical buildings. The improvement and beautification of their living environment, along with the arrival of tourists, have gradually made them aware of the social and economic value of historical buildings. During visits, it is common to see elderly residents living in historic districts directing tourists and narrating the history of the buildings and stories that took place there. In addition, official agencies regularly organize various themed markets and public lectures, such as those focused on the history of local neighborhoods. These initiatives aim to enhance public and local residents' awareness of heritage and its significance. These kinds of participation allow more private participants to get involved in the preservation of historical buildings from the bottom up.

In addition to the official selection process for commercial establishments, through street municipal engineering, the municipal government also directly participates in the thematic tourism of areas. For instance, in the Great Tea Route themed zones, the pedestrian paving blocks incorporate tea leaf patterns as decorations; similarly, in the century-old tourism zones, various historical building plaques and annotations are embedded in the streets to showcase the district's historical stories, and in the Old City Times themed area, a section of the antique city wall is built to spatially separate the historical building district from modern architectural areas, as shown in Figure 7.

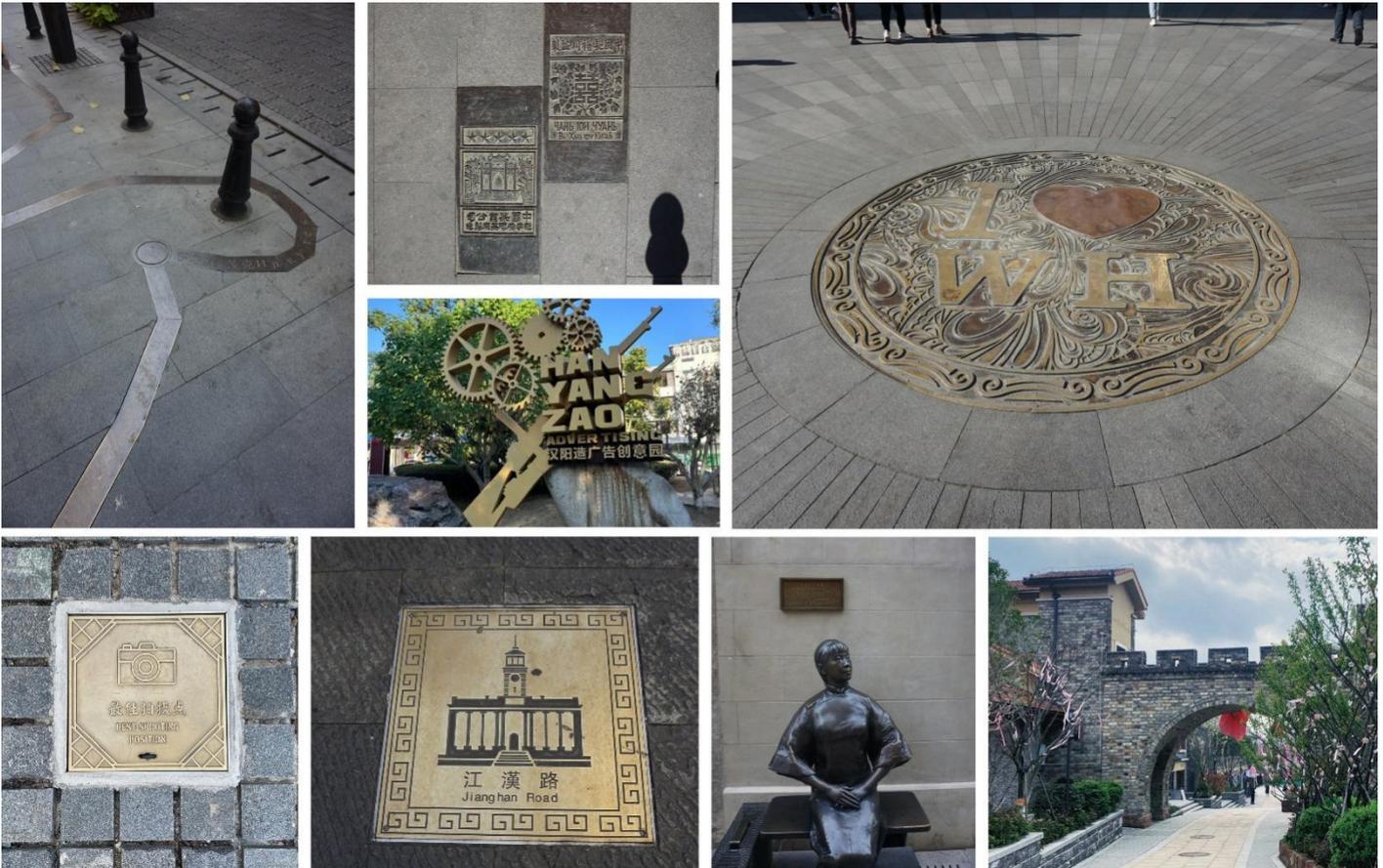


Figure 7. Decorative Paving and Sculptures in Different Neighborhoods

Through these top-down interventions from official entities, private participants also join the process of preserving historical buildings. In this context, historical buildings and districts become sites and carriers of official narratives and historical education, while economic interests drive merchants to protect and repurpose historical buildings. Tourists are drawn to the different styles of historical buildings and themed tourism spaces, thus providing greater incentives for merchants. Improvements in the environment have also motivated residents to interact with tourists, explaining these historical buildings from the perspective of local memory. These varied participants and motivations lead to a common goal: to protect and develop these historical buildings and tangible heritage, extending their lifespans and serving as carriers of collective memory.

DISCUSSION

The preservation of historical buildings faces multiple challenges in practice. The top-down production of heritage by official agencies often disconnects these sites from the public's collective memory and everyday life. This trend is particularly evident in the case of Wuhan's historical building preservation. For instance, while the proactive involvement of local government and the enactment of the "Regulations on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Style Districts and Outstanding Historical Buildings" have provided a certain level of legal protection, challenges such as low public participation, limited funding, and weak policy enforcement persist during implementation.

By integrating the preservation of tangible heritage with cultural tourism, private investors and consumers have contributed to the effective protection and reuse of certain historical buildings and districts. Additionally, bottom-up efforts by local residents to maintain historical buildings have allowed these neighborhoods to retain their collective memory and avoid excessive commercialization. However, this requires policymakers to continually focus on and optimize the legal framework to ensure that while promoting economic and social sustainable development, a balance is maintained between the protection and reuse of material heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an empirical foundation for understanding the legal framework of cultural heritage protection in non-coastal, underdeveloped cities in China by conducting an in-depth analysis of the laws and policies related to cultural heritage protection in Wuhan, a second-tier city. The research reveals the main challenges encountered in the protection of historical buildings under a government-led model, such as low public participation, offering crucial insights for policymakers seeking to improve conservation measures. This study explores how the development of the tourism industry can support the preservation of historical buildings, while government interventions ensure that these commercial activities do not harm the protection of tangible heritage, providing a case study for balancing heritage and economic development.

In Wuhan, although local laws and regulations specify stringent and systematic heritage protection measures, their top-down nature results in low local resident involvement, leading to a lack of support during the protection process. The official selective narrative of heritage disconnects these tangible heritages from public collective memory and daily life. The absence of effective public education and participation mechanisms often portrays cultural heritage protection as a task exclusive to government departments rather than a communal responsibility.

Tourism development in districts has somewhat alleviated this conflict. Official institutions have redefined districts by introducing new functions and images, transforming them into new tourist and cultural products and destinations, thus attracting investment and tourists. New groups and communities, including merchants, have taken on the task of protecting historical buildings. Due to the economic ties between these private stakeholders and the historical buildings, they often take the initiative to maintain and beautify these structures, making them more attractive to visitors. The improvement of the district's material conditions and the addition of new business forms also enhance the local community and residents' awareness of tangible heritage, thereby increasing public participation.

However, at the same time, due to top-down planning by official agencies and deliberate interventions by the municipal government during the development process of these districts, different historical districts have been transformed into various themed spaces. Today, these districts, which were once traditionally residential, have been redeveloped into multifunctional mixed-theme spaces under an official narrative framework, catering to the needs of tourists.

This study also acknowledges its limitations in perspective, primarily analyzing Wuhan's cultural heritage protection from a legal and policy angle at the city level. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with decision-making figures such as local officials. However, this perspective might overlook the specifics of each case, lacking direct communication with private participants, such as local residents and merchants in historical districts.

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