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# The dynamic identity of Chinese urban heritage space- Laomendong as a case study

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**ABSTRACT:** China provides a unique urban context to explore identity within the globalization. This paper examines the role of heritage conservation in making the contemporary city among heritage, commerce and tourism. Through a case study of Laomendong, a conservation-led transformation project in the inner-city of Nanjing, I analyze how heritage elements of the built environment are selectively and inserted into the new urban space. Heritage space materializes the memory in the city and has been transformed into a modern space for commerce and tourism by global and local actors. Finally, this study concludes that place identity can be interpreted as an interrelationship among physical environment, experience, and people, which needed to consider the different groups of users.

**KEYWORDS:** dynamic identity; different groups; urban heritage space.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Urban historical area plays an important role in making urban identity and memory. In general, this type of urban area can create place identity for its surrounding urban context. Scholars argued that heritage could be seen as soft value that provides special identity, while improving the urban attraction (Scheffler, Kulikauskas, [2009](#)). A large number of researchers discussed the heritage as main force for economic and social development. Tweed and Southerland examined the role of heritage in urban daily life, they proposed the role of heritage in the identity and sense of belonging of contemporary urban residents (Tweed& Southerland,[2007](#))

Although the urban physical heritage is important, other soft values of heritage should be paid attention since they form the essence of place identity. As UN Habitat emphasized the heritage in contemporary city: Since heritage plays an important role in shaping identity, proper planning is needed to protect and promote heritage in cities. In contemporary urban China, many cities have become homogenized through the process of rapid urbanization, especially in urban historical area. Previous studies on Chinese urban transformation have documented social, economic and political as the driving forces transforming urban China into a global city (Xu,[2004](#); He&Wu,[2005](#); Ren,[2008](#)). However, few studies focus on how the newly created historical area forms the urban identity. In order to explore the role of identity in urban historical area, this study selects the Laomendong historical area in Nanjing as a case study area, three aspects of heritage, commerce and tourism will be explored.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative method that was conducted by observing the historical area among heritage, tourism and commerce. An analytical framework is constructed for these three points (Figure 1). Heritage refers to the built environment that is restored with traditional building types, which has historical memory. Commerce is the new function of the new space, almost newly constructed buildings were rented to shopkeepers. The management office uses the shopping mall

model to control the shop types, which mainly focus on specialty stores, cafe shops and local food. Laomendong is a national 5A scenic area, such officially certified scenic spots have great appeal to visitors.

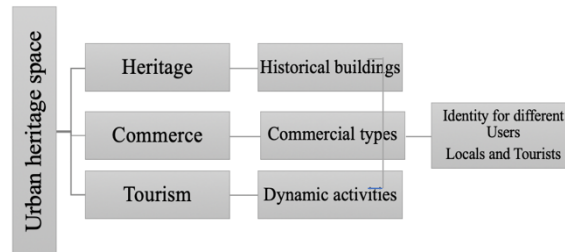


Figure 1. The Analytical framework

This article also structured interviews with local residents and tourists. Local residents refer to people who once lived in this area, and now they have moved to other urban areas. Tourists are the tourist group I met when I visited Laomendong. Most of them came from other cities, this area a new experience for them. Finally, I argue that the identity is not only a fix concept but also can be interpreted as a dynamic relationship, which depends on the perception of urban environment and life by different groups.

### 3 CASE STUDY

Nanjing is a famous historical and cultural city, which can date back to the state of Chu (571 BC). The long urban history makes the city have a lot of urban heritage, such as the residential buildings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and architecture with the western elements of the Republic of China. The historical preservation has always been a thorny issue in Nanjing because the city has experienced many wars and various heritage buildings are scattered. In order to preserve the historical culture in Nanjing, the government listed 9 historical culture areas and 22 history feature areas in the urban conservation planning in 2010. Most of them are located in Laochengnan (the old south of the city). Laomendong is one of them.

Nanjing was the capital of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the Republic of China (1912-1949) in urban history. On the whole city scale, the unique traditional character of Nanjing is mainly inherited from the two capital periods, which is represented in the built environment in Laochengnan. After the war, Nanjing was a major city in China that was needed to be renewed. Due to the lack of relevant protection policies. Many historic buildings were demolished in the process of rapid development. Most of these old buildings were dilapidated buildings that could not meet local needs. The government reclaimed land by the way of demolition, and relocated the residents to other urban areas. Laomendong area is one of the main representative areas in Laochengnan (Figure 2).

Due to the 2014 Nanjing Youth Olympic Games, Laomendong, a historical area that has not been transformed before, entering a transformation period in 2010. The local government set up a management company to take charge of renewal and construction of Laomendong. As an important part of the Confucius Temple-Qinhuai River Scenic Belt, Laomendong has received widespread attention since the demolition. The local municipality wanted to make this area an urban brand project for globalizing Nanjing, it finally decided to restore this area with physical

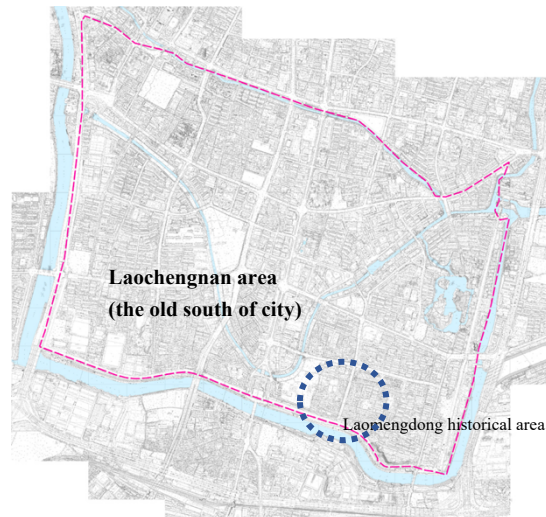


Figure 2. The location of Laomengdong historical area

features of Ming-Qing dynasties. In the Ming-Qing period, this area was a famous hybrid area with commercial and residential functions. The building type was courtyard style, which is also the main character of historical buildings in the entire Laochengnan area. The courtyard building is also called Siheyuan, which is one of the traditional Chinese house types. Usually, a courtyard is understood as a unit that is connected to the entrance door and serves as a public space for one family. The courtyard is surrounded by buildings that have functions, such as residence and reception. According to geographical conditions, multiple courtyard unit is combined and arranged to form an entire street.

Due to the rainy season in the Jiangnan area, compared to the spacious courtyards in the north, the courtyard houses in the Jiangnan area have formed a narrow patio. The basic unit is a horizontal rectangular patio as the core, surrounded by buildings on four sides or on the left and right back three sides, with less sunlight; the narrow and high patio also plays a role of pulling out the wind, which facilitates ventilation; the main room faces the patio and is fully open. In Laomengdong, due to the high population density, the scale of the courtyard of one unit is smaller than in North China. The courtyard houses are located on both sides of the street, which forms a narrow lane. The units are facing outside streets have shops, selling goods or food for local residents. In history, some floating vendors sold various goods or food on the street by using carts, which shaped the form of traditional commercial street. These historical elements have been selected and restored into new space, forming new historical space (Table 1).

Table 1. The comparison between new project and before transformation

Analysis elements of Case area	Before transformation	New space (after transformation)
Physical (Heritage)	Courtyard building type (disrepair and poor quality)	Restore the courtyard building type, street and plot
Dynamic activities	Hybrid types (Residence is main activities, with local commercial shops and market)	Hybrid types, commerce and tourism (no residence)

The new construction space was transformed from a residential area to a commercial area. The useful historical elements are selectively rebuilt and inserted into the new space, which provides the basic element of new heritage area. The developer wants to use heritage space to improve economic benefits. Various shops were introduced into the new space, such as Starbucks, Chinese traditional brands and many general shops. The new heritage space is only served for tourists. The newly project was utilized to apply the 5A level of National scenic area. The official certification of the National scenic area contributes to increasing the competitiveness and attractiveness of Laomengdong.

In 2013, the Laomendong was opened to visitors after renovation. The new area is only walkable. The main streets of this area are Gutong Lane, Santiaoying street, Zhongying street and Xinmingfang street, etc. The main streets of this area were retained and the name of streets were adopted their original name. The government and developer wanted to keep some historical information for both tourists and original residents, which can let them to experience the history.

During the transformation process, the local residents moved to another urban area where is far away from their original home. When I interviewed with some natives, they all said: *“Laomendong is not like that. It used to be one of the most prosperous places in Nanjing. The lanes were very lively, and it was also the daily life space of every household. Neighbors communicated a lot and help each other. After school, the children played in the lane...”*

Table 2. Tendency elements of natives for case area

Age	Elements	Physical environment (%)	Experience (%)
25-30		56%	44%
30-40		52%	48%
40-50		43%	57%
More than 50		50%	50%

\* Statistics based on the questionnaire with natives (Physical environment includes heritage environment, experience includes life experience and experience for new space)

These natives were born and grew up in Laomendong. In their memory, the row houses, the lanes and the interaction between neighbors are the real Laomendong. It is the natives' emotional responses to the physical environment of their living experience, which produced their identity. In fact, these natives point out the non-historical nature of the new historical space.

A large number of tourists come to Laomendong every year, most of them come from other cities or countries. The tour guide introduces the history of Laomendong to them, they take photos, shopping and taste the local food inside. Many respondents of tourists told me: *“Although we do not live there, we are very interested in the historical architectural of Laomendong, which we cannot see in our own city. We can eat a lot of local traditional foods and buy some local souvenirs. It has been listed in the National scenic area with 5A levels, which makes it more interesting for us.”*

Table 3. Tendency elements of tourists for case area

Age	Elements	Physical environment (%)	Experience (%)
25-30		53%	47%
30-40		52%	48%
40-50		52%	48%
More than 50		43%	57%

\* Statistics based on the questionnaire with tourists (Physical environment includes heritage environment, experience includes life experience and experience for new space)

These reasons for their interest explained their purpose of traveling, however, they did not specifically mention the problems about the local reconstruction (Table 3). This reflects that they do not care about the reality of history and whether historical buildings are fake. Because they have no experience and memory of local, what they are interested in is that they can experience many new things through the new Laomendong as a national scenic area. The social structure was changed during the transformation process, the tourists replaced the native. More precisely, the living memory associated with the original space is broken, and visitors spontaneously form an interactive relationship with the built environment through commerce and tourism.

## 4 DISCUSSION

On the local resident's (Native) scale, Laomendong contains a large number of their urban memories. Although the built environment is dilapidated before transformation, the narrow lane, mixed-use courtyard and neighborhood construct a unique urban structure. The special neighborhood relationship is hard to duplicate in other urban spaces. For local residents, although the new space is not the Laomendong in their memory, they visit this area for collecting memory through geographical location, built environment, traditional food, etc. Relph proposed a place a place is a diverse phenomenon of experience and personal participation (Relph,1976). This brings us to think that local residents form their place identity through their living environment and mode, which has been destroyed by mass demolition. The unique feature is a type of materialized cultural and symbolic capital that was recognized by local residents as an identity.

Another scale is tourist's scale, the Laomendong's old story has gone by demolishing material structure and replacing residents. The tourists can see the imagined history through newly constructed physical environment. Although the reconstruction space replicated the historical building type of Ming-Qing period, the building typology can represent the soul of the Laomendong and the traditional local life way. Tourists can experience the scenic and life through the built environment, they can buy and eat many local foods that they never experienced in their hometown. That is, they establish their identity through physical environment and their experience.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Place identity is one of the essential goals for the future built environment. At the urban level, the built environment should encourage people to feel some part of the environment belongs to them, whether they own it or not (Oktay,2002). Sociologist Zukin proposed that the character of the city breeds a constant dialogue between the old and the new, creating and reproducing the authenticity of the place in the process (Zukin,2010,1995). In order to make space for the construction of Nanjing as an international city, many valuable historical buildings were demolished in the Laochengnan-the most historically distinctive part of the city. Despite the reconstruction of historical areas, the dialogue between the historically valuable new and the old was destroyed, creating different identity in the contemporary city. This dynamic identity is formed by different groups with different experience.

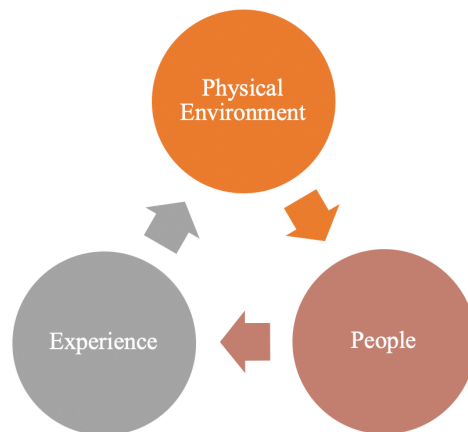


Figure 6. The dynamic relationship of the identity

Users in the built environment are always changing, so this study proposes that identity is a dynamic relationship rather than a fix concept. In this study, I argue that identity of new heritage space in urban China is a relationship among the built environment, people and experience. It depends on the emotion and response of different groups, which play an essential role in urban

transformation. In the next research, it is necessary to consider the place identity of other types of urban areas after urban transformation. At the same time, the identity crisis needed to get attention in the adjustment of future urban strategies.

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