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Creative placemaking at heritage sites between material improvements and selective memory: the case of Wudadao in Tianjin

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Abstract

Wudadao, the former British concession area of Tianjin, has undergone significant regeneration over the past decade, becoming a key urban tourism destination. This regeneration, driven by a successful creative placemaking strategy, effectively protected urban heritage, reviving the glory of the 1920s foreign architecture. However, in this paper we argue that these achievements have come at a cost to the existing local community. Drawing on interviews with local authorities and civil society, historical analysis, and field observations, this paper aims to reveal the material and symbolic impact of urban regeneration on Wudadao inhabitants and their stories. The findings show that, on the one hand, local residents have been only partially relocated, and contrary to trends in other Chinese cities, those who remained have experienced some improvements in their daily lives. On the other hand, a process of selective memory has taken place, largely erasing the more complex social history of Wudadao. This approach, which still prioritises material achievements in urban transformation processes and heritage commodification, is currently questioned at the local level, although it has not yet changed the status quo of current practices.

Keywords Tianjin, Creative Placemaking, Urban Heritage Conservation, Community, Selective Memory

1 Introduction

After the Second Opium War ended in 1860, Tianjin was designated a treaty port. Like many other treaty port cities in China, the architecture and urban form of its concession areas were deeply influenced by Western culture (Zhang 2018). With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, these areas gradually decayed, losing their original commercial and financial functions while accommodating regular waves of newcomers and migrants. After the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, the British concession area of Wudadao was designated a relocation area for those affected. Many newcomers were later employed in the booming industrial activities of the port of Tianjin, particularly in

sectors such as textiles and flour production, transforming the area into a crowded working-class neighbourhood (Chauffert-Yvart et al. 2020; Hershatte 1993).

Today, this area partially retains its original population (Xiang et al. 2024; Zhu 2013, 350), although it has undergone profound social and economic transformations. In particular, Wudadao has been designated by the local government as an important site for tourism development and is increasingly utilised in city branding strategies (Lu et al. 2019). Creative placemaking strategies have been implemented to promote tourism and the creative industry while also nurturing artistic activities (Bureau and of Urban Planning and Natural Resources 2013).

Despite the controversial history of foreign presence, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the concession period is regarded as a unique legacy for today's city. This process of heritagisation of the colonial past, however, is not immune to criticism, as it often overlooks the more recent history of this part of the city. In the

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selective remembrance of the glories of a lost time, the local community and its sociocultural legacy risk being forgotten. Moreover, this criticism is reinforced by a concern for the real beneficiaries of this strategy, given the changing residential structure of Wudadao as a result of gentrification.

Few studies have examined the relationship between the local community and the material and symbolic impacts of creative placemaking in Wudadao. This paper addresses this gap by investigating the inclusivity of the process, its consideration of the community's needs and history, and its role in fostering social sustainability. Through interviews with local authorities, residents, academic scholars and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), this study explores the impact of creative placemaking on the local community. The findings reveal that, despite the evident shortcomings of overlooking a comprehensive city history and its intangible value in current policy-making, the community has achieved certain economic benefits and improvements in their quality of life. However, these results prompt a critical discussion on whether the traditional pragmatic approach of Chinese municipalities, focused on material well-being, remains suitable for today's rapidly evolving Chinese society (Cioabata 2022).

2 Wudadao: the story of a British concession

Tianjin, one of the four directly administered municipalities in China, is a megacity with a population of more than 13.8 million (Statistics Bureau of Tianjin Municipality 2021). Strategically located near the Bohai Sea, the port of Tianjin has long been a hub of international trade, fostering a thriving transportation industry. This, in turn, drove the development of salt transport, commerce, and finance. In the early Qing Dynasty, Tianjin Port began engaging in economic and trade exchanges with overseas markets, bringing an influx of Western culture, finance, and commerce into the city (Zhu 2013). After the Second Opium War in 1860, Tianjin became a treaty port and opened to foreign businesses. Between 1860 and 1902, Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Germany, Russia, Italy, Belgium and Austria-Hungary successively established concessions on both sides of the Hai River in Tianjin to facilitate shipping and trade. The concessions were legally designated residential areas, administered and governed by foreign powers and not subject to the administration of the local government (Fei 1991). Entrepreneurs, politicians and diplomatic personnel introduced the culture of these countries, such as architecture, art, food and languages, making Tianjin a prosperous and culturally diverse economic centre (Zhang 2018). After one hundred years, that memory has proven successful in the area's rebranding strategy.

Tianjin is one of the most prominent industrial cities in China's modern history, with its industrial development closely tied to the city's urban growth (Tianjin Industrial and Information Technology Bureau 2021; Zhang et al. 2023). Between 1912 and 1937, the city experienced rapid urbanisation and industrial expansion, led by the textile and flour industries. Other sectors, such as machinery manufacturing, chemical engineering, steel, and electrical power, also experienced significant growth. By 1933, Tianjin had become the leading industrial city in northern China, ranking among the top twelve major cities nationwide in metrics such as the number of factories, total capital, workforce, and net production value. Despite the slowdown in industrial development caused by the impacts of war from 1937 to 1949, Tianjin retained its position as the second-largest industrial hub in the country at the dawn of the new PRC (Tianjin Industrial and Information Technology Bureau 2021). Moreover, the achievements of Tianjin's industrial development are closely tied to Wudadao. As Tianjin's first concession area, Wudadao played a pivotal role in introducing technological advancements from the Western Industrial Revolution, including railways, telegraphs, telephones, modern education, postal services, and judicial systems (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2024). Consequently, the history of Wudadao is inseparable from Tianjin's industrial history.

Wudadao, translated as 'Five Avenues' in English, refers to an area bounded by five main roads: Machang Avenue, Munan Avenue, Dali Avenue, Chongqing Avenue, and Chengdu Avenue. Covering 140 hectares, this district is home to more than 1,600 buildings (Zhang and Han 2014). The area was built in the 1920 s and 1930 s and was designed by British architect and engineer Henry McClure Anderson (1876–1842). Guided by the prevailing 'Garden City' concept in Western countries at the time, the Wudadao area was designed as a high-end residential area featuring houses with gardens and a carefully planned road network, land subdivision, and building layout (Lu et al. 2019; Gravari-Barbas et al. 2021). During the Republican era, Wudadao was home to numerous prominent figures, including politicians, industrialists, athletes, artists, and even former U.S. President Herbert Hoover. By 1945, the area housed approximately 15,000 residents, making it the largest affluent residential district in Tianjin at the time (Zhu 2013).

Since the establishment of the PRC, three significant historical events have drastically altered the residential structure of the Wudadao area, transforming it from an elite residential district into a mixed community of migrants and working-class residents. The first major change occurred in 1949 with the founding of the PRC. Most of Wudadao's original elite residents moved out, and the buildings were repurposed as government offices

and housing for officials (Zhu 2013). Soviet-style residential apartment designs, introduced with Soviet assistance, began to appear in Tianjin, including Wudadao (Zhang and Han 2014). At the same time, large numbers of working-class residents were relocated to the area. Single-family buildings were subdivided into multifamily dwellings, with additional kitchens, bathrooms, entryways, and staircases constructed to accommodate more households (Zhang and Han 2014). The second wave of transformation occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Original middle-class residents were forced to leave, while military personnel and workers moved in. By this time, nearly all the original residents from the 1940s had been replaced, and the area's demographic had shifted from elite to predominantly working class (Zhu 2013). The third major change followed the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, which damaged 67% of Tianjin's residential buildings (Guo 1995, 14). Owing to Wudadao's low building density and spacious courtyards, it had become an ideal relocation site with temporary tent settlements (*linjian*). By 1978, these temporary settlements were upgraded to two- or three-story buildings. Single-family homes were also further subdivided. By this time, the population had surged to 45,000, three times the original 15,000 residents of the 1940s (Zhu 2013).

Since the 1990s, under the guidance of cultural heritage conservation policy and tourism/city branding strategies, the rebuilding of the Wudadao area has become a priority for the local government. Regeneration strategies have included the demolition of illegal settlements from the earthquake period; architectural renovation; and water, gas, heating, and public and green space upgrades (Zhu 2013). Despite the negative connotation associated with Western domination, the Tianjin government has changed its perspective about the contemporary significance of this history and regarded its tangible heritage as both an economic and symbolic asset (Zhang 2018). Since the early 2000s, Tianjin has accelerated its tourism development efforts. To establish the city as a key tourist destination, new branding slogans such as 'Pearl of Bohai, charm of Tianjin' (*Bohai mingzhu, meili Tianjin*) and 'Experience China's modern history of China through Tianjin' have been officially promoted (Lu et al. 2019). The local government has prioritised investments and renovations in relatively well-conserved former Italian and British Concession areas (Wudadao), aiming to increase Tianjin's international appeal and cultural diversity through its foreign style architecture (Zhang 2018).

Moreover, since the release of the 'Tianjin Cultural Industry Revitalisation Plan' in 2006, cultural activities in the city have experienced a revival. With this trend, Wudadao was designated as an experimental site for creative placemaking and tourism projects. In 2013,

the *Conservation Planning of Wudadao Historic and Cultural District* was issued by the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Urban Planning and Natural Resources. The plan emphasised preserving Wudadao's elegant and comfortable environment. It encouraged cafes and art and creative activities, such as museums and creative handicraft studios, while prohibiting noisy pubs, smoky fast-food outlets and barbecue restaurants. Zhang and Han (2014) report that 52.7% of the historic buildings in the Wudadao area have been adaptively reused, serving functions such as private family-run restaurants (*Sifangcai*) and creative studios. The original morphological design of the 'Garden City' provided a foundation for Wudadao to adopt a creative placemaking strategy. Some former buildings have been transformed into creative and artistic spaces, while garden areas offer outdoor spaces for customers and visitors.

For example, the Minyuan Terrace, located at 29–39 Changde Road, comprises two interconnected English-style row houses divided into 17 units, each with its own courtyard yet interconnected with the other courtyards (Zhang and Han 2014). The urban morphology of the Minyuan Terrace (outlined in red in Fig. 1) is classified as a lilong-style courtyard type (Zhu 2013). Today, Minyuan Terrace is one of the main creative hubs in Wudadao, hosting cafés, bars, guesthouses, art galleries, and various cultural facilities throughout the block.

While more than half of Wudadao has been transformed into a tourism destination site for local, national, and international tourists and the land use of Wudadao has largely changed, some of its original residents have remained (Lu et al. 2019). Once a purely residential district has developed into a multifunctional zone with high-end commercial, residential and tourist functions. In recent years, this area has been regarded as an experimental place for creative-led strategies, resulting in overall improvements in the area but also increasing land value prices, thus leading to further pressure on the remaining community and gentrification processes. The following section critically examines the different stages of creative placemaking practices in China, addressing the theories of creative placemaking, global practices, and local implementation in China.

2.1 Global Experience: history and current criticism

Since its origin, the concept of 'placemaking' has been employed as both a conceptual and an operational framework for strategies aimed at improving the quality of city neighbourhoods (Karacor 2014; Wyckoff 2014). Instead, creative placemaking emerged in the early 2010s in the United States as a state cultural policy to boost the local economy and improve the attractiveness of places by supporting local creative and innovation networks



Fig. 1 The morphological design of the Minyuan Terrace and adaptive reuse (Source: adopted from Zhu 2013, 251; photos by the author)

(Markusen and Gadwa 2010; Moss 2012; National Endowment for the Arts 2021). Rooted in the discourse of creative cities (Florida 2002; Landry 2003), creative placemaking has spread worldwide, raising, in some cases, criticism as a merely pro-profit management strategy for cultural heritage sites (Taylor and Verdini 2022). On the other hand, some famous experiences, such as those of Manchester and Bilbao, have proven successful due to their investments in art, museums and creativity and the real long-term return for the city (Smith 2006). Following the conceptual framework developed by Ramli and Ujang (2020a), the benefits and value of creative placemaking are associated with an increase in economic development and the provision of job opportunities in the creative sector (Markusen and Gadwa 2010); the strengthening of community connections, resulting in investments in the development goals of communities (Vazquez 2012); and, in inclusive community engagement processes (Ramli and Ujang 2020b), the achievement of sustainable and higher quality of life in communities by supporting spaces for art and creativity and avoiding the gentrification and displacement of people (Markusen and Gadwa 2010).

Concerning the criticism of creative placemaking, the economic benefits might bear social costs with the potential for exclusion and gentrification when these creative interventions are usually in line with the middle

class's interests, neglecting the needs of lower-income residents (Bedoya 2013; Grenfell 2014; Zitcer 2020). Rising rents and tourist-driven real estate pressure might lead to further displacement of local residents (Arkara-prasertkul 2019; Zukin 1987; Zhu and Martínez 2021), the generation of exploitative economic strategies, and social cleansing (Fennel and Tucker 2015; Pritchard 2018; Seraphin et al. 2018). Artists are therefore instrumental in accelerating vicious cycles of urban transformation (Pritchard 2017), which tend to ignore the needs of local residents (Sorkin 1992) and contribute to the overall decline in the social life of historic areas (Settis 2016).

2.2 Creative placemaking in historical areas in China: challenges and opportunities

In China, some historic areas have also adopted creative strategies in the conservation process. The outcome has sparked debate, calling into question the overall social sustainability of the process, particularly concerning issues such as gentrification, forceful displacement of local residents, or unfair compensation in the relocation process. The most typical case is the Xintiandi urban renewal project in Shanghai in 1996, which is a top-down, supposedly culture-led urban renewal project led by a government-business coalition (He and Wu 2005). In the renovation process, an old Lilong residential area was de facto transformed into a high-end commercial

area and achieved significant economic growth; however, the beneficiaries were only the developers and the government, while the residents were relocated (He and Wu 2005). This development model is considered unsustainable because of its exploitative economic strategy and the displacement of residents. Unlike the 'Xintiandi Model', the 'Tianzifang Model' in Shanghai is regarded as a more socially sustainable approach. It has been a bottom-up creative placemaking initiative led by the local community and artists since 2005 (Yung et al. 2014). Although the process also experienced gentrification, commercialisation, and disruptions to the community caused by over-tourism, which eventually led to the relocation of some residents, the residents benefited economically from this process (Du 2022; Yung et al. 2014). The 'Shanghai Model' (Ren 2008), represented by the Xintiandi project, has influenced inner-city regeneration in many Chinese cities in recent years (Demgenski 2024). For example, the Italian-style town in Tianjin has undergone large-scale urban revitalisation over the past two decades (Wang and Marinelli 2024), and the original residential area was transformed into a tourism and commercial area, while all residents were relocated. There are critical views indicating that the heritage sites here have been used as purely marketing tools for commercial benefits, whereas the heritage values of Tianjin's modern regional cultural characteristics have been neglected, resulting in the loss of local identity (Wang and Marinelli 2024).

Notably, between the two extreme cases of the Xintiandi and Tianzifang models, a number of other examples have different outcomes, reflecting different forms of negotiation between the government and the community. For example, the 'Xintiandi' approach has been applied in the renewal project of Dabaodao in Qingdao's old town (Demgenski 2024), where the colonial-era residential 'liyuan' was transformed into a modern tourist and cultural consumption district for local officials to achieve various political and economic goals, while the interests of the original residents were harmed. However, policy-makers have made efforts to adopt a 'softer' and more 'humane' approach in the housing expropriation and compensation process (Demgenski 2024).

In other regeneration cases in China, residents have more explicitly benefited from the transformation. In Xi'an, the regeneration of the Muslim Quarter involves a different process, featuring consultations with Muslim groups through discussions and meetings. As a result, the government recognised that relocation would have threatened the livelihoods of the Muslim community and ultimately terminated the relocation plan. Consequently, the Muslim Quarter has become a tourist attraction in Xi'an while also serving as a primary economic source for local

Muslim residents (Zhu and Maags 2020). Similarly, in the old town of Lijiang, tourism has supported the livelihood of local ethnic communities, promoted their way of life, and revived their local intangible cultural heritage (Su 2019; Zhu and Maags 2020).

In recent years, community engagement has increased. For example, in renovation projects of Beijing's historic districts, residents have been involved with professionals, researchers, social organisations, and government departments in decision-making (Zhang 2017). Consultation mechanisms have been introduced, such as in the process of cultural heritage conservation on Kulangsu Island in Xiamen (Zhao et al. 2023). To balance development and local needs during the heritage-making process, local authorities have made efforts to listen to the voices of cultural heritage managers and local residents since the beginning of the management process and aimed to resolve issues in a timely manner.

Unlike the two mainstream development models of Xintiandi and Tianzifang, the cultural conservation and development model of Wudadao in Tianjin has adopted a microscale and more incremental regeneration approach (Zhang and Han 2014). The local government published protection plans and regulations for Wudadao to preserve the traditional built environment, restricting new construction and renovation projects to a building density not exceeding 38%, with the building height not exceeding 12 m. Under strict planning control, Wudadao has rarely experienced large-scale and intensive demolition for real estate development, and at the same time, some original residents still live in Wudadao in the initial phase of regeneration (Zhu 2013). More importantly, the government has subsequently explored a more inclusive and socially sustainable approach to the renovation process by encouraging the engagement of multiple stakeholders (Zhu and Han 2014). The following sections introduce the methodology and present the findings of this research to understand whether creative placemaking in Wudadao has effectively contributed to achieving social sustainability.

3 Methodology

To understand the impact of creative placemaking on the local community of Wudadao, interviews with local authorities and civil society were conducted alongside historical analysis based on secondary sources and field observations. The historical analysis has served the primary purpose of illustrating the working-class legacy in Wudadao, with the aim of understanding whether the current heritage narrative is coherent with its social history. Prior to the implementation of the interviews, an in-depth understanding of the local governance mechanism was needed. To this end, an analysis of the stakeholders

involved in creative placemaking in Wudadao, which is based on secondhand information from government official websites and social media, was conducted. The main stakeholders in the heritage-making process in Wudadao are shown in Fig. 2, which highlights the connections between different stakeholders and their implications for the governance system in the heritage-making process of Tianjin. At the city level, the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism, Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources, Tianjin Housing and Urban–Rural Construction Commission and Tianjin Historical Architecture Restoration and Development Company (THARD Company) are the four main departments in charge of heritage management in Tianjin. The Wudadao Area Administration Committee, the Tianjin Heping People's Government and the Resident's Committee (RCs) are the main organisations at the district level. In addition, NGOs, heritage experts, and creative communities also collaborate in the heritage-making process in Tianjin.

Based on the stakeholders' map, the next step of the research was to conduct data collection and field observations. Two fieldtrips were conducted between March 2022 and January 2024, and data were collected via semistructured interviews with local stakeholders in Wudadao: government officials, heritage experts, NGOs

and creative communities. Detailed information on the interviewees can be found in the [Appendix](#). The interviews were conducted both online and in person; each interview lasted 45–90 min, and the conversation was recorded with the consent of the interviewees. All the interviewees remained anonymous.

Guiding questions about the impact of creative placemaking are tailored to different types of interviewees. While government officials, heritage experts and NGO groups have been asked to comment on the pros and cons of the creative strategies in Wudadao, the creative communities have been asked about their initiatives of running art businesses in Wudadao and their relationships with the local community. The recordings have been translated and coded.

4 Findings

4.1 The benefits of creative placemaking in Wudadao

Through the process of interviewing key stakeholders, the creative placemaking of Wudadao has been praised for the following aspects: increasing economic revenues, strengthening community connections, increasing quality of life, and benefiting vulnerable communities. Challenges have also been highlighted, such as the negative impact of tourism on residents' everyday lives and creative communities, the potential for exclusion and

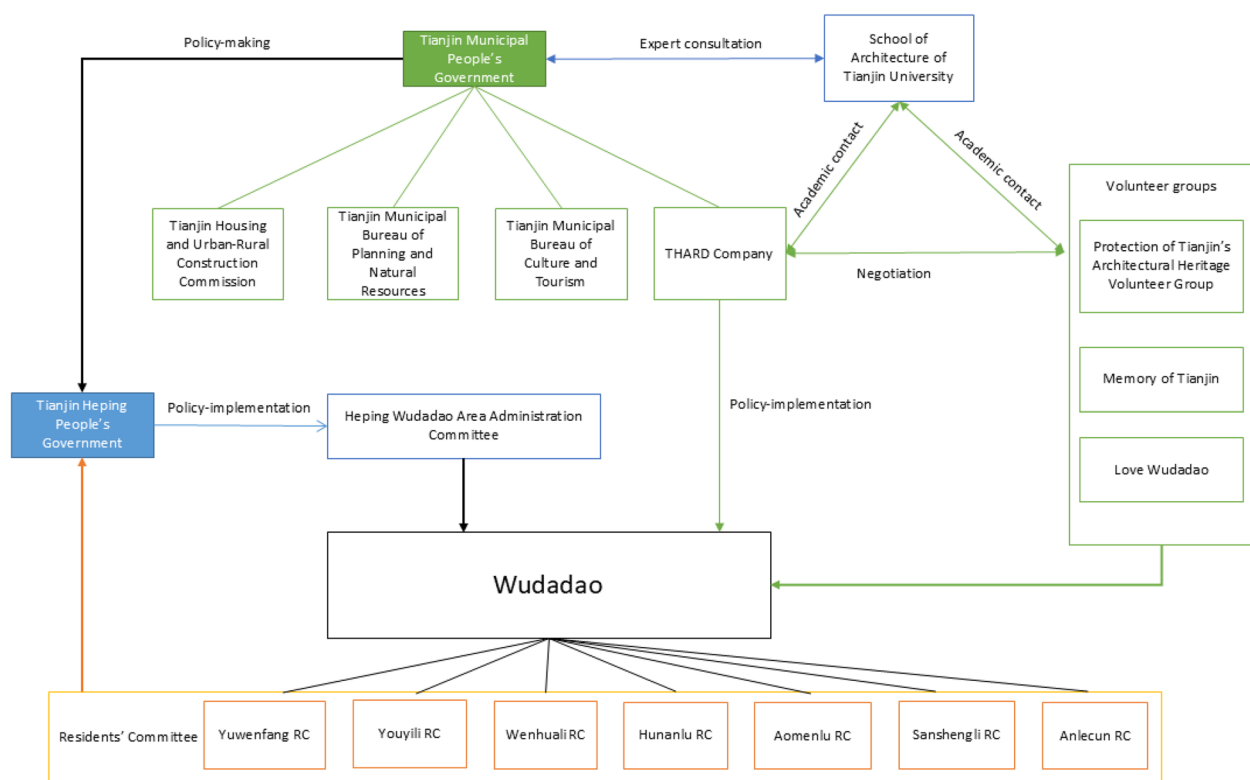


Fig. 2 Stakeholder map of Wudadao (Source: the author)

gentrification, and the selective memories of the heritage-making process.

4.2 Increasing economic revenues

Creative placemaking in Wudadao has brought economic benefits at both the city level and the local level. Most of the interviewees contend that, at the city level, creative placemaking in Wudadao helped attract tourists and visitors to the place, supporting the tourism industry in the city. At the same time, it attracted financial investments in this area. From the local residents' perspective, the development of tourism and creative placemaking in Wudadao provided them with job opportunities and the chance to increase their income. For example, some street-facing house residents were able to increase income by running small businesses in their houses, such as serving drinks and snacks to tourists. According to the manager of a local museum, *'As the popularity of local cultural tourism and the number of tourists increases, it brings a large number of employment opportunities for local people and disadvantaged groups'*.

4.3 Strengthening community connections and increasing quality of life

The development of tourism and creative placemaking has improved the built environment in Wudadao. The local government and planning departments have made efforts to improve the tourism infrastructure, such as the overall landscape design and public space for residents and tourists. In addition, some art projects, such as public art installations and street art, have helped increase the aesthetic value of Wudadao. In addition,

the development of creative placemaking in Wudadao attracted more reports from the media, which helped city branding in Tianjin.

From a qualitative point of view, creative placemaking in Wudadao provides residents with the chance to engage with art and creativity, which are mostly led by creative communities. The creative shops in Wudadao are generally of high quality, since these shops are not standardised, selling low-quality products as shops in another business area of Tianjin. Most of the art shops here have their own unique features and themes. For example, one interviewee runs a tea house that provides quiet space and high-quality tea for local people as a place for meeting; another interviewee introduces the theme of her store as *'The theme and features of my store are relatively subjective based on my personal aesthetic preference. I hold a degree in design, so I've tried to make sure the quality of the products in our store is higher among the creative market'*.

Creative placemaking also strengthens networking among residents via events, such as opera performances, art exhibitions and concerts that were held during the Begonia Flower Festival in April 2023 (Fig. 3) in Wudadao. According to a local government official, *'These activities provide residents with more opportunities to be exposed to and enjoy art. At the same time, it provides more networking opportunities for Wudadao residents, where they can make friends and share artistic interests and hobbies'*.

4.4 Benefits for vulnerable communities

Notably, creative placemaking in Wudadao has benefited vulnerable groups such as retired elderly people,



Fig. 3 Street view during the Begonia Flower Festival (Source: the author)

people with disabilities, and children. The development of tourism and creative placemaking has enabled a walking-friendly transport mode in Wudadao, while most other areas in the city are dominated by motor vehicles. In addition, the city planning department has renovated Minyuan Square to provide residents with a pleasant public place, (Fig. 4), which has become an essential daily activity place for residents, including elderly people and children. In addition, facilities such as canteens and colleges are available for elderly people. As a former resident and heritage expert observed, *‘Wudadao has provided a good living environment for elderly residents, most of them are satisfied with their lives’*.

In addition, the creative communities in Wudadao provided opportunities for residents, including vulnerable groups, to participate in art activities. For example, some art stores attract elderly people to visit. *‘Sometimes, they come for exhibitions, and sometimes they come to buy products, and sometimes they just come to visit and hope to have a chat with us. I think our store provides elderly people with a spiritual and artistic communication platform’*, as one shop owner mentioned. Another one, who is running a company for children’s artistic education but also regularly launches activities that can attract a wider audience to participate, mentioned that *‘For example, we organised a city history-themed walking tour this April as part of the Begonia Festival, more than 30 per cent of our attendees were elderly people’*.

4.5 The challenges of creative placemaking in Wudadao

4.5.1 Negative impacts on residents’ everyday lives and creative communities

The most direct impacts of creative placemaking on local residents are noise, heavy transport and environmental pollution, especially during large events. While mega-events bring many tourists and visitors to Wudadao, the garbage left by tourists pollutes the living environment of Wudadao. In addition, noise and traffic congestion affect residents’ quality of life and some creative communities. For example, the reason one shop owner chose Wudadao to run their bookstore was the quiet environment, which was an ideal place for reading in the city. However, the noise made by some businesses has forced him to consider relocating the bookstore.

4.5.2 The potential for exclusion and gentrification

In addition to the abovementioned side effects on residents, the creative placemaking of Wudadao has also caused deeper impacts, namely, the replacement of some original residents. Figures 5 and 6 show that in the past two decades of development in the Minyuan Terrace and Xiannong Courtyards (main creative placemaking sites), the original residential areas (in yellow) have gradually decreased and been used for commercial purposes (in red), such as art shops, cafes, and restaurants.

The process of fast social replacement is concerning as was highlighted by a historian: *‘The development of Creative placemaking, such as Xiannong Courtyard, has caused the relocation of original residents since the 2010s. I feel that the development of creative placemaking comes at the cost of reducing indigenous peoples, which*



Fig. 4 The daily life in Minyuan Square in Wudadao (Source: the author)

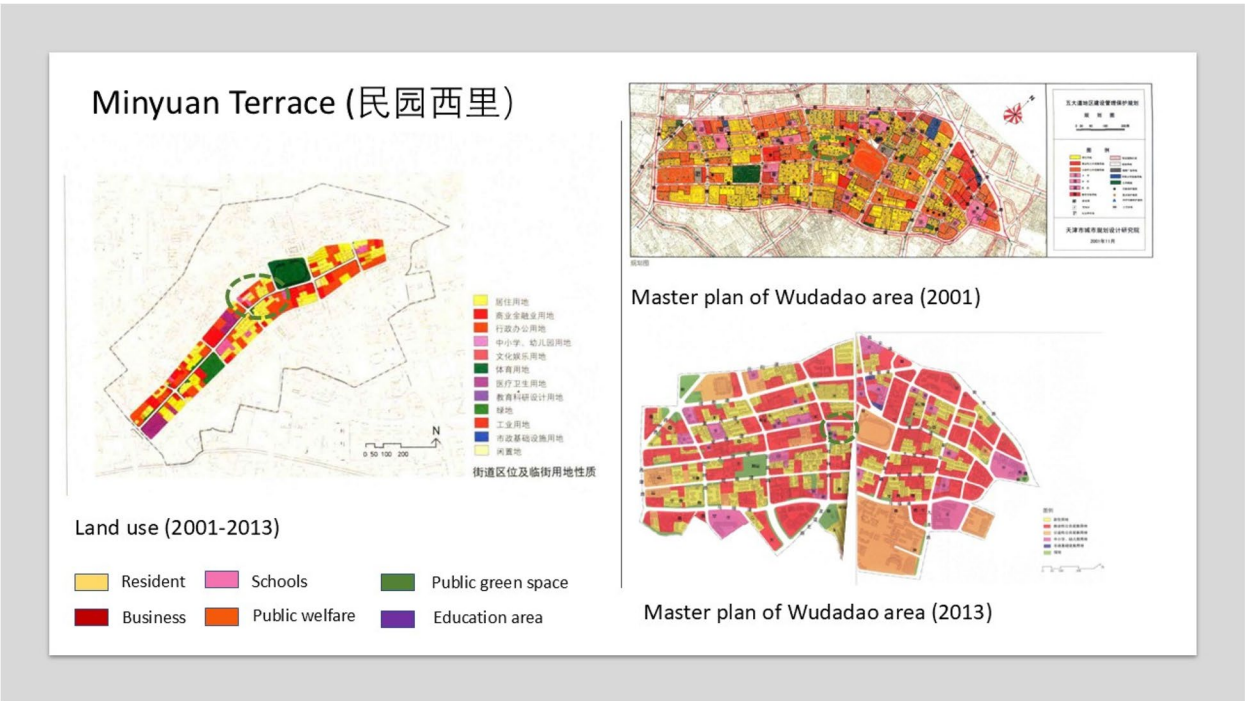


Fig. 5 The land use of the Minyuan Terrace [Source: adopted from Zhu 2013, 278 (left), 54 (top-right), 366–367 (bottom-right)]

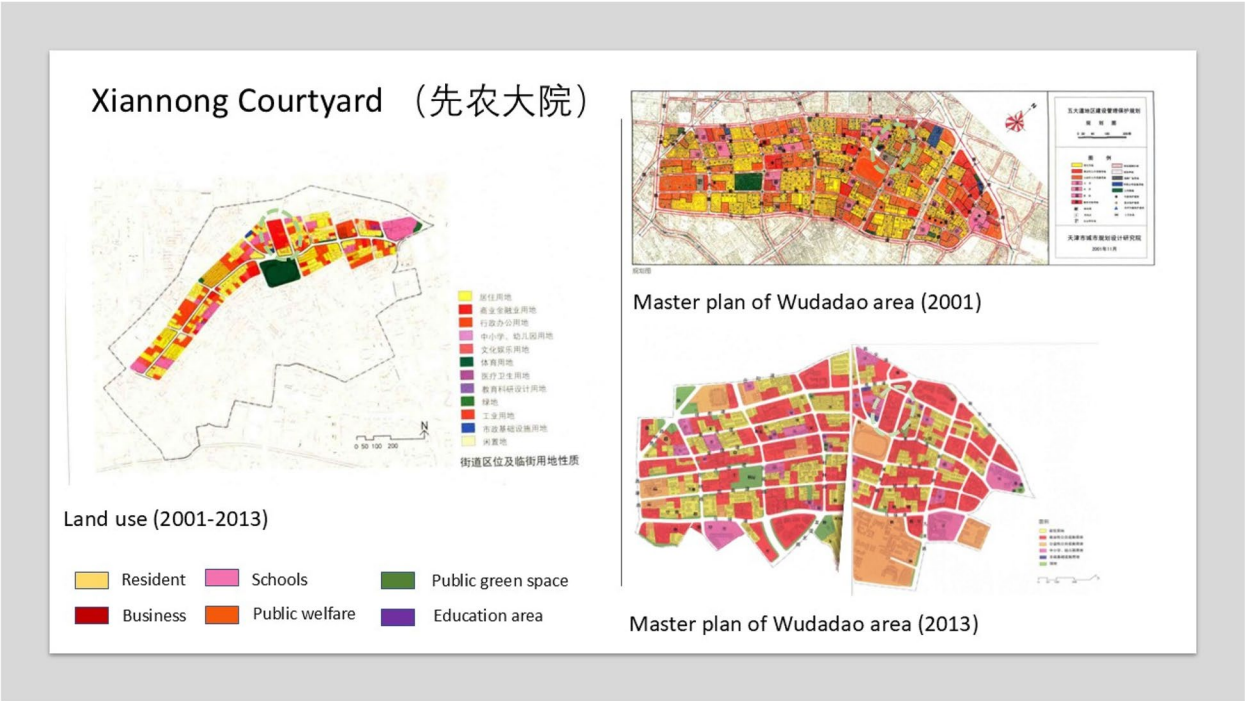


Fig. 6 The land use of the Xiannong Courtyard [Source: adopted from Zhu 2013, 304 (left), 54 (top-right), 366–367 (bottom-right)]

has caused the loss of the cultural identity of Wudadao. The development in Wudadao has been too fast. In recent years, the development strategies have been mainly focused on the economic, and the elements of long-term development have been ignored—that is, the protection of indigenous people. Also, there is not enough support for vulnerable groups from the policy level.

The development of Wudadao is still in its initial stage, and current policies do not address the well-being of community residents and vulnerable groups. Although some institutions are in charge of taking care of vulnerable groups, such as neighbourhood committees in Wudadao, this problem is difficult to address at the city level.

4.5.3 Selective memories

Some interviewees highlighted how the focus of current heritage conservation policies is on the promotion and preservation of buildings from the concession period, neglecting the social evolution of the area in the decades following the end of foreign domination. From the perspective of the local government, modern foreign-style architecture is seen as an important part of Tianjin's cultural heritage, which distinguishes the city from others (Xiang et al. 2024; Zhang and Han 2014). Therefore, themes such as the 'xiaoyanglou (Western-style building)' and 'mingren guju' (former residences of historic celebrities) from the concession period (1860–1945) are glorified and promoted through various official channels. The daily life memories of its residents after the colonial period have not been given official attention (Xiang et al. 2024). Overall, the city's industrial history and its contributions to art and culture are not considered in the official discourse. A local heritage expert highlighted that modern industrial heritage is instead a defining characteristic of Tianjin, noting that Western technologies such as telephones, trams, and railways were first introduced in Tianjin before they spread across the country. A Tianjin historical expert echoed similar comments in their evaluations of the city's heritage preservation strategy, suggesting that Wudadao's cultural heritage policies should expand beyond the promotion of Western-style houses and celebrity residences from the late Qing period to include a more comprehensive cultural approach, covering areas such as architecture, environmental planning, and the contributions of local scholars, artists, and writers.

In addition to expert views, some residents now working in creative communities choose to run art facilities in Wudadao because of their childhood memories and strong place attachment. For example, the owner of a local history museum explained that she founded the museum because of her childhood memory. She feels regret when she sees furniture from former residences being sold in

second-hand markets. Additionally, in recent years, several privately run art companies owned by local Tianjin residents have been established in Wudadao. These individuals, after acquiring certain assets, returned to Wudadao to open art companies, partly to fulfil their artistic aspirations but also owing to their emotional connection to the area and childhood memories: *'We are the generation that grew up on the rooftops. Most of our childhood was spent lying on the terrace... Most Tianjin people have a special affection for Wudadao. So, when I saw a property with a terrace in Wudadao for rent, I decided to rent it, even though I hadn't figured out exactly what business to run at the time.'*

In the creative placemaking process in Wudadao, local civil society has made efforts to understand and promote cultural diversity in Tianjin. The creative shop in Xiannong Courtyard has been planning to explore and develop unique products linked to Tianjin culture and historic elements, such as local architecture, cultural figures, famous historic schools (Nankai University and Tianjin University), and local publications. A local scholar is exploring pathways to promote Tianjin's local culture. For example, they have been trying to facilitate cooperation between local university art students and creative communities in Wudadao to jointly design cultural and creative products with Tianjin characteristics; however, as local scholars explain, this is still an incipient stage of reimagining local culture, and more experiences and research need to be done.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the interviewees revealed that different perceptions of gentrification and replacement emerged during the creative placemaking process in Wudadao. State-led replacement of the local community has certainly involved more than half of the existing building stock of Wudadao, raising concerns regarding the loss of social diversity in the area. This aligns with criticism about creative gentrification in the urban renewal process, which has appeared in the literature over the past two decades (Arkaraprasertkul 2019; Zukin 1987; Zhu and Martínez 2021). However, some have argued that this represents an acceptable social cost justified by the potential city-wide benefits of an ambitious tourism and business strategy. Others have instead commented on the inevitability of gentrification, noting that even recently, rising rents have forced some residents and creative communities to relocate. However, there is a certain consensus that the investments attracted to the area have increased job opportunities and residents' income, as well as improved the quality of life for a broader range of people, including in some cases, the most vulnerable.

While concerns about the loss of Wudadao social diversity and cultural identity remain, urban heritage conservation practices are generally accepted as positive outcomes. Compared with some old hutong residential areas in Tianjin that have been demolished, one interviewee highlighted that *‘Wudadao has been conserved and attracted participation from the citizens and visitors, which is the most important thing to the place’*.

In the official discourse on heritage protection, however, the focus of Wudadao’s heritage preservation tends to be limited to the heritage of the concession period and the Republican era. Prestige architecture, such as Western-style houses and celebrity residences, was glorified, but the period after 1949 was forgotten. Three significant historical events—the establishment of the PRC, the Cultural Revolution, and the earthquake—which transformed Wudadao from an upscale elite community into an overcrowded neighbourhood of working-class residents and migrants, are neglected. The memories of the working class are not coherent with large Western-style houses, although they could shed light on a crucial part of the history of contemporary China, highlighting the ability to survive and adapt in Wudadao during postwar hardships (Xiang et al. 2024). A wider variety of stories and identities are therefore hidden, questioning whether the process of cultural appropriation for commodification purposes is fair, socially inclusive and ultimately truly beneficial for the local community and the society at large (Young and Brunk 2009).

By examining the evolution of the market-oriented governance system of Chinese cities in recent years (Wu 2002), it is important to consider the wider picture. In the past, some urban renewal projects led by the government-business coalition, such as the Xintiandi project, dramatically converted residential areas into commercial districts, harming the interests of residents while achieving economic development (He et al. 2005). More recently, China’s urban regeneration model has been developing towards a more sustainable approach, allowing more civil society participation in the policy-making process rather than focusing solely on economic interests (Wang et al. 2022). It is a ‘trial and error’ characteristic in China’s governance, which is based on the introduction of positive incremental changes learned from previous mistakes (Verdini and Xin 2024). Although the ‘Xintiandi’ model has affected most urban regeneration projects in China, some nuanced changes can be seen in the heritage-making process, especially in favour of the material wellbeing of local communities (Demgenski 2024).

This ‘trial and error’ approach can also be observed in Tianjin’s urban regeneration. The renewal of the Italian-Style town has resulted in the loss of original residents, facing the challenges of commercialisation (Wang and

Marinelli 2024). Learning from the experience of the Italian-style town, Wudadao has adopted a different approach, retaining some of its original residents. This approach has provided conditions for multiple benefits, as already described. However, whether this is enough for the contemporary demands of Chinese society is open for discussion. It is an approach that still largely relies on improving the material conditions of people, either by providing good deals for relocation or job opportunities locally. The improvement of the built environment and the richer cultural scene of the neighbourhood may provide additional ‘intangible’ benefits, but the trade-off over commercial and tourist practices is certainly a risk that can soon undermine the fragile equilibrium of the new local community.

One aspect that appears promising, based on the results of the interviews, is the move from a narrow cultural appropriation approach inherent in the commodification of the early 20th century heritage. Artists and university experts are actively promoting the exploration of a more comprehensive memory of Tianjin’s modern history, although this is still in its initial stages. This rediscovery could prompt residents and the creative community to engage in deeper processes of reappropriation of the space, which is already happening on a more personal level, as some interviewees explained. This is a condition by which less exploitative practices of regeneration can flourish beyond the convenience of short-term economic benefits. It could therefore respond to the increasing demand for subjective well-being that Chinese society is increasingly searching for (Wielander 2018), despite the overwhelming materialistic values that decades of fast growth have imposed (Bartolini and Saracino 2015).

In conclusion, this research contributes to the field of creative placemaking and heritage conservation at different levels. First, this research argues that creative placemaking in Wudadao has led to incremental improvements in local urban regeneration and conservation practices. Although gentrification, relocation, and selective memory have occurred in Wudadao, residents, including vulnerable groups, have partially benefited from the regeneration process. The government has acted to minimise the social impact of urban transformations, marking a shift from a previous urban development phase. Second, this research contributes to the understanding of the current situation of creative placemaking in China more broadly. China’s urban renewal model has shifted from purely property-led regeneration practices led by government-business coalitions in the 1990s to more socially sustainable, community-oriented practices. In the case of Wudadao, the government is making efforts to balance various interests, incorporating diverse opinions into policy-making, and attempting to ensure social cohesion. What remains to be seen is whether the

local civil society could counterbalance a narrow discourse of commodification by bringing to the front the untold stories of the neighbourhood and by mobilising, with alternative practices and values, those who are willing to further change the status quo.

Appendix

Categories	Background
Government officials/urban planning department	Staff in the planning department Staff in Heping Wudadao area administration committee Key actor in the Wudadao planning evolution process, retired professor in Tianjin University
Heritage experts	Professor in school of architecture in Tianjin Chengjian University Historian of Tianjin and professor in cultural heritage in Tianjin Normal University Professor in the school of architecture in Tianjin University Professor in the school of architecture in Tianjin University
Creative communities	The owner of creative product store in Xiannong courtyard, as part of the key company that runs creative business The manager of a creative business for children The owner of a history museum The manager of a history museum The manager of a bookstore in Minyuan Terrace The owner of a tea house in Minyuan Terrace The owner of an art company
NGOs	Member of a local volunteer group Funder of a local volunteer group

Abbreviations

NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
PRC	People's Republic of China
RC	Resident's committee
THARD Company	Tianjin Historical Architecture Restoration and Development Company

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The research has received ethical approval from the University of Westminster, application ID: ETH2122-0758. Permission to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this research was obtained from all respondents, who were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored. All interviewees have been anonymised.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. Giulio Verdini is the Book Review Section Editor of *Built Heritage*.

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