

# Heritage-led regeneration in Chinese intermediary cities: understanding incremental changes under a ‘business as usual’ urban governance regime

This study examines Longchang, an intermediary city in China, to discern differences in its heritage-led regeneration compared to major Chinese cities. Despite the recent incremental shifts in China’s urban governance regime, which is characterised by ‘selective learning’ and ‘trial and error’ approaches, cities like Longchang, constrained by scant socio-institutional resources, perpetuate pro-growth tendencies in their regeneration. While progress has been made towards more sustainable outcomes, the persistent disregard for local communities is still ‘business as usual’ in current practice. This phenomenon jeopardises the urban transformation process, amplifying heritage commodification and adversely impacting the intangible and living heritage.

**Keywords:** state entrepreneurship, culture-led regeneration, incremental urban regeneration, pro-growth urban regime, intermediary cities

## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, China has implemented an entrepreneurial and market-oriented urban governance regime, underpinned by pro-growth coalitions between local governments and real estate developers (Wu, 2002; Zhu, 1999). This has resulted in a specific type of urbanism, characterised by rampant urban expansion and large-scale urban redevelopment. This form of state-led development, while efficient in boosting economic growth, has largely ignored local contexts and their socio-cultural diversities (Ye, 2011; Verdini, 2014). In recent years, however, China has increasingly turned towards incremental urban regeneration as a means to achieve sustainable urbanisation, with a greater emphasis on human scale, collaboration and people’s well-being (Verdini and Zhang, 2020; Cioboata, 2022). This shift reveals a new relationship among state, capital and communities, wherein state entrepreneurialism purses a broader range of benefits — beyond pure economic advantages — to legitimise its ideological authority and central power (Wu, 2020). In this regard, urban

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governance has diverged from the traditional urban growth machine regime, allowing for more participatory and incremental decision-making, in response to evolving state mandates (Wu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022)

This transition is also evident in urban heritage conservation and regeneration. China's heritage-led regeneration, exemplified by the famous case of Xintiandi in Shanghai, has historically concentrated primarily on the material conservation of a few iconic buildings, without preventing the displacement of residents or inhibiting redevelopment (He and Wu, 2005). This entrepreneurial approach has resulted in the commodification of heritage assets during regeneration projects, with benefits accruing mainly to local elites rather than to local communities (Zhu and Maags, 2020).

In the last decade, a more nuanced form of conservation has emerged, wherein bottom-up initiatives have increasingly played a role in shaping diverse and generally more collaborative regeneration pathways (Yung et al., 2014). These initiatives have served, in certain instances, as a relatively powerful counterbalance to prevent large-scale demolition and eviction (Verdini, 2015). Overall, some progress has been made in bolstering participatory 'micro-regeneration', elevating heritage conservation standards and driving redevelopment through place-based revitalisation (Xie and Heath, 2017; Wang et al., 2022). Collectively, these elements have improved the quality of heritage conservation processes in China (Taylor and Verdini, 2022). They also indicate a departure from the erstwhile purely pro-growth urban regime, which frequently bypassed community involvement in favour of land revenue through governmental financing vehicles (Yang and Chang, 2007).

Despite the growing body of research on the governance of Chinese heritage-led regenerations, the dynamics of these practices in small- and medium-sized cities, also known as intermediary cities, remain relatively under-explored. The differentiated administrative power and socio-economic profiles of Chinese cities yield uneven capacities and distinct politics in responding to central diktats of local economic growth and community demands (Zhu, 1999). Operating at the periphery of the state administrative system, intermediary cities have constantly adapted to state commands and ambitions, although, as this article will demonstrate, their local socio-institutional conditions may not favour more sustainable approaches. Therefore, addressing this research gap is crucial for assessing the appropriateness of current urban heritage regeneration politics across a significant portion of China, and for ultimately advancing more regionally balanced, sustainable urbanism.

This article focuses on Longchang County, a typical intermediary city located in Neijiang Municipality, Sichuan Province, in Western China. Since 2007, Longchang has initiated a series of heritage-led regeneration projects centred on conserving its renowned local stone archways. The underlying hypothesis of this work is that Longchang, emblematic of a typical intermediary Chinese city, adopts incremental

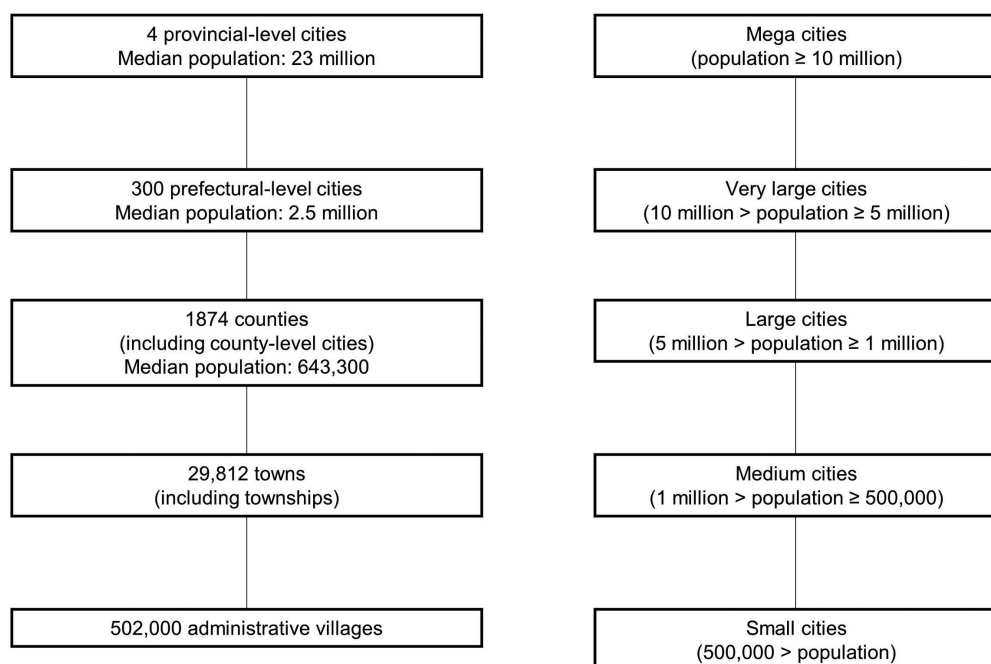
approaches in regeneration similar to larger cities but faces distinct and potentially more problematic heritage planning and regeneration outcomes owing to structural institutional and socio-economic constraints. This study aims to answer two primary questions through in-depth fieldwork and interviews with local stakeholders from the public, private and civil sectors: 1) What challenges in urban governance do intermediary cities face today? 2) How do these challenges affect the emerging heritage-led regeneration practices in intermediary cities? Given the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic during the fieldwork, the research also considers its impacts on the regeneration practices and potential legacy. Collectively, these questions aim to discern whether current regeneration practices in intermediary cities are leaning towards more sustainable (i.e. more collaborative) outcomes or remain 'business as usual', and why.

The article commences with a literature review that scrutinises the governance challenges faced by Chinese intermediary cities, followed by an analysis of the current governance mechanisms in China's heritage-led regeneration, which are increasingly evident beyond large cities. These two sections aim to connect the broad topics of intermediary city governance and heritage-led regeneration, providing a socio-institutional context to comprehend the case of Longchang. The article then details the methodology and provides a brief background of Longchang. The case study then presents a critical analysis of the challenges and opportunities inherent in culture-led approaches to accomplishing sustainable urban transformations. The article also discusses potential scenarios in the post-pandemic era.

## **Intermediary cities in China and their governance challenges**

Over the past two decades, China's urbanisation model has primarily focused on promoting economic growth by investing in large-scale urban projects (Hsing, 2010; Chan, 2018). Urban planning has frequently facilitated seemingly unlimited growth, fuelled by the entrepreneurial and occasionally reckless behaviour of local authorities (Wu, 2015). Consequently, many small- and medium-sized cities, especially those located inland, have been neglected, despite recent efforts to shift development policies away from major urban centres and special economic zones towards these underdeveloped regions (World Bank, 2014).

In this article, we use the term 'intermediary cities' to denote the small- and medium-sized cities that serve as mediators between urban and rural areas, playing a key role in the development strategies of national and regional governments (Bellet and Llop, 2003). Although these cities defy easy quantification, they share the function of serving as nodes in an urban-rural integrated development network. Globally, the governance of intermediary cities faces multiple challenges, including constrained budgets and lack of administrative capabilities (UCLG, 2016). In China, small- and



The median population data for towns and administrative villages have not been obtained from official statistics

Figure 1 Official city tier by administrative level and city tier by population in China  
Source: NBS, 2022

medium-sized cities are defined by the State Council (2014) as jurisdictions with populations fewer than one million; the majority of these are counties (县), which also include county-level cities (县级市) (Li et al., 2019) (Figure 1). Over 90 per cent of these counties have populations fewer than one million, and 60 per cent have fewer than 500,000 inhabitants (NBS, 2020). Counties, governing both urban (i.e. urban districts and towns) and rural areas (i.e. villages) since Imperial China (221 BC–1912 AD), serve as the periphery in the urban governance system, connecting central authority with diverse grassroots communities (Fei et al., 1992; Huang, 2008). Therefore, we argue that counties epitomise typical Chinese intermediary cities.

After the rapid expansion of megacities, counties have emerged as critical nodes in Chinese urbanisation. Currently, over 40 per cent of the Chinese population resides in counties, and the residential population in county seats has increased by 30 per cent between 2006 and 2020 (Li et al., 2019). Moreover, counties often maintain traditional

acquaintance societies characterised by high-bonding social capital and diverse local informal economies, thereby becoming significant centres for creative and cultural economies (CCE) and entrepreneurship (Zhou et al., 2017).

Counties have also served as platforms for significant policy innovation. For instance, in 2016, the central government initiated the ‘characteristic town’ programme to conserve both tangible and intangible heritage, using ‘distinct cultural identification’ as the new focal point of local development strategies (Chen et al., 2018). This challenges the predominant narrative that manufacturing drives development. In the recent ‘national rural revitalisation strategy’, culture-led revitalisation has been further identified as a critical tool to synergise local and extra-local forces for rectifying imbalanced urban–rural relations (Gao et al., 2023).

Despite their crucial roles in urban–rural integrated development, the governance of intermediary cities faces several structural socio-institutional constraints affecting local cultural and heritage conservation and development:

- **Institutional constraints:** The 1983 ‘prefecture governing county’ reform politically marginalised counties (Zhong and Xin, 2020). Subsequent policies on land finance have further complicated this relationship, leading to unchecked urban expansion often at the expense of cultural and heritage assets (Zhao and Webster, 2011; Chien, 2013; Verdini et al., 2016). Counties have been left grappling with inconsistent policies, inadequate land allocations and sub-par planning outcomes (Zhao, 2017).
- **Fiscal constraints:** The 1994 ‘tax-sharing’ reform created an imbalance where local governments, handling over 85 per cent of total budget expenditure, receive only 54 per cent of the total budget revenue (NBS, 2021). The fiscal disparity at the county level
  - has been exacerbated by the delegation of tasks from prefectural governments (Gong and Wu, 2012). The abolition of agricultural taxes in the early 2000s further strained intermediary cities’ financial conditions (Ma and Pang, 2010). Consequently, counties’ financial dependency, especially in the culture and tourism sectors, leans heavily on top-down earmarked funds, leading to escalating debts and perpetuating growth-focused governance (Shen, 2020).
- **Social constraints:** The governance challenges, compounded by fiscal pressures, resulted in diminishing public services. According to the 6th National Population Census, counties experienced a net loss of over 91 million residents and are confronting the challenges of an ageing society (Li et al., 2019). A lack of young skilled professionals has further strained counties, and the overarching emphasis on growth in governance evaluations has solidified a business/growth-first mindset in leadership (Zhang et al., 2011).

COVID-19 has reshaped the landscape for intermediary cities, specifically in terms of their cultural and heritage economies. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing structural impediments and introduced new challenges. First, the temporary expansionary fiscal responses to the pandemic in 2020 led to austerity policies in 2021 (State Council, 2022). The ‘zero-COVID policy’, primarily affecting large cities, has had cascading effects on the socio-economic development of intermediary cities (Chen et al., 2022). Key consequences include a decline in tourism and its contribution to GDP, the bankruptcy of numerous small- and medium-sized CCE enterprises (Dai et al., 2021), amplified regional income disparities (Shen et al., 2021) and rising living costs (Wang et al., 2021). While the relaxation of the zero-COVID policy in December 2022 suggests a potential recovery, the enduring impacts on the socio-economic fabric of intermediary cities warrant close scrutiny.

### **Heritage-led regeneration in Chinese intermediary cities: state of the art**

The heritage conservation in China, dating back to the 1950s, is strongly anchored in structured conservation planning, and it has recently evolved from the recognition of ‘Chinese National Historic Cities’ to a broader scope encompassing towns and villages (Chen et al., 2020). About 30 per cent of these ‘Historic Cities’ are counties, with 60 per cent sustaining regular traditional cultural activities (Zhao, 2017). Recognising the potential of intermediary cities, China’s national rural revitalisation strategy has strategically employed heritage as a tool to bolster the burgeoning cultural tourism industry (Zhou et al., 2021). By 2016, inward investment in rural tourism reached 395 billion yuan (CNTA, 2017), and in 2019, Chinese tourists made over three billion visits to rural areas (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021).

As a result, intermediary cities are increasingly pivoting towards a culture-centric development agenda. Central to this transformation is the heritage-led regeneration model, which integrates urban conservation with place-making strategies (Pendlebury and Porfyriou, 2017). Moreover, this model fosters CCE (Taylor and Verdini, 2022). Tourism serves as one of the primary channels for profit extraction from heritages (Su, 2015), especially in smaller cities where other revenue streams, such as real estate or capital market, are less developed and less profitable.

In general, the governance of Chinese heritage-led regeneration has undergone significant development in recent years, becoming increasingly collaborative albeit still contested (Wang et al., 2022). On the one hand, the increasing engagement of professional planners and local communities has been evident in emerging collaborative heritage regeneration and management initiatives (Li et al., 2020). Such a trend appears to mitigate the predominant urban governance regime, characterised by its

top-down and state-led system and pro-growth entrepreneurship, which has been well researched in current literature (Ye, 2014; Wu, 2015).

In the aforementioned context of incremental adjustments, heritage-led regeneration in China has adopted a nuanced, mosaic-like approach. Cities are experimenting with new regeneration practices, featuring ‘selective learning’ from global practice (Zhao, 2010). While Chinese principles of heritage conservation are rooted in international charters and conventions, reflecting global concerns for authenticity and integrity (Ludwig et al., 2020), its heritage-led regeneration often leans heavily towards extensive physical reconstruction. To some extent, this inclination is derived from a unique understanding of authenticity shared by China and several Asian nations, which prioritise perceived authenticity over genuine authenticity (Ludwig and Wang, 2020). This understanding frequently permits the replacement of building materials, the use of replicas, and even contemporary interventions and alterations (Ludwig et al., 2020). Generally, however, when this approach leads to the disregard of community demands and the protection of so-called living heritage, the urban heritage planning processes in place appear controversial (Stegmeijer and Veldpaus, 2021). In fact, despite the increasing presence of collaborative platforms and the reduced scale of intervention (‘micro-regeneration’) (Wang et al., 2022), public participation remains nascent, and local residents still have little voice in a process which is conventionally led by the state (Li et al., 2020). This approach arguably contravenes the Burra Charter of Conservation (Taylor and Verdini, 2022), a globally recognised standard that underscores participation of local actors, particularly those with traditional custodianship roles.

Simultaneously, incremental regeneration reflects a ‘trial and error’ approach to urban governance, involving the exploration of diverse strategies, learning from mistakes and adapting to achieve desired outcomes. This approach enables China to progressively investigate socially accepted and sustainable forms of urban governance while upholding the legitimacy of the Communist Party (Heilmann, 2008). Although the profit-centric and ‘business first’ rationale of heritage-led regeneration persists as an important trait of the current governance regime, efforts are increasingly made to ensure social stability via more transparent and accountable urban governance (Li, 2020). For instance, issues such as rampant demolition and involuntary displacement of local communities have received increased attention (Liu and Xu, 2018). Noteworthy practices have emerged in rural areas and districts beyond China’s large cities (UNESCO, 2019; Verdini et al., 2017), serving as experimental grounds for inclusive planning and design strategies for heritage conservation (Bolchover and Lin, 2013).

Intermediary cities constitute the predominant urban form in China and are often seen as the ‘weakest link’ in the urban system. A deeper understanding of their heritage-led regeneration is thus essential to assess whether the current urban governance regime (Figure 2) can enable sustainable management of urban heritage beyond well-resourced large cities and more developed rural tourism destinations. While



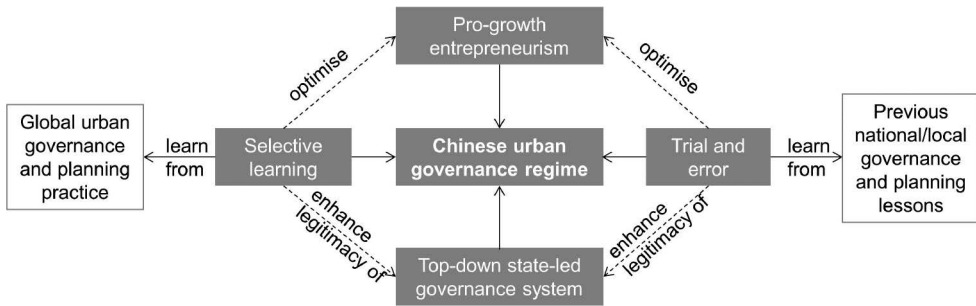


Figure 2 Chinese urban governance regime

Source: authors

research on heritage-led regeneration spans from metropolises (Wang and Aoki, 2019) to medium cities (Theurillat, 2017) and villages (Zhou et al., 2021), scant literature has examined the impact of the current urban governance regime on the regeneration of intermediary cities. These cities, having fewer socio-institutional resources and governance capacity than their larger counterparts, pose unique challenges and insights. The underlying argument of this article is that local structural conditions of intermediary cities may hinder their sustainable and inclusive transformation processes, contrasting with developments observed in larger cities recently.

## Methodology and study area

### Background

Longchang, a typical intermediary city in China's Sichuan Province, was elevated from a county to a county-level city in 2017 and falls under the governance of Neijiang Prefecture. Situated between Chengdu and Chongqing, the city comprises 17 predominantly agricultural towns. Despite its registered *hukou* population of 763,800 in 2019, only 633,000 individuals actually reside there, marking a 10.6 per cent decline since 2010 (LSB, 2020). With an urbanisation rate of 55.5 per cent, which is 5 per cent lower than the national average, its urban residents earn 2.19 times more than their rural counterparts (ibid). The city's ageing population comprises 12.2 per cent of individuals over 65 years old. In 2021, its fiscal revenue amounted to approximately 2.4 billion yuan, with 60 per cent originating from land leasing fees (Longchang Financial Bureau, 2022); meanwhile, the total disclosed government debt surpassed 6.8 billion yuan (ibid).

Cultural tourism plays a crucial role in Longchang's economy, characterised by a wealth of cultural heritages. Notable attractions include historic stone archways (Figure 3), traditional villages and renowned intangible heritages like tofu, ramie cloth and





Figure 3 The Archway tourism zone today  
Source: authors

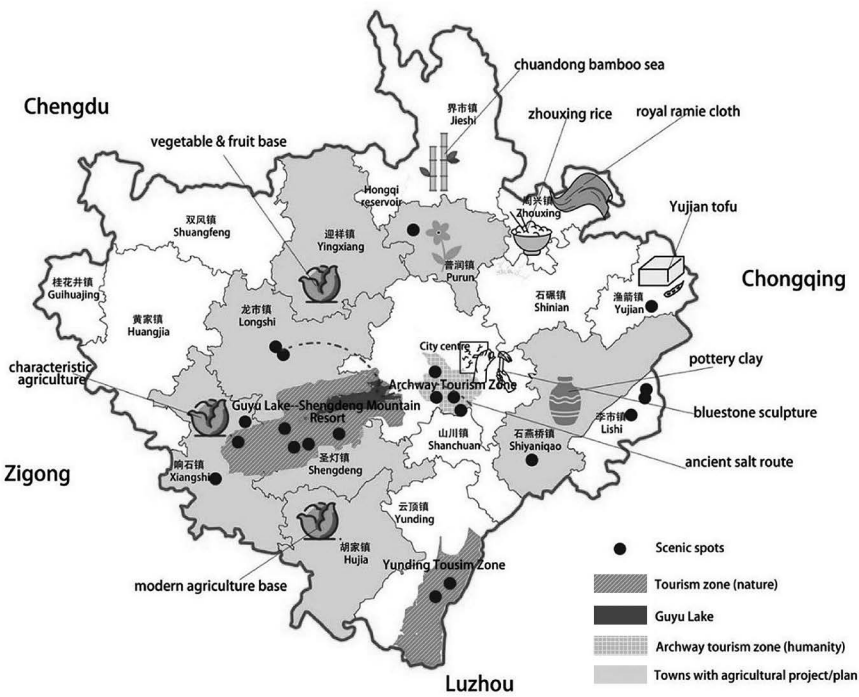


Figure 4 The map of cultural and tourism resources and key state programmes in Longchang  
Source: authors

pottery, primarily located in towns and rural areas (Figure 4). Addressing the challenge of integrating urban and rural cultural tourism, a recent local development plan aims to position Longchang as the ‘holiday backyard’ of the Chengdu-Chongqing metropolitan region. From 2010 to 2019, local tourism income increased from 1.17 billion yuan to 8.5 billion yuan, with 10 million tourists contributing to an annual growth rate over 10 per cent in the hospitality sector (LSB, 2020).

### Methodology

Between 2019 and 2020, two field visits were conducted in Longchang. Post-COVID-19 outbreak, during the second visit, two focus groups were organised to analyse the regeneration process of the inner-city stone archways. These focus groups were guided by semi-structured questionnaires and involved a total of 23 stakeholders, including ten officials, two managers of state-owned enterprises, and 11 representatives from local private culture-related companies, shop owners in the archway zone and civil cultural associations (as shown in Table 1). The first focus group consisted of stakeholders from the public sector and addressed topics such as the regeneration history of the archways, governance challenges at the heritage site and visions for Longchang’s future cultural development. The second focus group comprised non-governmental actors, who were queried about their relationships to the archways and regeneration projects, business challenges, received supports and future plans. Both groups were also questioned about the impacts of the pandemic, recovery policies and effects. The findings were triangulated using interview data from each group, on-site observation and secondary data from official websites and media reports.

**Table 1** List of interviewees

Stakeholder category	Title
Governmental officials	Deputy director, two officials and a retired research fellow of Culture and Tourism Bureau; official of Housing and Urban-rural Construction Bureau; official of Natural Resource Bureau; official of Agricultural and Rural Affairs Bureau; director of Cultural Heritage Institute; director of Cultural Palace; director of Party and Local Chronicles Office
State-owned enterprises	General manager of Lianfeng Opera House; manager-assistant of Longchang Sangu Cultural Tourism Development Company
Private CCE companies	Manager of Bitan Pottery Company; founder of Yushuzi Ox Horn Comb Shop; founder of Xiabufang Ramie Cloth Boutique Shop; founder of Heixinliangfen Bean Jelly Shop; general manager of Jinpaifang Hotel
Civil cultural associations	Representatives from Music and Dancing Association, Photographers Society, Poem and Couplets Association, Calligraphy and Painting Association, Writers Association, Fine Art Association

Source: authors

## The case study of Longchang Stone Archway tourism zone

### Evolution of regeneration: tale of two phases

During the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912 A.D.), Longchang served as an important regional transportation hub, with 240 stone archways lining its main artery through the city centre. These monuments were adorned with sculptures that documented traditional legends, celebrated the benevolence of local gentries and highlighted other ethical achievements. Despite their immense historical value, most of the archways were destroyed during the wars and the cultural revolution, leaving only 13 conserved structures that were incorporated as columns in the surrounding households. Situated in two separate blocks, Nanguan and Beiguan, these archways existed within historic districts characterised by a dense fabric of shanty houses lacking sewage and sanitation facilities, making them susceptible to urban flooding.

The regeneration of these historic districts was initiated through a synergistic blend of top-down directives and local state ambition. In 2001, the Ministry of Housing and Urban–rural Construction recognised the archways as a national-level key heritage site, and in 2005, Longchang was bestowed with the title of ‘the hometown of Stone Archways’. Interviewed officials recounted that these official accolades led the government to use them as a ‘hook’ to attract inward investment and stimulate growth. During this period, the Chongqing and Sichuan governments promoted inter-regional cooperation in tourism development, and Longchang leveraged its proximity to Chongqing to secure investment from the Shiyuan Real Estate Development Company, a private developer.

In an attempt to boost tourism growth, the local government advanced a proposal to transform the archway districts into a designated tourism zone. Nonetheless, owing to financial constraints, the ambit of this ambitious plan was confined solely to the Nanguan block. In 2006, all buildings in this block were demolished by the government, thereby compromising the historical significance and aesthetic integrity of the area (Figure 5). Approximately 10,000 households were relocated by the local Construction Bureau to a newly developed neighbourhood nearby, under the pretext of ‘improving people’s living environment’.

The regeneration project of the Nanguan archway districts was funded by the Shiyuan Company, which invested over 150 million yuan, double the local government’s revenue at the time. In return, the local government transferred the property ownership to the developer. The government also allocated funds for archway restoration before construction began and implemented a conservation guideline, establishing a 50-metre buffer zone around the archways with density and facade controls. However, according to an official from the construction bureau, the developer dominated the planning process, with the review process characterised by offering ‘high flexibility and privilege’ to ‘secure the investment’.

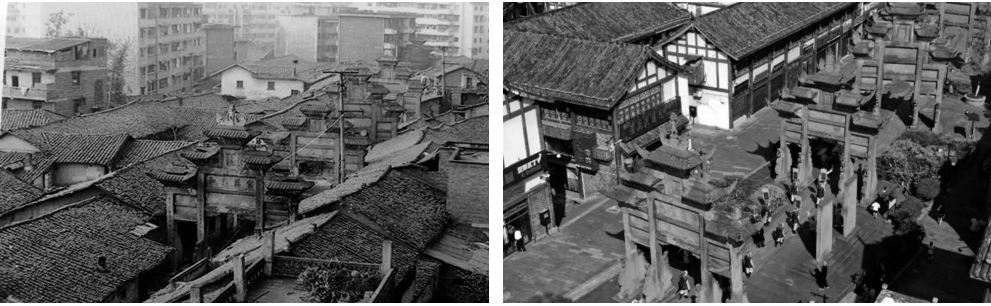


Figure 5 Longchang Archways: before and after the regeneration  
Credited by Longchang municipal government, 2019

Limited public intervention resulted in poor coordination between the tourism zone plan and the county's statutory comprehensive plan, particularly in public infrastructure such as parking lots, thereby compromising the overall tourism experience and the quality of urban area. To expedite investment recovery, the developer indiscriminately divested assets within the Nangan zone to a diverse array of retailers. This absence of judicious selection and subsequent oversight led to a haphazard assemblage of commercial enterprises, encompassing karaoke, massage parlours and low-quality souvenir shops. Notably, these businesses exhibited tenuous affiliations with Longchang's rich indigenous intangible cultural heritages. Nevertheless, the project yielded satisfactory returns for both the government and developer, key stakeholders in the pro-growth urban regime. According to the general manager of Shiyuan, the profit rate of Nangan tourism zone exceeded 30 per cent in 2007, far surpassing typical residential developments (Chongqing Evening News, 2007). That same year, the total tourism income of Longchang reached 476 million yuan, growing at an annual rate of 48 per cent (*ibid.*).

Since its nomination as one of the 'key counties for tourism development in Sichuan' in 2007, the Longchang government initiated its second-phase regeneration plan for Beiguan. Drawing on the lessons learned from the Nangan experience, the government adopted a proactive approach to formulate a holistic regeneration plan that preserved more properties and public spaces for archway history exhibitions and community-oriented activities, such as complementary film screenings and civic performances. The government also exercised differential rent control to attract enterprises pertinent to local intangible heritages such as ramie cloth. To oversee the everyday operations and stimulate value growth in both tourism zones, the Sangu Cultural Tourism Development Company, a state-owned enterprise financed by a local governmental financing vehicle, was established in 2012. Also, an additional 10 million yuan was allocated to enhance the physical infrastructure of Nangan, including lighting and toilet facilities.

In addition, in the regeneration of Beiguan Zone, the government partnered with Chengdu Yalin Traditional Architectural Design Company, a specialised institute in heritage planning and conservation, to ensure a high-quality built environment. This planning institute consulted international standards for heritage revitalisation, such as preserving living heritage, traditional buildings and the authenticity of the place. The institute also mobilised several heritage conservation experts to lobby the local state (Yalin Company, 2009). However, the county government insisted on extensive resident relocation, opting for *tabula rasa* strategies to replace them with ‘faux-antique buildings’, motivated by development cost considerations (ibid).

Completed in 2012, the Beiguan zone subsequently received ‘national 4A-level tourism zone’ and a ‘provincial-level cultural industry demonstrative base’ designations in 2013. The total production value of both archway tourism zones exceeded 1.2 billion yuan according to the Neijiang Municipal Government (2016).

### State programme, active state and marginal civil society

In 2020, Longchang attracted more than 9.48 million visitors and generated total revenue of 7.6 billion yuan. That same year, the city was nominated as a candidate for the ‘Tianfu famous tourism County’ (TFTC) designation, a provincial-level honour initiated by the provincial party secretary, the highest-ranking official in Sichuan. The TFTC initiative aims to position Sichuan as a ‘world-renowned tourism destination’ by integrating tourism with culture, offering high-quality cultural tourism products and promoting characteristic and differentiated local development at the county level. This initiative also seeks to establish a sustainable operational framework for county-level tourism, thereby contributing to the long-term socio-economic advancement of these jurisdictions (Sichuan Provincial Government, 2021).

The designation of TFTC employs a top-down evaluation across four sectors: overall socio-economic effectiveness, brand building, tourism industrial development and service environment. A third-party evaluation method is used, which includes big-data evaluation, tourist sampling surveys, unannounced official visits, mainstream media assessments and weighted scoring by industry associations as well as member entities of the Provincial Cultural and Tourism Industry Leading Group (i.e. the highest cross-departmental authority of Sichuan’s tourism policy-making). The comprehensive technocratic evaluation framework comprises hundreds of quantitative indicators, such as frequency of media coverage, tiers of governmental commendations and levels of private investment (Table 2).

**Table 2 Selected evaluative indicators of TFTC**

<b>Fields of evaluation</b>	<b>Example of evaluative indicators</b>
Major investment (Total point: 2)	If a county has more than two cultural tourism projects listed in the provincial-level category of major projects, it can earn one point in the evaluation. If the completed real investment in cultural tourism in the past year was over 500-million-yuan, 1 point can be earned under this indicator
Smart tourism (Total point: 1.5)	County-wide supervision and command e-platform and online supervision system against daily operation of tourism industry, and its functions should include: business supervision, economic data analysis, emergency command, public opinion analysis; CCTV, management and marketing of tourism projects, big-data platform on tourism, integration to provincial- and municipal-level system. Each function accounts for 0.1 point.
Cultural and tourism enterprise (Total point: 1.5)	Each 'dragon-head Company' (operational income > 300 million yuan per year) earns 0.3 point; provincial-level honours (e.g. 'Sichuan flagship tourism enterprise'): 0.2 point per honour
Institutional reform and innovation (Total point: 1)	Institutional innovation in line with provincial strategy of 'vitalising bureaucratic institution, social actors and factors of production'. Institutional innovation recognised as best practices by national- or provincial-level conferences/state-affiliated media on rural revitalisation or cultural tourism. Each achievement accounts for 0.2 point.
Tourism revenue (Total point: 1)	Total tourism revenue for the previous year must reach 10 billion yuan to earn 0.5 point, with no points awarded for revenue below 5 billion yuan. Counties with tourism revenue ranked in the top three of its municipalities and with average annual growth rate of at least 10 per cent for the past three years can earn 0.5 points. Those that are not ranked in the top group but have an average annual growth rate of at least 20 per cent for the past three years, or ranked in the top group but has an average annual growth rate of less than 10 per cent for the past three years, will receive 0.3 points.

Source: authors

According to the officials of the tourism bureau, receiving the TFTC designation not only serves as a political gesture of loyalty to higher-level governments but also yields substantial economic benefits, such as a 10-hectare construction land quota (worth approximately 100 million yuan), 30 million yuan in fiscal incentives, and preferential consideration in future competitions for other state programmes and transfer payments. Consequently, the Longchang government has been highly motivated to leverage their strengths in archway heritage and tourism zones for a new round of regeneration.

In 2019, a county-level Leading Group (LG), co-chaired by the county party secretary and county mayor, was established to vie for the TFTC designation, indicating



strong political impetus. Several interviewees from public sectors suggested that the TFTC has become a ‘politically correct’ avenue for county leaders to integrate and concentrate previously fragmented public resources across various county authorities to achieve local development objectives. The LG comprises key leaders from most county authorities, town governments and state-owned tourism enterprises, with each member mandated to designate a liaison for weekly progress review meetings to promote the campaign. Almost all public financial and human capital, previously constrained by departmental regulations and administrative credentials, can now be allocated to support the TFTC programme. Each TFTC-related project is overseen by a responsible county-level leader, who has established a bespoke task force. According to several officials in these task forces, the county government has reconfigured the performance evaluation criteria and set explicit, outcome-based incentive clauses related to personnel promotion and departmental performance for local authorities involved in the projects, thereby effectively mobilising the local party-state apparatus.

Despite constrained public finances, the Longchang government has proactively allocated a minimum annual investment of 30 million to the cultural and tourism sector. Moreover, it has set up a 50-million-yuan earmarked fund for cultural tourism in its most recent 14th Five-year Plan (2021–2025) (Longchang Municipal Government, 2021). The level of public investment is threefold higher than the criteria stipulated for TFTC evaluation. The majority of these funds originated from local governmental financing vehicles, which used state-owned land assets as collateral for loans from local commercial banks, as per an official from the construction bureau. Additionally, in alignment of the TFTC criteria, a bespoke comprehensive plan for tourism development was formulated to support physical enhancement of local scenic spots, with particular focus on the archway zones. Thus far, the local tourism bureau has undertaken multiple infrastructural augmentation projects within the archway zones, as outlined by the TFTC evaluation framework. These include the construction of 31 new 3A-level public toilets, a smart tourism digital management centre, a VR exhibition hall, as well as initiatives for greening and lighting design. Regarding private sector contributions, according to the interview with the officials from the cultural and tourism bureau, the Gangying Investment Corporation’s 800-million-yuan investment in a five-star Wyndham Hotel and the 120-million-yuan Xinjieli shopping block project stand as notable achievements. As of 2022, over 120 million yuan has been deployed as matching funds for the TFTC, and the total investment allocated for the infrastructural enhancement of Longchang’s tourist destinations is projected to exceed 674 million yuan (The Cover, 2020).

However, both research and conservation efforts directed at archways have been conspicuously neglected. Climate change has caused the erosion of the stone heritage, affecting at least four archways, which are now supported by wooden standing bars. Attempts by the local Cultural Heritage Institute to collaborate with the Dazu rock



carving academy, a leading research institute on stone heritage in Chongqing, were stymied by budget constraints, inadequate political backing and hierarchical administrative discrepancies, as indicated by the institute's director. The absence of specialised academic institutions in local planning and heritage has further resulted in a paucity of high-quality research on archways. Currently, research on local cultural heritage is mainly led by retired tourism bureau officials and non-specialist civil servants who lack pertinent academic credentials and research experience. Local tourism bureau officials have expressed frustration that their work is primarily focused on catching-up and competing for higher-up state programmes and private inward investments or handling endless top-down inspections, which left little time to, as an official said, 'do something meaningful' in governance and investigation of local heritages.

Alongside the active entrepreneurist state, Longchang's civil society has been marginalised in the governance framework of heritage-led regeneration. Community participation has been largely confined to perfunctory consultations during the planning stages of two tourism zones, as noted by the officials in planning and construction sectors. It has been found that these officials regarded engagement as superfluous, apprehensive that it would not yield constructive feedback or actionable contributions. Such a stance reveals an undervaluation of the significance of community engagement in the development initiatives. However, our investigation revealed that local residents in Longchang exhibit a profound place attachment to their locale, coupled with a rich cultural identity and collective memory associated with the stone archways. Indeed, many retailers operating within the archway zones were originally local residents who have been relocated but continue to maintain their family business in proximity to the archways, thereby perpetuating ancestral legacies.

Despite the marginalisation of local communities and retailers, Longchang boasts a vibrant society underpinned by grassroots cultural associations. These associates generate cultural products reflecting local culture, history and archway heritage, including paintings, novels, songs and musicals. They serve a key role in linking heritage to local and extra-local stakeholders. For instance, the Association of Dancing and Singing regularly hosts performances in the archway zones and rural areas, while the photographers' society has contributed invaluable historical images of the archways. The Association of Paintings even collaborated with the Russian Academy of Arts on co-creating oil paintings of the archways. However, according to the interviews, these associations received minimal support from local authorities when seeking exhibition spaces and workshop venues in the archway tourism zones, resulting in their broad exclusion from the regeneration and governance of these historic areas.

Furthermore, Longchang's abundant intangible heritage receives scant institutional support for market integration. Except for a ramie cloth shop in the Beiguan zone, most intangible heritage remains confined to rural areas, devoid of marketing outlets. Consequently, the archway zones lack activity diversity and exhibit minimal

historical resonance. This disconnect between Longchang's tangible and intangible heritage underscores the need for an inclusive, place-based and community-driven approach to heritage-led regeneration.

### Post-pandemic winter of cultural tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional challenges to the sustainable development of CCEs and civil associations in Longchang. Shop owners in the archway zones have reported a sharp decrease in income due to the significant drop in the number of tourists, estimated at 60–70 per cent based on interviews. During the peak tourism season in October 2020, the authors' on-site observations revealed that the zones were largely vacant. Pandemic control measures intensified and became less predictable from 2021 till the end of 2022, further undermining the tourism industry. Notably, the data on tourism was omitted from the 2021 statistical report of Longchang for the first time in the past decade, as confirmed by an official from the culture and tourism bureau.

Although Longchang secured a 133-million-yuan national loan for pandemic control and recovery by the end of 2020, the funds were primarily allocated as tax incentives and subsidies to large manufacturing companies that made substantial contributions to local GDP and employment, according to interviews with local retailers and officials. Consequently, the pandemic has worsened the already existing financial disparities between large industrial companies and small businesses, CCEs and civil associations. These vulnerable entities have grappled with challenges to their survival during the pandemic, and the long-term sustainability of their operations remains uncertain. In fact, even the state-owned opera house and its troupes had to, as per its director, 'endure and wait the pandemic out'.

## Discussion

Heritage-led urban regeneration has gained prominence in Chinese cities, with notable examples in both strategic inner-city areas of large cities and lesser-known areas of intermediary cities. While existing research has reported positive outcomes of this emerging regeneration initiative in large cities, indicating incremental changes towards more collaborative and human-centred practices, the case of Longchang suggests this trend may not be universal in intermediary cities with limited socio-institutional resources.

Building on the investigation of Longchang, the following discussion will examine how constrained socio-institutional and governance resources in intermediary cities can influence China's urban governance regime and subsequently affect the processes and outcomes of heritage-led regeneration.

### Entrepreneurism and centralisation: governance constraints of Chinese intermediary cities

As discussed earlier, Chinese intermediary cities are marginalised within the current urban governance framework, thereby leading to socio-institutional constraints such as limited administrative power, insufficient financial budgets and a scarcity of human capital. Rather than mitigating the pro-growth, entrepreneurial characteristics of current urban governance, these constraints serve to exacerbate them, as evidenced in local heritage regeneration agendas. For example, during the Nanguan phase, the local government's dependence on external funding led to the underselling of land to private developers, resulting in diminished oversight of development and the privatisation of the public spaces. Additionally, the limited availability of professional expertise in urban heritage conservation contributed to the neglect of both physical and living heritage, enabling developers to dominate the pro-growth regime that is usually underpinned by the coalition between the state and developers.

In the subsequent Beiguan phase, the 'trial and error' approach allowed the local government to rectify previous mistakes by collaborating with professional heritage planning institutes and exerting enhanced control over the regeneration process. This led to a more diverse range of activities and a livelier urban heritage experience for visitors, as well as the retention of state ownership of key sites to provide cultural activities and public spaces for the local community. However, the 'selective learning' approach based on global standards caused the government to reject proposals from planning professionals that aimed at protecting the surroundings of archways, leading to government-sanctioned demolitions as a cost-cutting measure. Such urban clearance is widely regarded as detrimental to urban heritage conservation, as it eradicates both local community and traditional morphology (Cody and Siravo, 2019). In fact, as demonstrated in the Beiguan phase, the budgetary constraints of intermediary cities have even provided a plausible rationale for the local government's selective adaption of international standards when facing resistance from professional bodies.

While the two regeneration phases of Longchang's stone archways indeed demonstrate how local governance policies have mitigated real estate speculation – a positive planning outcome – and created a more beneficial relationship between the public and private sectors through the 'trial and error' approach, they have not effectively aided in preserving the spirit or significance of the location in line with the Burra Charter of Conservation (Taylor and Verdini, 2022). Thus, regardless of the improved physical and social outcomes (e.g. more public spaces), these regeneration efforts have not successfully safeguarded Longchang's living heritage and traditional environment, exposing it to common profit-driven practices of commodification.

In addition, the constrained socio-institutional resources have compelled counties to solicit support from higher-level authorities, thereby amplifying the state-led features of the Chinese governance regime. The centralisation of governance was

evident in the recent campaign for the TFTC. This higher-up state programme heightened Longchang leadership's awareness of its heritage assets and motivated the implementation of smart and digital strategies to attract tourists. However, the tourism-oriented funding scheme raises concerns about the sustainability of archway tourism zones after the pandemic. Meanwhile, the 'one-fits-all' evaluative criteria of the TFTC impeded the local state from exploring more context-sensitive heritage regeneration strategies.

This centralisation was not only manifested in the upper-level government's interventions to local governance but also within the daily governance practice of intermediary cities. Through institutional arrangements such as establishing leading groups and task forces, various county authorities were 'woven' into a highly organised and mobilised system. This system aimed to concentrate scarce local socio-institutional resources effectively to achieve high-yield political or economic tasks – in the case of Longchang, competing for TFTC designation by improving archway tourism zones. This programme-based governance has gained recognition as a crucial top-down element in China's urban governance regime (Shen, 2020). However, the scarcity of local resources has reinforced an 'outcome-first' rationale, leading to an undue focus on material gains and economic indicators (e.g. private investment and digital infrastructure). This focus has overshadowed the need for the integration of less profitable rural intangible heritages with the archways, as well as the engagement of active civil cultural societies. Consequently, potential endogenous development forces emerging from stakeholders' engagement, and collaboration with local associations have remained undervalued and marginalised.

### Opportunities and limits of the post-pandemic recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted challenges for intermediary cities like Longchang, particularly when relying on mono-functional tourism strategies. As tourism declined, Longchang intensified its tourism-centric approach rather than diversifying its economic base. This contrasts sharply with the post-pandemic shift towards re-evaluating traditional tourism models that prioritise high volume, low cost and standardised products and services at the expense of authenticity, leading to commodification and displacement (Koh, 2020). Additionally, local CCEs and civic associations received minimal financial and institutional support during the pandemic. Consequently, rather than capitalising on the opportunity to re-evaluate existing development strategies, the heritage-led regeneration approach has remained 'business as usual', emphasising short-term economic profits and political capital.

In the post-pandemic era, heightened central oversight over local debt and financing will exacerbate financial challenges for intermediary cities, particularly in the effective preservation of extensive cultural heritages, including intangible and

living heritages. Such conditions risk erasing the unique historical landscapes and spatial identities of urban and rural areas. Furthermore, the high-cost ‘trial and error’ approach, led by the state, will face challenges in terms of fiscal sustainability.

Drawing on the Longchang case, county governments should fully acknowledge the significance of local place attachment, cultural identity and collective memory. Such recognition necessitates the active engagement of local communities and civic cultural associations in the regeneration process. Given resource constraints, ‘selective learning’ could be inevitable for intermediary cities’ urbanism and governance; however, its guiding rationale can be modified through enhancing local participation, thereby facilitating a transition towards collaborative governance. Thus, local residents and cultural associations should not be perceived as impediments to urban governance; rather they should be seen as catalysts for refining the ‘selective learning’ paradigm and optimising the unsustainable highly centralised, business-oriented urban governance model.

## Conclusion

The efficacy of culture-led regeneration in China’s intermediary cities presents a complex challenge. While large cities have seen progress towards more collaborative and sustainable urbanism outcomes, the case of Longchang reveals how the scanty socio-institutional resources, coupled with a dearth of professionals, public funding and governance capacity, can hinder the adoption of more diversified and community-oriented models of revitalising local heritage resources and promoting sustainable urban regeneration.

While the ‘trial and error’ and ‘selective learning’ approach has yielded incremental improvements within the Chinese state entrepreneurialism urban regime, the local resource constraints inhibit substantial deviation from the prevailing growth model. Despite the exacerbating impact of COVID-19 on the cultural and creative sectors, as well as the domestic tourism industry, there seems to be limited effort to re-evaluate the current regeneration pattern. If the pandemic is leveraged as an opportunity to secure increased top-down funding aimed at pro-profit growth, it is unlikely to challenge the status quo, at least in the near-term context.

Following decades of growth, the constraints inherent in China’s local financing system and the complexities of balancing economic growth with social benefits remain pivotal and contentious issues within the current frameworks of urban governance and heritage planning. These challenges are further exacerbated by the limitations of a national politics that is struggling to reconcile these tensions, as was seen during the period of rapid urban growth (World Bank, 2014). Moreover, the latitude previously afforded by the ‘trial and error’ approach may be drastically reduced in the current post-COVID austerity, necessitating a greater degree of accountability in

terms of resource allocation. While collaborative approaches have been achieved in more mature megacities, such outcomes may not be readily replicable in intermediary cities due to enduring socio-institutional impediments, as outlined in this study. If the past mistakes and subsequent corrections prove no longer viable, enhancing urban management processes and local capacities by introducing more adaptive, participatory governance and development agenda become imperative.

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