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Destructive reconstruction in China: interpreting authenticity in the Shuidong Reconstruction Project, Huizhou, Guangdong Province

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Abstract

In the name of conservation, many local governments in China have demolished and reconstructed their historic districts using pseudo-antique architecture as part of their commercial developments. While the destructive reconstruction practice involves issues such as who plays the decisive role in defining authenticity in the targeted district considering the creativity and imagination entailed in reconstruction, few studies analyse the factors leading to changes in the interpretation of authenticity throughout the destructive reconstruction process. Through a discourse analysis on project portfolios and semi-structured interviews with government officials, project planners and Shuidong residents, this study investigates the interpretation and implementation of the national-level authenticity principles in the Shuidong Reconstruction Project in Huizhou, Guangdong Province. Narratives of authenticity in local heritage practices are constantly changing because of the shifting local politics and regulatory powers involved. The effectiveness of national-level authenticity principles at the local level relies largely on the establishment of sub-national heritage regulations and the authorisation of heritage, which draws inspections from upper-level administrations. This study reveals certain socio-political factors that affect the relationship between reconstruction practices and the interpretation of authenticity. The political and profit-oriented tendency of local heritage conservation practices in China demonstrates the mismatch between conservation ideologies and bureaucratic realities.

Keywords: Destructive reconstruction, Authenticity, Heritage politics, Government fragmentation

1 Introduction

Ever since the concept of authenticity in international heritage charters and conventions was introduced to China in the 1980s, there have been non-stop discussions on its definition and applicability on the national-level legislation and practices. With no equivalent terms in Chinese, nuances in the translation of authenticity into ‘*yuanzhenxing*’ (originality and truthfulness) and ‘*zhen-shixing*’ (truthfulness) have led to confusion about the relationship between ‘the original state’ and ‘authenticity’ in the enactment of heritage regulations and conservation

practices (Zhang 2010; Zhu 2017). Likewise, the ambiguous definitions of ‘the original state’ and ‘authenticity’ in heritage regulations at the state level, including the *Law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on Protection of Cultural Relics* (State Council of PRC 2002) and the *Principles of the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* (ICOMOS China 2002), leave loopholes for multiple authenticity narratives in local practices (Qian 2007; Gao and Jones 2020). The literature considers authenticity a constructed notion shaped by the power relations involved in local heritage projects (Xu et al. 2012; Peters 2013). National-level authenticity principles were sometimes appropriated by local governments to rationalise their pro-profit heritage creations, which are stimulated

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by the fragmentation of regulatory administrations responsible for heritage sites that are protected at different levels and the decentralised decision-making powers for land uses (Zhu and Maags 2020). However, although inconsistencies between the authenticity as interpreted by local practices and that required by superordinate regulations have been observed, few studies investigate the factors leading to changes in the local authenticity narratives throughout the destructive reconstruction process.

In the name of conservation over the past two decades, local governments in China have demolished and then reconstructed their dilapidated historic districts using pseudo-antique architecture (Ruan and Li 2008; Wang 2016; Cui 2018). Critics call this practice '*chaizhenjianjia*' (destructive reconstruction). The overall demolition of historic buildings and their subsequent reconstruction in the name of heritage conservation, accompanied by the relocation of residents, expropriation of houses and commercial developments operated by real-estate companies in the reconstructed district, is a common approach for local governments at different levels to increase revenue, the city's popularity and political achievements (Ruan et al. 2014). On the one hand, the authenticity narratives are intermingled with different stakeholders' self-interests and imagination, which reflects the local government's fetish for physical completeness and neatness. On the other hand, improved heritage regulations and assessment criteria for authenticity may attract more regulatory powers to destructive reconstruction practices, which will affect their articulation of authenticity over time.

This paper investigates the local government's interpretation of national-level authenticity principles in the reconstruction of the historic Shuidong Quarter in Huizhou, Guangdong Province. Two questions are addressed: (1) What are the factors influencing the changes in the interpretation and implementation of national-level authenticity principles in the Shuidong Reconstruction Project? And (2) what roles do authenticity principles play in the Project? The paper first reviews the interpretation of authenticity in the heritage regulations and local practices in China, as well as the controversies over authenticity in the reconstruction projects. After presenting the research methods and context of the Project, the paper further analyses the reasons behind the changes in the articulation of 'authenticity' in the original and revised plans of the Project. It contributes to the understanding of the relationship between reconstruction practices and the interpretation of authenticity by showing that the authenticity narratives in local heritage projects are constantly changing because of shifting local socio-political factors. The phenomenon that Chinese critics call '*chaizhenjianjia*' also demonstrates the

disconnection between heritage conservation ideologies and bureaucratic realities.

2 Authenticity and destructive reconstruction in China

Authenticity is an essential element in defining, assessing and protecting cultural heritage. In its combination of the meanings of 'authoritative' and 'original', the term originally referred to the truthfulness of scriptures and religious relics (Zhang 2010). In 1964, authenticity was introduced to the heritage conservation field via the *Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* (ICOMOS 1964). Subsequently, during the 1970s, authenticity was recognised as the essential criteria for the nomination and monitoring of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites. Authenticity, which is defined so that it can be assessed through its designs, materials, workmanship and setting, has gradually influenced heritage legislation and practices around the world. Since the 1990s, with the establishment of non-Eurocentric conservation guidelines, such as the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (ICOMOS 1994) and the *Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia* (UNESCO Bangkok 2009), the criteria for authenticity embrace not only the historical fabric but also the socio-economic and cultural contexts of heritage (Labadi 2010).

2.1 Understanding authenticity in Chinese heritage regulations at the state level

After ratifying the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (UNESCO 1972) in 1985, China introduced global criteria for authenticity to its national conservation regulations by blending the principles of authenticity with its history of restoration (Qian 2007). Since the 1930s, China's architectural conservation practices have predominantly been influenced by the architect Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), who advocated restoring historic buildings to their original state. Thus, the understanding of authenticity in China was linked with Liang's philosophy of conservation '*xiujiurujiu*' (i.e., restoring the old as it was) (Zhu 2017). At the state level, the *Law of the PRC on Protection of Cultural Relics* (State Council of PRC 2002) requires that the preservation and repair of immovable heritage sites should conform to the site's original state (*yuanzhuang*). However, as there is no clarification for whether '*yuanzhuang*' means the earliest form of the building or the condition prior to the last demolition in the legislature, space is left for the local governments to create a variety of interpretations of '*yuanzhuang*' and authenticity (Su 2018). The *Principles of the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* (China Principles), which were developed

through the joint efforts of China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), the Getty Conservation Institute and the Australian Heritage Commission, similarly link the term 'authenticity' with '*yuanzhuang*'. Retaining '*yuanzhuang*' by either maintaining its existing condition or reinstating the original state is acceptable depending on a set of criteria (ICOMOS China 2002). Despite the China Principles' requirement of minimal interventions of heritage sites, many local governments in China allow the relocation and even reconstruction of historic sites if justified by their government agendas (Qian 2007), which could lead to the appropriation of national-level authenticity principles by local authorities for pro-profit heritage reconstruction after destruction of the original heritage sites.

2.2 Understanding authenticity in Chinese academia

The Chinese academia translated authenticity into '*zhenshixing*' (Liu 1997; Wang 2007; Chang 2009) and '*yuanzhenxing*' (Zhang 1999, 2010; Ruan and Li 2008). Wang (2007) prefers '*zhenshixing*' because the term, which literally means 'truthfulness', does not limit the historic condition of a site to a specific era and hence shows the diachronic value of heritage as defined in international authenticity principles. Conversely, Zhang (2010) favours '*yuanzhenxing*' because the term indicates the relationship between heritage authenticity and certain time periods. Different views on the translation of 'authenticity' also bring about further articulations of various authenticity principles in local practices in China.

In particular, the literature shows that authenticity in heritage practices in China is a construct shaped by the involved power relationships (Xu et al. 2012; Zhu and Li 2013; Yan 2018; Zhang and Lenzer Jr 2020). Owing to the decentralisation and fragmentation of the heritage administrative system, the SACH regulates only the management of historic sites protected at the national level while other immovable cultural relics are scrutinised by provincial, municipal and prefectural governments according to their relative protection levels (Huo 2016; Zhu and Maags 2020). Therefore, the localisation of national-level authenticity principles in heritage practices is largely affected by local governments in support of their development needs, in which authenticity is often interpreted as physical authenticity frozen in time. Xu et al. (2012) find that the local government presents the authenticity of the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Hongcun in static material-based ways, whereas the intangible heritage preservation, the quality of interior building structures and community participation, which are also essential elements of authenticity articulated in conservation guidelines, are marginalised in the local

government's site management practices. Zhu and Li (2013) demonstrate that as local bureaus have leeway to establish their regulatory agencies to manage heritage affairs, they tend to develop their own understanding of 'authenticity', such as in the reconstruction of a Buddhist monastery for tourism development at the Mount Emei World Heritage Site. However, while existing studies indicate that authenticity, as interpreted in local heritage making, is embedded with a certain amount of subjectivity and governmental agendas, few studies explore the changes in local governments' authenticity narratives throughout the destructive reconstruction process. The socio-political factors leading to the variations in the interpretation of authenticity should be analysed to further reveal the relationship between the interpretation of authenticity and actual implementations at the local level.

2.3 Heritage fever and destructive reconstruction in urbanised China

After China's fiscal contract system was established in 1980, local governments became more positive about their local revenue growth and urban developments (He and Wu 2005; Shin 2010; Wang and Bramwell 2012). With the reinvigoration of traditional Chinese cultures becoming one of the key elements in evaluating the performance of leading local officials, they have engaged in regenerating their dilapidated historic districts to manifest their unique local cultures (Ruan et al. 2014). Subsequently, in the name of heritage conservation, local governments work with real-estate companies to demolish the original buildings in their historical districts and reconstruct them using pseudo-antique architecture, modern materials and techniques to develop businesses or tourism and construct a distinct identity for the city, which ultimately increases revenue and political achievements (Ruan and Li 2008; Xie et al. 2020). This widely practised phenomenon in China can be referred to as destructive reconstruction.

The literature shows different views on the heritage authenticity of reconstructed historic sites and areas. Poullos (2010) argues that the authenticity of living heritage sites lies in the present because the sites' continued functional use and association with local communities are characteristics of their authenticity. Changes in the physical fabric are part of the heritage process; therefore, conservation should be associated with the recreation of heritage based on the cultural meanings attributed to the sites by local communities. Wells (2010) views heritage reconstruction in inner cities as a process of cultural revitalisation. The historicist design can stimulate a 'spontaneous fantasy' that plants the image of well-preserved buildings in the people's minds,

thereby arousing a sense of authenticity regarding the reconstructed landscapes. However, the arguments above are based on heritage reconstruction in European or religious contexts, which cannot be applied to the practices of destructive reconstruction in China where authenticity principles are commonly subjected to national heritage laws and local bureaucratic thinking, and this reconstruction is implemented in a top-down manner to downplay community engagement (Qian 2007; Xu et al. 2012; Zhu 2017). In contrast, scholars have questioned China's fever dream of destructive reconstruction, which began in the 1990s, especially regarding its relationship with authenticity (Ruan et al. 2014; Wang 2016). Peters (2013) observes that to create a sense of material-based authenticity for Lijiang Old Town, the local officials, together with tourism developers, removed 'unattractive' houses and built new ones using architectural styles only from the 19th-century Lijiang. Here, the emphasis on physical authenticity is driven by the needs of the tourism industry, whereas the historical and cultural authenticity of the area is undermined by the reconstructed heritage landscapes. Cui (2018) also shows that the destructive reconstruction of the Datong historic city is largely influenced by the cultural ambitions of the local political leaders. That is, the local administrative authority could shape the citizens' perceptions of authenticity in the Datong historic city and the role of the reconstruction as an accelerator for the city's cultural and economic regeneration. Nonetheless, while destructive reconstruction involves issues such as who plays the decisive role in defining the authenticity of historic areas and the mismatches between authenticity as constructed at the heritage site and that required by the heritage regulations, few studies analyse the socio-political factors influencing the effectiveness of national-level authenticity principles in the interpretation process. The dynamic relationship between the interpretation of authenticity and destructive reconstruction should be investigated comprehensively to understand the current nature of heritage conservation in China.

3 Methodology

This paper mainly investigates the factors leading to changes in the interpretation of national-level authenticity principles in the government-led Shuidong Reconstruction Project. Apart from the reconstruction practice which at first aroused public confusion on its motive, the Shuidong Project is characterised by a redesign following the intervention of upper-level regulatory bodies. Consequently, the government needed to rationalise both the original and revised plans towards different audiences, including Shuidong residents, the general public, and

upper-level regulatory agencies. In these rationalisations, the government's authenticity narratives are presented through the Shuidong Project plans, conversations with Shuidong communities and promotional materials. Thus, this paper analyses government documents and project portfolios, in addition to performing semi-structured interviews with government officials, project planners and local residents.

This study examines the master plans for Huizhou from the past three decades to illustrate the role of the Shuidong Quarter in the city's development schemes. It then examines in detail how authenticity principles in the nation-level heritage legislation are interpreted in the local heritage regulations. Through comparisons between the original and revised project plans, the study investigates the actual purposes of the Shuidong Project and differences in the related authenticity narratives. It also reviews promotional materials to understand how the concept of authenticity is articulated to the general public.

In addition to the document review, this study conducted 12 interviews in July 2019 and November 2020 with stakeholders who were directly involved in or impacted by the Shuidong Project. Two municipal government officials who have engaged in both phases of the Project were interviewed to explore its political contexts, the interventions by superordinate heritage administrations and the official explanation for its authenticity. The study also collected data from a core member (hereinafter Core Member) of the Leading Group for the Transformation of Shuidong Quarter (LGTSQ) to understand the development of the project plans and the reasons behind variations in the interpretation of authenticity over time. The study interviewed five relocated residents (hereinafter Relocated Residents) about the government's justification for the demolition of West Shuidong Street and related relocation measures for the local communities during the first phase of the Project. It also interviewed four East Shuidong Street residents (hereinafter Remaining Residents) about the government's explanations for the cancellation of both reconstruction and relocation plans for the East Shuidong Street communities.

4 Shuidong Reconstruction Project

The Shuidong Quarter is situated at the confluence of the East and Xizhi rivers in the Qiaodong subdistrict, Huicheng District, Huizhou, Guangdong Province (Fig. 1). Covering an area of around 10 hectares, the Quarter includes one historical and cultural site protected at the municipal level, one immovable cultural relic, 16 historical buildings identified at the city level, 10 historical alleys and other traditional Cantonese houses (Feng and Gong 2018).

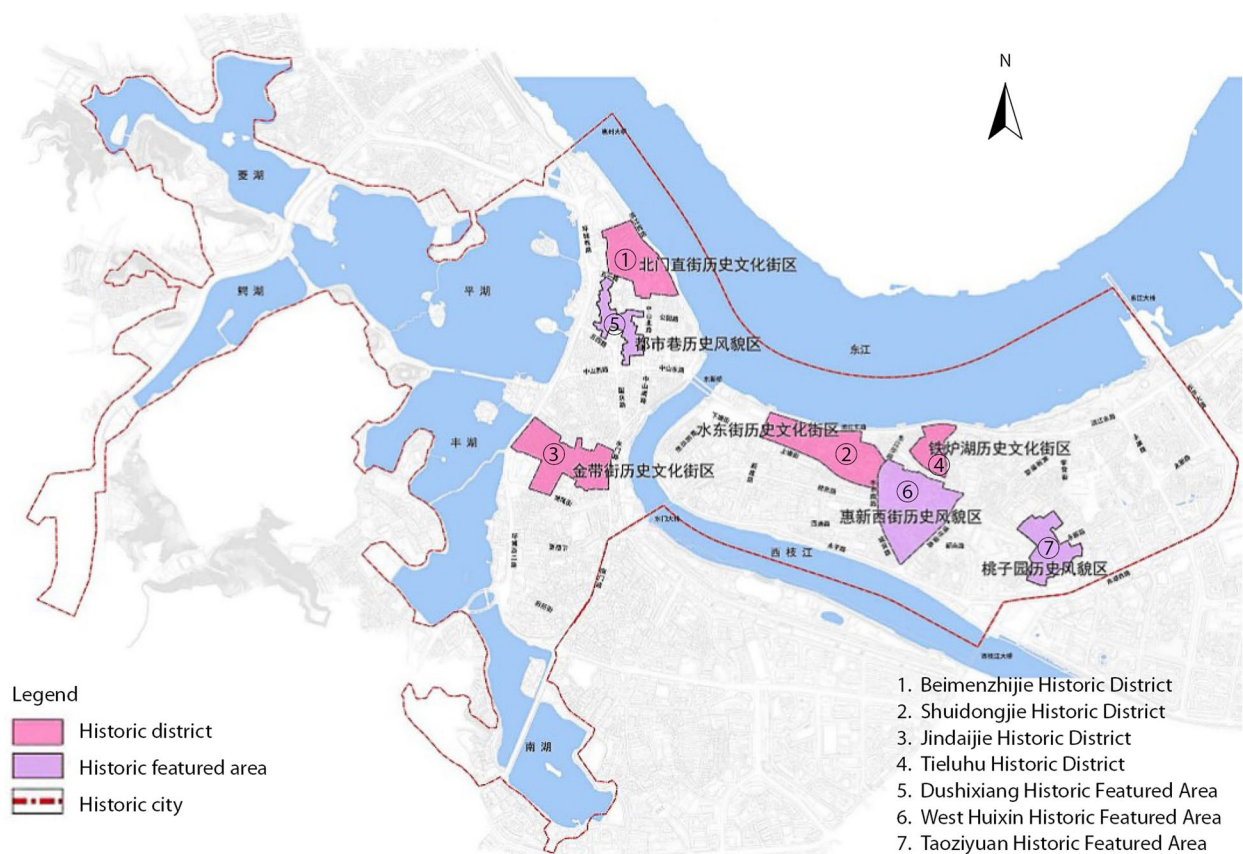


Fig. 1 Map of the Shuidong Quarter in Huicheng District, Huizhou. (Source: An-Design Architects)

The Quarter is known for its Shuidong Street, which was initially built during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) as a footpath. Since the Ming Dynasty (1279–1368), the street has become an important passage to connect the main counties of Huizhou that were separated by the rivers (Li 1991). Water transportation was essential for the movement of people and goods across the cities along the East River; thus, because Qiaodong was surrounded by water on three sides at the centre of Guishan County, it has prospered as an intermediary centre of trade (Li 1991). In this area, Shuidong Quarter has become the largest marketplace in Huizhou. In the 1920s, the streets in the Quarter were widened and Cantonese arcade houses (*qilou*) were built on both sides. The arcade houses are a type of Cantonese architecture that originated in the 19th century as a mixture of traditional Chinese and Western architectural styles. These two-to-four-storey buildings are designed for both commercial and residential use, with the first floor used to operate small businesses while the upper floors were used as the shopkeepers' living space. The buildings

are linked together to form a shaded corridor and protect the pedestrians and shopkeepers from the blazing sun and rain (Fig. 2). The Quarter was extensively damaged by bombing during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945); thus, two-thirds of its houses were repaired or rebuilt after the founding of the PRC in 1949 (Liao et al. 1996). Before the launch of the Shuidong Reconstruction Project, around 3% of buildings alongside Shuidong Street were built during the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), and 33.17% were built during the Republic of China (1912–1949) (Gong and Zhong 2015; An-Design Architects 2017).

Shuidong Quarter is significant in that its business activities have continued since the Ming and Qing dynasties in a reflection of Huizhou's commercial development. As it retains the urban fabric from the Republic of China, it is the only area of Huizhou with a dense distribution of Cantonese architecture built during the early 20th century. However, the Quarter has degenerated since the 1990s because new commercial spaces were developed in other sub-districts, and its original residents who became rich through their small businesses or had

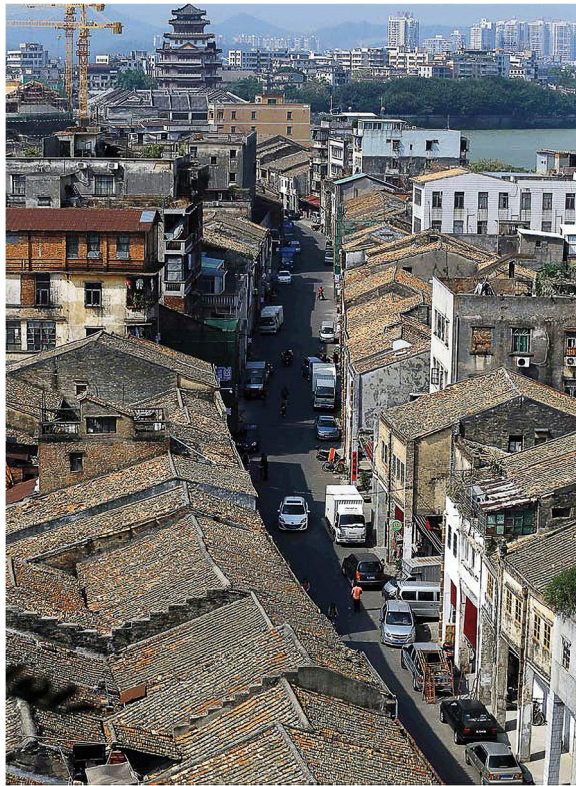


Fig. 2 Cantonese arcade houses along East Shuidong Street. (Source: An-Design Architects)

monetary support from Hong Kong relatives have gradually moved out¹. The local government classified over one-third of the Quarter's buildings as decrepit housing and 54% had safety issues, such as ageing electrical systems and decayed timbers (Fig. 3). In addition, unauthorised building works along the streets had disrupted the historic landscape of Cantonese arcade houses (An-Design Architects 2017).

4.1 Phase 1: reconstruction of the West section, 2007–2012

From 2006, in alignment with Huizhou's sustainable development goal to create an ideal city to live and work in, the Huizhou local government was preparing to renew the Shuidong Quarter (Xu and Wang 2014) and commissioned a design company to help draft a design portfolio. In the meantime, during a visit to Anhui Province to



Fig. 3 The damaged original stairs at the House of Li. (Source: An-Design Architects)

explore the revitalisation of historic districts, Huizhou's then-mayor was enchanted with the province's traditional Hui-style architecture and intended to apply its characteristics to Cantonese arcade houses in the Quarter because both architectural styles use grey and white colours, similar gable designs and wood carvings on the beams and columns². Although Huizhou was successfully nominated as a provincial Famous Historical and Cultural City (FHCC) in 1991, Shuidong Quarter at that time was not an official historic district identified at the state or provincial levels and superordinate administrations. Therefore, the Department of Culture and Tourism of Guangdong and the Department of Housing and Urban–Rural Development of Guangdong did not need to examine the renewal scheme (Wang and Bramwell 2012). Additionally, neither municipal legislation for the protection of historical districts nor provincial regulations for the management of the provincial FHCC were established to supervise the urban renewal projects in Huizhou. Thus, the then-mayor, the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, and the design company directly controlled the interpretation of national-level authenticity principles and applied them to legitimise their reconstruction of buildings surrounding Shuidong Street in the name of heritage conservation.

In June 2008, as directed by the then-mayor and the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, the LGTSQ was founded as a specific management committee to mark the launch of the Shuidong Reconstruction Project. According to the *Planning for the Protection and Renewal of Traditional Districts in Qiaodong* document (The People's Government of Huizhou Municipality 2008), the Project would be divided into three phases to upgrade different areas of the Quarter

¹ According to the interviews with relocated residents. The interviewees are relocated resident #1 (housewife), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 14 November 2020; relocated resident #4 (retailer), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 15 November 2020; relocated resident #5 (retired salesman), telephone conversation with the author, 15 November 2020.

² According to interviews with the core member of the Leading Group for the Transformation of Shuidong Quarter, Huizhou, conducted by the author on 2, 5 and 10 July 2019.



Fig. 4 The targeted area of the original plan for the Shuidong Reconstruction Project. (Source: Huizhou Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development)



Fig. 5 Reconstructed Cantonese arcade houses in West Shuidong Street (left) versus Hui architecture (right). (Source: The author)

in sequence. As Baogong Alley divides the main street of the Quarter, Shuidong Street, into two sections, the first phase targeted neighbourhoods surrounding West Shuidong Street while the following phases targeted areas around East Shuidong Street (Fig. 4). Ultimately, streets of Cantonese arcade houses in the Quarter would be transformed into ensembles of Cantonese arcade houses combining Hui-style architectural elements. The Quarter would be revitalised into ‘a recreational hub for Huizhou residents and a tourist destination showcasing the city’s culture and history’ (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2008).

Renderings of the houses around West Shuidong Street show that the Hui-style elements, including gables with their top parts looking like warped horse-heads, black tiles and white walls, were integrated into the Cantonese arcade houses (Fig. 5). According to the interviewed

residents, this borrowing of architectural features from other regions was largely influenced by the then-mayor’s personal preferences. The LGTSQ responded in promotional news articles that the design was based on the ‘traditional Chinese style’ and supplemented by ‘modern Western elements’ to adhere to ‘*xiujiurujin*’³. Furthermore, the linear spatial composition of the Cantonese arcade houses on both sides of West Shuidong Street was replaced by five separate building ensembles. There were doubts concerning their authenticity because Cantonese arcade houses are supposed to be built in rows (Fig. 6). The designer responded that the alteration was

³ According to interviews with the core member of the Leading Group for the Transformation of Shuidong Quarter, Huizhou, conducted by the author on 2, 5 and 10 July 2019.



Fig. 6 Urban fabric of the Quarter (left) versus the reconstructed West Shuidong Street (right). (Source: An-Design Architects)

to improve the buildings' fire resistance and that architectural professionals would be capable of identifying their authenticity by the colour arrangements and architectural structures of the houses. He further contended that the blending of Chinese and Western elements is a manifestation of authenticity through its portrayal of the essence of Canton culture⁴. The portfolio and official response reveal that in the first phase, the Quarter's authenticity was a top-down construction largely based on an individual local government official's aesthetic preferences and economic needs. This is a one-way imposition of a 'professional' understanding of authenticity on the local communities, which goes against the emphasis on intangible elements and diverse social contexts in the evolving definition of authenticity in the national-level heritage regulations.

In 2009, the relocation of West Shuidong Street residents began with joint efforts from the LGTSQ and the Shuidong Residents' Committee (*juweihui*). The local government justified their decision to the local residents as a necessary action to regenerate the dilapidated Quarter into an epitome of the traditional Huizhou architecture⁵. Offered the choice of compensation by either an exchange of housing properties in other areas or

in the Quarter, most residents chose to return to Shuidong Quarter because they thought they could profit from commercial activities on the ground floor of their new building, as the ground floors of Cantonese arcade houses were used as shops with the living spaces on the upper floors. However, because a tourism company was commissioned to manage commerce on West Shuidong Street, the residents lost the opportunity to run their businesses in their own houses, despite the fact that the combination of residential and commercial functions provided by the house for its inhabitants was a prominent traditional characteristic of Cantonese arcade houses⁶. By borrowing 'authenticity' from the national-level conservation guidelines as a rationale for a strict control of the community's lifestyles and the visual beauty of traditional buildings in West Shuidong Street, the local administrations sanitised the physical environment of the Quarter using an up-down model of commercial development and community-based elements of authenticity were marginalised in the process of the interpretation of authenticity.

The first phase of the Project revealed the local government's subjective interpretation and implementation of authenticity to rationalise its reconstruction of West Shuidong Street. Despite the inclusion of authenticity principles in the state's heritage regulations and conservation guidelines, because the Quarter was not an official historic district, inspections from higher government tiers and municipal heritage legislation were absent in the management practice. Thus, local government rationale could overshadow professional expertise and

⁴ According to the interview with Government official B from Huizhou Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, conducted by the author on 12 November 2020.

⁵ According to the interviews with remaining residents and relocated residents. The interviewees are remaining resident #1 (housewife), telephone conversation with the author, Huizhou, 1 July 2019; remaining resident #2 (retired factory worker), telephone conversation with the author, Huizhou, 1 July 2019; remaining resident #3 (housewife), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 4 July 2019; remaining resident #4 (shopkeeper), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 4 July 2019; relocated resident #1 (housewife), telephone conversation with the author, Huizhou, 3 July 2019; relocated resident #2 (driver), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 3 July 2019; relocated resident #3 (vendor), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 4 July 2019.

⁶ According to the interviews with relocated residents. The interviewees are relocated resident #1 (housewife), telephone conversation with the author, Huizhou, 3 July 2019; relocated resident #2 (driver), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 3 July 2019; relocated resident #3 (vendor), interviewed by the author, Huizhou, 4 July 2019.

heritage regulations (Cui 2018). The concept of authenticity introduced in national-level conservation principles was appropriated to over-emphasise aesthetic values and the neatness of physical environments, which led to the legitimization of the transformation of West Shuidong Street into a commercial complex decorated with pseudo-antique architectural elements (Qian 2007). The term ‘authenticity’ was further used as a scientific term for the local government to advertise the reconstructed area to the wider public, who knew little about the Quarter or conservation principles. Hence, the public would normally be attracted to visit the reconstructed street as tourists and would not dissent too much.

4.2 Contention and transition

While reconstruction in West Shuidong Street has been underway since 2011, the local citizens raised discussions and shared memoirs about the Quarter mainly via the local online social media platform ‘*xizi hupan*’ with their concerns that the reconstructed area was becoming a museum of pseudo-antique architecture instead of an expression of ‘*xiujiurujiu*’. In the meantime, the municipal government relaunched preparations for a national FHCC application (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2009). Huizhou has strived to achieve this title because it is ‘of high value and will significantly promote the city’s competitiveness’ according to the then and current directors of the municipal planning bureaus⁷. Its application to become a national FHCC failed in 1993, partly because of its inadequate numbers of provincially authorised historical and cultural districts and its poor maintenance of historic quarters (Xu and Li 2015). Thus, in this period, the local government must promulgate heritage regulations and provide periodic conservation reports about its official heritage sites to the Department of Housing and Urban–Rural Development of Guangdong Province. The provincial government would then submit its national FHCC application portfolio to the Ministry of Construction and the SACH for review and evaluation. The Shuidong Quarter, together with other four historic districts, were chosen to apply for the title. Furthermore, the scale and integrity of official historical and cultural districts is also essential in the selection of the national FHCC, requiring, among other conditions, that over 50% of the old buildings in core protected areas be banned from demolition and that preservation conditions of old buildings align with the criteria for authenticity in national heritage regulations (State Council of PRC

2010). Thus, local officials worried that the reconstruction of West Shuidong Street would reduce the Quarter’s physical authenticity because the urban fabric in West Shuidong Street had already been changed significantly⁸, which could prevent the Quarter from being nominated as an official historic district and hence affect the national FHCC application.

In 2011, the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development consulted the provincial heritage expert committee on the renewal of Huizhou’s inner-city areas and the national FHCC application. The committee members from provincial institutes and universities urged that the reconstruction work be terminated immediately after they were informed about the details of the Project (Han 2011). They warned that Huizhou would not pass the national FHCC assessment, which opposes reconstructions in provincial historical and cultural districts, and that the practice violated authenticity principles that respect the original state of historic buildings and contributions of different periods to the physical fabric (State Council of PRC 2008). Considering the national FHCC assessment criteria and future inspections from state and provincial authorities, the Shuidong Reconstruction Project was suspended in 2012 as the local government sought opportunities for a successful national FHCC application.

4.3 Phase 2: conservation and tourism (2016–present)

Between 2012 and 2015, Huizhou pursued its application for a national FHCC accreditation. To diminish any negative effects of the reconstruction of West Shuidong Street on its application, the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development re-demarcated areas around East Shuidong Street as the core protected zone of Shuidong Quarter, while the reconstructed area was delimited as a buffer zone. Meanwhile, the newly established city master plan (2006–2020) listed conservation principles that were localised from the national heritage regulations in a section named ‘Protection of the Historical and Cultural City’, including comprehensive protections for the traditional landscape and spatial layout, authenticity and integrity of the area, and adherence to the original state of heritage sites. The plan also encourages tourism development in the historic districts under effective protection (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2012). The principles of authenticity from national conservation guidelines were officially introduced into municipal regulations, which restricted the

⁷ According to interviews with the core member of the Leading Group for the Transformation of Shuidong Quarter, Huizhou, conducted by the author on 2, 5 and 10 July 2019.

⁸ According to the interview with Government official A from Huizhou Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, conducted by the author on 5 July 2019.

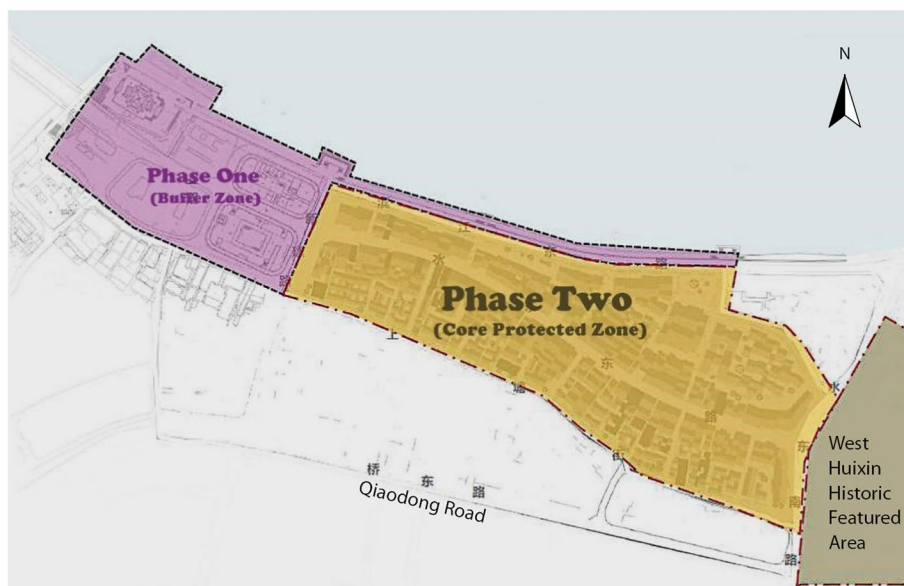


Fig. 7 Core protected and buffer zones in Shuidong Quarter. (Source: The People's Government of Huizhou Municipality)

reconstruction of Shuidong Quarter, whereas Huizhou's sustainable development goal as a tourism city further stimulates the revitalisation of Shuidong Quarter as a recreational centre.

Following its declaration of Shuidong Quarter as a provincial historical and cultural district in 2014, Huizhou succeeded in its national FHCC application in 2015 (Xu and Li 2015). The new status of the Quarter has greatly regulated the interpretation and implementation of national-level authenticity principles in the Shuidong Restoration Project because both state and provincial heritage administrations are now involved in examining the conservation of the Quarter (State Council of PRC 2008). This also means that the management of Shuidong Quarter should strictly abide by the state's heritage regulations, especially the *Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages* (State Council of PRC 2008) and the *Cultural Relics Protection Law* (State Council of PRC 2002). In the same year, having obtained legislative power, The People's Government of Huizhou Municipality (2016) issued the *Protection Planning for the Famous Historical and Cultural City of Huizhou*, which clarifies the roles of different local administrations in the management of Shuidong Quarter and requires the establishment of a detailed regulatory plan articulating conservation measures for the area. For example, new architectural constructions and the demolition of historic buildings are not allowed in the core protected zone. Thus, to maintain the new status of Shuidong Quarter and Huizhou, with restrictions from multi-level heritage legislation

and inspections, local administrations must follow national-level authenticity principles in the Project plan and actual implementation, rather than simply reconstructing the Quarter in the name of authenticity as shown during the first phase.

In 2016, supervised by the Department of Housing and Urban–Rural Development of Guangdong and the Guangdong Bureau of Cultural Relics, the redesign of the Shuidong Reconstruction Project was initiated that only targets the core protected zone covering an area of 7.1 hectares surrounding East Shuidong Street (Fig. 7). In the process of formulating the detailed regulatory plan, the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development commissioned a planning institute to design conservation and revitalisation measures for East Shuidong Street. After conducting detailed documentation on each building's façade and interior structure and evaluating their conservation status, the planning institute customised a conservation plan for each house based on its current condition and level of harmony with Shuidong Quarter's architectural styles. For example, the façades of historic buildings, especially their pediments, windows, screens and cornices that notably manifest Cantonese architectural styles, should be repaired based on the '*xiujiujiu*' principle. Modern buildings whose scales are compatible with the historic landscape can be retained by altering their exterior building elements in accordance with the Quarter's urban fabric (An-Design Architects 2017).

In 2017, the *Detailed Regulatory Plan on the Protection of Shuidong Historical and Cultural District* was issued

by the Municipal Bureau of Housing and Urban–Rural Development. This document adhered to Huizhou’s *Protection Planning for the Famous Historical and Cultural City of Huizhou* (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2016) and clearly articulates the requirements for authenticity in the management of Shuidong Quarter, including the special protection of historic buildings protected at the municipal level, appropriate repairs of damaged historic buildings and documentation of historical changes. The commercial and residential use of Shuidong Quarter should be continued, which guarantees the ongoing residency of East Shuidong Street communities (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2017). The interpretation of authenticity in the *Detailed Regulatory Plan* corresponds to the evolving definition of authenticity in the 2015 China Principles that respects the continuation of living heritage sites’ original functions and diachronic values (ICOMOS China 2015).

Similar to Phase 1, commercial activities are still the dominant elements in the revitalised Quarter. Now mainly positioned as a remarkable *qilou* shopping district, Shuidong Quarter will be further developed into three thematic commercial zones, which present its identity as it changed over different periods: i.e., as a commercial port, a hub of Cantonese arcade houses and a hometown for overseas Chinese. Huizhou’s intangible cultural heritage, including bamboo weaving and dragon dance, will be promoted in the form of commodities or performing arts. The Quarter will ultimately be integrated into the inner city’s cultural route to present Huizhou’s history of commercial development and its Cantonese built heritage (The People’s Government of Huizhou Municipality 2017).

Overall, the effectiveness of national-level authenticity principles in the Shuidong Restoration Project was enhanced following the involvement of upper-level heritage legislations and examinations by the superordinate authorities involved in the management of Shuidong Quarter after its ascension into a provincial historical and cultural district. The redesigned plan conforms to the criteria of physical authenticity in national heritage regulations by emphasising the diachronic values of historic buildings, the Quarter’s original functions and the documentation of conservation work. Intangible heritage and community values have also been mentioned in the written documents. Nonetheless, the interpretation of authenticity in the second phase, which still prioritises material-based elements and bureaucratic thinking to commodify the historic quarter into a tourist product, is still far away from the requirements for authenticity from international conservation documents.

5 Discussion

The idea of authenticity as derived from the Western values for cultural fabric and truth is absent from the Chinese traditional culture, which appreciates the aesthetics rather than the scientific qualities of historic landscapes (Derde 2010; Yang et al. 2020). Likewise, the reconstruction of historic architecture was commonly conducted in pre-modern China because of the rapid decay of wooden constructions and the emphasis on spirituality over materiality in the conservation discourse (Zhu and Maags 2020). It is only since the 1980s that China has introduced a material-based concept of authenticity from the international heritage conservation doctrine to keep up with the global trends (Zhu and Maags 2020) where reconstruction began to be linked with the issue of authenticity. In national-level policies, however, the conservation of historic urban landscapes had long yielded to urban and social modernisation until the late 1990s, when the State Council of PRC called for the rescue of cultural relics (Yan 2018). Due to the deep-rooted ‘use first’ principles for historic relics (prioritisation of economic development over preservation) and the city’s craving for an image of advancement and modernisation, the advocacy to preserve authenticity inevitably collides with and is ultimately subjected to the political and economic potential of the heritage site. As shown in the Shuidong Project, authenticity is first used as an excuse for the spatial cleansing of the Quarter through reconstruction and now as a strict criterion leading to the termination of the reconstruction work in order to attain the National FHCC accreditation. However, authenticity is, above all, a tool to serve the shifting priorities of the local government, which reflects the political and market-driven leanings of local heritage conservation practices in China.

This study further argues that the interpretation of authenticity keeps changing because of the shifting local socio-political factors. Variations in the top-down policy transfer, alterations in local development priorities and the involved regulatory powers all contribute to the changes in the articulation of authenticity in the Shuidong Reconstruction Project.

The introduction of authenticity criteria from national conservation guidelines to local regulations experienced at least two levels (i.e., provincial and municipal) of policy transfer. Due to the non-state government’s leeway in policymaking and implementation, the authenticity narratives could continue to transform across administrative levels (Maags 2020). The state-level authenticity principles thus become malleable through the local administrations’ self-interests, which could adjust the authenticity contents to justify heritage reconstructions and fulfil local government agendas (Acharya 2004;

Zhu and Maags 2020). In the first phase of the Shuidong Reconstruction Project, the renewal of Shuidong Quarter was not restricted by the national heritage law because it only applies to sites protected at the state level. Thus, the local government successfully borrowed ‘authenticity’ as a scientific term to legitimise its reconstruction of West Shuidong Street.

However, the interpretation and implementation of authenticity are further influenced by the local government’s shifting needs. Alongside the regular changes in leading local officials, the city’s development priorities may change over time. With Huizhou’s main task updated into attaining the national FHCC accreditation, the local administrations must formulate their heritage regulations to comprehensively articulate their authenticity principles in alignment with upper-level standards. In the meantime, to win the reputation as a heritage site and maintain it afterwards, the subjective construction of authenticity in the Shuidong Quarter through reconstruction had to be terminated and followed by the appropriate repair of historic buildings based on their historical conditions.

The regulatory power involved in local heritage projects is also shifting depending on the protection level of the historic district and the improvement of sub-national heritage regulations, which affects the interpretation of authenticity throughout the reconstruction process. As official heritage sites are increasingly regarded as assets for city branding and political achievements, the local governments are dedicated to pursuing heritage authentication by upper-level authorities. Following the ascension of historic districts as heritage sites protected at the national or provincial levels, superordinate administrations intervene in the conservation work to subsequently modify the interpretation of authenticity by local governments towards the districts.

6 Conclusion

The destructive reconstruction of dilapidated historic districts driven by the local governments’ needs for political and economic achievements has been commonly performed in the name of heritage conservation in China for over 20 years. While its official scheme and promotional materials emphasise ‘authenticity’ as a highlight of such reconstructed historic districts, the fake-antique architecture and functional restoration actually deviate from authenticity as defined in the national-level heritage regulations. This study investigates the factors leading to variations in the interpretation of the national-level authenticity principles in the reconstruction of Shuidong historic quarter in Huizhou, Guangdong Province. The subjective construction of authenticity was shown to rationalise the pro-profit reconstruction of unofficial historic districts, where local political agendas could

overshadow conservation principles. However, such an interpretation is consistently changing because of the shifting local politics and involved regulatory powers. As shown in the first phase of the Shuidong Project, ‘authenticity’ became a tool for the local government to legitimise the reconstruction of the dilapidated historic area into a commercial complex with a historicist architectural design. In contrast, during the second phase, with the establishment of municipal heritage regulations and the authorisation of Shuidong Quarter as an official heritage site inspected by upper-level administrations, the Project has carefully interpreted the national-level authenticity principles, respecting the diachronic values of historic buildings, intangible cultural heritage and community values. Nonetheless, the over-emphasis on the physical architectural appearance and commodification of regional culture indicates that the national-level authenticity guidelines are adopted not for pure conservation purposes but to serve the local government’s political agendas, which reflects the disconnection between conservation ideologies and bureaucratic realities.

This research study has explored only the mediation across vertical lines of authority on the interpretation of authenticity in reconstruction practices; hence, future studies could examine the dynamics between different horizontal municipal administrations responsible for heritage conservation or the so-called *tiao-kuai* relationship that combines both the vertical and horizontal organs of government.

Abbreviations

FHCC: Famous Historical and Cultural Cities; ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites; LGTSQ: Leading Group for the Transformation of Shuidong Quarter; PRC: People’s Republic of China; SACH: State Administration of Cultural Heritage.

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Author’s contributions

The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

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