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# The right to entrepreneurial expression over heritage significance: the micropolitics of an adapted cafe in a historic Chinese town

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## Abstract

This study draws on Henri Lefebvre's (*The production of space*, 1992, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith) concept of the spatial triad to examine the micropolitics of the production of urban and social space in a cafe in a historic tourist town in the southern Chinese city of Zhuhai. Such a spatial and social examination of the historic town of Tangjiawan's Wangchuan Cafe is conducted in the context of a growing consumer society and experience economy in China. Specifically, we found that the cafe proprietor has performed a role that is commonly associated with official planners and technocrats in creating a 'coffee art living space' in a process that Lefebvre describes as a 'representation of space'; and that 'spatial practices' serve to shape the space away from the heritage significance of the town and towards entrepreneurially aligned ideals. Such resultant consumerist spaces are coconstructed with and negotiated by visitors and consumers. In conducting such an examination, we highlight and critique the ways in which dominant discourses operate in a microsite, such as that of a cafe, that has become a key cultural tourism attraction of the refurbished historic town, the means by which such discourses and visions result in real-world transformations and the ways in which visitors and tourists interpret and negotiate such a microsite.

**Keywords:** adaptive reuse, conservation, experience economy, cultural tourism, gentrification, historic town, China

## 1 Introduction

In response to a nascent visual movement in the staging of instagrammable, social media appealing retail spaces within the broader global trend of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 2011), China's conservation effort in revitalising historic towns (古镇) has spurred the development of the local cultural tourism industry in the forms of cafes, art studios and boutique homestays. These establishments typically strive to display artistic and/or poetic nuances through visually attractive, photogenic and desirable displays such as those involving flowers and trendy decorations within and outside these

establishments to facilitate instagrammable photo opportunities for visitors.

Against the rising backdrop of a developing consumer society and experience economy specifically in China's Greater Bay Area cities and more broadly in its urban spaces, this study examines the micropolitics involved in the production of such consumer spaces. In particular, it uses Lefebvre's (1992) concept of the spatial triad to analyse the roles of the cafe owner in the selection of a particular theme for the space, the owner's work on and perception of the space and how these have been variously negotiated by cafe guests and residents (including those who do not use the cafe). In doing so, this paper contributes to our understanding of the micropolitics of heritage towns and their adaptive reuse, moving beyond those discourses and practices centred on cultural and historical significances, to include the authoritative

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actions of building owners and users and the associated everyday negotiations.

The microsite of this study, Wangchuan Cafe (忘川咖啡), is situated in the historic town of Tangjiawan, Zhuhai city, Guangdong Province, China. As one of the oldest historic towns within Zhuhai city, Tangjiawan arguably has rich reserves of culture and history. This historic town is renowned for being the birthplace of Tang Shao-yi, the Republic of China's first premier. The majority of Tangjiawan's cultural and tourist development effort is focused along a particular stretch of road, Shanfang Road, where traditional town houses have been readapted for use as commercial and consumer spaces. The Wangchuan Cafe particularly stands out in Shanfang Road as a *wanghong* (网红- China's equivalent of instagrammable) cafe given its en masse appeal as a nuanced curation of the cafe proprietor's deliberate mingling of his personal (artistic, gastronomic, and lifestyle) and commercial interests. The practice of such deliberate acts sheds light on the salient process underlying the production of Chinese urban and heritage tourism spaces in the emerging Chinese consumer and experience economy.

Informed by ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with Wangchuan Cafe's proprietor, staff, visitors and tourists, our inquiry considers Lefebvre's (1992) spatial conceptualisations, i.e., the technocratic and official visions of the proprietor (representations of space), spatial operations that materialise the endorsed visions (spatial practices) and the actual interpretations and appropriations by visitors and tourists in their encounters and experiences within Wangchuan Cafe (representational space).

## 2 Social construction, power and the production of the experiences and settings of cultural tourism

The sociopolitics of the production of postindustrial consumption and their relationship with heritage sites have been an important topic of inquiry (Lynch 2022; Ong 2012). The conservation and adaptation of industrial buildings have been a challenge and concern for architects and heritage planners in China (Wang and Nan 2007). Assessing the entanglements of capitalistic ideals in Macao in Coloane Village's traditional shipyards located alongside the territory's booming casino resorts, Ong (2012) argued for the protection of Macao's working class and industrial heritage. Additionally, writing on postindustrial Macao, Simpson (2008) examined the contradictions inherent between the consumptive logics applied and the territory's casino-led postindustrialism within this cultural world heritage city.

Symbolic consumption, as an infused by product of the postmodern consumption era, has encouraged the emergence of cultural and creative industries as a means

of meaningful shaping urban internal space. Such purposeful spaces play vital roles in economically revitalising cities and enriching people's spiritual lives since consumption transcends the sphere of economic activity into the social and cultural processing of symbols and their interrelationships (Baudrillard 1996). Consumption takes on meanings constructed by various social relationships that become superimposed on consumption spaces and infuses then with meaning beyond their functional role as a location for consumption activities (Crewe and Lowe 1995). A 'cultural and spatial turn' via the revisioning of our cultural and tourism worlds (Barnett 1998) occurs just as the study of new cultural geography has begun to engage the ontology of spaces. From a macro perspective, consumer space is shaped and marketed in the context of social transformation, globalisation, transnational capital and postmodernism (Lowe 2000; Lyons 2005; Zukin 1998). Lyons (2005) focuses on the construction and local promotion of cafe space in the context of globalisation. In considering Guangzhou's themed restaurants, (Zeng et al. 2013) analyse the symbolic production of local food culture space against the backdrop of the conflict between globalisation and localisation. Similarly, within microgeography studies, the scale of space research has focused down to the microspaces entwined in daily human activities. In the study of consumer spaces, urban microspaces with rich cultural manifestations, such as bars, restaurants, bookstores, and theatres, have gradually become objects of study. Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe (2000) observe a trend in the appropriation of symbols, images, gazing, acting, body, celebrity anecdotes and historical stories when studying the complexities associated with the construction and shaping of consumer space. Consumers are able to perceive the inherent symbolism of a space during their experience of and consumption within that space and will interpret the cultural implications of symbols and images in consumption space accordingly (Chaney 1990; Goss 1993). This is evident in the study of local spaces and the perceptions of consumers and/or operators in cultural bookstores (Xie, Feng, and Zhu 2014), less-developed rural minority areas (Liu, Gan, and Chen 2016), and restaurants and tea houses participating in exotic and heritage spaces (Liu and Chen 2018). While extant literature on cultural consumption spaces has offered rich phenomenological insights into consumer perceptions and experiences, locality and space-time, an assessment of how the arrangement and experience of cultural consumption spaces are constructed against the nascent trend of integrating culture, art and the particularity of modern lifestyles in heritage rich tourist areas such as historic/ancient towns is lacking.

Social constructivist perspectives in tourism research have illuminated the ways in which the travel

phenomenon is shaped by a myriad of social and cultural processes (Erb 2000; McIntosh 1999; Melis and Chambers 2021; Ong and du Cros 2012). This necessitates seeing and treating tourism as a phenomena that reaches beyond its core business and marketing orientation and embracing its complexities and structural orientation as a social phenomenon and activity (Hollinshead 2007; Hollinshead and Jamal 2007). By examining the ontology of tourism environments, one can begin to discover how tourism spaces and touristic activities diffuse meanings, values and aspirations among individual visitors (Erb 2000; Hollinshead 2007; Jamal and Hollinshead 2001). Through our investigation into a gentrified and revitalised Chinese historic town and its occupants, we discovered multiple values and interpretations engaged as adaptive reuses of traditional Chinese residences, such as the one Wangchuan Cafe resides in, and that this type of reimagining is never a value-free project.

Such an endeavour as that taken by Wangchuan Cafe is entangled in webs of power. Power and its operations in heritage and tourism are areas of concern to researchers investigating the gentrification of historic towns specifically and that of cultural and heritage tourism more broadly. In the case of historic towns and their gentrification, scholars have documented urban struggles (Chen and Zhang 2021) and power plays in their production (Ning and Chang 2021). In terms of cultural and heritage tourism, academic inquiries have extended into the politics of their experiences and places (Di Giovine 2009; Ong 2012; Ong and du Cros 2012; Ong, Ryan, and McIntosh 2014; Winter 2007). The shaping of the Wangchuan Cafe in Tangjiawan is one example of a consumer space caught within the web of urban politics. In this paper, we focus on the micropolitics involving the cafe proprietor, staff, and the cafe's users, i.e., customers and tourists to this newly minted wanghong tourist attraction (Wangchuan Cafe) and to the historic town itself (Tangjiawan). Specifically, we adopted Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space in general and that of his spatial triad, as they are particularly useful in uncovering the micropolitics of the heritage and tourism space that Wangchuan Cafe embodies.

Lefebvre's concept of the spatial triad has provided great utility for heritage and tourism research (Buzinde and Manuel-Navarrete 2013; Cavallo and Di Matteo 2021; Farmaki, Christou, and Saveriades 2020; Leary 2009; Palmer 2010) in terms of the unpacking of the dominant, everyday discourses and practices that influence urban spaces (Carp 2008; Gottdiener 1993; Mtolo 2021). There are three aspects to Lefebvre's spatial triad: representations of space, spatial practices and spaces of representations, with all three aspects operating in tandem, like a three-dimensional version of a Marxian dialectical approach. The first dimension, representation of space, is concerned with the official, technocratic and intellectual uses of urban spaces

for planning, administrative and business purposes and falls within the 'scientific' and objective lens of architects, engineers, planners and artists. In our study, the work of Wangchuan's cafe proprietor, with his technocratic visions and development plans for the cafe, falls within the 'representation of space.' The second dimension, spatial practices, concerns the physical operations of the space and place and the routine everyday practices that occur within the space and speak to and conform to official representations of the space. In our empirical case, the spatial transformations imbedded in the adaptive reuse of traditional houses within Tangjiawan and the routine consumption of these places by tourists and visitors are manifestations of spatial spaces. Third, spaces of representation constitute the individual urbanite's consumption of the curated space and highlight the consumer's values and interpretations that might conflict with the cafe proprietor's technocratic discourses.

From feminist spatial theories to the poststructuralist analysis of discourse and performances, there exist various competing theories regarding the analysis of the politics of spaces. Here, we are concerned with issues of class and their implications for everyday life, and Lefebvre's concepts are well suited for such analyses. In particular, Lefebvre's spatial triad clarifies the role of a class of experts and elites in leading the enactment of social stratification in societies via the production of specific spaces. In this study, the cafe owner's visions are aligned with the broader developmental plans for the village, which had centred on the adaptative reuse of old buildings for broadly 'cultural' commercial purposes and which have arguably eclipsed the heritage values of the town.

### 3 Methods

Tangjiawan's historic town is an ancient Chinese town with a rich culture and history. The town itself is located in southern Zhuhai city in the Lingnan region on the west bank of the Pearl River estuary. The earliest recorded history of Tangjiawan dates back to the early 16th century, as does the increasing number and size of the Tang lineage, and was then named Tangjia village (Zhu and Zhou 2006). The village is now commonly known as Tangjiawan, alluding to Tangjia as a village as well as to its adjacency to a bay (Zhou 2016). The historic town covers an area of approximately 20 ha and includes careful architectural maintenance of the traditional Chinese houses of the region. For instance, the well-preserved traditional structure of the original clan settlement reflects the patrilineal descent system of the Chinese family in Guangdong. Following the clan's prosperity and further branching out to adjacent areas, a cluster of buildings was shaped with a unified architectural style in the village (Zhu, Zhang, and Ding 2005). This architectural style features a blend of traditional Chinese and Western

cultures, which was indirectly influenced by both the surrounding area and foreign culture.

To conserve the important cultural heritage in Tangjiawan, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China announced that Tangjiawan was included in the third group of national historical and cultural towns in 2007 (State Administration of Cultural Heritage 2007). According to Guo (2020), Tangjiawan is the first town in China to successfully declare itself a national historical and cultural town based on its relatively modern historical sites. Tangjiawan houses a variety of historical buildings, such as traditional Chinese dwellings, ancestral halls, renowned individual dwellings (Tang Shao-yi), and private gardens, many of which feature Lingnan culture and include foreign culture. Notably, Tangjiawan has come to embody Chinese historical and cultural values and has become a tourist attraction for cultural tourists.

Our study is situated in Wangchuan Cafe, No. 125 Shanfang Road, and examines its embodied spaces primarily from the perspective of the proprietor and customers. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews and a collection of online reviews about the cafe. The first part of the fieldwork was conducted between 14 and 17 Jan 2021 on three separate occasions: (1) participatory observation, note-taking and photography collection of the cafe's interior design and decoration, operations and consumer behaviour; (2) semistructured interviews lasting between 15 minutes to an hour with the proprietor, one employee and twelve customers of Wangchuan Cafe. The interviews were mainly conducted to understand the interviewee's perspective and/or interpretation towards the name of the I (Wangchuan), the products (i.e., coffee beverages) it offers, the interior design of the shop and the ambience felt in the cafe vs. customer's desired level of ambience. (3) Data collection also included text, pictures and other materials regarding public comments posted on Wangchuan's public account and Meituan (a prominent China-centric superapp that allows customers to post written and pictorial reviews of their experiences in retail establishments). Follow-up fieldwork was conducted in April 2022 and was centred on residents of Tangjiawan (both those who patronise and those who do not patronise the cafe) and tourists (both those that have dined in the cafe and those who have not). The second part of the fieldwork was performed to capture the broader interpretations and politics of the adaptive reuse and theming of the cafe.

Data analysis was conducted through the discourse analysis method. Discourse analysis emphasises the role of criticism, that language is a reflection of social processes and structures and the construction of social processes and

structures. We align our analysis with Fairclough's (1992, 1995) view of discourse analysis, namely, that discourse is a three-dimensional whole that includes the following dimensions: (1) social practice, i.e., discourse constructs social reality and regulates social order and behaviour; (2) discourse practice, i.e., the production, flow and use of language symbols; and (3) text itself, i.e., the specific use of language. This three-dimensional framework affords due attention to the microlevel system, such as vocabulary, semantics, stylistic types and presentation methods, and considers the mesosystem of social and discourse practices (Qu and Zhang 2016). For data organisation, coding and analysis, ATLAS.ti was used as the research platform for managing and sorting codes. Coding, however, is done intuitively.

#### 4 The micro-politics of a cafe in a historic Chinese town

A young cafe, Wangchuan Cafe, opened in May 2020. In addition to the main cafe business, Wangchuan's planned and envisioned its use of space as consisting of a miscellany of activities ranging from that of an art gallery to the teaching of flower art, leisure art and baking. Wangchuan has a nuanced style of combining commercial interests with tourism resources, cultural monuments and modernisation to create a modern niche 'coffee art living space' which is a trend that is increasingly prevalent within China's cultural tourism spaces. The interior design of Wangchuan Cafe incorporates elements such as tile and wood chip splicing, black tiles and red bricks, transparent glass rooms and the use of log-constructed bars, tables and chairs, exhibition booths and floors, which are scattered in many small, connected nooks within the spacious shop. There is also the usual coffee-making equipment used in cafes that specialise in coffee, including a professional Italian coffee machine (a symbol of the specialty cafe in China), bean grinder, hand-brewed coffee pot, and ice drip pot. Wangchuan also boasts of having its own roaster and possess complete bean roasting equipment with the capability of roasting its own coffee beans, which is another symbol of its specialisation. In consideration of the art gallery, the inner walls of the cafe are adorned with paintings, which enhance the distinctive artistic ambience creates an impression on anyone who walks into the cafe.

In the following three subsections, this paper discusses how Wangchuan Cafe has been transformed from a traditional townhouse in a sleepy historic town to a prominent *wanghong* (or instagrammable) cultural consumption space in the now revitalised and tourism-oriented Chinese historic town and heritage attraction.



#### 4.1 Representations of space

Representation of space refers to an expert-dominated space that is occupied by planners, scientists, engineers, urbanists and governments and represents the official discourse of space (Lefebvre 1992). We consider the proprietor of Wangchuan Cafe and its staff as bureaucrats of the representation of space given that their discourse dominates the allocation of resources to plan, use and manage the retail space as a consumption space that integrates coffee, art and lifestyle.

The name 'Wangchuan' is an allusion to the Wangchuan River (忘川河). According to Taoist beliefs, the Wangchuan River exists between the realms of spirits and humans. In order to be reincarnated, the deceased must drink the legendary Mengpo's soup, and whoever consumes the soup will forget about his or her past life before crossing the river. The Wangchuan Cafe proprietor idealised the cafe as a specialty space for customers to enjoy oblivion, forget their worldly troubles and remain grounded in the present by relaxing with a cup of coffee. In the words of the proprietor and key discourse maker of the place:

*The Wangchuan Cafe is for the purpose of forgetting our work and worries when we drink coffee to enjoy this coffee in the present moment. Have you ever heard of the Wangchuan River where the naihe qiao (mythical bridge) is located? If you have some distracting thoughts, the Wangchuan River you see will be very muddy. If you have no distracting thoughts, the river you see will be very clear. Our hope is to forget the troubling things in life and enjoy the present moment. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

Such a narrative of leaving behind one's mundane and worldly troubles is echoed by the employees:

*In fact, the principal discourse of Wangchuan is that as modern people, we are always very busy and under great pressure in all aspects, and there will always be troubles we want to forget. In this endless society, there are always some things that you may never forget, so the symbolism of Wangchuan is about forgetting the troubles in life and emptying yourself. (Interviewee B1: Employee)*

Considering the cultural background and tourism resources of Tangjiawan, Wangchuan's cafe proprietor had the idea of creating a 'coffee art living space' where the coffee culture is integrated with art to create a unique lifestyle space with distinctive artistic and cultural flavours while offering leisure and relaxation to customers. The current location of Wangchuan Cafe is a former townhouse that was converted by the tenant into an art studio prior to the opening of Wangchuan Cafe.

*When I was chatting with my friends, I mentioned that there was an empty house here. It used to be an art studio, so I thought of combining coffee and art. Then, I saw a pool behind the house, and it aligned with my envisioned decoration style. The feeling was very close to my ideals, as was the style of this ancient Tangjiawan. So made a proposal of cooperation to the former proprietor. If he has an art exhibition, he can hold it in Wangchuan Cafe. His paintings can also be hung here, so we could build a coffee art living space together. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

The cafe proprietor is also the brainchild of the relational lexicon for Wangchuan Cafe that uses such deliberately coined terms as 'poetic cafe' and 'coffee is the art of time', which serve to highlight the artistic atmosphere and the main objectives of space construction, reflecting the fact that the space is a representation of his particular conceptualisation:

*Opening a typical cafe is very competitive. This operating model of combining art and coffee, this kind of living space, with food and drinks, this particular style and this name... it is very poetic and a complete concept, an entire ideology. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

*Coffee is a beautiful thing. Coffee is the art of time, so are painting and creation. These are activities that relax people, make them comfortable, reduce their anxiety and slow things down (Interviewee B1: Employee)*

As an ideological representative of cultural consumption space, 'coffee art living space' is the fundamental intellectual notion of the cafe operator, and it includes 'leisure', 'relaxation', 'artistic flavour', 'poetry' and other connotations, as well as his staff who act as his practitioners, but are nonetheless limited and restrained by the proprietor's power discourse. Together, the proprietor and his staff form and practice the power discourse dominating this curated cultural consumption space, albeit from different power levels. Such discourse directly influences the practice of space transformation and shapes the perception and experience of incoming customers to the cafe. The institutional space formed within the landscape of Tangjiawan symbolises the proprietor's 'absolute discourse power' in the spatial representation of Wangchuan Cafe.

However, such authoritative discourse power and spatial representation of Wangchuan by the cafe owner do not go uncontested. While a majority of the tourists and visitors to the historic town report accepting the cafe

owner's theming of the cafe space, a minority offered alternatives:

*I would prefer that the cafe speak about something more unique, something that relates to the town's unique history – for example, the town is the cradle of modern Chinese intellectuals such as Tang Shaoyi (Interviewee T2: Tourist)*

*It is a comfortable cafe, and I can understand how it can appeal to all those wanghong visitors. However, as a local of this town, I am saddened by how commercial and placeless the town is becoming. Cafes such as this are commonplace in large cities such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou. We do not need these here. People can go to those large cities if they want to experience this kind of placeless place. There is no history or culture in this cafe (Interviewee R10: Resident)*

The minority segment of tourists who are more in tune with heritage and cultural management and some residents who feel strongly about the articulation of cultural heritage via buildings and structures in the historic town reject and contest the cafe owner's vision and discourse, most commonly by a refusal to revisit the place.

#### 4.2 Spatial practices

Spatial practices refer to everyday routines and experiences that form the practices that occur within a space, representing the organisation and use of that space (Lefebvre 1992). Within the Lefebvrian lens, a place may hold two contradicting spaces: the representation of spaces as conceived by the planners and 'lived spaces' as appropriated by actors for their own purposes. Actors may appropriate, produce and reproduce space through various personal practices, such as their use, control and transformation of spaces, thereby forming living practices, behavioural consensus and social structure (Lefebvre 1992).

To transform the original closed residential living space of the historical townhouse to the present retail

and cultural consumption space, Wangchuan Cafe has planned and invested thoughtfully into revamping and restoring both the interior and exterior spaces. For the external building walls, the cafe proprietor has selected thematic decoration such that the original damaged historic building can be improved upon, artistically aligning the cafe's decor with the overall architectural style of the ancient town. For the interior decor, the cafe was fully renovated to showcase the openness of the internal space with a number of connected nooks as space dividers while also creating the ambience of spaciousness and accessibility. Then, the paintings, porcelain decoration, tables and chairs and other miscellaneous objects are strategically placed to convey alignment with the artistic flavour of the ancient Tangjiawan town while displaying a consciousness of modern culture and style (Fig. 1).

To create the ambience of 'coffee art living space', Wangchuan Cafe employs space production and reproduction from different scales via its means of design, transformation and display according to the proprietor's idealised conceptualisation of representation of space. In the renovation theme, elements such as tile splicing, wood chip splicing, glass house, white wall, black tile and red brick are used purposefully to convey design and style, and 'art' and 'leisure'.

*The design is adapted to the overall environment of the ancient town, simple and relaxed. The use of wood texture makes people feel more relaxed in the rustic environment. (Interviewee B1: Employee)*

Coffee is the core element of this cultural consumption space, and it contains a full range of coffee making equipment, i.e., an Italian coffee machine, bean grinder, hand-brewed coffee pot, ice drip pot, and so on, which are mainly strategically displayed in the coffee preparation area with related equipment also displayed in other parts of the cafe. Wangchuan Cafe also roasts its own beans and displays coffee roasting equipment near the cafe seating for consumers to gaze upon. At the entrance of the cafe, there are also displays of the cafe's



**Fig. 1** Internal and external space of Wangchuan Cafe, 2020 (Source: the authors)

self-roasted coffee beans and creative coffee-related products.

Paintings are another important communicator transmitting a sense of culture. The cafe's walls display paintings in collaboration with artists, and there are assorted styles of paintings ranging from the conventional to the abstract displayed with a description of Shanfang Road and the town's historic buildings. The overall style could be considered relatively simple and straightforward. Additionally, there are glass cases in the cafe displaying exquisite porcelain for customers to appreciate (Fig. 2).

*We work with some artists and art studios; they provide paintings, we provide this venue. Some of these paintings are also related to the ancient town. There is one particular painting where the artist painted the entire Shanfang Road. Of course, we will also pick some famous paintings. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

While there have been efforts to align the space with the town's authorised cultural significance and history by choosing paintings that depict iconic streets of the town, more often than not, the paintings are chosen on a more ad hoc basis.

The artistic transformation of material space provides an artistic atmosphere and commercial environment for the resulting cultural consumption space. Wangchuan Cafe still emphasises the coffee consumption experience where the customers can slow down their pace of life in the relaxed ambience of the cafe and feel the aroma and practices of mindful coffee consumption and the embodied atmosphere of Wangchuan Cafe as a 'coffee art living space'. Within this embodied space, the staff and proprietor are very willing to interact with guests, hoping to bring to their customers the leisure experience of coffee consumption and exchanging life stories through human interaction.

*In fact, we hope that every guest who comes here will gain a new understanding or different experience of coffee as well as a different taste for an environment different from other coffee places. We do not want to be too commercial. We just come here happily and feel the whole process of coffee roasting, from raw beans to cooked beans to coffee, as well as its flavour and taste when drinking. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

*More guests come here because they like coffee and our atmosphere. When we are free, we will chat with the guests more. This is also a kind of communication, talking about coffee and art, rather than following the trend of fast drinking and leaving hastily. We tell the guests about each type of coffee bean and allow the guests to taste the rich flavour, which is a kind of appreciating coffee that is unlike Starbucks' style of selling coffee quickly. (Interviewee B1: Employee)*

The Wangchuan Cafe also incorporates art exhibition activities into its operations, changing the paintings on display and inviting artists to hold art exhibitions regularly. Guests who like coffee and art can participate in the art exhibition and feel the artistic atmosphere while consuming coffee, thus integrating art appreciation and coffee consumption.

*We have always been doing painting exhibitions, and after the epidemic, we hope that there will be more painting exhibitions by famous artists. Coffee is a very beautiful thing, and it pairs well with these arts, and then there an idea that links both together. They (artists) provide paintings and add them to the cafe to create an environmental experience. (Interviewee A1: Boss)*

In addition, Wangchuan Cafe is currently trying to integrate some flower art and porcelain exhibition activities and may integrate even more artistic elements in the future, enriching the connotation of cultural consumption space and realising a more comprehensive



**Fig. 2** Paintings and Porcelain Inside Wangchuan Cafe, 2021 (Source: the authors)



presentation of ‘coffee art living space’ as commercial interests through more diversified management.

#### 4.3 Representational space: everyday interpretations, convergences and divergences

Representational space refers to lived spatial experiences such as that of everyday space, which is usually occupied by the intermingling of contradictions and struggles (Lefebvre 1992), and represents the space that people try to change and/or occupy. The contradictory relationship between practices and cognition is manifested in representational space, contrasting the physical space with the everyday spatial practices (Lefebvre 1992).

In the consumption space of coffee culture, the actors of space production are primarily the cafe proprietor (direct role), employees (indirect role) and consumers (undertaking role). When the proprietor and the staff and consumers are present concurrently, each actor depends on their own capital to exchange and compete in the same space, producing and selecting suitable space-time resources based on their consumption habits within the same embodied space.

Social life and its social relations are not only the producers of space but also represent the relational outcomes of space, which are full of politics, ideologies, contradictions and struggles (Lefebvre 1992). The cafe space reflects micropower production, with consumers adjusting their various strategies of discipline, adaptation or resistance within the practices of that space.

If walk-in customers have minimal knowledge about coffee culture and seldom drink coffee, the barista's introduction to coffee and their recommendation will constitute the dominant power discourse. Conversely, if customers are knowledgeable about coffee, then there may be a power convergence. Therefore, the transmission of coffee culture and knowledge by baristas reflects a kind of implicit microspace power production, with lesser-informed consumers often deferring to the introduction and recommendation of the barista. This reflects the adaptation and discipline of consumers in the practice of space, with the power relationship of space constructed in ways that the customers may not be aware of.

Often, the baristas engage customers sincerely and introduce their self-roasted beans and in-house paintings.

*Their home-roasted coffee taste is very good. (Interviewee C2: Consumer)*

*I seldom drink coffee. I ordered a cup of coconut latte at the barista's recommendation. It tasted refreshing, and as expected, the barista did not make the wrong recommendation (Interviewee C3)*

However, a small number of consumers resist the power discourse in the space, expressing their dissatisfaction with the staff and space consumption.

*I felt that the staff's introduction of the paintings was nonsensical (interviewee C9)*

However, overall, the spatial production of Wangchuan Cafe has not caused great conflict between host and guest. More often, it has created a new communication between host and guest centred on spatial relationships, resulting in a stable and harmonious micropower space with room for further improvement of the host-guest relations.

Visitors and tourists also interpret the space in myriad ways. Most associate the curated space with notions of comfort and ease:

*The environment is very comfortable; there is a small courtyard in the back that feels truly natural. The courtyard is not carefully maintained. Nonetheless, it conveys a feeling of ease and comfort. (Interviewee C1)*

*The environment is very quiet, and the layout is very comfortable. One can choose to sit where one desires. (Interviewee C2)*

*The place is very comfortable. A cup of tea, a cup of coffee, and a leisure day are meaningfully spent. (Interviewee C4)*

In addition to the comfort conveyed through the overall atmosphere of the space, consumers are also influenced by the artistic mood of Wangchuan Cafe, which is evident through their sentiments that Wangchuan Cafe is ‘literary’ and ‘artistic’. Compared with traditional cafes, consumers can discover new and atypical things in the cafe, such as porcelain pieces and art exhibitions that evoke consumers’ aesthetic senses. The material space helps ease the tensions of everyday life and evokes a sense of art and cultural identity.

*The decorated environment is good, and the space is very large, filled with poetry and paintings. There is a feeling of indie art. The walls are covered with many Chinese murals, and the cafe converted from an old house also has a nostalgic atmosphere. It is very restorative to sit here for a while having a cup of hand-brewed coffee, admiring the art gallery and porcelain pieces in this bright glass room. (Interviewee C7)*

*A very special art cafe, there are many paintings that you can admire or buy. Art and coffee are both spiritual ‘food’ to restore spirits. (Interviewee C10)*



*The combination of an art gallery and gourmet coffee is quite bold. However, it matches the atmosphere of Tangjiawan Ancient Town very well. This is an artistic coffee shop. I do not know much about coffee, but I think the taste, the atmosphere, the story and the people are all pleasant. (Interviewee C12)*

However, not all agree with the ways in which the owner appropriated the space.

*This cafe is pretentious. It may work well for the wanghong (Instagram) seeking tourists, but I do not think it projects the real culture of the town. I think it dresses up commercial interests in the name of 'art' and 'culture' and misleads people. I hope we have fewer such places and more real and genuine ones. (Interviewee, R2)*

*We need real cultural tourism and not just photogenic places. I came to this town looking for narratives concerning the Chinese pioneers who originated from this town and the traditional cultures and rituals of Tangjiawan. However, I am greeted by so many cafes and shops trying to do more or less the same 'artistic' and 'cultural' thing. These are no different from those found in historic towns elsewhere in China. (C15)*

Some customers experience the cafe through direct sensory experiences and then relate these experiences to their everyday lives. This is in stark contrast to standards of cultural and heritage significance and notions of historical authenticity and accuracy that some conservationists, planners, cultural tourists and residents wish to maintain.

For other customers, interactions between the host and guest play a part in the social construction of space. Both the key message of Wangchuan Cafe and the customer's identification with the space are enacted through interactions. In their interviews, some consumers noted the importance of the interactive experience, believing that such interactions can enhance their sense of participation and that the hospitality of the proprietor and employees is very warm.

*You can communicate with the barista in depth, sit in front of the bar and talk a lot to them. The service attitude is very good, and the barista is very enthusiastic in inviting us to watch the process of brewing coffee. Great experience, not so easy to experience such feelings. (Interviewee C3)*

*The proprietor was very enthusiastic, asking us if we often drink hand-brewed coffee and then recommending two creative coffees with a higher consumer acceptance, which were also served with a detailed*

*description of the unique features of these two cups of coffee. (Interviewee C4)*

*The manager was super gentle and explained the coffee to us one by one and even showed me their cake samples. The steps of making coffee were explained to us one step at a time, the beans were super fragrant, and we learned a lot through this experience. (Interviewee C7)*

The performance of such experiences is illustrative of a coproduction of new values for the cafe. However, such a coproduction is still skewed towards the owner, who dictates spatial changes within the cafe with very little input from customers, residents, and tourists. In this cafe, we see how the micropolitics motivated by the owner and operated through his cafe workers and in coproduction with customers created a commercial cultural space that is out of sync with the heritage of the town.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has sought to present a microslice of the political economy of everyday life in a Chinese historic town through an analysis of an adapted cafe in the historic town of Tangjiawan. Through a Lefebvrebian lens, we examined spatial spaces (perceived space), representation of space (conceived space) and represented space (lived space) within the Wangchuan Cafe and highlighted how art, porcelain and other perceived identified artistic elements transform the relationship between space, people and stories such that space is no longer simply a meaningless material objective backdrop. The representation of space within the Wangchuan Cafe, with its conceived artistic spaces and meanings, has become a meaningful medium where customers can become immersed in subjective consumption experiences through sensory experiences conveyed by the concept of 'coffee art living space' and can identify with the very concept envisioned by the cafe proprietor through their lived experiences. In its bid to become a niche gourmet cafe, Wangchuan Cafe cocreates value with customers through human interaction. The proprietor, baristas and consumers interact through aligned interests to realise the idealised represented space. However, such cocreation leans heavily on the visions of the owner, while customers negotiate and resist by not revisiting and by discouraging others from patronising the cafe.

Although this paper presents Wangchuan Cafe as a standalone case, Wangchuan Cafe's transformations and its owner's vision are not entirely unique and are constituted within broader sets of representations of space concerning the commercialisation and gentrification of historic towns. While supported by the town's

redevelopment plans, which consists of the massive provisioning of livelihood opportunities and entrepreneurship, the owner's visions for the cafe as an artistic 'chill spot' do not completely align with cultural heritage management principles. This is due to a liberal interpretation of culture, which tends to result in the replication of standardised spaces. Such representations of space see noncommercial spaces in historic towns as 'empty' plots that need filling in with new 'cultural tourism' enterprises. While the building is not a listed heritage building, it could arguably be used for other purposes that are better aligned with the histories and cultures of the town. Resultantly, what comes across to some as a photogenic spot of culture and art is seen by others as a pretentious endeavour that relies on a homogenising strand of cafe culture and is divorced from the historic town of Tangjiawan's roots.

In providing this microanalysis, we have sought to demonstrate the manner in which, while supported by specific segments of planners, tourists and some town-folks, the large-scale use and very commercial adaptive reuse of historic towns and its resultant gentrification contain contradictions and tensions and should not be thought of as a straightforward and unproblematic process. We hope that such a cafe-based critique can serve as a call to better align cultural values, entrepreneurial visions and tourism.

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#### Declarations

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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