

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Tianjin's Italian-Style town: the conundrum between conservation practices and heritage value

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Abstract

The former Italian concession in Tianjin (1901–1945) has assumed symbolic significance for the modern urban redevelopment of this municipality through experimentation with distinctive practices of conservation management. In 1986, when the Historic Buildings Protection Area was defined, the former Italian concession was identified as a pilot urban conservation project. In 2002, the public company Haihe Construction and Development Investment Ltd. was put in charge of the design and implementation plan for the site, which progressively assumed the semblance of an 'Italian-Style Town'. The distinctive transformation raised significant questions regarding the architectural restyling as well as its specific historical and cultural value. In August 2020, the management of the Italian-Style town was handed over to the Hebei District Government. This coincided with the emergence of a proposal for the creation of a 'Larger Italian-Style Town', that extended beyond the borders of the original Italian concession to include the former Austrian concession and the western section of the ex-Russian concession. The redevelopment strategy for this larger area aimed to create a service-oriented commercial area, presented as an 'urban living room', while showcasing Tianjin as an international metropolis.

This article analyses the evolution of the conservation strategy as well as the relevant legislation, management, and practices during the redevelopment of the former Italian concession. The aim of this study is to address the conflict between heritage protection and commercialisation. Thus, this article offers a critique of the trend towards functional replacement and structural adaptation to cater to the tourism industry rather than to the value of the community's livelihood as a living heritage.

Keywords Tianjin, Italian-Style town, Conservation management, Urban redevelopment, Heritage value, Commercialisation

1 Introduction

This article is the outcome of a collaboration between historians and architecture specialists with a particular focus on Tianjin's Italian-Style town (hereafter referred to as the I-Style Town).

Between 1860 and 1945, Tianjin was the site of nine foreign-controlled concessions that developed and functioned side by side (Marinelli 2009). Over the last two decades, Tianjin has undergone a massive urban revitalisation programme (Marinelli 2018) that merges historical elements with imaginaries of modern living to create an atmosphere of rejuvenated 'globalising' of the city's vitality.

Historical sites do not merely reflect a city's history and culture; they also provide insights into the living conditions and lifestyles of residents from a specific era. Furthermore, they showcase unique and irreplaceable

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aspects of a city's identity. Of the nine concessions, only the former Italian concession has been effectively transformed into a domesticised-foreign-themed town by capitalising on its meticulously preserved urban layout and unique historical features with the insertion of modern buildings such as the Tianjin Urban Planning Exhibition Hall. This hybridised site of 'becoming,' from the former Italian concession through the I-Style Town to its current expanded scope, has witnessed Tianjin's entire modern and contemporary history, from the era of nine foreign concessions to the present, marked by rapid urban development and redevelopment patterns of heterotopic spatial (re)production.

The I-Style Town plays a crucial role in showcasing Tianjin's distinctive identity through its notable historical features. Additionally, it plays a driving role in enhancing the city's economic and cultural vibrancy, accelerating the growth of the tourism industry, and creatively catering to its visitors. Consequently, the I-Style Town can be considered a laboratory of heritage conservation methods as part of Tianjin's overall urban redevelopment strategy and, ultimately, a site of experimentation for the significance of heritage value with distinctive practices that we deem worthy of further studies and critical analysis.

The rationale for this article originated from the appearance of the term 'the Larger I-Style Town (大意风区);' which we noticed increasingly featured on various Tianjin government websites and media outlets since 2018. Preliminary research revealed that 'the Larger I-Style Town' is not a novel concept; it was introduced by the Hebei District Government as early as 2013. It originated as a regional development strategy derived from the commencement of the 'I-Style Town Central Business District' project, which was launched in 2012 but was rarely mentioned until 2018. However, based on an analysis of government documents and planning drawings in addition to an examination of scholarly debates related to this project, we observed a significant shift: in August 2020, the management rights of the I-Style Town were reverted to the government, placing even greater emphasis on the concept of 'the Larger I-Style Town'. This change is noteworthy, especially since it occurred nearly two decades after the I-Style Town was fully managed by the Haihe Construction and Development Investment Ltd. (hereafter, the Haihe Company). By incorporating the renowned concept of the 'I-Style Town', this 'enlargement' strategy and its management dynamics prompted us to examine its historical origins, rationale, and significance to fully understand what is at stake in terms of cultural authenticity and heritage value.

An in-depth analysis of the area's historical evolution led us to the conclusion that its scope, scale, and size do not align with the former Italian concession. As evidence

of this, we created a series of maps illustrating their respective borders (Fig. 1). We believe that it is important to fully investigate the convergence and divergence between the former I-Style Town and the current larger area. In our research, we aim to understand the potential reasons for this change.

After conducting a study on the historical and spatial transformation of the site, we created Figs. 2, 3 and 4, which outline the most significant events from 1901 to the present in chronological order. We paid particular attention to the following criteria: 1) commercialisation and touristification (orange); 2) conservation and redevelopment (blue); 3) urban planning and strategies (black); 4) regulations and recognitions (pink); 5) relevant events (green); and 6.) management responsibilities (azure). We also divided the entire urban redevelopment process into three distinct phases.

We aim to evaluate the temporal-spatial processes at stake concerning conservation practices and, ultimately, to identify the heritage value of the site. This article engages with the thought-provoking concept coined by Macdonald (2012) of 'unfolding the past presencing' while acknowledging the importance of the debate on the connection between memory heritage and identity (Bovarin 1996; Pine II and Gilmore 1998; Assmann and Shortt 2012; Rowlands and De Jong 2007; Anheier and Isar 2011; Franquesa 2013). Our process of engaging with the past 'Italian concession' and presencing it in the present built form of the I-Style Town is also in line with the conceptual framework that emphasises the urgency of 'memory-work' (Hamilakis and Labanyi 2008) since we believe that the strict interconnection of history, memory, and heritage create cultural capital and social value. The analysis of the concept and the realisation of 'the Larger I-Style Town' calls for an exploration of Tianjin as a laboratory of urban redevelopment characterised by interconnected practices of redevelopment and conservation on various scales, which questions the attribution of heritage value through the strategic presencing of the past.

2 Brief historical background

The Treaty of Tianjin, signed in June 1958 and ratified by the Qing government on 24 October 1860, was the main outcome of the second Opium War (1858–60). The treaty consisted of a series of documents that integrated the previously signed Treaty of Nanjing (29 August 1842) and fully established the treaty port system in the Chinese territory, expanding foreign rights and foreign control over China (Fairbank 1978; D. Wang 2005; J. Wang 2005). The port city of Tianjin was one of the newly opened ports for foreign trade and residence. Between 1860 and 1945, Tianjin's urban space assumed a distinctive identity, with

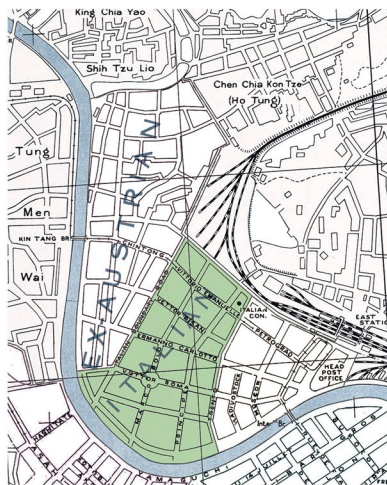


Figure 1.1 The Former Italian Concession (1901 - 1945)

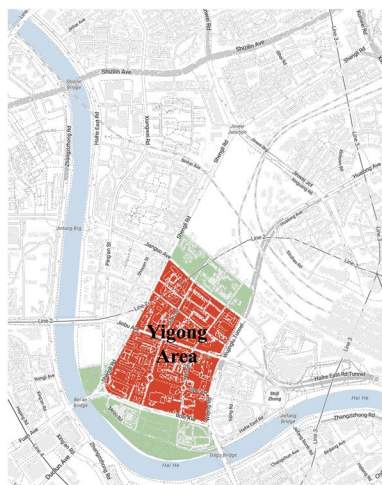


Figure 1.2 Yigong Area (1986)

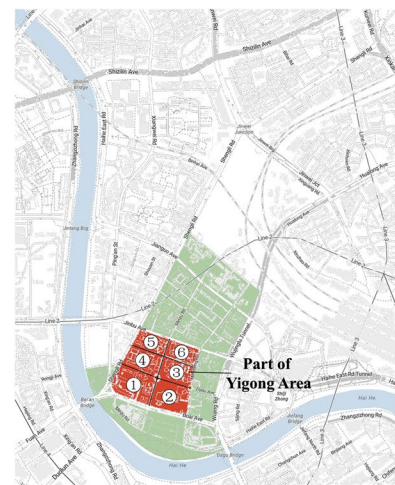


Figure 1.3 Six Lots of the Detailed Construction and Redevelopment Plan (2001)

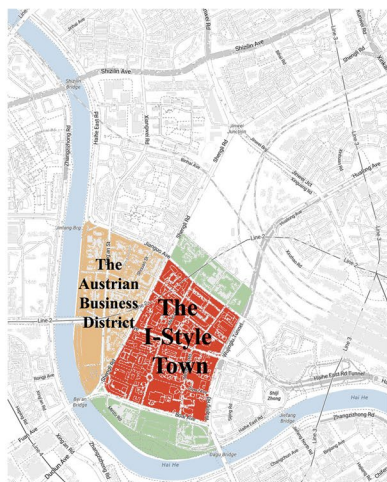


Figure 1.4 The I-Style Town (2002)



Figure 1.5 Yigong Garden Historic Area (2012)

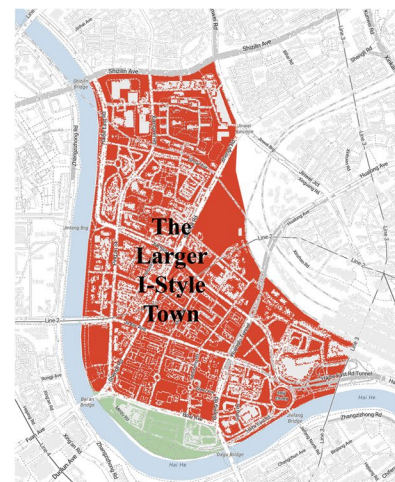


Figure 1.6 The Larger I-Style Town (2017)

Fig. 1 The evolution of the area over time: From the former Italian concession (1901) to ‘The Larger I-Style Town’ (2017) (Source: the authors)

its multiple foreign-controlled concessions functioning side by side. With the final Protocol of 7 September 1901, which followed the repression of the Boxer Uprising, Italy received an allotment of 5.91 percent of the Boxer indemnity, extraterritoriality privileges in the Legation Quarter in Beijing, and the acquisition in perpetuity of a small zone (approximately half a square kilometre) on the left bank of the Haihe in Tianjin on which to develop an Italian concession. Despite a slow and uncertain start, the Italian concession in Tianjin became the testing ground for a full-scale pedagogical project of transcultural hypercolonial modernity through a radical redesigning of the Chinese space in the name of Italian ‘beauty’. The socio-spatial reorganisation of this territory led to the creation

of an Italian-style ‘neighbourhood’—a miniature venue of ‘Italianness’ or ‘Italian spirit’ (*Italianità*) (Marinelli 2007).

The climax of the juxtaposition of near and far spaces side by side in hypercolonial Tianjin was poignantly expressed by a former resident, the American journalist John Hersey, who in 1982 described Tianjin’s multilayered identity when reminiscing about the affective atmosphere intensely experienced in his childhood:

What a weird city I grew up in. For three or four Chinese coppers, I could ride in a rickshaw from my home, in England, to Italy, Germany, Japan, or Belgium. I walked to France for violin lessons; I had to cross the river to get to Russia and often did because the Russians had a beautiful, wooded park with a lake in it (Hersey 1982, 54).

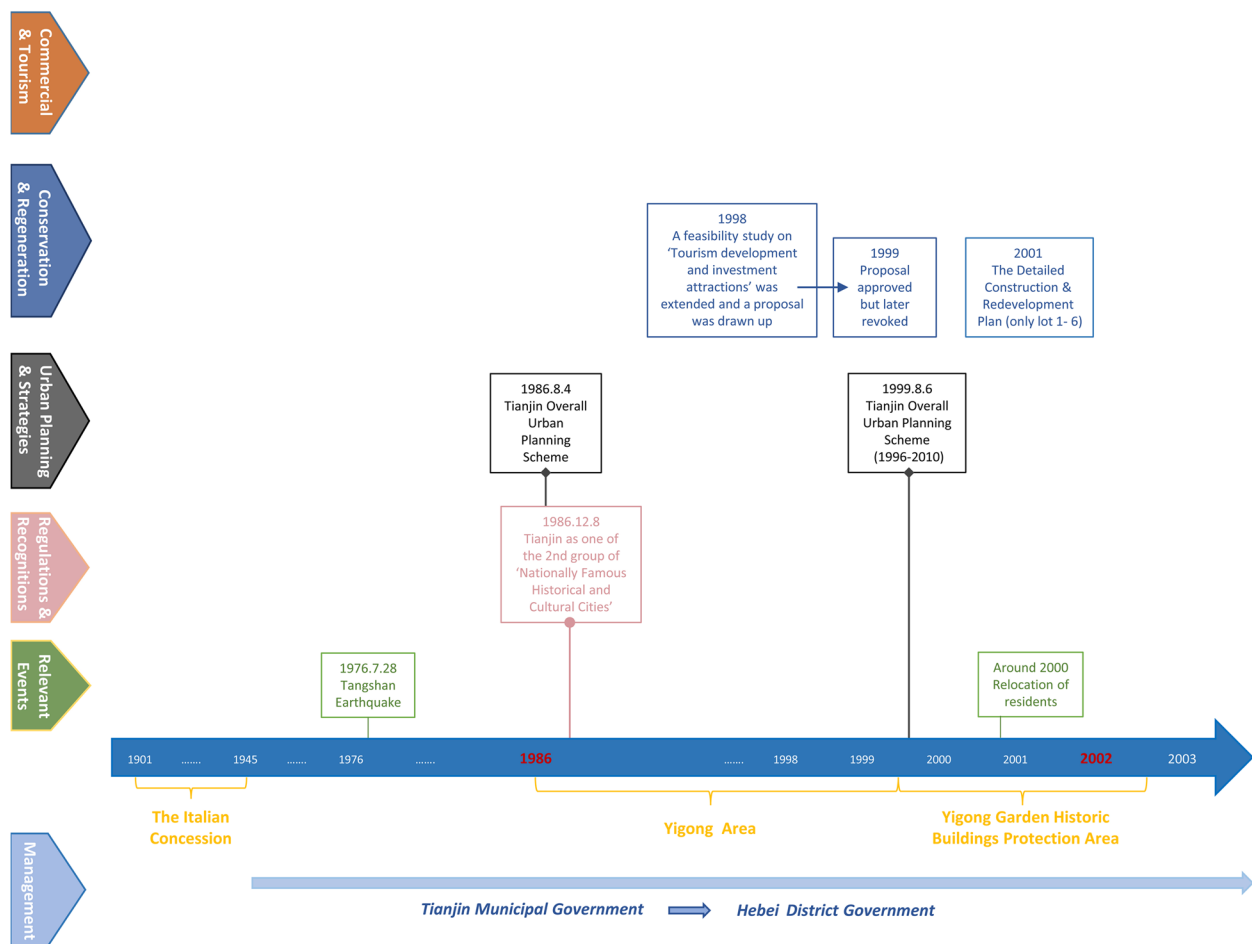


Fig. 2 The most important aspects of the first phase (1986–2002) (Source: the authors)

In contemporary Chinese literature on Tianjin (He and Guo 2009), the city is often referred to as a permanent ‘exhibition of world architecture’ (万国建筑博览会 *wan-guo jianzhu bolanhui*), a tag that encapsulates the fact that the city boasts the simultaneous presence of different architectural styles in what amounts to a plain air museum.

Since 2011, Tianjin has undergone a vast urban redevelopment programme that has been conducted under the aegis of ‘beautification’ and has radically transformed the cityscape. The hypercolonial phase of Tianjin, when the treaty port constituted an unparalleled microcosm of the world with up to nine foreign concessions (1860–1945), has been actively reinterpreted as marking the beginning of the city’s hyperglobal age. The urban planning strategy for Tianjin’s former concessions combines the reordering and redesigning of foreign space in concert with Tianjin’s vaulting ambition to promote its globalising identity. Tianjin’s powerholders are acutely aware of their city’s history and regard its transnational

architectural heritage as having accrued specific typologies of economic, symbolic, emotional, and, ultimately, political capital (Marinelli 2009). Chinese citizens and foreign tourists alike are told that they do not even need to leave China to experience the world; it is enough to visit Tianjin.

Since 2008, Tianjin tourist maps have shown two special visual-textual boxes in the top right corner. One focuses on the ‘European charm’ of the ‘Five Street Area’ (Wudadao); the other features the rechristened ‘Italian-Style Scenic Neighbourhood’ (*Yishi Fengqingqu* 意式风情区—also translated as ‘Italian Business Park’). In 2009, the former Italian concession was rebranded as *XinYijie* 新意街, the ‘New Italian-Style Town’, where ‘Yi’ stands, of course, for Italy. One could argue that among the former nine foreign concessions, only the Italian concession has been successfully transformed into an ‘I-Style Town’. This can be considered a laboratory of urban redevelopment and conservation and, ultimately, an experimentation project related to heritage value with distinctive

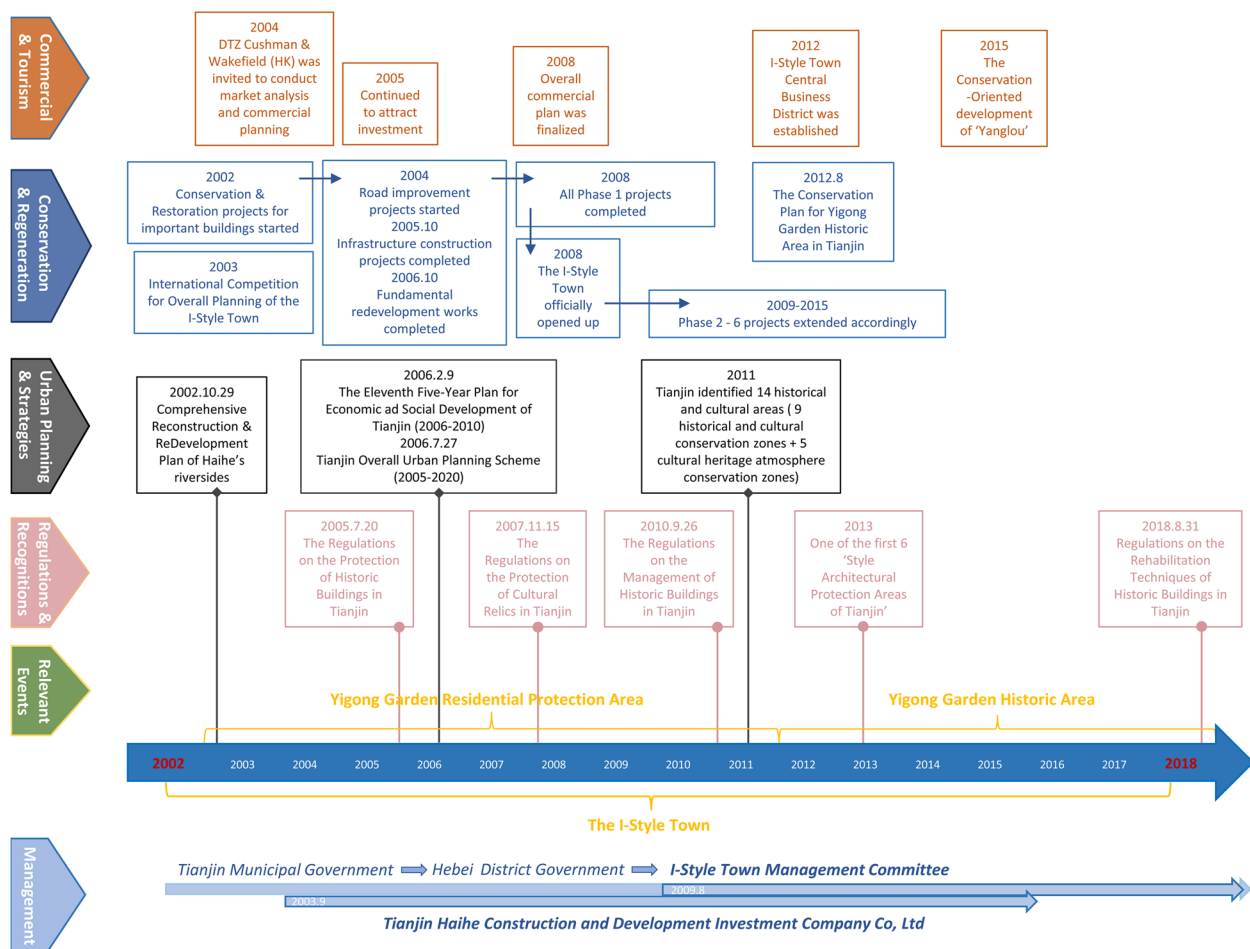


Fig. 3 The tension between commercialisation and conservation, with the relevant regulations (2002–2018) (Source: the authors)

practices. Thus, we divide the analysis of the redevelopment of the former Italian concession into three phases.

2.1 The initial phase (1986–2002): the conservation of the ‘Yigong Historic Buildings Protection Area’

The initial phase in the urban redevelopment process dates back to 1986. During this time, Tianjin was recognised by the Chinese State Council as one of the second group of ‘National Famous Historical and Cultural Cities’ (State Council 1986a) (hereafter, the 1986 Guidelines). This followed the first group of 24 cities identified in 1982 (State Council 1982). Tianjin was now included due to its profound historical and revolutionary importance. This represented a pivotal moment for Tianjin: at the national level, the modern Western-style architecture within the former foreign concessions area was officially acknowledged as historical and cultural heritage as well as a distinctive feature of present-day Tianjin. Importantly, in the previous period, the same foreign-style buildings were deprecated as representative symbols of the ‘century of

humiliation’ (Chauffert-Yvart et al. 2020). At this point, numerous buildings were in a critical state of disrepair, which was also due to the impact of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake.¹ The area was densely populated, leading to rampant unauthorised construction. The subsequent decline in infrastructure and essential amenities not only affected residents’ lives but also further damaged the buildings (Yan et al. 2019).

It was not until 1986 that awareness of the importance of conservation began to take shape in Tianjin. This change in aesthetic and discursive perceptions can also be ascribed to the political and intellectual nature of the ‘Reforms and Opening-up Era’ in the 1980s, when Western-style architecture lost its previously derogatory connotation of a material marker of Western imperialism

¹ The extremely intense earthquake that hit Tangshan on 28 July 1976 had severe repercussions not only in Tangshan (where 85% of the buildings collapsed or became unusable) but also in Beijing and Tianjin.

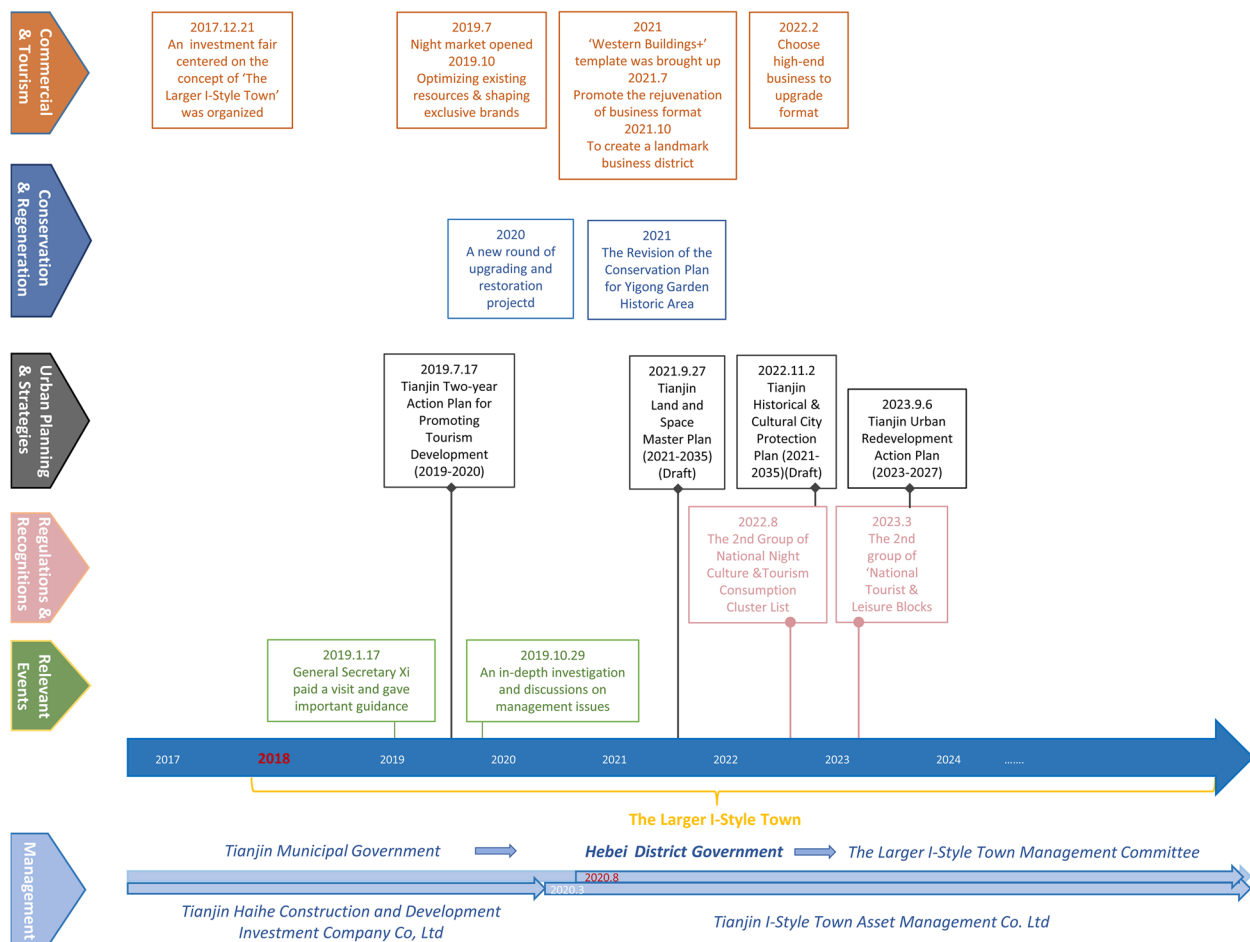


Fig. 4 The creation of 'the Larger I-Style Town' (2018-present) (Source: the authors)

and capitalism. Therefore, the former Italian concession progressively assumed a different connotation as a pedagogical laboratory of China's globalising ambitions.

Under the 1986 Guidelines, historic buildings and historic conservation sites became an integral part of Tianjin because of their historical and cultural value. The Tianjin Municipal Government took various steps to integrate the conservation of historical sites into the city's comprehensive urban planning process with the declared aim of aligning redevelopment with the city's overall environment. As a result of these efforts, a specific section within the former Italian concession called the 'Yigong Area' (Fig. 1.2) was identified and particularly emphasised for conservation purposes (Zhang and Zheng 2007).

In August 1999, the Chinese State Council approved the 'Tianjin Overall Urban Planning Scheme (1996–2010)' (State Council 1999), which included a detailed plan on the protection of historic and cultural cities (《天津市城市总体规划方案 [1996 - 2010年]》的《历史文化名城保护专篇》). This plan was aligned with the fundamental

principles set out in the 1986 Guidelines. This plan outlined 11 'scenic areas to be protected' (风貌保护区) within the central urban region. Subsequently, the so-called 'Yigong Area' was officially renamed the 'Yigong Historic Buildings Protection Area' (一宫历史风貌建筑保护区). The recognition of the importance of this area was a significant factor, but the guidelines were not thoroughly and systematically implemented. There is no evidence that Tianjin's Municipal Government, the core authority responsible for decision-making with regard to the site, had the necessary awareness to add conservation criteria to the previous 1986 edition known as the 'Tianjin Overall Urban Planning Scheme' (State Council 1986b). Instead, both versions of the urban planning scheme aimed to develop Tianjin as a globalising commercial port city with a strong emphasis on industrial development and the priority of the construction of infrastructural projects. The municipal government's positioning later received criticism from urban geography scholars, who noted a lack of adequate acknowledgement and a missed opportunity to

highlight the distinctive characteristics of Tianjin, while the generic nature of the plan could have been applied to any large coastal city (Zhou 1995).

In 1998, the Hebei District Government commissioned a feasibility study on tourism development and investment attractions for the former Italian concession (Huang and Wang 2005). The outcome was a proposal that was approved the following year but later revoked (Sun 2006). In 2000, several residents relocated from the area prompted by the Tianjin Municipal Government (D. Wang 2005; J. Wang 2005). It was only in 2001 that 'The Detailed Construction and Redevelopment Plan (修建性详细规划)' was entrusted to the Tianjin Housing Appraisal, Survey, and Design Institute (天津市房屋鉴定勘测设计院), while the planning of the roads' improvement and engineering projects was entrusted to the Tianjin Urban Planning and Design Institute (天津市城市规划设计院). However, due to practical considerations, only a smaller group with six lots was included in the redevelopment plan (Fig. 1.3). The modalities and aims of these plans became clearer in what we define as the second phase.

2.2 The second phase (2002–2018): the 'I-Style Town' experimental redevelopment project

The second phase in the urban redevelopment process involved the conceptualisation, implementation, and operational redevelopment of the I-Style Town. Its beginning was marked by the initiation of conservation and restoration projects for important buildings within the area, such as Liang Qichao's study known in Chinese as 'Yinbingshi'.

In 2002, the Tianjin Municipal Party Committee (天津市委) formulated five strategic development measures² and approved the 'Comprehensive Reconstruction and Redevelopment Plan of the Haihe's Riversides' (海河两岸综合开发改造规划), Tianjin Municipal Party Committee 2002), which was the top priority.³ This significant initiative set an ambitious vision for Tianjin's economic and social development in the following 10 to 15 years. Importantly, the I-Style Town project was one of the 'Ten Nodes' (十大节点) of the plan. To ensure the implementation of the project, the Municipal Party Committee established the Haihe Development and Renovation Headquarters (海河开发改造指挥部) as the unit responsible for regional government functions while at the same time establishing the Tianjin Haihe Construction and

Development Investment Co., Ltd. (天津市海河建设发展投资有限公司 – Haihe Company) in September 2003 to serve as a comprehensive development investment and financing platform. The Haihe Company signed an agreement with the Hebei District Government to undertake the urban redevelopment project through land mortgage by increasing the land value and covering all the expenses of the urban redevelopment process through land exploitation and land transfer transactions. As the project proceeded, the business department of the Haihe Company established two subsidiary companies responsible for diverse fields. The Tianjin Haichuang Engineering Project Management Co., Ltd. (海创工程项目管理有限公司) was established in January 2004 to undertake the redevelopment project, and the Haihe Landscape Construction and Development Co., Ltd. (海河风貌建设发展有限公司) was established in July 2005 and given the responsibility for future investment and management.

The I-Style Town redevelopment project was proposed in this complex administrative context. This was an experimental attempt to address the historical architecture of the former Italian concession, and it met the criteria set by the Hebei District Government with the Haihe Company and its subsidiaries. From the beginning, 'conservation-oriented development (保护性开发)' was established as a key principle. However, the area designated for conversation changed a few times. In 2002, this area was restored to the original Yigong area identified in 1986 (Fig. 1.4). Subsequently, continuous planning, conservation, and restoration together with investment activities were extended accordingly.

In January 2003, an international tender was launched to collect comprehensive redevelopment planning proposals for the I-Style Town. Four companies from France, Italy, Germany and the Taiwan region of China submitted tender documents, but none of them managed to secure the contract. The Tianjin Architectural Design Institute was finally appointed to take charge of the implementation plan by integrating and optimising the respective advantages of the aforementioned tender plans (Jia 2012). Tianjin's Municipal Government made active efforts to advance cooperation with the Italian government and achieved solid progress by involving the experienced SIRENA Company⁴ from Italy and Italian professional personnel to promote the project. This

² The five strategic development measures were as follows: vigorously developing the economy along the Haihe, promoting the marine economy, boosting key industries, supporting district-level economies, and fostering small and medium-sized enterprises as well as individual private businesses.

³ Cf. the article by Maurizio Marinelli in the Special Issue of 'Tianjin: History, Memory, and Heritage in a Hyper-Colonial-Globalizing Port-city'.

⁴ S.I.Re.Na. (Società per le Iniziative di REcupero di NApoli) started in 2001 as a company under the control of the Naples Municipal Government. Its aim was to promote the development and implementation of urban redevelopment programmes with public social purposes, research for the valorisation of historic centres through knowledge integration, historic fabrics, and dilapidated urban areas. In addition to hundreds of buildings in Naples, S.I.Re.Na. has been involved in urban redevelopment projects in the I-Style Town.

was the largest cultural cooperation project between China and Italy to be included in the ‘Eleventh Five-Year (2006–2010) plan of Tianjin’ (天津市“十一五”规划 [2006–2010]). The transcultural mobility dimension of the Sino-Italian collaboration is worth emphasising. The implementation of the project involved a significant transfer of technology as well as the mobilisation of professional capital from Italy to China to assist with the various redevelopment phases of the site. This can be seen as a sort of hourglass-like experience or a diachronic reverse mirror of past experience, which is poignantly described by Zhang Gaoheng as a chronotope of ‘1930s Italian colonialism and tourist consumerism’ when ‘the mobility-architecture dyad’ reached its climax in the former Italian concession (Zhang 2023, 112). If, in the 1930s, the intention to promote the success story of the colonial administrators’ pedagogical project became intertwined with the cultural materiality of the site and ultimately inscribed in its built form, with the recent reinvention of the former Italian concession, the various stages of redevelopment showed an uncannily similar ambition to beautify the I-Style Town as a model of enclave development (Marinelli 2010).

On-site construction started with the implementation of road improvement projects in 2004. Infrastructure construction projects ensued in the following year. By October 2005, a significant number of demolition works had been completed. By October 2006, the fundamental redevelopment of I-Style Town was basically completed. However, it was not until 2009 that all the renovation work of Phase 1 was finally completed, and the I-Style Town officially opened (Mao 2009). After attracting widespread attention and creating a localised sensation, the phase 2–6 projects were extended from 2009 to 2015. The first two phases were primarily focused on dining, while the third phase introduced shopping, hotels, and public green spaces. The six phases diversified the business structure of the I-Style Town.

Since then, the Haihe Company has become responsible for the enhancement and operational management of the I-Style Town with the I-Style Town Management Committee (hereafter, the ITMC) established in 2009 to assist it. As one of the subordinate departments of the Hebei District Government, the ITMC was meant to act as a coordinating management authority that contributed to investment promotion and marketing activities. However, in reality, a large amount of publicly available news indicates that it oversaw multiple departments, including landscaping, horticulture, and municipal services. Its primary focus was order maintenance, food safety control, the advocacy of regulatory policies, and official receptions. The remaining collaborative business development matters could only be forwarded to the Haihe Company

for further consideration. During this time, the government played a supporting role; as a result, it found itself in a passive position on decision-making occasions.

In terms of investments, in 2004, DTZ Cushman & Wakefield, a commercial real estate investment company, was invited to conduct market analysis and commercial planning simultaneously (Shi 2013). The investment activities continued to be conducted for a few years, but it was only at the end of 2007 that the projects began to show results and the area finally gained a sense of vitality. In 2008, the overall commercial plan was finalised by identifying the commercial layout into five major sectors: catering and entertainment, business offices, featured hotels, cultural tourism, and boutique retail stores. In February 2012, the ‘I-Style Central Business District’ (中央商务区, hereafter, ICBD) project was developed to separate the site into two parts and form a ‘commercial+business’ template. The ICBD comprised 10 standalone western-style buildings and 4 framed structures, creating a striking contrast between historical remnants and modern aesthetics. It fostered a garden-style, low-density ambience for business offices, and it was recognised by the municipal government as one of the key ‘billion-yuan building projects’. This initiative laid the foundation for the incubation of the concept of ‘The Larger I-Style Town’ in 2013. In 2015, the I-Style, particularly its Western-style buildings, emerged as a significant asset for the Hebei District and contributed to its distinctive regional character. This concept evolved into a tripartite economic approach in 2016 that encompassed the development of the riverside economy, subway economy, and high-end building economy and leveraged regional advantages to propel the differentiated and specialised growth of the Hebei District.

Specific regulations and constructive-detailed schemes were also promulgated after 2002, when the idea of ‘I-Style Town’ came to the forefront. Three distinct offices were responsible for heritage conservation in Tianjin at that time: the Tianjin Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage (天津市文物局) under the supervision of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, the Tianjin Planning Bureau (天津市规划局, hereafter TPB) under the supervision of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (hereafter MHURD), and the Tianjin Historic Buildings Protection Committee (天津历史风貌建筑保护委员会, hereafter THBPC) under the jurisdiction of the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Land Resources and Housing Administration.

The THBPC strengthened its control through the application of the ‘Regulations on the Protection of Historic Buildings in Tianjin’ (《天津市历史风貌建筑保护条例》), The 21st Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 14th Tianjin Municipal People’s Congress (2005) in

2005 and the ‘*Regulations on the Management of Tianjin’s Historic Buildings*’ (《天津市历史风貌建筑使用管理办法》), Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Land Resources and Housing Administration 2010) in 2010 concerning the listing, restoration, and management of historic buildings. The ‘*Regulations on the Rehabilitation Techniques of the Historic Buildings of Tianjin*’ (《天津市历史风貌建筑保护修缮技术规程》), Tianjin Urban and Rural Development Commission 2018) and the ‘*Regulatory Principles for the Protection of the Historic Buildings of Tianjin*’ (《天津市历史风貌建筑保护图则》) for the respective buildings were subsequently extended in detail to concrete solutions to problems related to the restoration of historic buildings (Chauffert-Yvart et al. 2020). The ‘*Regulations on the Protection of Cultural Relics of Tianjin Municipality*’ (《天津市文物保护条例》), The 40th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 14th Tianjin Municipal People’s Congress 2007) were adopted by the 14th Tianjin Municipal People’s Congress (天津市第十四届人民代表大会) in 2007 and put into force in March 2008. These regulations provide a general idea of the conservation, utilisation, and management of cultural relics. In 2008, the MHURD published the ‘*Regulations on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages*’, which provided a more explicit definition of historic and cultural districts in China. It emphasised the concept of overall preservation and involved a larger number of conservation plans. In 2011, its subordinate department, the TJPB, identified 14 historical and cultural areas that represented a merger of the previous nine ‘Historical and Cultural Conservation Zones’ (历史文化保护区) and five ‘Cultural Heritage Atmosphere Conservation Zones’ (文化历史氛围保护区). It seems that Tianjin has shifted its focus from individual isolated entities to holistic preservation.

The three offices were under different leadership, which did not simplify the collaborative efforts for Tianjin and its heritage. Each organisation established its own rules, selection criteria and restoration standards with limited levels of interaction and communication. Although the abovementioned laws and regulations directly affect the conservation and renovation project of the I-Style Town, their implementation is a reflection of the application of national decisions at the local level rather than a strategic outcome. The definitions and concepts of various departments differ and the scopes of the three departments are not clearly defined, leading to overlapping confusion in management. Urban cultural heritage plans in different regions show that they resemble real estate development plans rather than plans for urban and heritage management.

The ‘*Conservation Plan for the Yigong Garden Historic Area in Tianjin*’ (《天津市一宫花园历史文化街区保护规划》), Tianjin Planning Bureau 2012) was developed

against this backdrop. It outlined principles for conservation, objects of conservation, overall positioning, and spatial planning, among other aspects. In 2002 and 2003, the area of the ‘Yigong Historic Buildings Protection Area’ was expanded and renamed the ‘Yigong Garden Residential Protection Area’ (一宫花园住宅风貌保护区). Through several rounds of renaming, we can observe a transition from individual buildings to regional development in terms of the protected entities. Furthermore, by adjusting the scope of protection, the conservation strategy was finalised, and the protection levels were clearly defined. Interestingly, the term ‘Yigong’ is used in files related to urban planning and heritage. Although the current I-Style Town is the result of a combination of various factors, including heritage conservation and commercial development, the term ‘I-Style Town’ can only be found in files related to commercialism and tourism.

2.3 The third phase (2018–to the present): the reiteration and emphasis of ‘the Larger I-Style Town’

The onset of the third phase was marked by the reiteration and emphasis of the concept of ‘the Larger I-Style Town’. On December 21, 2017, the Hebei District Government organized an investment fair that concentrated on the development concept of ‘the Larger I-Style Town’. This was not a novel concept, but it was only from this point onwards that it was publicly announced and given significant consideration. This is a strategically designated area that occupies an area of 1.55 square kilometres with the former I-Style Town as its core and the adjacent Austrian business district and other surrounding areas as the buffer zone (Fig. 1.5). The overall approach of the new project is to preserve the core area and utilise its influence to encompass investments and promote construction developments in the buffer zone. By highlighting the features of Western-style buildings, redesigned land plots and overall commercial complexity, the government aims to attract industry and service enterprises to settle in and drive efficient development in surrounding areas. This is presented as facilitating the integration of resources in the entire area in the name of ‘sustainable development’. Since December 2017, a renewed emphasis on urban redevelopment, revitalisation and management issues has led to the creation of new business opportunities and investments in the region.

The government has played a significant role throughout this process. Since 2018, the Tianjin Municipal Government has vigorously supported the development of the night economy, which was officially reflected in the ‘*Tianjin Two-Year Action Plan for Promoting Tourism Development (2019–2020)*’ (《天津市促进旅游业发展两年行动计划(2019—2020年)》), Tianjin Municipal Government 2019) (hereafter, the Two-Year Plan). The Two-Year Plan is a local document that complies with national

guidelines to promote the integration of culture and tourism and tailors it to local circumstances. It clearly outlines 20 major tasks, with the fourth task focusing on exploring resources related to modern architectural heritage and former residences of modern celebrities and the seventh task aiming to promote the development of city-level nighttime economy pilot areas and diversify nighttime economic templates. It specifically mentions the enhancement of the Yigong Garden Historic Area. The Hebei District responded rapidly to the guidance document, and in July 2019, a night market opened in the I-Style Town based on preliminary market research (Hebei District People's Government of Tianjin Municipality 2019). It also seized the opportunity to further explore economic development pathways. Existing resources were integrated and allegedly optimised through continued efforts, and the night market economy eventually gained success. In August 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism included the I-Style Town in the second batch of nationally designated night-time cultural and tourism consumption agglomeration areas (Industrial Development Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2022) and, in March 2023, it was included in the second batch of national-level tourist leisure zones (Resource Development Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2023).

The government has attached increasing importance to this area. On October 29, 2019, the Hebei District Development and Reform Commission led a team to conduct a special investigation and engaged in in-depth discussions with the leaders of the ITMC on management issues. Subsequently, in March 2020, the establishment of the 'Tianjin I-Style Town Asset Management Co. Ltd,' (ISTAMC), a state-owned company, aimed to bolster asset management capabilities. This company has progressively assumed the operational rights of buildings from the Haihe Company. In August 2020, the management of I-Style Town was officially returned to the Hebei District Government from the Haihe Company. Simultaneously, ISTAMC has been progressively assuming ownership of the buildings. Taking this as a development opportunity, the Hebei District Government proposed strengthening its regional presence, turning 'The Larger I-Style Town' into a 'special area (特区)'. This was a strategic decision to utilise the potential of this area to promote the overall development of the entire Hebei District.

This distinctiveness is exemplified by the unified organisational management and operational system implemented by the ITMC. The committee seemed to have wholeheartedly aligned with the strategy of the Hebei District government and aimed to consolidate the previously fragmented ownership, management, and operational powers. The main responsibilities were largely expanded from four to

thirteen functions, with the introduction of an additional five functions related to economic development. Several regulations were also established to regulate the daily work of the ITMC. Regulations were also formulated to govern day-to-day operations and enhance the work efficiency and standards of the ITMC. The 'Joint Leadership Meeting System for Promoting the High-Quality Development of the I-Style Town' (推进意风区高质量发展工作领导小组联席会议制度) outlines personnel allocations and enhances enforcement management. The '*Management Measures for Activities within the I-Style Town*' (《意风区活动管理办法》) establishes a unified management system and an effective coordination mechanism for activity details. The 'Work Mechanism for Official Receptions by the I-Style Town Management Committee' (意风区管委会公务接待工作机制 - ITMC) regulates reception procedures and requirements. The powers and responsibilities of relevant functional departments are also delegated to this committee.

Based on these premises, in 2021, the Hebei District designated 'the Larger I-Style Town' project as the top priority for the development of the entire district. The Western-style buildings and 14 commercial buildings were meant to become the focal points of the future development template. This involved enhancing the scientific management level, refining public facilities, reinforcing adjustments in commercial formats, and strengthening workforce support. Elevating and renovating the I-Style Town was considered a paramount task. The Hebei District Government performed intensive landscape improvement and renovation projects. A series of infrastructure upgrades, environmental enhancements and functional improvements were promoted in various stages to create a new appearance. In addition, the Hebei District Government adopted a new initiative called 'Western Style Buildings + (洋楼+)' to promote the revitalisation of 'the Larger I-Style Town' by capitalising on its historical and cultural features. This semipropositional strategy combined Western-style buildings with various formats and technological means. The 'plus' sign can indicate traditional performing arts, shows, curatorial activities, technology-driven events, or consumption-related events, each of which corresponds to a 'new' modality applied by the Larger I-Style Town Management Committee. A typical approach is to exploit the effects of brands, such as by attracting the crosstalk club Deyunshe (德云社), a leading Chinese crosstalk group, and, in the near future, Zhongshuge Bookstore (钟书阁).⁵ Another approach is to apply digital and smart technologies to create a particular atmosphere. For example, in May 2023, the Liang Qichao Memorial Hall made

⁵ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/3hJkN0YzY5C9Y9FHMZdF9w>.



Fig. 5 One of the main streets of the I-Style Town: Ziyou Road, 2022 (Source: the authors)

use of holographic projections and digital matching to enable storytelling (IIOTMCCPC 2023). The ever-changing vocabularies after the ‘plus’ sign all cater to different consumption-related scenarios. Therefore, it is evident that the recent development of ‘the Larger I-Style Town’ emphasises commercialisation and tourism. The site has become a national internet celebrity check-in place and a city landmark rather than a place with distinctive historical and heritage value (Fig. 5).

Regarding the value derived from historical and heritage-specific features, it is necessary to investigate the latest relevant official documents. The ‘*Tianjin Historical and Cultural*

City Protection Plan (2021–2035)’ (《天津市历史文化名城保护规划 (2021–2035年)》, Tianjin Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau 2022) is consistent with the ‘*Tianjin Land and Space Masterplan (2021–2035)*’ (《天津市国土空间总体规划 (2021–2035年)》 (征求意见稿), Tianjin Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau 2021) in the same planning period. Both documents include President Xi Jinping’s guidance on conservation and redevelopment given during his visit to Tianjin on 17 January 2019. In both documents, the key idea of strengthening the protection of historical districts and revitalising them is repeatedly emphasised. The idea of ‘value’ here lies primarily



Fig. 6 The main square of the former Italian concession, also known as ‘Marco Polo Square’, 2013 (Source: the authors)

in its role as a carrier of the urban context and its economic potential as a historical and cultural resource that can create cultural experiences (Fig. 6).

3 Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the three developmental phases demonstrated that there was a noticeable shift in management authority. Initially, the Tianjin Municipal Government held full control, while in the second phase, economic considerations prompted the management's transfer to the Haihe Company. However, in the third phase, the government reclaimed management rights and exercised unified management. Since 2018, the Hebei District Government has mobilised the overall strengths of the entire district towards comprehensive coordination and deployment, connecting cultural and tourism resources and fostering complementary advantages to enhance the leading role of the I-Style Town. By appointing a commissioner to serve as the director of the IITMC, the government ensured specialised management and achieved centralised control.

On the one hand, this kind of management template was an effective implementation strategy that ensured that the government's guiding ideology was accurately transformed into specific and implementable plans following the guiding criteria of uniformity and consistency. At the same time, the ITMC created more collaboration opportunities by gaining support from government policies. The ITMC also offered valuable suggestions for the macroplanning of regional development, especially with regard to the regional positioning of the Hebei District Government. On the other hand, this kind of management template allowed for more streamlined administrative processes by shortening the workflow of signing projects and facilitating the intervention of enterprises outside Tianjin that were unfamiliar with the local circumstances and the relevant procedures.

As a nonprofit organisation directly overseen by the government, the ITMC exhibits a proactive approach to its work. Committee members are motivated to proactively identify and address challenges, implement innovative solutions, and meaningfully contribute to the organisation's objectives. Their proactive stance not only enhances work efficiency but also strengthens their ability to navigate complex issues, ensuring the successful execution of initiatives and furthering missions. We can observe the continuous dedicated efforts through a variety of vibrant activities in cultural and artistic fields as well as the media exposure they receive by closely

following relevant news.⁶ According to this perspective, after nearly two decades, the government has enhanced the effectiveness of policy implementation in practical terms.

Simultaneously, this government's initiative reflects existing issues and prompts us to ponder a crucial question: does the conservation of historical buildings necessarily align with commercial development models, or should it respect heritage value? On the one hand, the fact that the government reclaimed management rights highlights the influential role that the I-Style Town assumes in Tianjin's broader development strategy. The government has strategically placed it as the core of current urban planning and development efforts, capitalising on its unique geographical advantages and building upon its historical and cultural heritage value. On the other hand, 'the Larger I-Style Town' is not merely a geographical demarcation at the administrative level; it also responds to the key concept of commercial development within the context of urban redevelopment. It has now been rebranded as an 'urban living room' and is envisioned as a trailblazing pilot zone that could spearhead high-quality development throughout the region. The introduction of 'the Larger I-Style Town' concept has reshaped key elements such as 'the most beautiful kilometre along the Haihe' (海河最美一公里), the 'clusters of Italian-Style architecture', and the 'former residences of modern celebrities' into compelling unique selling points. Together, they contribute to establishing the I-Style Town as an iconic commercial area. The incorporation of foreign-style elements appears geared towards highlighting its international allure and seamlessly blending cultural tourism and economic advancement. This underscores how heritage is strategically harnessed for commercial interests while retaining its global appeal, leaving open the question of 'value' (Fig. 7).

The I-Style Town reflects the modern regional cultural characteristics of Tianjin in terms of architectural style, urban layout, and spatial form. Neglecting all of these forms of heritage value in favour of a strategy that aims to utilise heritage sites as mere marketing tools for commercial gains is a concerning trend in the current redevelopment process. Instead of appreciating the intrinsic historical and cultural significance of these sites, they are often exploited as commodities for profit. While the individual buildings associated with modern celebrities create commodity value and are highlighted through different forms of storytelling, the conservation of the overall design of the historical district, the spirit of the place, and the distinctive stylistic characteristics are ignored. This approach not only undermines the historical environmental atmosphere and disregards the authentic essence of the heritage site but also dilutes its unique identity, robbing

⁶ This is based on our extensive analysis of the WeChat Official Account Platform of the I-Style Town named 'Tianjin Yifengqu'.



Fig. 7 Juxtaposition of old and new in the I-Style Town, 2022 (Source: the authors)

visitors of the opportunity to connect with its rich cultural past. When heritage sites are primarily viewed as assets for commercialisation, their educational, historical, and social value becomes secondary, leading to a loss of the invaluable knowledge and insights that they offer. In this case, it is unsurprising that ordinary people often have insufficient understanding of historical and cultural heritage as a whole and of the value of cultural heritage.⁷

The material entities and the historical atmosphere of these past presencing memory-work sites carry multiple types of value, such as historical, cultural, social, and commercial value. What is the value that the government truly cares about? An analysis of the nexus between the policies and practices implemented in this laboratory of urban redevelopment suggests that the government considers heritage a thematic object of tourism and consumption that takes precedence over alternative visions highlighting the historical-cultural authenticity and critical perspectives on historical-social-collective memories linked to the distinctiveness of the identity of the place. The I-Style Town could be a gimmick used to attract investment, which is clear evidence of Tianjin's globalised 'consumable' identity more than its sustainable future. It could also serve as a cultural label to tell 'good stories', which serve the purposes of a certain kind of 'cultural tourism' industry that is palatable and ready for consumption. The real historical and cultural value originating from the Italian-transcultural atmosphere is diluted by the generic pseudo-European flavour and other stereotypical objectifications, which are part of the global phenomenon of domesticising foreignness for consumption

(Marinelli 2019). Macdonald's call for 'presencing the past' seems to be lost in translation, as does the intrinsic connection between memory heritage and the identity of a place (Macdonald 2012) (Fig. 8).

One could argue that within the context of the current trends of urban redevelopment, it would be utopian to focus merely on historical and cultural value. One could further add that the tension between the idea of heritage as community belongingness or as an object of touristic consumption exists in many other cities in China and abroad. In the case of Tianjin, because of its historical distinctiveness, which has created an architectural qualitative and quantitative richness, conserving (i.e., presencing) the past is essential for maintaining the city's unique identity and fostering a sense of belonging among its people. The current logic of urban redevelopment is informed by the awareness that historical and cultural sites not only carry heritage value but also possess immense economic potential. The integration of economic criteria does not necessarily have to diminish historical significance; it could also ensure longevity by expressing the relevance of this value in the face of contemporary challenges. However, given the economic pressures, the imperative of finding ways to sustain these heritage sites while avoiding overcommercialisation becomes vitally important for sustainable development. With this focus, we can not only safeguard heritage but also foster thriving, economically sustainable and prosperous communities.

The nighttime economy is a modern urban format. The current I-Style Town maintains this trend and uses exotic elements and atmosphere as an advantage to develop a nighttime economy. Gradually departing from the

⁷ The evidence for this derives from both informal conversations with Tianjin residents and our analysis of social media in the period 2018–2022.



Fig. 8 Domesticising foreignness for consumption, 2022 (Source: the authors)

traditional belief that the ‘nighttime economy’ is limited to dining and street food stalls, the ITMC has integrated a diversified nighttime consumption market with tourism, the backstreet economy, the small business economy and the influencer economy by introducing diverse formats such as experiential, entertainment-oriented, interactive and immersive experiences. Despite achieving some significant results from the commercial perspective, the heavy reliance on economy-driven activities may ultimately cause the loss of its ‘Italian-Style’ distinctiveness and risks converging with similar projects of commercial enclaves with a high degree of generalisation. In particular, the themed light shows and colourful nighttime illuminations should not be the focal points of promotion, especially when the light obscures the original architectural façades and affects the overall aesthetic ambience. The I-Style Town should not merely be seen as a ‘new’ space and a commercial enclave to promote cultural, tourism, and technology consumption but rather as a site that binds history, memory, and heritage value so that the ‘presencing of the past’ translates into valuable lessons that are relevant in the present.

Striking a balance between heritage conservation and commercial development is the challenge that modern Tianjin must face and successfully address. Finding a harmonious balance requires the thoughtful identification of historical and cultural value and reasonable long-term development strategies. A comprehensive and holistic approach is crucial. This approach involves rigorous research and documentation. Collaboration between urban planners, architects, historians, and local communities is imperative to ensure that the redevelopment process not only respects the heritage value of the site

but also integrates it harmoniously into the fast-paced, contemporary urban environment.

The concept of ‘protecting people and buildings together’, which originated in Bologna, Italy, has created a consensus in the field of historic urban conservation and redevelopment (Martínez 2017).

Due to its complexity, urban redevelopment inevitably transcends material spatial issues and extends into the social realm. The redevelopment of the I-Style Town involves multiple concerns, such as historical and cultural conservation, the optimisation of urban functions and the stimulation of social vitality. However, unlike other cases, the redevelopment of the I-Style Town seems to lack adequate consideration of the improvement of the living environment and the daily lives of residents, primarily due to the relocation of indigenous people. The transformation of residential land into commercial space diminished residents’ sense of participation and directly resulted in the loss of regional vitality (Leng and Chen 2017). Under the government-led redevelopment process, it is worth contemplating whether long-term robust financial support from the government and the execution power of government departments can be relied upon to carry out protective development in the area and to compensate for the disadvantages arising from the absence of indigenous people and the lack of livelihood.

A holistic approach is required to prevent the current I-Style Town from being seen as merely a ‘hybrid-Western-Sinified’—and ultimately Disneyland-esque—atmosphere for middle-class Tianjiners. Instead, it should be valued as a historical space that is open and accessible to the public while constantly evolving and revitalising. This article offered a critique of the frequent swinging of

the pendulum towards functional replacement and structural adaptation for the tourism industry rather than the value of the community's livelihood as a living heritage. The hope of valuing 'presencing the past' into the future is that the government's dedicated efforts will allow for adequate maintenance of the I-Style Town and its use in a manner that benefits both the local community and visitors while promoting cultural heritage and historical significance and fostering sustainable commercial development.

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Haihe Company | Haihe Construction and Development Investment Ltd. |
| ICBD | I-Style Central Business District |
| IOTMCCPC | Internet Information Office of Tianjin Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China |
| ITMC | I-Style Town Management Committee |
| ISTAMC | Tianjin I-Style Town Asset Management Co. Ltd. |
| MHURD | Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development |
| THBPC | Tianjin Historic Buildings Protection Committee |
| TPB | Tianjin Planning Bureau |
| Two-Year Plan | Tianjin Two-Year Action Plan for Promoting Tourism Development (2019–2020) |

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Authors' contributions

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Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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