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NAVIGATING URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS OF DALIAN CITY – INSIGHTS FROM REGIONAL CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Ye Chai¹, Nor Arbina Zainal Abidin^{2*}, Kunyu Li³, Jing Fan⁴

*^{1,2,3,4} School of Housing, Building and Planning,
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA, PENANG, MALAYSIA*

Abstract

Responding to this crisis, the Chinese government has undertaken the initiative to conserve and revitalise the urban historic districts in recent years. However, it has been observed that the process of historical heritage conservation in China is significantly influenced by the top-down protection system that renders the heritage voiceless. Past studies have explored the context of urban heritage conservation based on morphological integrity alone. This necessitates examining the context of the conservation of historic districts from a micro perspective involving human behaviour activities and experiences. This article aimed to navigate the path of urban heritage conservation in historic districts of China from a micro perspective of reviewing the regional cultural experiences. To do so, this article focused on the case of the historic district in Dalian City in China particularly Zhongshan District which is known for Zhongshan Square surrounded by classical buildings built in the early 20th century. Following the field visit and qualitative interviews with the residents, the collected data in the form of transcribed responses was thematically analysed. This article presents the main themes identified from the thematic coding of the collected data. The findings from the interviews indicated that the residents were dissatisfied with the heritage conservation interventions implemented by the government. This article concludes that the dissatisfaction among the residents was attributed to the concerns of the residents about the lack of connection between heritage buildings and the urban textures of their surroundings and the lack of supportive policies. This calls for strategic measures driven by regional cultural experiences.

Keywords: heritage conservation, cultural landscape, historic districts, Zhongshan Square, Dalian City

² Corresponding author. Email: arbina@usm.my

INTRODUCTION

During the late 20th century, China faced a rapid rate of urbanisation owing to the opening up and reform policies. As explained by Farrell and Westlund (2018), this urban transition in Chinese cities led to the reorganisation of the spaces and associated population. This can be understood from the observation that the road to urbanisation in China has been different than that of Western countries (Chen et al., 2013). However, with the rapid rate of urbanisation in China, cities in contemporary times are challenged by a far greater challenge – the challenge of sustaining a balance between the built heritage and modernisation. As Wu et al. (2022) explained, with the large-scale urbanisation in China, the historic districts have encountered the threat of decline and destruction. For instance, Figures 1 and 2 below show how the local government in Guangdong has destroyed the historic district in the name of reconstruction with their pseudo-antique style of architecture (Yang, 2021).



Figure 1: Reconstructed houses on the left versus original Hui architecture
Source: Yang (2021)



Figure 2: Original urban fabric versus the reconstructed one
Source: Yang (2021)

Given the perceived threat and decline to the historic built heritage in Chinese cities, this calls for the efforts of planners and policymakers to sustain a balance between preservation and modernisation. In fact, this problem is more pronounced in the context of Dalian City in China. As discussed by Zhang et al. (2023), being a port city throughout history and now being a megacity, Dalian in Northeast China has a demonstrated history of colonisation for roughly five decades. Following the reforms in the 1980s, the city began to witness rapid urbanisation thereby making it crucial to address the conflict between preservation and modernisation (Wang et al., 2023). Also, as shown in Figure 3, the prominence of ensuring protection and regeneration grew quite late. It is this context of Dalian City that makes it an intriguing context to explore the initiative to conserve and revitalise the urban fabric of its historic districts (Liu et al., 2019).

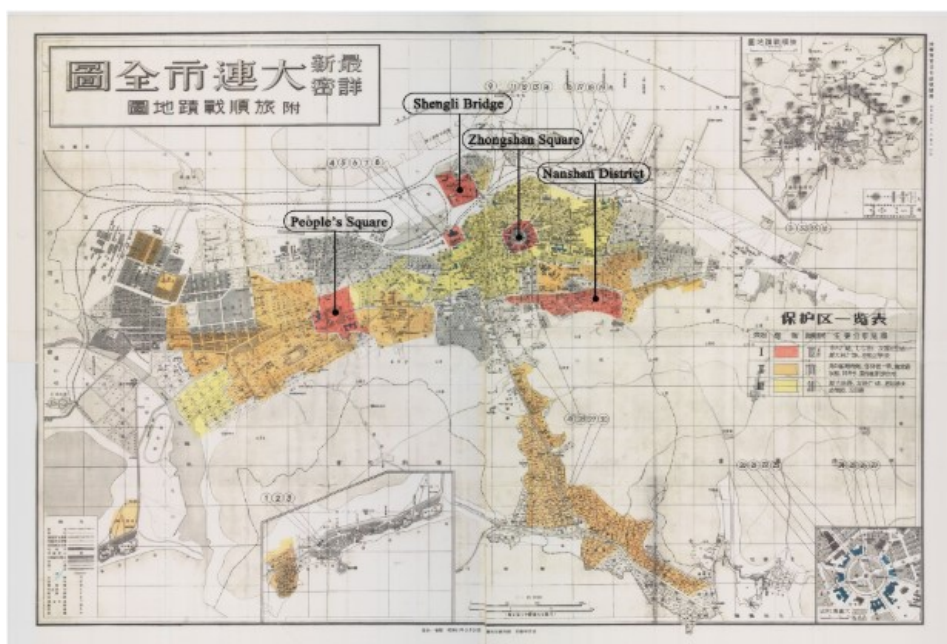


Figure 3: Historic map of Dalian showing the urban conservation areas during the colonial period
Source: Zhang et al. (2023)

Based on these perspectives, this paper aimed to navigate the path of urban heritage conservation in historic districts of China from a micro perspective of reviewing the regional cultural experiences. In order to attempt this, this study focused on the case of the historic district in Dalian City in China particularly Zhongshan District which is known for Zhongshan Square surrounded by classical buildings built in the early 20th century.

URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN CHINA

A review of International and Chinese approaches to built-heritage

The idea of conservation of built heritage originated in the 19th century in response to the French Revolution following which it spread across the Western nations. As explained by Zhang et al. (2023), during the 20th century, the term heritage conservation grew stronger owing to the expansion of the legal and regulatory framework in the Western context. In fact, the term “heritage” began to include a broad range of buildings, landscapes and objects (Scott, 1998). This led to the increase in centralised management of heritage, a trend that gained prominence in the 1960s.

Also, in the period following 1970s, new economic forms were introduced that changed public values thereby influencing the politics of representation (Parry, 2007). On the basis of this observation, it can be deduced that the theme of preserving urban history gained recognition. Not only did it become a specialised topic but also attracted the attention of diverse stakeholders not limited to professionals but also the community at large. In the Chinese context, heritage conservation is heavily influenced by official and unofficial heritages. For instance, in the Chinese system, there exists a hierarchical system for classifying urban heritage from the viewpoint of conservation, however, it is vastly dominated by political structures (Liu et al., 2019). This can be understood from the fact that the “**Famous Historic and Cultural Cities (FHCC)**” system which consists of three tiers emerged from significant national policies over time.

Furthermore, reviewing the theme of heritage conservation policies in China indicated the influence of the goal of economic development. As Cao and Li (2023) discussed, the current heritage conservation policy applies to built and intangible cultural heritage only. In fact, Zan (2013) drew attention to how policy concerning urban heritage conservation has evolved in the context of China. Also, past studies have focused on policy development, analysing policy changes and understanding organisational behaviours involved in it. This can be understood from the differences between the studies published in the context of tangible and intangible heritage. Studies such as the one by Zhang (2022) on tangible heritage conservation policy emphasise concept and typology development, while those on intangible heritage conservation focus on policy frameworks and the management approach to production-based conservation (Xu et al., 2022). This indicates that there is a need to adopt a contextual approach to analysing the urban built heritage conservation in the context of Chinese cities owing to the inherent differences in the underlying policy frameworks.

Protecting and Conserving Historic Districts

One of the most crucial factors influencing the assessment and protection of the built heritage in the urban context is the developed conservation system. As explained by Wang et al. (2023), the growth in interest in heritage conservation can be traced to the mid-20th century wherein a deeper understanding of heritage areas emerged. In the words of Chen et al. (2021), the Chinese historical heritage conservation system emerged with the designation of historic conservation areas (DHCA) within Chinese cities. This was recognised as the most effective way of preserving large-scale historical environments in Chinese cities that were challenged by rapid urbanisation. As can be observed from Figure 4 below, this can be understood from the designated historic conservation areas within the historic urban area in the city.

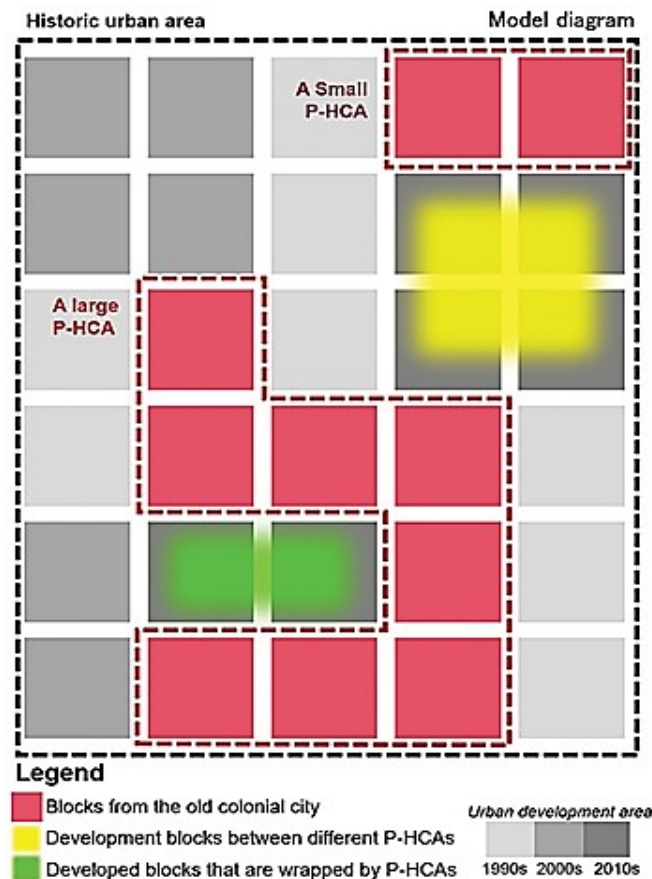


Figure 4: Historic conservation area in Chinese cities
 Source: Wang et al. (2023)

While the method was initially thought to be effective, the forces of rapid urbanisation have led to the designation of only a few historic districts in accordance with the requirement of the conservation system. As Chan and Ma (2004) discussed, this is owing to the challenge posed by large-scale demolition practices by several cities to reconstruct their historic districts. For instance, this can be understood by the case of Shanghai which is recognised as a national FHCC in China but still, the Shikumen Lilong neighbourhoods of Shanghai remain unrecognised as DHCA owing to their abundance. This can be understood from Figures 5 and 6 shown indicating the declining state of Shikumen Lilong neighbourhoods in Shanghai.



Figure 5: Shikumen neighbourhoods in Shanghai in decline
Source: Anne, 2013

As Liu et al. (2019) explained, this lack of recognition is owing to the strict and cumbersome nature of process of selecting built heritage areas under DHCA system. Consequently, this paves the way for the demolition of the unrecognised heritage areas followed by the redevelopment of the land. This explains the reason for disappearing historic urban areas in China owing to the strict reliance on the current DHCA system alone. Besides, it may be noted that the lack of clear boundaries and policies concerning historic conservation areas makes it crucial to develop new conservation strategies based on a regional approach (Cao & Li, 2023).



Figure 6: Lost Shikumen neighbourhoods in Shanghai
Source: Anne, 2013

The review of past studies indicated that conservation in historic districts in China has been significantly influenced by the DHCA system only. However, these inferences in the past studies are mostly theoretical and lack empirical evidence. In this context, Zhang (2022) drew attention to inadequacy of restrictions on urban renewal which could have otherwise encouraged their preserving rather than redeveloping them. On a similar note, Ruan and Sun (2001) discussed about the scope of conservation which should be based on managing the functional use of the neighbourhoods and landscape. Interestingly, past studies have also examined the morphological features of historic urban areas in China. Such studies have been undertaken in the context of cities namely Guangzhou and Suzhou with the use of space syntax theory in the past as discussed by Wu et al. (2019). From these studies, it can be deduced that, planners and policymakers must consider the significant role played by restrictions and guidelines in heritage conservation planning.

Not only this but heritage conservation system must involve a robust system to evaluate and designate areas of priority. In this context, Liu et al. (2019) highlighted the need for a diverse evaluation mechanism and government-enterprise cooperation. In their opinion, such approach can play a crucial role in historical continuity as well as creating economic value. Besides, Yang (2022) drew attention to the role of policy in conserving heritage in non-FHCC areas such as Jiangyin. As discussed by the author, this must involve policies for restoring urban form and developing renovation guidelines. Despite these studies,

there has been little analysis of the morphological characteristics of such heritage conservation areas. This is so because past studies have explored the context of urban heritage conservation based on little morphological integrity. Thus, it is not wrong to infer that the process of historical heritage conservation in China is significantly influenced by the top-down protection system that renders the heritage voiceless.

A Case of Zhongshan District, Dalian City, China

In order to navigate the path of urban heritage conservation in historic districts of China from a micro perspective of reviewing the regional cultural experiences, the case of Zhongshan District in Dalian City presents a relevant context.

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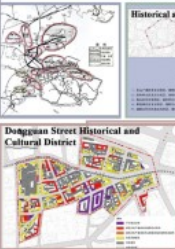








Nation	1950	1978	2002	2010
	'Liang Chen Plan' 1961 'Interim Regulations on the Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage' 1963 'Interim Measures for the Restoration Management of Revolutionary Monuments, Historic Monuments, Ancient Architecture, and Carving Caves'	'Interim Measures for the Restoration Management of Revolutionary Monuments, Historic Monuments, Ancient Architecture, and Carving Caves' 1980 'Report on Strengthening the Conservation and Management of Ancient Architecture and Cultural Heritage Sites' 1982 'Request for Instructions on the Protection of China's Famous Historic and Cultural Cities' (mother batch) 1982 'Cultural Heritage Protection Law' 1986 'Request for Instructions on the Protection of China's Famous Historic and Cultural Cities' (second batch) 1989 'Cultural Heritage Protection Law' Revision 1990 'Urban Planning Law of the People's Republic of China' 1992 'Rules for the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics' 1994 'Suggestion on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Cities in China' (mother batch) 1994 'Protection Planning Requirements for Historic and Cultural Cities' 1997 'Provisional Measures for the Protection and Management of Historic and Cultural Reserves in Tunxi Old Street, Huangshan City'	'Cultural Heritage Protection Law' 2004 'The Management of Purple Line Planning Method' 2005 'Protection Planning Specification of Famous Historic and Cultural City' 2005 'Historical and Cultural City Protection Planning Norms' 2005 'Circular of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage' 2008 'Urban and Rural Planning Law' 2008 'Regulations on the Conservation of Famous Historic and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages'	'National Historical and Cultural City Protection Assessment Standards' 2012 'Notice on the Issuance of the National Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Construction of Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection Facilities' 2012 'Evaluation Standard of Historical and Cultural City Protection' 2014 'National New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020)' 2016 'Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Further Strengthening the Management of Urban Planning and Construction' 2016 'Delimitation of Historical and Cultural Blocks and Determination of Historical Buildings Work Plan' 2018 'Conservation Planning Standards for Historic and Cultural Cities'
Local	Special Liberated Areas Period Early Days (1945-1955)	Exploration Period / Initial Establishment of Historic and Cultural City Protection (1978-2000)	Independent Cultural Relics and Historic Building Protection (2000-2008)	Holistic Protection of Historic Districts (2008-Present)
	Initial Stage of Socialist Construction Stagnation Period (1949-1978)	Urban Development Stagnation Period (1955-1978)	Rapid Economic Development in the Period of Conflict between Urban Construction and Old Urban Areas (1995-2010)	Stable Economic Growth Period (2010-2017) / New Era: Territorial Spatial Planning (2017-Present)
	1958 'Overall Planning of Dalian City'	1980 'Overall Planning of Dalian City' 1986 'Liaoning Province on the Implementation Measures' 1990 'Dalian City Planning Regulations' 1990 'Overall Planning of Dalian City'    	2000 'Overall Planning of Dalian City' 2002 'Dalian First Batch of Key Building Protection List' 2004 'Dalian City Master Plan (2001-2020)' 2004 'Dalian Second Batch of Key Building Protection List' 2006 'Circular of the People's Government of Liaoning Province on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage' 2007 'Maintenance Management Measures for Key Protected Buildings in Dalian' 2009-2012 'Dalian Third Batch of Key Building Protection List' 2009 'Dalian First Unmovable Protection List' 2009 'The Second Unmovable Protection List of Dalian' 2010 'Dalian City Master Plan (2009-2020)' 2011 'Dalian City Master Plan (2010-2020)'   	2012 'Regulations on the Protection of Unmovable Cultural Relics in Dalian' 2015 'Management Measures of Special Subsidy Fund for Unmovable Cultural Relics Protection in Dalian' 'Dalian Cultural Relics Protection Unit Care Management Implementation Measures' 2017 'Interim Measures for the Protection and Management of Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, Villages and Historic Districts in Liaoning Province' 2017 'Notice on Listing 37 Cities Such as Shanghai as the Second Batch of Pilot Cities for Urban Design' 2017 'Dalian Urban Master Plan (2001-2020) (2017 revision)' 2019 'Dongguan Street Historic District Protection Planning' 'Dalian Zhongshan Square Historic District Protection Planning' 'Protection Planning of Sungou Historic and Cultural Block in Lushun' 2020 'Famous Historic and Cultural City Protection Planning in Dalian' 'Regulations on Famous Historic and Cultural City Planning in Dalian' 2021 'Dalian 2049 City Long-range Planning' 2021 'Territorial Spatial Master Plan of Dalian City (2021-2035)'   

Figure 7: Development of heritage protection system at national, city and district levels
 Source: Zhang et al., 2023

Dalian City is known to have a profound history despite being modern. This can be understood from the concentration of several historic districts in the city built

during different periods of history. As explained by Zhang et al. (2023), Dalian City is known to have traditional buildings that are mostly inspired by Western architectural styles. This is so because this part of the city was developed by foreigners, unlike other colonial cities. Figure 7 above shows the development of heritage protection systems at the national, city and district levels. As can be observed from the figure, the planning for heritage conservation of historic districts in Dalian City fails to consider constructive indicators. As of now, there exist limited historical and cultural blocks at the provincial level that are certified under the system of heritage protection system (Figure 8). Not only there is a detailed plan for community participation and funding, but there is also a lack of consideration of regional experiences which could pave the way for the dynamic protection of built heritage.

File Name	Release Time	Quantity	Identifying neighbourhood information
'The members of the CPPCC visited the protected historic districts in our city'—Dalian Daily	2006	5 historic and cultural blocks	Historic and cultural blocks: 1. Zhongshan Square (~15 ha) 2. Shengli Bridge (~9 ha) 3. Nanshan District (~40 ha) 4. Blackstone Reef (~18 ha) 5. Taiyanggou, Lvshun (~350 ha)
'Dalian City Master Plan (2009–2020)'	2010	5 historic and cultural blocks, 4 new historic sites	Historic sites: 1. 87 Sanatoriums (~5 ha) 2. Xiaolong Street Cadre Sanatoriums (~6 ha) 3. Xinghai Street Lot (~9 ha) 4. Russian Army Barracks Site (~5 ha)
'Dalian City Master Plan (2010–2020)'	2011	5 historic and cultural blocks	
'Dalian City Master Plan (2001–2020) (Revised 2017)'	2017	5 historic and cultural blocks	Historic and cultural blocks: 1. Zhongshan Square ^a (~15 ha), core area 9.1 ha; 2. Shengli Bridge (~13.4 ha), core area 9.6 ha; 3. Nanshan District (~41.4 ha), core area 26.5 ha; 4. Blackstone Reef (~18.3 ha), core area 5.2 ha; 5. Taiyanggou, Lvshun (~350 ha), core area 28.6 ha.
FHCCPPD	January 2021	2 historic urban areas 4 historic and cultural blocks 6 historic and cultural scenic areas 20 sites with historic conditions (not listed)	Historic urban areas: Lvshun historic urban area, Dalian historic urban area Historic sites: Lvshun Old Market historic site Jinzhou ancient city historic site Historic and cultural blocks: Zhongshan Square ^a , Dongguan Street ^a , Shengli Bridge, Taiyanggou (Lvshun) ^a
'Dalian 2049 city long-range planning'	May 2021	2 historic urban areas 2 historic sites	Historic and cultural scenic areas: Nanshan District, the Dalian Institute of Chemical Physics, Fengming Street, Liansuo Street, People's Square, Golden Hill, and others.
'TSMPPDC (2021–2035)' draft	September 2021	4 historic and cultural blocks 24 historic and cultural scenic areas	

Figure 8: Existing historical and cultural blocks at the provincial level as presented
Source: Zhang et al. (2023)

As can be observed from Figure 6, Zhongshan District is one of the historical districts in Dalian City that has been officially recognised under the heritage conservation system. Located at the eastern edge of Dalian City, Zhongshan District constitutes a major business and commercial centre for the city. One of the most significant heritage areas in the district is Zhongshan Square which constitutes the heart of the district. As shown in Figure 9 below, the site of Zhongshan Square has been modernised with the development of high-rise

buildings. This offers a context to explore the regional cultural experiences with respect to the broad goal of conservation of historic districts.



Figure 9: Zhongshan Square and its surroundings in the central business and commercial district
Source: Zhang et al., 2023

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the urban heritage conservation of Zhongshan Square and surrounding spaces, this study involved field visits and qualitative interviews with residents of Zhongshan District (Figure 10). The first phase of the study was designed to undertake a field survey involving visit to the site followed by the second phase of the study in which interviews were conducted to gather insights from individuals.

Fieldwork

Before undertaking the fieldwork, this study involved reviewing a detailed map of Zhongshan District including Zhongshan Square, its surroundings, and notable streets within the district. During the fieldwork, the researcher was involved in visiting the site to observe the current state of heritage conservation efforts in Zhongshan Square and its surrounding areas. The aim here was to identify any discrepancies between preserved historical sites and modern development. This was accomplished by capturing the images of existing historic buildings, modern constructions and urban landscapes so as to visually document the current state of the area. Also, the fieldwork involved detailed notes on the condition of buildings, layout and signs of neglect/conservation.

Qualitative Interviews

During the second phase of the study, the study involved interacting with ten individuals concerning their experiences and perceptions of heritage conservation in Zhongshan District. The sample size of $n = 10$ was chosen in line with the guidelines (sample size range 5 to 25) by Beitin (2012) so as to ensure objectivity of findings while also being mindful of constraints of time and resources. These conversations were held in the form of interviews with owners, residents as well as visitors so as to understand their views on how to sustain a balance between preserving the heritage and the demand for modern spaces. The broad list of aspects that were focused upon during interviews were as follows.

- *Current state of heritage conservation in Zhongshan District*
- *Changes observed over time in Zhongshan Square and its surrounding areas*
- *Main concerns regarding the conservation efforts*
- *Personal experiences pertaining to the historic sites*

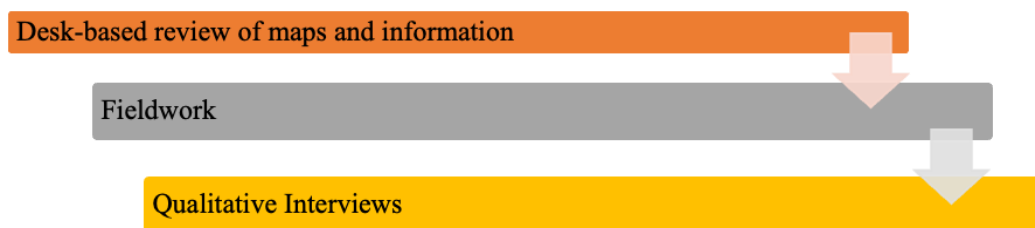


Figure 10: Research design adopted in the current study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the current study found that the current heritage conservation interventions in Zhongshan District of Dalian City are met with dissatisfaction among residents. This was found to be attributed to the perceived loss of connection, insufficient supportive policies, lack of community engagement, and loss of cultural identity as discussed below.

Loss of connection between heritage buildings and urban textures

The current study found that there is a significant loss of connection between the heritage buildings and the surrounding urban textures in Zhongshan District. As observed during the field visits, many historic buildings are now overshadowed by modern high-rise constructions. At the same time, the current study observed that the contrast between traditional architecture and contemporary developments has led to a fragmented urban landscape (Figure 11).

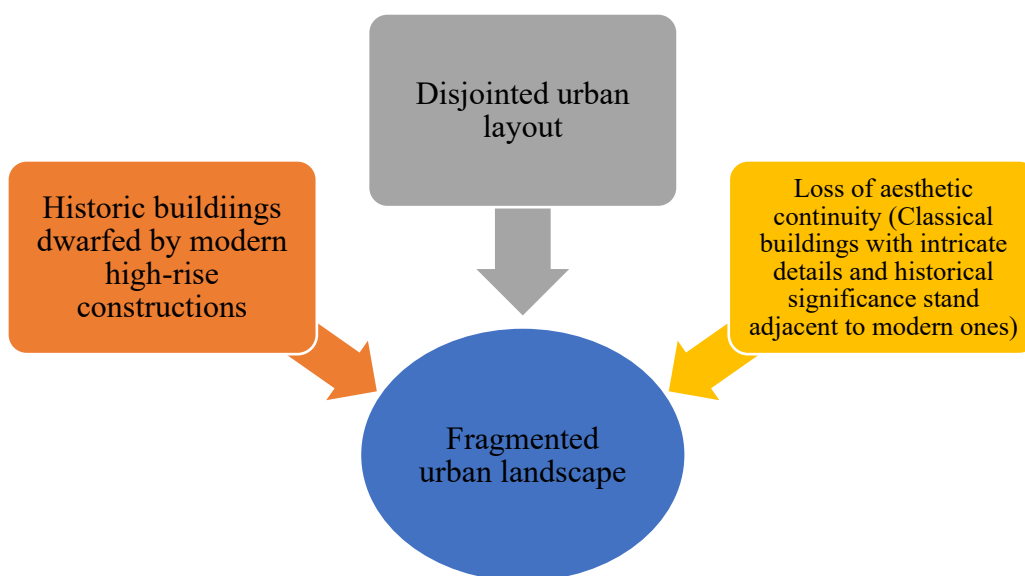


Figure 11: Patterns identified during the fieldwork (Created by the Author)

Furthermore, analysis of the responses of the interviewees at the site supported these observations. This was found to be supported by the views of the residents that the new constructions were not in harmony with the historic aesthetic which in turn paved the way for a disjointed appearance. This implies that the existing preservation efforts undermine the historic significance of the area. Besides, when it comes to preserving the urban textures of Zhongshan

Square and surrounding areas, the current study found that the urban textures in the case study region have witnessed irreversible damage. Therefore, while this may be attributed to the lack of detailed conservation strategies in the existing conservation system, there is a need to ensure a detailed plan for regaining the lost connection.

Lack of supportive policies and inadequate community engagement

Furthermore, analysis of the data confirmed the lack of supportive policies in conserving the heritage in the concerned area. This was evident in the responses of the interviewees that the existing heritage conservation system in Dalian City lacked in terms of protecting historic buildings. Majority of the interviewees expressed that the historic buildings in the case study region were challenged by the threat of being replaced or modified permanently which was found to be supported with the changing urban form of the case study site (Figure 12).

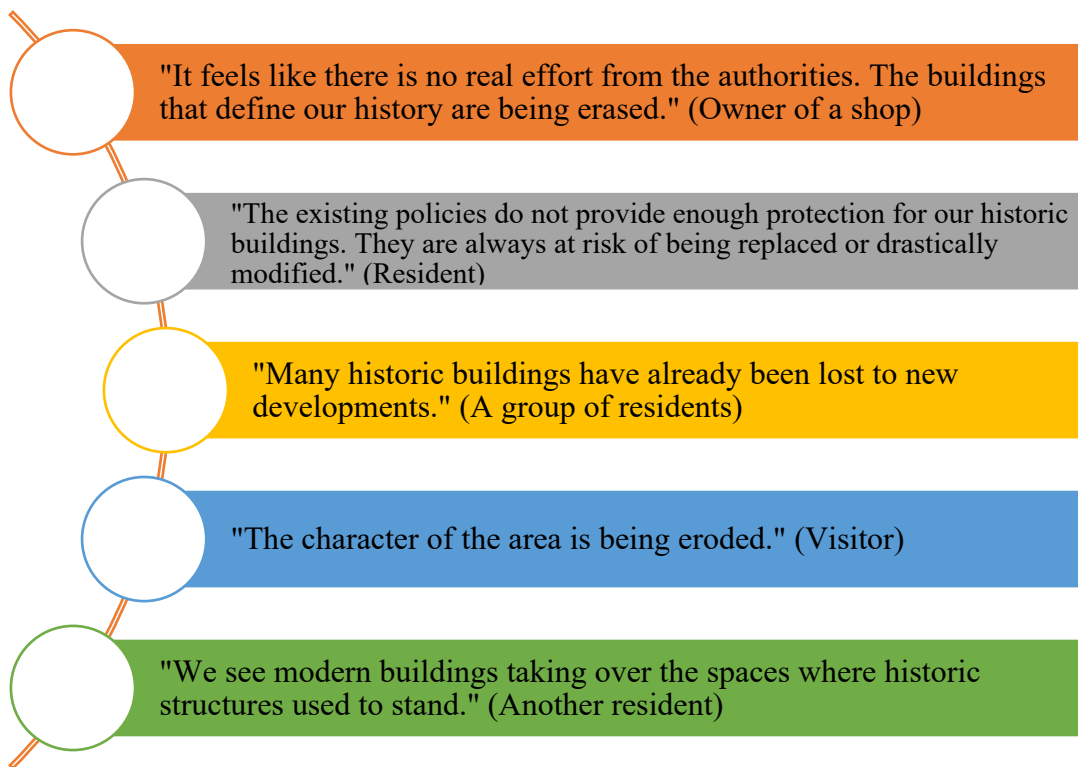


Figure 12: Responses of interviewees expressing concerns (Created by the Author)

Also, the findings of the current study drew attention to a lack of community engagement under the existing heritage conservation system. Majority of the interviewees stated that they felt a sense of exclusion from the process of decision-making when it comes to preserving the urban built heritage. This implies that the current heritage conservation system in the context of Dalian City lacked consideration of the needs and values of the broader community as a whole. This draws the attention of planners and policymakers to consider the needs and values of the local community and align conservation efforts with them.

Loss of Cultural Identity and Living Heritage

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the current study found a sense of loss of cultural identity among the individuals interviewed during the visits to the case study region. This was attributed to their opinion that demolition and alteration had changed the appearance of many historic spaces in Zhongshan District which actually were tangible links to the past. In fact, the current study found from the interactions at the site that the existing strategies in the case study region lack the preservation of the living heritage. This is not only concerning owing to the changing appearance of the buildings in the case study region but also the loss of cultural practices associated with them. This indicates that with the influence of modern development, there is a loss of the cultural fabric in the area which in turn makes it even more difficult for people to connect with their historical roots. This paves the way for planners and policymakers to develop heritage conservation strategies to enhance the experiences of the community. In doing so, the focus should be on enabling the connection between the community and the cultural fabric of the region. Such strategic integration of historical heritage with the community can promote preservation and cultural continuity.

Holistic conservation based on regional experiences

Realising the need for a more holistic approach to heritage conservation, the findings of the current study indicates that it should not be limited to their physical preservation alone. As emphasised by the interviewees, conservation efforts should focus on preserving individual buildings as well as the broader urban context and cultural landscape. Such an approach would involve the creation of policies for sustainable conservation while integrating the heritage with modern development. For instance, this can involve encouraging the use of traditional architectural elements in new modern development. Additionally, the current study implies that local communities must be involved in the process of decision-making. In this way, their regional knowledge and cultural awareness can pave the way for complementing the urban built heritage conservation. As a

result, it is possible to preserve the urban built heritage of Zhongshan District based on regional experiences.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to navigate the path of urban heritage conservation in historic districts of China from a micro perspective of reviewing the regional cultural experiences. In order to attempt this, this study focused on the case of the historic district in Dalian City in China particularly Zhongshan District which is known for Zhongshan Square surrounded by classical buildings built in the early 20th century. Following the field visit and qualitative interviews with the residents, the collected data in the form of transcribed responses was thematically analysed. This paper concludes that the residents were dissatisfied with the heritage conservation interventions implemented by the government. Furthermore, this paper concludes that the dissatisfaction among the residents was attributed to the concerns of the residents about the lack of connection between heritage buildings and the urban textures of their surroundings and the lack of supportive policies. This calls for strategic measures driven by regional cultural experiences. The findings of this paper have significant implications for planners and policymakers to preserve the urban built heritage of Zhongshan District based on regional experiences.

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