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**The Commercialization Transformation of Chinese  
Historic Blocks under Consumer Culture:  
A Case Study of Pingjiang Road in Suzhou**

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# ABSTRACT

As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman emphasized, consumerism is a pivotal concept for understanding contemporary society. What is consumed extends beyond mere objects, it also covers the relationships between individuals and their environments, as well as between individuals and themselves. Consumerism manifests through the creation, distribution, desire, acquisition, and utilization of symbolic goods. It creates a unique social structure that diverges from traditional societal frameworks. Moreover, philosopher Henri Lefebvre highlighted that the domination and assimilation of space are crucial for sustaining consumerism. Spaces influenced by consumer culture serve as arenas for the reproduction of productive relationships, embedding consumerist dynamics into everyday life through processes like commodification and symbolization. The entities governing production also dominate spatial production, thereby influencing the reproduction of social relations.

This thesis investigates the shift in Chinese society from a production-centric to a consumption-centric paradigm. Consumer culture has emerged as a vital force in the contemporary urban evolution of China, reshaping cityscapes for a new era and transitioning from 'consumption within space' to 'consumption of space'. Advancements in media technologies have introduced several new urban space marketing strategies, enhancing the popularity of spatial consumption. Concurrently, Chinese historical cultural districts are being reimagined as modern consumer spaces, integrating with current consumption trends through refurbishment and media promotion.

The study explores the historical evolution and rejuvenation of two prominent urban locales: Shanghai's Xintiandi and Suzhou's Pingjiang Road. It reveals how these traditionally anchored areas have transformed and integrated into a consumerist society. The analysis constructs a logical and analytical framework for the consumerization of historical blocks, drawing insights from Shanghai Xintiandi and outlining the contemporary production stages of historical areas: "Transformation—Marketing—Consumption."

The proliferation of Pan-Xintiandi-like projects throughout China exemplifies Lefebvre's perspective. The primary research focus is to apply this theoretical framework to examine the consumerization and symbolic transformation process of Suzhou's Pingjiang Road, tracing its evolution from "Spatial symbol production" to "Media marketing" to "Experiential consumption."

This imitation of a non-localized spatial production approach has facilitated the widespread multiplication of a cultural mechanism of spatial consumption across China. The prevailing consumerist approach to spatial usage erodes the richness of social life and local cultural identities, while adeptly incorporating local elements, thereby reinforcing the elite's influence on consumer culture and their dominion over spatial production.

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# Chapter1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

#### *Consumer Revolution in China*

Before the 1978 reform and opening-up policy, Chinese society was characterized by a rigid ideological framework, where the state controlled all social resources and production. Wealth was distributed through a centrally managed allocation system, and individuals were not allowed to own productive assets. People wore the same clothes, ate the same food, and individual consumption was largely ignored and suppressed within the broader consumption structure. The society as a whole was marked by uniformity and homogeneity.

Since the 1978 reform and opening-up, Chinese society has gradually transitioned from a highly centralized planned economy to a consumption-oriented society dominated by a socialist market economy. A consumption revolution swept across all corners of Chinese society, bringing profound changes in many aspects. In the book *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*<sup>1</sup> (2000), scholars examine the changes in Chinese people's lifestyles and consumption patterns in various areas, including housing, children's consumption, clothing, food markets, McDonald's, transportation, and festival culture. The authors collectively argue that the transformation in Chinese consumption is not merely about changes in the quantity and quality of consumer goods, but rather a shift in consumer values, lifestyle orientations, and, more broadly, in social structure and social relations. It can be considered that after 1992, with the establishment of a market economy and the formation of a mass society, consumerism began to spread across China as a guiding value orientation and daily practice. The continuous decline in the Engel coefficient and the annual increase in income levels signify the rising demand for consumption and the shift in consumption patterns. The core of this transformation is reflected in the economic emphasis on demand expansion and consumption stimulation as fundamental policies for promoting economic growth; socially, the content and form of consumption have become key symbols of personal identity and social status; culturally, the freedom to consume represents individual independence and social justice and equality.

It is important to note that China's consumption transformation occurred within the context of globalization. The rapid economic development led to regional economic disparities, and the direct impact of globalization and information networking introduced transnational capital, Western consumer culture, and consumerist ideologies. This made the evolution of China's consumer society markedly different from that of Western developed countries. According to Hua Xiahong, "Contemporary Chinese consumerist culture has two distinct characteristics: precocity,

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah, Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

meaning the shift in values precedes economic and social transformation; and transplantation, meaning social life undergoes abrupt changes under the influence of globalization.”<sup>2</sup>

China's consumer society is characterized by a high degree of temporal and spatial compression, where phenomena typically seen in the mature phase of Western consumer societies, such as "symbolic consumption," "identity anxiety," and "cultural crisis," appear prematurely and intertwine with early-stage consumption phenomena like "premature consumption" and "overconsumption." These factors profoundly influence consumer behavior in China. At the same time, the Western practice of urban development driven by consumption has been widely adopted and imitated in China, bringing with it various associated problems that have emerged rapidly, making the relationship between consumption and Chinese urban spaces increasingly complex.

### *Urban China Influenced by Consumption*

Over the nearly fifty years since the reform and opening-up, China's consumer society has become a powerful force in controlling resources, transforming material production, social interactions, and significantly influencing the development of the construction industry and the shaping of urban forms. Consumerism has emerged as a constructive force in urban development, driving the rise of symbolic economies and spatial consumption in cities.

During the period of rapid socioeconomic development, lifestyles that were once exclusive to a small elite class began to emerge and become normalized, largely due to the prior long-term material scarcity, social stratification, and ideological constraints. As a result, there was a widespread desire for material enjoyment and a strong imagination of social status in consumption practices. The prevailing consumer mentality within society also became a major driving force behind urban construction practices. On one hand, there was a need for rapid capital expansion and accumulation; on the other hand, there was an urgent desire to showcase the achievements of economic and social transformations to the world. Over the course of forty years, urban construction developed in an extensive manner, rapidly achieving industrialization and systematization in the construction industry. China's urbanization process has advanced steadily and swiftly, and the continuous increase in urbanization has also driven up the consumption rate among Chinese residents. According to a report by the National Bureau of Statistics, the added value of the construction industry reached 55.689 trillion yuan by 2017, an increase of 55.550 trillion yuan compared to 1978, with an average annual growth rate of 16.6%. The added value of the construction industry accounted for 6.7% of GDP, an increase of 2.9 percentage points compared to 1978. The massive expansion of Chinese cities during this period led to a dramatic transformation in the overall urban landscape. By 1996, China's urbanization level had reached 30.48%, entering a phase of rapid development; in 2008, the urbanization rate reached 45.68%, and by 2023, it had reached 66.16%. China's economic model has transitioned from being industrialization-led to urbanization-led, and urban construction has shifted from being investment-driven to consumption-driven.

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<sup>2</sup> Hua, Xiahong. "Consumption Dreams and Architectural Carnival in China Since 1992." [当代中国的消费梦想与建筑狂欢] *Time+Architecture* 01 (2010): 124-128. <https://doi.org/10.13717/j.cnki.ta.2010.01.026>.

At the macro level, the shift of urban functions towards consumption has led to a transformation in spatial structures. The rise of shopping and consumer culture has spurred the development of urban commerce, entertainment, and cultural sectors, with an increasing number of public facilities becoming venues for consumption activities. Additionally, the popularity of urban tourism has strengthened the consumption service functions of cities, driving the enhancement of landscapes in urban central areas. Public consumption and cultural facilities have been transformed into tourist attractions. As Han Jing notes, “The impact of consumption on urban centers is one of the most typical and evident manifestations of how urban forms in consumer society are influenced by consumption.”<sup>3</sup> Consumption has come to dominate and shape the destiny of these urban core areas, endowing them with distinct consumer characteristics.

On one hand, the integration of traditional historical and cultural tourism sites with consumption in urban centers has become more pronounced, as evidenced by the high correlation and homogeneity between high-end consumption in Shanghai and the spatial delineation of its 12 historical and cultural zones. On the other hand, as urban centers become increasingly defined as tourist destinations, they begin to morph into reflections or phantoms of their current or past selves, thereby taking on the character of more typical consumer spaces—marked by fantasy and experience. For example, areas like the Bund and Xintiandi in Shanghai, the Chinese International Architectural Practice Zone in Nanjing, and the 798 Art District in Beijing exemplify this trend. This has led to the theming, staging, visual enhancement, and entertainment-oriented development of Chinese urban spaces, resulting in excessive material consumption and aesthetic fatigue.

At the micro level, architecture in China has become an integral part of consumer culture, evolving in line with consumption logic. The development of architecture not only highly adapts to the economic, cultural, and social logic of a consumer society but also actively participates in constructing this logic. The influence of consumption logic on architecture is first evident in the blurring of boundaries between architectural art and everyday life. The aestheticization of daily life, or the pursuit of aesthetics and appearance in all fields, transforms various forms into commodities. Architectural practice has expanded to encompass every aspect of daily life. According to Hua Xiaohong, “The material value of architecture has shifted from fulfilling basic functional needs to maximizing bodily pleasure to entice consumers, with novelty, constant change, and overpowering effects becoming central to technological innovation and cultural creativity.”<sup>4</sup>

This phenomenon is observable in the Chinese architectural field's excessive focus on form and style, where its operational logic mirrors the pursuit of fashion's symbolic systems. However, the life cycle of fashion symbols is short, easily replaced by new trends. For instance, the latest global architectural forms, materials, and decorations are rapidly imitated, replicated, and pieced together once introduced, leading to significant breakthroughs in the appearance of Chinese urban construction. However, these developments often lack localized humanistic care and original thought. The relentless pursuit of style ultimately results in homogenization and a loss of regional

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<sup>3</sup> Han, Jing. *Consumption, Space, Urban design*. [城市消费空间] (Southeast University Press. 2014.)

<sup>4</sup> Hua, "Consumption Dreams and Architectural Carnival."



identity, even leading to the homogenization of users. When architecture becomes a symbol of capital and power, the excessive pursuit of glamorous national image projects culminates in a monotonous and uniform urban landscape across China, neglecting the construction of truly personalized and diverse cityscapes. For example, early Chinese "European-style" architecture, "retro streets," "Chinese-style residences," and the renewal of numerous historic cultural cities have been co-opted and labeled as "nostalgic."

### ***Proliferation of Commercialization and Transformation in Historic Districts***

Against the backdrop of China's rapidly advancing "compressed" urbanization, the growing scarcity of land resources and the increasing emergence of urban issues signal the end of the extensive urban development model. As Zhao et al. note, "Currently, cities in China have entered the development stage of stock renewal. Urban renewal has become the focus of urban development, and optimization of stock space has become the main aspect of urban design."<sup>5</sup>

In this context, historic districts located in the development centers of old cities are also facing large-scale renewal and restructuring. Under the traditional mindset of old city redevelopment driven by land economic benefits, the aggressive approach of demolition and reconstruction, guided by real estate redevelopment, has increasingly led to the replacement of "old cities" with "new cities," resulting in the rapid disappearance of historic districts with centuries of cultural heritage during the renewal process. Following the storm-like expansion of new construction, people gradually became dissatisfied with the new and began to see the "old" as a new form of novelty. They also realized that transforming historic districts into tourist pedestrian streets could yield significant economic benefits.

Driven by consumerist culture, and with the continuous growth of national consumption demand and the rapid rise of the urban experience economy, the trend of transforming historic districts into new urban consumption spaces by incorporating modern leisure and consumption practices has gained widespread popularity across the country. This approach is increasingly becoming a common paradigm for historic district renovation in the new era. For instance, the "Xintiandi" model in Shanghai, which recreates the ambiance of Republic-era alleyways, has spurred widespread emulation and replication in many cities throughout China. Furthermore, the spaces created through the commercialization of historic districts have become new consumer hotspots, further propelled by media repackaging and marketing. These newly developed urban cultural consumption spaces deeply reflect the impact of contemporary consumerist culture on historic urban districts, making them particularly noteworthy in the current era of stock renewal.

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<sup>5</sup> Feiyu Zhao, Xiaodong Xu, Dong Wei, Jianyu Fu, Xiaoqi Bai, and Jinxiu Wu, "Research on Sustainable Renewal of Historic Blocks Based on Urban Catalyst Theory," *Applied and Computational Engineering* 63, no. 1 (July 2024): 195-205, <https://doi.org/10.54254/2755-2721/63/20240974>.

## 1.2 Research Object and Significance

### *Origin of the Study and Problem Statement*

In the context of China's consumer society, an increasing number of historic districts have abandoned their traditional functions, transforming into significant modern commercial spaces within urban areas, with many even becoming tourist destinations. As Shi and Huang (2016) observe, "Currently, the approach of commercial transformation of historic districts, guided by their cultural value, involves introducing new economic functions and creating consumption-oriented spaces, thereby reconfiguring the functions of these historic areas."<sup>6</sup> Historic districts are products of cultural development over time, embodying distinct regional cultural characteristics. For ancient cities, the traditional culture and intrinsic spirit preserved in these historic districts over the centuries are invaluable, representing an irreplaceable resource.

During the process of social transformation, cities aspire to shift from being centers of industry and production to hubs of consumption and culture, leading to a shift in capital investment from production spaces to cultural consumption spaces. Under this aspiration, the unique cultural essence of historic districts has been utilized and promoted, integrating these spaces into the "production-consumption" framework of consumer society. As a result, cities as a whole, including their distinctive cultural heritage and historical memory, have become subject to commodification through the symbolization of space. Gradually, the continuity and regeneration of historic districts are becoming increasingly dependent on symbolic landscapes, as consumerism and the influence of globalization encroach, leading to the erosion of the traditional essence of these areas.

This phenomenon prompts the inquiry of this thesis into the issues related to the commercialization of historic districts. How have these districts been passively or actively guided toward consumerism? As the consumer attributes of historic districts are strengthened, what impact does this have on the preservation of their spatial and cultural heritage? Moreover, what characteristics are reflected in the consumer behaviors and cultural perceptions of people within these spaces?

Therefore, this study focuses on the transformation of historic districts within a consumer society, incorporating the role of media and drawing on consumption theory as well as the derived theory of urban space symbolism. It aims to reexamine and analyze the construction paths, spatial characteristics, and cultural impacts of historic districts as consumption spaces from the perspective of spatial consumption. The study also seeks to outline the full process of "space production—space marketing—space consumption" in historic districts, thereby establishing a framework for analyzing similar types of spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> Yaling Shi and Huang Yong, "Spatial Reshaping in the Renewal and Reconstruction of Historical Neighborhoods—Taking Shanghai Xintiandi and Tianzifang Neighborhoods as Examples" [历史街区更新改造中的空间重塑——以上海新天地与田子坊街区为例], in *Proceedings of the 2016 China Urban Planning Annual Conference*, China Urban Planning Society (Shenyang, 2016).

## ***Research object***

To conduct this research, this study selects Shanghai's Xintiandi and Suzhou's Pingjiang Road historic districts as the primary case studies. These two cases represent different stages in the evolution of China's consumer society and illustrate two distinct directions in the commercialization of historic districts.

Firstly, Xintiandi is chosen as the initial case for analysis because it is considered a milestone in the renovation and redevelopment of historic districts in China. The massive commercial success of Xintiandi set a precedent that was widely imitated and replicated across the country, as cities sought to achieve similar consumer-driven economic gains. During this period, the renovation of historic districts was often conducted "in the name of culture" but with the underlying intent of fostering consumption. Xintiandi integrated historically localized spaces into a globalized landscape, initiating a production model of "placeless" spaces and promoting the commercialization of historic districts throughout China. Therefore, as a pioneer in the consumer-oriented transformation of Chinese historic districts, Xintiandi's underlying operational logic offers substantial value for analysis. Pingjiang Road, as a subsequent case, reflects the influence of Xintiandi on its own commercialization process. Consequently, analyzing Xintiandi first follows a logical chronological sequence.

Secondly, Xintiandi and Pingjiang Road demonstrate different approaches in their consumerist transformations. Influenced by Xintiandi, many historic districts have actively embraced consumer-oriented transformation. In contrast, Pingjiang Road represents a case of passive transformation. Early in its redevelopment, planners of Pingjiang Road were already aware of the negative impact that globalized landscapes could have on historic spaces. As a result, they aimed to preserve the everyday life of the historic district as a final form of resistance during the transformation process. Tim Heath (2017) appraises the Pingjiang Road revitalization project in this way: "One critical approach that demarcates Pingjiang Street from many other urban regeneration projects that are solely tourist oriented is the inclusion and integration of local residents. Indeed, following numerous urban renewal projects in China that have completely removed local residents, it is admirable to see the effort to recognise the importance of and to preserve local living patterns in the Pingjiang district."<sup>7</sup> However, in recent years, the increase in tourist numbers on Pingjiang Road has led to overcrowding, significantly encroaching on the living space of original residents. Pingjiang Road now exhibits a strong commercial character and seems to be on the path to becoming a tourist consumption district. If Xintiandi's transformation represents complete submission to the consumer society, then Pingjiang Road's transformation is characterized by resistance relatively. Under such circumstances, does Pingjiang Road exhibit the same consumer logic as Xintiandi? Additionally, by analyzing the development trajectory of Pingjiang Road, what value judgments and positions should we adopt concerning the renovation of historic districts?

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<sup>7</sup> Jing Xie and Tim Heath, "Conservation and Revitalization of Historic Streets in China: Pingjiang Street, Suzhou," *Journal of Urban Design* 22 (2017): 455-476.

Finally, China's consumer society is rapidly changing, including the continual evolution of consumption trends. The periods and social consumption trends of these two cases differ. The redevelopment of Shanghai's Xintiandi occurred during a period of rapid economic growth in China, when there was an urgent need to stimulate consumption to drive economic expansion. In the context of globalization, Xintiandi marked an important starting point for revitalizing Shanghai's impoverished old city areas. Due to its semi-colonial history and the blend of Chinese and Western architectural features, Xintiandi's transformation easily catered to the fantasies and novelty-seeking tendencies of both Eastern and Western consumers, as well as the Chinese preference for expensive consumption as a means of identity affirmation. By the time Pingjiang Road gained prominence, China's consumption trends and identity had already shifted. "In fact, we found out that China is entering an era of new consumption habits. In our report, we draw upon a case study to prove that consumption downgrade is better defined as consumers opting for value-for-money options, rather than high-end products."<sup>8</sup> Beyond the phenomena of consumption downgrade and reverse consumption, the consumer demographic has also changed. "China's Gen Z (born between 1995 and 2009) exceeds 260 million, accounting for more than 18% of the total population. The Tencent 'Gen Z Consumption White Paper' points out that Gen Z values personalized self-expression and sees consumption as a form of emotional expression."<sup>9</sup> Driven by different consumer trends, the commercial spaces of Xintiandi and Pingjiang Road have developed different types of consumer businesses and consumption models.

Therefore, through the analysis presented in this paper, can we conclude that regardless of time or place, the influence of consumer culture on the renovation of historic districts remains similar?

### ***Research Significance***

In response to the increasingly frequent phenomenon of the commercialization of historic districts, much of the focus in urban planning has been on the technical aspects of redevelopment, such as development models, strategies, and practical experiences. There has also been some discussion on the mechanisms involved, including spatial production, social conflicts, and the negotiation of interests during the redevelopment process. However, there has been relatively little research that examines the redevelopment paths and spatial characteristics of historic districts from a consumer perspective.

As Chinese society rapidly transitions from a production-oriented to a consumer-oriented society, the media has played a significant role in shaping contemporary urban spaces, particularly in terms of spatial marketing. By analyzing the commercialization of historic districts through the lens of consumer culture and incorporating the role of media in spatial marketing, this research provides a valuable addition to the study of urban spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> "Is China Looking To Live on Less?" MioTech Team, November 2018. Accessed August 5, 2024. <https://www.miotech.com/en-US/article/3>.

<sup>9</sup> Ma, Qing. "China's Major Consumption Trends in 2023." *Chinadaily.com.cn*. Updated: January 02 2024, Accessed August 12, 2024. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/02/WS65933f35a3105f21a5079fa2\\_7.html](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/02/WS65933f35a3105f21a5079fa2_7.html).

Incorporating the influence of media into the research framework enriches and broadens the perspective of urban space studies. It reveals the intrinsic relationship between culture and consumption within historic districts and outlines the full process of urban space transformation under the influence of a consumer society. This approach offers a reflective perspective on the modernization of historic districts and, more broadly, on the renewal of Chinese cities.

### **1.3 Research Methodology and Framework**

#### ***Research Methodology***

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily from theories related to consumer society within the disciplines of architecture, urban planning, and sociology. By integrating these theoretical insights with the analysis of practical case studies, this research aims to summarize the operational mechanisms behind the renovation and renewal of historic districts under the logic of China's consumer society. It explores how historic districts have transitioned from traditional functions to consumer-oriented spaces, such as tourist and leisure pedestrian streets. The specific research methods are as follows:

##### **(1) Literature Analysis Method**

This method involves collecting and analyzing books and academic literature related to consumer society, consumer spaces, urban space production, and media communication to enrich the theoretical foundation of the study. The research draws upon studies of consumer society in Western developed countries and existing research on consumer spaces in China as background. This helps to identify the stages of development in China's consumer society and the influence of consumer culture and consumerism on urban spaces in China. Additionally, this method allows for the study and adoption of existing research methodologies and perspectives, enabling a systematic summary of the principles and underlying logic of the commercialization transformation in historic districts as urban spaces. In analyzing specific cases, relevant literature, online resources, and planning documents are used to gain a comprehensive understanding from multiple perspectives, such as historical background, economy, and socio-cultural aspects.

##### **(2) Case Study Method**

In the case study analysis, two representative historic districts, Shanghai's Xintiandi and Suzhou's Pingjiang Road, are selected as subjects. The analysis begins with Shanghai Xintiandi, a case that has been extensively studied in academic circles, to extract a general operational pattern: "space production—space marketing—space consumption." This analytical framework is then applied to the study of Pingjiang Road to test the validity of this pattern, thereby further affirming that the commercialization transformation of historic districts in China follows similar processes and underlying principles.

##### **(3) Text Analysis Method**

Textual analysis involves examining structured information composed of symbols or codes, which reflect the specific positions, viewpoints, values, and interests of the text's subject. Given the study's focus on the role of media in urban space marketing, the analysis of Pingjiang Road's

spatial marketing is based on textual content gathered from online sources, including reviews and images on mainstream social media platforms. This analysis helps infer and summarize consumer intentions and perceptions.

#### (4) Field Research Method

Field research was conducted on Suzhou's Pingjiang Road during the writing process, providing a more comprehensive and profound understanding of its consumer spaces. This method also offered direct insights into visitors' consumption experiences and psychology. The author's long-term residence in Suzhou and firsthand observations of Pingjiang Road contributed to a clear understanding of the district's overall transformation process, facilitating a more accurate analysis of Pingjiang Road's commercialization transformation.

### ***Research Framework***

The entire study is divided into seven chapters, following the structure of "problem identification—theoretical construction—case analysis—conclusion."

#### Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides background information, focusing on the context of China's consumer society, its current state, and development trends. The analysis emphasizes the commercialization transformation of historic districts, explaining the research focus and its significance.

#### Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant research, including studies on urban architecture, historic district renovation, consumer society theory, symbolic consumption, media communication, and the relationship between consumption and space. It identifies the research focus of this study and summarizes the theoretical foundations that support the analysis.

#### Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter constructs the theoretical framework by analyzing the typical case of Shanghai's Xintiandi. It abstracts and summarizes the "space production—space marketing—space consumption" pathway in contemporary Chinese historic districts, forming the analytical framework for the subsequent case studies.

#### Chapter 4: Case Overview of Pingjiang Road

This chapter begins the application of the analytical framework developed in the previous chapter. It provides a detailed overview of the Pingjiang Road historic district in Suzhou, including its historical background, the cultural context of Suzhou, heritage elements within the district, the process of renovation and renewal, and the stakeholders involved. This chapter aims to give readers a comprehensive understanding of Pingjiang Road's redevelopment.

#### Chapter 5: Analysis of the Commercialization of Pingjiang Road

This chapter focuses on the commercialization and spatial construction of Pingjiang Road. By analyzing the spatial symbolic characteristics of the district, it explores the underlying cultural

imagery conveyed through its spaces. The analysis covers various aspects, such as the traditional spatial layout, street and alley spaces, architectural facades, rivers, and interior design styles of shops. The chapter affirms Pingjiang Road's achievement in the symbolic construction of space.

#### Chapter 6: Space Marketing and Consumer Space

This chapter examines Pingjiang Road's efforts to transition from space production to space marketing, analyzing how it has gradually transformed into a new type of consumer space under market operations. Through direct observation and text analysis, the chapter evaluates the already realized "space consumption" of Pingjiang Road.

#### Chapter 7: Conclusion and Open Discussion

The final chapter summarizes the main findings and contributions of the study, discussing the key conclusions and innovative aspects. It also addresses the limitations of the current research and suggests directions for future studies.

## Chapter 2

# Chinese Historic Blocks in the Context of a Consumer Society

### 2.1 Related concepts

#### *Consumption*

“There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species.”

“We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

In the traditional sense, consumption refers to the process of using goods after their purchase. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, consumption is defined as "in economics, the final using up of goods and services." Consumption behavior is fundamental to human existence and has been a constant throughout human history. Essentially, consumption is the process of utilizing and depleting natural resources and man-made materials to meet human needs.

In a broader sense, consumption encompasses the entire series of processes involved before a product enters the consumer domain, including planning, buying, and using the product. It can be categorized into three levels: 1. Consumption that meets the most basic human survival needs, which focuses solely on the use value of goods. 2. Consumption that serves to demonstrate purchasing power, emphasizing the exchange value of goods. 3. Consumption that expresses individual taste and personality, highlighting the symbolic value of goods, which refers to the cultural connotations of the products.

In microeconomics, the process of social reproduction is divided into four stages: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, with consumption standing in contrast to production. Consumption involves the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair, and disposal of any product or service, effectively representing the destruction of the production object. What people consume is not the material itself, but the utility it provides. This concept has not only sparked researchers' interest in the use value of consumption objects but has also led to a deeper consideration of the social and symbolic meanings of consumption. From the material starting point of the entire economic process, consumption can be traced back to the development and

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<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. ( Edited by Mike Featherstone. London: Sage, 1998.), 25



utilization of natural resources, converting natural capital into human-made capital that is ultimately consumed.

Consumption refers to the expenditure of production factors and living materials within the social reproduction process. In its broadest sense, consumption includes both living consumption and production consumption, with production and consumption being inherently linked activities. In its narrow sense, consumption refers specifically to living consumption. The concept of consumption discussed in this study goes beyond the economic notion of expenditure; it is viewed as a mode of thinking and a way of life that influences the entire social fabric through the manifestation of cultural power in consumption imagery.

### *Consumer Society*

It is widely recognized that the consumer society emerged in the early 20th century in the United States, built upon an abundance of goods and commodities. This new social form is distinct from the traditional "production society" and is characterized by large-scale consumption. According to the New Oxford English Dictionary, a "consumer society" is defined as "a society in which the buying and selling of consumer goods and services is the predominant social and economic activity." The society discussed in this context refers to one of material abundance.

Related concepts to the "consumer society" include "society of the spectacle," "post-industrial society," and "postmodern society," among others. The emergence and evolution of the concept of a consumer society follow a specific process, and its appearance requires at least the following conditions: first, a highly developed level of productivity, where the production of goods has reached a significant scale and society possesses a surplus of material goods for consumption; second, the everyday consumer capacity, desire for consumption, and consumer market have been fully cultivated and are closely interconnected.

The consumer society is characterized by the following features:

**Highly Developed Social Productivity and Abundance of Goods:** In a consumer society, the level of social productivity is highly advanced, resulting in an abundance of goods and a relatively high standard of living. The production model shifts to large-scale, standardized Fordist production, while management practices transition to smaller-scale, personalized post-Fordist approaches. The economy evolves from being predominantly industrial to one centered on service-based and knowledge-based sectors. New consumption concepts and patterns emerge, along with the rise of leisure and holiday economies, marking a shift from a production-dominated society to one driven by consumption. To sustain the production and reproduction inherent in the production mode, society needs to continually stimulate consumption, making large-scale consumption the basic lifestyle.

**Unlimited Pursuit of Material Enjoyment:** At the material level, the consumer society fosters an unrestrained pursuit of material enjoyment and leisure. The purpose of consumption extends

beyond mere survival; consumption behaviors are no longer solely for meeting basic needs but are driven by the desire to express status, taste, and individuality. What people consume is not the use value of goods and services but their symbolic and representational meanings. The advanced development of modern mass media manipulates and stimulates public consumption desires, making consumption an important means of social stratification.

*Aestheticization of Everyday Life:* In a consumer society, there is an increasing interest in the image presentation of various products and the construction of lifestyles, with a greater emphasis on the image of goods rather than their practical necessity. Consumerism, a derivative of the consumer society, is one of its key features, reflected in an awareness of aesthetic styles and the pursuit of symbolic and representational consumption. This particular value system rationalizes the pursuit of consumption as a free choice in daily life, presenting it as a universal ethic or contemporary trend. As a result, it becomes the dominant cultural background in specific social systems and environments, shaping the everyday life of modern society.

The determination of whether a country or region has entered a consumer society is often based on a revolution in production and consumption patterns. A "consumer society" characterized by these features is primarily found in "Western countries that have entered the phase of developed capitalism since the 1960s, also known as the period of global (transnational) capitalism, including countries in Europe, the United States, Japan, and others"<sup>11</sup>. For other nation-states or regions, they may not be considered full-fledged consumer societies. Instead, China is often described as a "partial consumer society" or an "incomplete consumer society." This is because, as a developing country, China experiences extreme economic disparities across its regions, with a significant gap between the rich and poor—a situation that persists even today.

For China's major cities, however, their economic and social development levels have become comparable to those of countries that have fully entered a consumer society. As early as 2012, scholars recognized that cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Shenzhen had fully transitioned into consumer societies.<sup>12</sup> The scope of this study is therefore limited to what can be considered fully developed consumer societies, specifically focusing on the cases of Shanghai and Suzhou.

### *Consumer Culture*

The key concepts related to consumer culture include "culture-ideology of consumerism," "material culture," "commerce culture," "mass culture," "popular culture," "culture of fashion," and "postmodern culture."

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<sup>11</sup> Xiahong Hua, "Melting and Transforming: Architecture in Consumer Culture" [消融与转变], PhD diss., Tongji University, 2007, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>12</sup> Minghua Ma, "Study on Architecture Practices in a Transitional China in the View of Consumer Society" [消费社会视角下的当代中国建筑创作研究], PhD diss., South China University of Technology, 2012, accessed via CNKI.

According to Wikipedia, "Consumer culture describes a lifestyle hyper-focused on spending money to buy material goods." Featherstone further explains that "the term, as it suggests, refers to the culture of the consumer society."<sup>13</sup> From this definition, it is clear that consumer culture emerged alongside the development of consumer society and post-industrial society. It encompasses both the material and spiritual factors that influence consumption behavior, as well as the specific forms in which culture manifests within the realm of consumption. More broadly, consumer culture refers to the values and operating systems embedded in a lifestyle dominated by consumption, essentially functioning as a symbolic system under the influence of capital.

The core characteristic of consumer culture is "the availability of an extensive range of commodities, goods, and experiences which are to be consumed, maintained, planned, and dreamt about by the general population"<sup>14</sup>. Consumer culture is considered a phenomenon that emerged during the era of market economies, driven by the need to stimulate consumption in response to the rapid expansion of social production. This need to stimulate demand facilitates economic growth, accelerates capital circulation, and drives production, leading to shifts in social values, lifestyles, and ideologies. The means by which this is achieved is through the symbolization of goods, where mass media play a crucial role in stimulating consumer desires, thereby promoting both economic and cultural development. Consumer culture has the capacity to subvert the original utility or meaning of goods, imbuing them with new images and symbols that evoke a range of related emotions and desires.

The spread and popularization of consumer culture are inextricably linked to the context of globalization, as the consumerist lifestyle extends to every corner of the world, becoming a global reality. In this context, whether willingly or unwillingly, China has inevitably been influenced and incorporated into the "production-consumption system of late capitalism," resulting in a "consumerist culture" that is noticeably out of sync with the country's level of productivity and social development.

To analyze the driving forces behind the development of Chinese cities and architecture, it is essential to consider the influence of consumer culture. For example, during the Xintiandi era, the consumer culture exhibited by Chinese cities was characterized by a marked precocity and transplantation, heavily influenced by the lifestyle of the Western middle class. This culture leveraged people's desire to replicate and imitate this lifestyle, using the construction of difference as a means to achieve urban renewal in China. In contrast, Pingjiang Road's rise occurred after China had been part of the globalization process for many years. By this time, the information gap between the Chinese public and the Western middle-class lifestyle had already closed, and consumption trends had shifted, no longer idolizing middle-class symbols as the pinnacle of fashion.

The evolution of Pingjiang Road from its renovation to becoming a popular destination also reflects the arbitrary and random nature of changes in fashion and consumption trends. However, whether in Xintiandi or Pingjiang Road, the core driving force behind the evolution of the objects

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<sup>13</sup> 1. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 111-112.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

of consumption remains the presence of consumer culture. Therefore, this study focuses on the mechanisms of consumer culture's influence on Chinese cities.

### *Historic Districts*

The discussion of "historic districts" can be traced back to the Charter of Athens (1933), which states, "The document includes urban ensembles in the definition of the built heritage and emphasizes the spiritual, cultural, and economic value of the architectural heritage." The Charter also condemns "the use of pastiche for new construction in historic areas." Additionally, the Washington Charter (1987) defines "historic urban areas" as the natural and man-made environments that bear witness to historical development and embody the traditional cultural values of cities. It emphasizes that all material and spiritual components that characterize historic districts should be preserved.

In China, the concept of "historic districts" can be traced back to the definition of "historical and cultural protection areas" provided when the State Council announced the second batch of national historical and cultural cities in 1986: "Areas, building complexes, towns, and villages with a high concentration of cultural relics or those that can fully represent the traditional features and ethnic characteristics of a particular historical period should be protected... and designated as local 'historical and cultural protection areas' at various levels. The focus is on preserving the overall appearance and characteristics." Later, the Regulations on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages, issued in April 2008, officially defined a "historical and cultural district" as: "An area approved and announced by the provincial, autonomous region, or municipal governments, where cultural relics are particularly abundant, historical buildings are densely clustered, and the traditional layout and historical appearance are well-preserved on a considerable scale."

It can be concluded that historic districts not only include the physical fabric, such as building complexes and appearances, but also encompass the cultural elements formed by people's way of life, values, customs, and habits that have accumulated over time. Historic districts represent a layered state of material and cultural characteristics that have slowly evolved and overlapped through different historical stages, which contribute to their authenticity.

On September 18, 2003, the Shanghai Municipal Government approved in principle the "Plan for the Historic Cultural Landscape Area of Central Shanghai" proposed by the Shanghai Urban Planning Bureau, which designated 12 historic cultural landscape areas. These areas are characterized by clusters of historic buildings that reflect the regional cultural characteristics of specific historical periods in Shanghai. Xintiandi is located within the Hengshan Road-Fuxing Road Historic Cultural Landscape Area, which is notable for its garden residences—this area is one of the most concentrated regions of garden residences in Shanghai and the best-preserved in terms of its distinctive character. In addition to garden residences, there are also numerous old apartments, modern lane houses, outstanding public buildings, and revolutionary historical sites, with most of the buildings constructed between 1919 (after World War I) and 1941 (before the outbreak of the Pacific War).

Suzhou was designated as one of China's first 24 national historical and cultural cities in 1982. In 1986, the State Council approved the Suzhou Urban Master Plan, making Suzhou the only city in China to comprehensively protect the appearance of its ancient city. In 2012, Suzhou became the only national model area for the protection of historical and cultural cities approved by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. Pingjiang Road Historic District is located at the heart of Suzhou's ancient city and is a prime example of Suzhou's historical character.

## **2.2 Factors Contributing to Spatial Consumption in a Consumer Society**

### ***Spatial Production and Cultural Capital***

In the context of a consumer society, the expansion of consumer demand from material to spiritual levels has driven a transformation in capitalist production and markets. Cities are no longer industrial centers; their focus has shifted from production to consumption. Urban spaces, in turn, have actively or passively responded to this shift, leading to changes in the modes of spatial production.

The theory of spatial production was introduced by Lefebvre (1991), who, in his critique of the oppressive modernity of everyday life, proposed that the reproduction of space is a fundamental revolutionary solution integrating culture, politics, and economics. Space itself becomes both the direct object of production and consumption, interacting with social processes and human existence, and serving as an intermediary and tool for capitalism to generate surplus value. At its core, spatial production reflects the fundamental contradiction between producers' pursuit of surplus value from space and consumers' pursuit of the use value of space.<sup>15</sup>

From the theoretical perspective of spatial production, the response to the symbolic consumption demands of a consumer society involves applying capital and culture to physical spaces to create spatial products, thereby stimulating consumption to generate profit. This production process is particularly evident in the preservation, renewal, and development of urban historical and cultural spaces. The cultural heritage embedded in historical spaces, when symbolized, caters to consumers' spiritual needs for cultural refinement and nostalgia. Simultaneously, the significant virtual value derived from this transformation is highly attractive to producers seeking to maximize surplus value.

David Harvey (1992) further reveals the economic logic and production relations underlying this social space, arguing that consumption is the primary driving force in the post-industrial era. Building on this, Harvey critically analyzes the essence of urban construction, asserting that the true purpose behind creating "urban spectacles" is to stimulate continuous consumption growth and long-term capital accumulation.<sup>16</sup> The so-called creation of uniqueness is merely the process of symbolizing historical and local elements, applying the same economic logic across different locations, ultimately leading to the loss of distinctiveness and the transformation of these spaces into generic sites of consumption. In this process, the unique historical and cultural elements of

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

these spaces become what Bourdieu (1997) describes as "symbolic capital" and "cultural capital."<sup>17</sup> Within the context of globalization, local elements are alienated into homogeneous symbols of consumption. Consequently, historical spaces, saturated with symbols and transformed into symbols themselves, become objects of consumption.

### *The Construction of Difference in Historical Spaces*

In the process of transforming historical spaces into objects of consumption, the first step is to leverage their cultural characteristics to create symbolic value. Symbolization can be understood as a method of constructing difference. As consumption shifts from material goods to symbols, people increasingly consume the symbolic meanings rather than the goods themselves. Semiotic theory posits that symbols must form a system to convey meaning, with the significance of a symbol arising from the differences between symbols within a system. Thus, as Baudrillard argues in *The System of Objects* (1996), for an object to be consumed, it must not only become a symbol but also a part of a symbolic system.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in symbolic consumption, the construction of a symbolic system is more critical than the symbol itself. Only as part of a symbolic system can a symbol establish differential relationships with other symbols, thereby acquiring consumable symbolic meaning. Otherwise, the relationship between the signifier and the signified remains merely a connection, without generating meaning. In other words, the difference produced within a symbolic system, between symbols, is the essence of symbolic consumption. What is consumed is not the materiality of the object, but its difference. This difference is evident both in the relationships between specific objects of consumption and in the new social relationships and identities constructed by consumers based on symbolic consumption.

Contemporary urban historical districts have been integrated into the production-consumption process and symbolic consumption system of a consumer society. The renewal of historical districts is, therefore, a process of creating symbolic commodities. Like other objects, historical districts become part of the symbolic system of consumer society. Symbolization is a way to enter the realm of consumption through the systematic construction of difference. Space is not merely a physical entity but also implies particular symbolic meanings and connotations. Hence, the symbolization of historical districts can be seen as a process of transforming the district by substituting real elements with symbolic representations, serving as a spatial reproduction strategy aligned with capitalist logic and consumerist objectives. Through this symbolic construction, historical districts ultimately become commodities that cater to mass aesthetics.

Therefore, the symbolic production of historic districts, or the construction of spatial difference, will be a central focus of this study. The research will particularly explore the mechanisms of difference production in the spaces of Xintiandi and Pingjiang Road. In examining the production and consumption processes of historic districts, this study identifies several methods for constructing difference in the context of spatial transformation:

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<sup>17</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1997)

<sup>18</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 200.

1. **Creating Difference through Functional Displacement:** The renovation of historic districts often involves discarding some or all of their traditional functions, such as residential use, and introducing new functions that align with contemporary societal demands, such as commercial or cultural purposes (e.g., shops, museums). This creates a difference between the new spatial functions and the original functions.
2. **Combining New Functions with Traditional Elements:** The integration of new functions with the district's inherent traditional elements, such as the original street layout, architectural style, and other characteristics, can produce a distinction from other consumer spaces in the urban environment. This enhances the symbolic significance of the space, thereby increasing the appeal of the spatial commodity.
3. **The "Old as New" Principle:** In the fashion system, the "old" can become "new" simply because it is unfamiliar. In the spatial reproduction of historic districts, the inherent natural environment, historical cultural features, and urban architectural characteristics, while ancient, can offer modern individuals a sense of novelty, thus creating difference. This is especially potent when the historic elements of the city hold significant historical status and influence, fostering a strong sense of cultural identity.

### ***Consumption Under the Influence of Media***

The shift from biologically driven or economically motivated consumption to modern consumption, which is increasingly social, symbolic, and psychological, places symbolic representation at the core of consumerism, with mass media serving as the central stage for creating these symbols. It is through the intervention of media that the connection between production and consumption is established, fostering a consumerist ideology that serves the logic of capital.

Media, through newspapers, television, the internet, and other communication channels, uses sensory stimuli such as sound and imagery to directly influence consumer behavior, constantly providing people with an overwhelming amount of information. Commercial advertisements employ images, colors, sounds, text, and various techniques such as symbolism, metaphor, and implication to subtly integrate concepts like beauty, romance, and happiness into product promotion, thereby inducing symbolic consumption. Especially in today's fast-paced, technologically advanced society, the media utilizes high-tech methods to bombard people with information. Given the accelerated pace of life and increased work pressures, people often lack the time and capacity to critically process the information presented by the media, leading to a passive acceptance of it. While individuals' lifestyles and consumption preferences are inherently diverse, the media's content and delivery methods are relatively uniform, typically reflecting a dominant trend. As a result, people unconsciously alter their original lifestyles under the influence of media content, gradually aligning their consumption patterns with the modes promoted by the media, leading to a loss of personal autonomy. This manifests in consumption as a growing uniformity in consumption practices. As a mediator between people and objects, and between commodities and

meanings, the media, through its advertising systems, dominates the discourse of consumer society, thereby controlling the power of cultural coding and its practical application<sup>19</sup>, guiding people to form habitual associations between consumer goods and certain symbolic meanings.

Therefore, the media plays a crucial role in embedding and interpreting meanings within consumer culture, subtly guiding the widespread acceptance of symbolic consumption through large-scale symbol production and dissemination. This process has transformed consumption patterns and stimulated the rise of experiential consumption. The media's influence on the promotion and shaping of urban consumption spaces has similarly been significant, albeit subtle. For example, in the era of social media, new or novel places quickly become “viral check-in spots” once they are widely shared online. Whether it’s a particular photo spot, a specific store’s ice cream, or a particular event, anything and any place can become a subject of consumption, highlighting the arbitrariness of this phenomenon. For instance, Zhou Kai and Zhang (2021) utilized geotagged data from the popular lifestyle-sharing app Xiaohongshu to exploratively analyze the impact of social media on urban consumption spaces in Changsha, noting that “social media has successfully expanded the scale and scope of urban consumption spaces, creating a new consumption space that combines ‘individuality’ and ‘conformity’ and encompasses a wide range of social classes.”<sup>20</sup>

On one hand, individuals construct and differentiate their identity, status, and personal style through the symbolic value of goods, thereby gaining social codes. On the other hand, the media's taste-making influence has instilled a style consciousness and consumption orientation in the contemporary public, based on aesthetic and evaluative abilities. This has further fueled the rise of the experience economy, where the pursuit of ever-changing, aesthetically pleasing appearances and the emphasis on novel and varied visual pleasures have become central to the consumer experience.

## 2.3 Literature review

### *The Evolution of Renewal Approaches for Historic Districts in China*

Historic districts undoubtedly serve as vital carriers of a city's historical and cultural heritage, embodying “multiple layers of ‘value’ to its community,”<sup>21</sup> including social, cultural, aesthetic, urban context, architectural, historical values, and the value of sense of place. Urban renewal is one of the most significant topics in contemporary China. With the end of urban growth-driven policies and the shift towards stock-based development, the focus has gradually turned to enhancing the quality of urban spaces and reallocating resources, with urban space transformation increasingly guided by cultural capital.

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<sup>19</sup> You Zhou and Shuyan Zhang, “Research on the Specific Ways in Which Advertising Affects Consumption Concepts” [广告影响消费观念的具体方式研究], *News Knowledge*, no. 3 (March 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Kai Zhou, Haitao Zhang, Yining Xia, and Chong Liu, “New Urban Consumption Space Shaped by Social Media: A Case Study of the Geo-Tagging Places of Changsha on Xiaohongshu” [社交媒体影响下的城市消费空间新特征: 以小红书长沙“网红打卡地”为例], *Modern Urban Studies* (August 2021): 20-27, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1009-6000.2021.09.003>.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Tiesdell, Taner Oc, and Tim Heath, *Revitalising Historic Urban Quarters*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1996).



Historically, the renewal and redevelopment of historic districts in China have followed two extreme approaches. The first approach focused on economic development as the core objective, characterized by large-scale demolition and construction, where historical buildings were replaced by modern commercial areas and real estate developments, often neglecting the historical value of cultural heritage. The second approach prioritized cultural preservation in a "museum-like" manner, attempting to retain historic districts in their entirety without alteration. Neither approach is conducive to the effective preservation and sustainable development of historic districts. As Heath, T. et al. argue, the preservation and development of historic districts must be "a rational economic and commercial choice." Without economic value, preservation driven solely by policy is unlikely to revitalize the district. However, if there is economic feasibility, then protection and adaptive reuse become possible.

Therefore, the renewal of historic districts is essentially a process of reshaping them based on their economic value. With the rise of consumer culture and experiential consumption in urban spaces, it has been recognized that introducing tourism and related cultural activities can leverage "its historic character, ambience, and sense of place" to create economic value. Historic districts, due to their cultural rarity and economic potential for development, are transformed into potential urban cultural capital. This transformation occurs either through government intervention or market-driven operations, turning these districts into spatial commodities for consumption.

Historic districts have increasingly adopted consumer-oriented transformations to meet the demands of contemporary consumer culture by tapping into historical and cultural heritage and shaping local characteristics, which has become a mainstream strategy. The preservation and adaptive reuse of historic districts now emphasize the core of cultural heritage, protecting historical appearances on a material level while preserving the spirit and atmosphere of the place on a cultural level. This revival leverages the cultural capital inherent in these districts. This new approach to producing consumer spaces through the renovation of historic districts has effectively aligned with the demands for local cultural development in the context of a consumer society and the current trend of cultural consumption. It has thus replaced traditional "demolish and rebuild" and "museum-like" preservation methods, emerging as a powerful and widespread spatial transformation model in China.<sup>22</sup>

### ***A Review of Research on the Commercialization of Historic Districts in Urban Renewal***

Current research on the commercialization of historic districts in China's urban renewal can be categorized into two main types: studies focused on design and planning, and those that critically examine the humanistic and cultural values. This is evident in the existing studies related to consumer-oriented transformations in Xintiandi and Pingjiang Road.

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<sup>22</sup> Xiangyu Li and Hongyuan Mei, "Urban Commercial Space Construction of Consumer Cultural Perspective" [消费文化视角下的城市商业空间建构], *Architectural Culture* 28, no. 02 (2010): 182-185, <https://doi.org/10.13942/j.cnki.hzjz.2010.02.040>.

From a design and planning perspective, research in urban planning typically focuses on the development models, practical experiences, strategies, and improvement pathways for historic district renewal. The emphasis is often on how to leverage cultural capital to unlock the potential value of these districts and assess the current state of cultural utilization. In the field of architecture, studies mainly analyze methods for the preservation of historical buildings, the creation of commercial spaces, and the enhancement of spatial experiences within historic districts.

For instance, Shi and Huang conducted a comparative analysis of the locational context, renewal processes, and redevelopment models of Shanghai's Xintiandi and Tianzifang districts. They explored how these renewal processes influenced the spatial reconfiguration and social relationship changes, aiming to identify effective models for historic district renewal.<sup>23</sup> Li Xiangyu et al. examined cultural characteristics and spatial consumption patterns of modern commercial historic districts from the perspective of cultural consumption. They summarized renovation strategies based on symbolic extraction, cultural extension, and the restoration of appearance and texture.<sup>24</sup> Wang Jun et al. highlighted historic districts as typical examples of cultural consumption spaces, using Suzhou's Pingjiang Historic and Cultural District as a case study. Through field interviews and questionnaires, they investigated the sense of identity among different stakeholder groups in the context of cultural consumerism and proposed corresponding spatial strategies.

Additionally, Wang Yayun analyzed experiential consumption behavior and psychology, combining this with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of spatial experiences in existing commercial pedestrian streets in Suzhou's old city. This study led to the development of suitable design strategies for Suzhou's commercial pedestrian streets.<sup>25</sup> Niu Yu, using Pingjiang Road and Shantang Street in Suzhou as examples, conducted a comparative analysis of cultural, leisure, and landscape spaces. The study summarized successful practices and proposed a tourism development model for historic districts that not only preserves local cultural continuity and regional characteristics but also meets the consumption needs of tourists.<sup>26</sup>

From the perspective of humanistic value critique, most studies acknowledge that the commercialization of historic districts can contribute to economic growth, but they also recognize the detrimental effects of consumerism on the traditional spirit of these districts. For instance, Zhu and Feng used "Shanghai Xintiandi" and "Chongqing Tiandi" as case studies to compare their spatial forms and architectural styles, uncovering the pervasive influence of consumer culture.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Shi Yaling and Huang Yong, "Spatial Reshaping in the Renewal and Reconstruction of Historical Neighborhoods."

<sup>24</sup> Li Xiangyu and Mei Hongyuan, "Urban Commercial Space Construction of Consumer Cultural Perspective."

<sup>25</sup> Yayun Wang, "Research on Commercial Pedestrian Street Design in Suzhou Ancient City by Experience Consumption Background" [体验式消费背景下苏州古城商业步行街设计研究], Master's thesis, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, 2017, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>26</sup> Niu Yu, "Tourism Spatial Evolution and Organization of Historical Streets under the View of Postmodernism: The Cases of Pingjiang Road and Shantang Street in Suzhou" [后现代视角下历史街区旅游发展空间格局演变与组织——以苏州平江路和山塘街为例], Master's thesis, Soochow University, 2016, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>27</sup> 1. Xiao Zhu and Jianfeng Miao, "Discussion about the Alienation Phenomenon of Critical Regionalism in Urban Renewal: Taking the Comparison of 'Shanghai Xintiandi' and 'Chongqing Xintiandi' as an Example" [旧城改造中批判地域主义异化现象的探讨——以“上海新天地”和“重庆天地”的比较为例], *Journal of Anhui University of*

They critically analyzed the phenomenon of regionalism gradually becoming alienated and explored the underlying causes.

Zhang and Deng pointed out that the recent proliferation of modern-style consumption spaces in China is essentially a form of symbolic consumption space driven by commercial interests, targeting specific groups and utilizing particular cultural atmospheres.<sup>28</sup> They argued that the creation of these spaces is a profit-oriented process of spatial production, which metaphorically reflects the social inequality and cultural disjunction behind gentrification.

Wu Xiaoqing et al. conducted a comparative analysis of Shanghai Xintiandi, shaped by global consumer culture, and Nanjing Laomendong, rooted in local culture.<sup>29</sup> They explored the multiple forms of alienation and potential crises brought about by commercialization and emphasized the need to return to the core values of urban historical culture. Similarly, Zhang Jie et al. conducted an in-depth investigation into the commercialization of Shanghai Xintiandi. In their analysis of the "Xintiandi cloning" trend, they highlighted the cultural crises induced by consumer culture, media dissemination, and elite-driven planning, arguing that the "new culture and symbols" propagated by the media undermine the original historical and cultural essence of the district, effectively negating the "cultural ontology."<sup>30</sup>

Using widely studied cases like Xintiandi as an example, it is evident that many studies focus on the specific strategies for physical commercial space renovation and the methods of utilizing cultural capital. Some research also interprets the commercialization of historic districts through the lens of spatial production theory, paying attention to the impacts of consumerism and consumer culture on these areas. However, there is relatively little research that examines the influence of media on spatial consumption or explores the underlying logic of historic district commercialization from the perspective of consumer society theory.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining various aspects, including the background and stakeholders involved in the renovation of historic districts, the use of cultural capital, the symbolic application of spatial characteristics within the districts, the role of media in marketing the space, and spatial consumption. Through this analysis, the study seeks to summarize the overall logic behind the commercialization of historic districts from a consumer perspective. Additionally, by adopting cultural heritage as the fundamental value stance for district renovation, the study will further analyze the real impact of symbolic construction on local culture.

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*Science and Technology (Natural Science)* 36, no. 5 (2016): 78-86, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-1098.2016.05.015>.

<sup>28</sup> Jingxiang Zhang and Huayuan Deng, "Interpretation of the Shaping of Modern Urban Style Consumption Space: An Analytical Perspective Based on Space Production Theory" [解读城市近现代风貌型消费空间的塑造——基于空间生产理论的分析视角], *International Urban Planning* 24, no. 1 (February 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Xiaoqing Wu, Lu Xia, and Zhendong Luo, "Alienation and Rethinking of Cultural Symbols in Old City Renewal: The Case of 'Xintiandi Series'" [文化符号在旧城更新中的异化与反思——以“新天地系列”为例], in *Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Conference on Urban Planning in China* (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Jie Zhang, "Clone of Urban Cultural Heritage in the Context of Consumption Culture" [论消费主义视野下城市文化遗产的克隆], in *\*Proceedings of the 2008 Annual Conference of Urban Planning in China\** (September 2008).

## Chapter3

# The construction logic and analytical framework of consumerization of historical blocks

### 3.1 Overview of Xintiandi and Its Cultural Capital

As a milestone in China's urban renovation, the development of Shanghai Xintiandi, which began in 1999, rapidly evolved into a distinctive landmark and cultural symbol unique to Shanghai. Based on Shanghai's unique early 20th-century Shikumen architecture, Xintiandi merges traditional design with modern commercial elements and urban amenities into a cohesive cultural center. Its significant success has sparked a nationwide trend of old town renovations, serving as a model for the transformation of Linongs, Hutongs, historic streets, and even villages, leveraging their cultural characteristics. This approach has initiated a new era in the transformation of Chinese cultural and historical districts.

#### *Background*

Shanghai Xintiandi is located in the Luwan District of central Shanghai, along the eastern section of Huaihai Middle Road. It forms part of the urban renewal project in the Taipingqiao area. Before its redevelopment, the area was primarily a residential district consisting of old Shikumen-style lane houses. By the 1990s, Taipingqiao was designated as an urban renewal zone due to its dilapidated state and lack of modern infrastructure, which rendered it unsuitable for the commercial development needs of central Shanghai. In the mid-1990s, Shui On Land, a Hong Kong-based company, secured the development rights for the Taipingqiao district and embarked on creating Xintiandi as the first step in the area's urban renewal. Xintiandi was envisioned as an international leisure, cultural, and entertainment center, integrating dining, shopping, and entertainment facilities.

The redevelopment design was led by American architect Benjamin Wood, who had previously overseen the renovation of Boston's Quincy Market and brought extensive experience in the adaptive reuse of architectural heritage. The Shanghai Xintiandi project covers a planned area of approximately 30,000 square meters, with a total building area of about 57,000 square meters. The northern block covers approximately 16,555 square meters, while the southern block occupies around 13,445 square meters. The building area of the northern block is about 24,800 square meters, and the newly constructed shopping center in the southern block spans approximately 25,000 square meters. The foundational construction was completed in June 2001, and the site officially opened in late September 2002.

On November 22, 2002, Shanghai Xintiandi Plaza was awarded the "Cultural Heritage Conservation Award" at the American Institute of Architects' annual honors ceremony held in Hong Kong. On November 3, 2003, the northern block of Shanghai Xintiandi (north of Xingye Road) received the 2003 Urban Land Institute's Award for Excellence.

Shanghai Xintiandi underwent a comprehensive redevelopment process, executed in three phases over the course of 15 years. The project adhered to the basic land management model of "land acquisition—development—leasing and selling." The three phases of the project included overall planning and layout, promotion and tenant recruitment, and operation and management. Throughout these phases, the positioning of Xintiandi also evolved: In the first phase, the initial focus was on creating a comprehensive destination, as at that time, there was no single place in Shanghai that combined dining, entertainment, shopping, tourism, and culture. In the second phase, the focus shifted to establishing Xintiandi as a historic and cultural urban tourism landmark in downtown Shanghai, aiming to make it a must-see destination for all visitors to the city. In the third phase, Xintiandi positioned itself as an international hub for exchanges and gatherings, hosting numerous events and becoming a key meeting point in the city.

### ***Location***

The district is bounded by Taicang Road to the north, Madang Road to the west, Zizhong Road to the south, and Huangpi South Road to the east. It is divided into the North Block and South Block by Xingye Road, the watershed between them, which is also the site of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, a critical revolutionary historical preservation site in Shanghai. The South Block is dominated by modern architecture with Shikumen buildings as a secondary element, and the North Block, which preserves these historic Shikumen buildings, creating a dialogue between the old and new. Xingye Road not only segregates the area but also integrates various historical and tourist attractions, enhancing the surrounding infrastructure and environmental quality. Today, Xintiandi stands as a symbol of *Haipai* architectural heritage, on par with the Bund, Yuyuan Garden, and Nanjing Road.

### ***Haipai culture and Haipai architecture***

*Haipai* culture, which literally means "Shanghai style"<sup>31</sup>, emerged in modern China amid the sociocultural transformations of early 20th-century Shanghai. It is a cultural expression deeply rooted in the local features of Shanghai and influenced by Western modes of thought and practice, developing amidst the encroachment of Western culture and navigating tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as survival and progress. It preserves the essence of ancient culture while incorporating modern humanistic elements, blending Western cultural features with Chinese

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<sup>31</sup> "Haipai." Wikipedia, June 21, 2022. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haipai>.

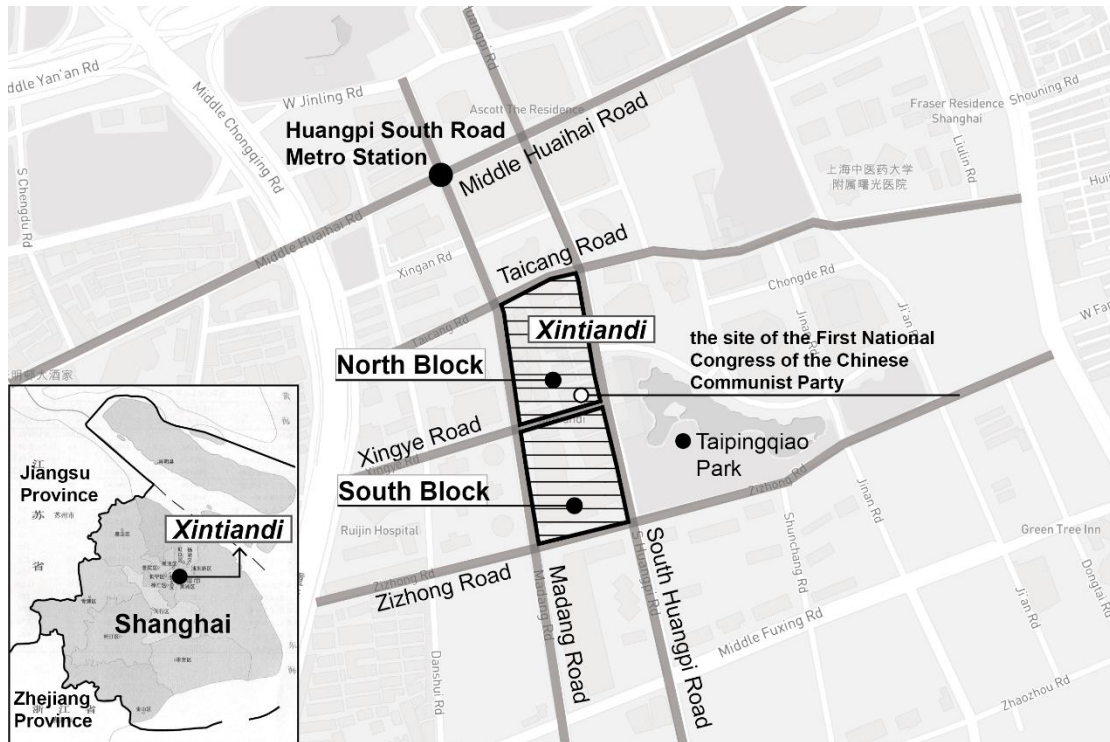


Figure3.1 Location of Shanghai Xintiandi, Author's own creation

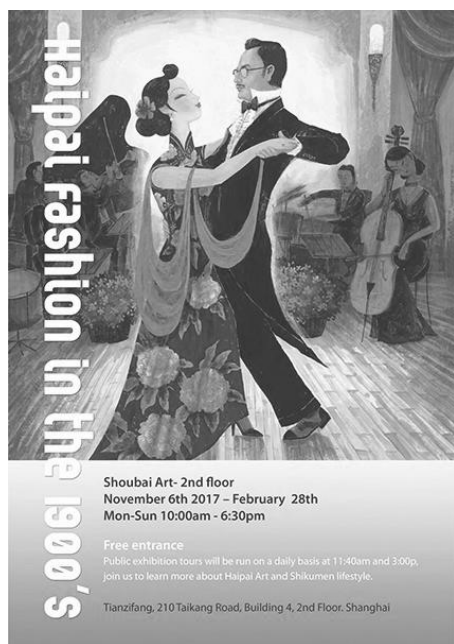


Figure3.2 Haipai Fashion in the 1900's Exhibition (Source: Gu, Xing. "Haipai School's Art on Display in Hangzhou." Chinadaily.com.cn.)



Figure3.3 Haipai school's art on display in Hangzhou (Source: Ren Bonian. Photo provided by China Daily)

traditional traits.

*Haipai* culture is characterized by three main aspects: it originated from a commercially advanced society and a relaxed political climate; it represents a state of mind that has fostered the flourishing of literature and the arts; and as a local lifestyle, it reflects the vibrant living conditions of the people, encapsulating various narratives of life within the city. *Haipai* culture has permeated various facets of Shanghai, influencing urban development and architectural styles, modern literature and philosophical thought, as well as lifestyle and living philosophies.

*Haipai* culture has significantly influenced architectural design, fostering the emergence and development of Haipai architecture. Early Haipai architecture is characterized by a fusion of Western design techniques and local styles, often embracing large spatial dimensions to reflect advanced social trends and global architectural movements. It features elaborate and diverse decorations that display cultural characteristics from around the world. Despite its relatively brief century-long history, Haipai architecture has managed to blend inclusivity with innovation, nostalgia with modernity, integrating Western classical elements with Eastern aesthetics. This architectural style encompasses a variety of structures, including commercial, residential, and office buildings, with notable examples like the Bund International Architecture Exhibition and the culturally rich Shikumen buildings, epitomizing its classic representation.

Shikumen architecture, a fusion of Eastern and Western design, was once the most prevalent residential form in Shanghai, originating in the 1920s and 1930s. This style is intrinsically linked to Shanghai's colonial history a century ago. As defined by scholars, "Shikumen (translated as 'stone gate') refers to the black-colored heavy gateways leading into the houses, which abut one another and are arranged in straight alleys called Linongs (Li means row or block of houses, while Nong means a lane providing access)"<sup>32</sup>

This architectural style predominates in the central urban residential districts of Shanghai, embodying a significant aspect of the city's architectural heritage. During the period of the first global economic boom and urban expansion in Shanghai, there was a significant influx of people from the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions. To address their housing needs and facilitate British colonial administration, designers blended traditional Jiangnan courtyard homes with British terraced architectural layouts. This evolution gave rise to a residential style featuring a front courtyard, a central hall, and a rear space with a second courtyard and kitchen. Shikumen architecture connected households through alleyways (Longtang or Linong, a form of *Haipai* architecture<sup>33</sup>), with branch alleys linking several homes and main alleys connecting to the external streets. This enclosed alleyway space not only catered to the inland migrants' desire for

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<sup>32</sup> Xiaohua Zhong and Xiangming Chen, "Demolition, Rehabilitation, and Conservation: Heritage in Shanghai's Urban Regeneration, 1990–2015," *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 41, no. 2 (2017): 82-91, <https://doi.org/10.3846/20297955.2017.1294120>.

<sup>33</sup> "Longtang." Wikipedia, April 23, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longtang>.

security and mutual support but also facilitated the maintenance of order by the rulers, thus becoming prevalent in old Shanghai.<sup>34</sup>



Figure3.4 Haipai architecture, Shikumen Street in old Shanghai (Source: Liu, Fuping. "Series Album" Old Shanghai Shikumen.)

<sup>34</sup> Na Li, Gang Wang, and Shanshan Cao, "Reconstruction of the Symbolic Meaning of Regional Traditional Architecture" [地域传统建筑符号意义的重构], *Art Education*, no. 12 (2015): 230-231, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.



By the 1940s, Shikumen residences had become the dominant and most densely populated type of housing in Shanghai, comprising 72.5% of the city's residential architecture. These dwellings are noted for their unique and enduring characteristics, standing out in Shanghai's architectural history and social fabric. As the quintessential architectural form in Shanghai, Shikumen neighborhoods supported local commerce, manufacturing, and service activities, sustaining and shaping the city's modern life.

### *Shikumen in Xintiandi*

The Shikumen architecture of Shanghai Xintiandi, a pivotal element of Haipai architecture, has its roots in the early 20th century in the Taipingqiao area, where Xintiandi is situated. Starting in 1845, various international concessions—British, American, French, and Japanese—were established in Shanghai, while the areas in the old city were designated as Chinese districts. Unlike the traditional Shikumen structures represented by those in the Sinan Road area, Xintiandi features a newer style of Shikumen architecture. This modern form of Shikumen residential architecture began appearing in Shanghai after the eighth year of the Republic of China (1919), with its peak construction period between 1919 and 1930.

In the Xintiandi area, the exterior walls of Shikumen buildings typically use exposed gray bricks, red bricks, or a combination of both, set with lime mortar, rather than the traditional white lime wash used in older Shikumen styles. Traditional architectural elements like the horse-head walls or the Guanyin pocket-style gables are no longer employed. A significant change in the newer Shikumen styles is the replacement of stone door frames with ones constructed from exposed brick, and the door lintels now feature more elaborate decorations. Traditionally, Shikumen lintels often mimicked the ceremonial gates of Jiangnan-style architecture, characterized by traditional Chinese brick carvings topped with green tiles. However, the lintels in the Shikumen of Xintiandi have been influenced by Western architectural styles, adorned with triangular, semicircular, arched, or rectangular ornamental motifs similar to those found above doors and windows in Western architecture. These diverse and stylistically distinct decorations are among the most characteristic features of Shikumen architecture, with some modern versions also incorporating Western classical pilasters as decorative elements beside the door frames.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1990s, the Taipingqiao area had become a hub for the lower-middle working class, with nearly 47.9%<sup>36</sup> of residents (averaging a monthly salary of 800 yuan) employed in production and transportation sectors. The area suffered from material aging and functional decline due to outdated housing and inadequate facilities, failing to meet the demands of modern living. The *Shanghai Urban Master Plan (1999-2020)* proposed transforming Shanghai into a modern international metropolis, focusing on developing the tertiary sector in central urban areas.

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<sup>35</sup> Jun Geng, "Times Charm of 'New Shanghai Style' Architecture: Taking Shanghai Xintiandi Design Practice as an Example" ["新海派"建筑的时代魅力——以上海新天地设计实践为例], \*Urban Architecture Space\* 29, no. 10 (2022): 95-96, 102, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1006-6659.2022.10.027>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

<sup>36</sup> "新天地." Wikipedia. Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-cn/%E6%96%B0%E5%A4%A9%E5%9C%B0#>.

Taipingqiao, despite its advantageous location, could no longer satisfy the commercial development needs of the central district due to its deteriorated material conditions and was designated for urban renewal<sup>37</sup>. In the 1990s, Shanghai authorities initiated a comprehensive transformation of 3.65 million square meters<sup>38</sup> of dilapidated housing, leading to large-scale demolition and reconstruction. Many old Shikumen buildings in the Taipingqiao area were replaced with high-rise buildings. Luwan District, where Taipingqiao is located, underwent two major renovations, but due to financial constraints and issues relocating residents of old houses, the actual redevelopment in Taipingqiao did not commence until January 1999.

### 3.2 Shanghai Xintiandi as a “Prototype”

#### *The Renovation Strategy*

The redevelopment and transformation of the Xintiandi project represents a collaborative venture between government and business, conducted under governmental planning control, with Hong Kong's Shui On Land securing the development rights for the Taipingqiao area in Luwan District. As the initial step in the broader old city renewal effort, the Xintiandi project aimed to balance heritage preservation with organic urban renewal. Unlike traditional “blanket transformation” or “authentic preservation”, the renovation of Xintiandi pursued a “third way”<sup>39</sup>, employing a method of “preserving the facade while gutting the interior” to facilitate a meaningful spatial reinterpretation and conversion.

1. **The extraction and preservation of Shikumen symbols.** As a material representation of Shanghai’s traditional lifestyle and Haipai culture, Shikumen architecture, along with its distinctive alleyway configurations, comprises unique historical features of Shanghai that constitute the foundational memories of old Shanghai. The renovation of Xintiandi is fundamentally based on the preservation of typical Shikumen architecture, maintaining its architectural facade while employing the “restoration as it was” method to refurbish the exterior form, color, material, and texture. Modern architectural elements such as glass and metal have been integrated into the well-preserved Shikumen facades. Additionally, innovative and radical new structures have been embedded within this historically preserved environment, transforming the nostalgic ambiance maintained by the exterior into a space that is both familiar and novel. This approach has cultivated an architectural style and neighborhood character that seamlessly blends Eastern and Western elements, merges old and new, and harmonizes local and modern sensibilities.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wenjin Jiang, Keshi Chen, and Xueguang Ma, "Study on the Spatial Production of Urban Renewal in China: A Case of Shanghai Xintiandi Square" [我国旧城改造的空间生产研究——以上海新天地为例], *Urban Studies* 18, no. 10 (2011): 84-89, 96, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1006-3862.2011.10.015>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

<sup>38</sup> "新天地," *维基百科*, last modified August 20, 2023, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-cn/%E6%96%B0%E5%A4%A9%E5%9C%B0>.

<sup>39</sup> Shiwen Sun, "The Embedding of Public Space and the Reversal of Spatial Patterns: A Review of the Planning of Shanghai's 'Xintiandi'" [共空间的嵌入与空间模式的翻转——上海“新天地”的规划评论], *City Planning Review* 31, no. 8 (2007): 80-87, <https://doi.org/10.3321/j.issn:1002-1329.2007.08.013>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

<sup>40</sup> Xiaoqing Wu, Lu Xia, and Zhendong Luo, "Alienation and Rethinking of Cultural Symbols in Old City Renewal: The Case of 'Xintiandi Series'" [文化符号在旧城更新中的异化与反思——以“新天地系列”为例], in *Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Conference on Urban Planning in China* (2014).

2. **Protection of the original Shikumen architecture.** The project has retained the original spatial dimensions of the streets and alleyways while upgrading the interiors of the old buildings with modern infrastructure such as plumbing, electricity, gas, telecommunications, fiber optic cables, and air conditioning systems. The renovation of the Shikumen structures was conducted in three distinct approaches: (1) preserving and reinforcing the existing structures; (2) maintaining only the exterior walls and roofs, with the interior structures demolished and rebuilt according to the original architectural plans, using the “restoration as it was” approach; (3) largely demolishing the structures, preserving only the gatehouses. Additionally, a special exhibition space called “Wu Li Xiang” (translated as “home” in Shanghainese) has been established to display the unique architectural culture of Shanghai’s Shikumen, recreating the living spaces and lifestyles of Shanghai residents from that era, and explain the philosophy and developmental process of the project.<sup>41</sup>
  
3. **Reconfiguration of interior spatial structures and functions.** Interior spaces have been comprehensively remodeled to meet new functional requirements. For instance, three-story spaces have been converted to two-story configurations, and internal partitions have been removed to transform a single bay into three, thus creating large, open areas that maintain a traditional spatial ambiance while accommodating modern commercial uses. As Dong Zhinian notes, “With the influence of globalization and the upscale positioning of the district, spaces such as bars, cafes, international restaurants, and luxury brand stores have continually moved in, becoming another symbol of consumer culture embedded with local elements, emblematic of the ‘Xintiandi-style’ capitalist myth.”<sup>42</sup> The internal functionality of Shikumen has shifted from private residential use to public commercial spaces, reflecting this transformation.
  
4. **Integration of modern elements.** According to the planned development, Xintiandi is divided



Figure 3.5 Comparison of Qiantianti before (on the left) and after renovation (on the right) (Source: Jiang et al., 2011.)

<sup>41</sup> Ping Yao and Ye Zhao, "How to Protect and Utilize Historical Heritage: A Case Study with Xintiandi Shopping Mall in Shanghai" [基于上海新天地对历史遗产保护利用问题的思考], \*Journal of Liaodong University (Natural Science Edition)\* 16, no. 1 (2009): 75-78, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1673-4939.2009.01.020>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

<sup>42</sup> Zhinian Dong, "Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Interpretation of Public Symbol Phantom in 'Xintiandi' Environmental Design" [消费文化背景下的公共符号幻象的解构与重构——以上海'新天地'环境设计为例], *装饰*, no. 12 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.16272/j.cnki.cn11-1392/j.2011.12.007>.

into two sections: South Block and North Block. The North Block consists of several traditional Shikumen buildings, which have been transformed into upscale commercial venues through the incorporation of modern architecture, decor, and facilities. Conversely, the South Block has been developed into a modern shopping complex with a total floor area of 25,000 square meters. This structural division reflects a strategic blend of preserving historical architecture while introducing contemporary functionalities to meet current market demands.

### ***The Transformation of Spatial Meaning***

“ In the postmodern consumer society, the shift from the consumption of objects to the consumption of symbols means that people no longer consume merely the objects themselves but rather their symbolic meanings. ”<sup>43</sup> The redevelopment of Xintiandi has transformed the value of Shikumen from primarily residential spaces into areas rich with consumptive and symbolic meanings. Semiotic theory posits that symbols must form a system to generate meaning, and the significance of a symbol arises from the differences within a system of symbols. Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* (1968) argues that for an object to be consumed, it must not only become a symbol but also part of a systemic symbol. Xintiandi's success is largely due to its transformation into a symbol and its integration into a broader system of symbols within the consumer society.

(See Table 3.1-3.3 for an analysis of the evolution of the significance of Xintiandi.) This transformation of spatial meaning in Xintiandi can be understood from several perspectives:

1. **By symbolizing historical architecture, Xintiandi triggers consumers' memories of Shanghai's distinct *Haipai* culture.** Part of Xintiandi's success stems from leveraging this local "Haipai culture" as cultural capital to construct a narrative space. The Shikumen architecture, forming the outermost layer of Shanghai Xintiandi, closely associates the external and spatial characteristics of historical buildings with the everyday life of old Shanghai, with various spaces narrating historical events of the time. As the most common type of family housing in that era, Shikumen buildings easily evoke memories of the living conditions of old Shanghai residents. Additionally, to reinforce these memories, Xintiandi has constructed an attraction, the “ Wu Li Xiang ” (translated as “ home ” in Shanghainese), a well-preserved Shikumen building that vividly recreates the living environment and lifestyle of 1920s Shanghai residents. Once Shikumen spaces acquire symbolic meanings and labels such as “old Shanghai”, “nostalgic”, and “petit bourgeois”, they possess the necessary conditions to become objects of consumption. The transformation of consumption from tangible objects to the symbols they represent endows Shikumen spaces with commercial properties. However, the creation of meaning through the symbols of Xintiandi is not merely accomplished by applying labels; it requires integration into a system of symbols. This process involves embedding these spaces within a broader symbolic network that contextualizes and enhances their meaning within the consumer society.
2. **The construction of differentiation in Xintiandi.** In the context of symbolic consumption, the development of a symbolic system is more significant than the symbols themselves. Only by becoming an integral part of a symbolic system can an element establish differential relations with other symbols, thereby generating consumable symbolic meanings. The differentiation

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<sup>43</sup> Jing Han, *Consumption, Space, Urban Design* [城市消费空间] (Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2014).

crafted by Xintiandi can be analyzed from two perspectives: the differentiation of architectural spaces and the differentiation of social identities. This strategy highlights how Xintiandi strategically integrates diverse architectural designs and social spaces to appeal to specific consumer groups, embedding these elements within a broader consumer culture framework to enhance their symbolic value and market appeal.

- 1) Differentiation of Urban Architectural Spaces (i.e., differentiation of consumption objects). Differentiation, within the context of consumer society theory, refers to the separation between the signifier and the signified in urban spaces that are consumed as symbols. This separation creates a degree of arbitrariness and uncertainty in the relationship between a space's physical form and its original function. As Han Jing notes, "As symbols of consumption, urban spaces, through their 'Appearance,' 'Form,' and 'Image,' become the primary carriers of meaning, detached from their functional use and original context, and can be freely encoded."<sup>44</sup> This flexibility allows the visual form of urban spaces to serve as a vital tool in constructing spatial differentiation. In the fashion system of consumer culture, the concept of "new" does not necessarily oppose the "old"; instead, the "old", being unfamiliar, can evoke a sense of novelty. Thus, " 'making the old new' becomes a crucial method for generating novel forms."<sup>45</sup> Here, the "old" encompasses the city's inherent natural and historical cultural characteristics.

Xintiandi effectively utilizes its "old" to create the "new." As a pioneer in the renovation of historical urban districts in China, Xintiandi employs Shikumen architecture as a medium, discarding its original residential function to introduce modern consumer spaces into these traditional settings. This juxtaposition of old Shikumen architecture with new consumer environments creates differentiation, eliciting a sense of novelty among visitors. Furthermore, the inclusive and eclectic nature of Haipai culture provides a foundation for this differentiation in Xintiandi. The Sino-Western architectural fusion inherent in Shikumen allows Xintiandi to offer distinct experiences to both Chinese and Western visitors. For Chinese tourists, the Western elements in Shikumen are perceived as new and exotic, yet they resonate with Eastern memories. Conversely, for foreign tourists, Shikumen's foundation in Western architecture, embellished with Chinese elements, presents its own form of novelty.

- 2) Differentiation of Social Identity (i.e., differentiation of consumption subjects). The diversity in visual forms can endow urban space commodities with new social symbolic meanings, which then act as the referents for generating new significations—symbolic meanings. Symbols can be viewed as identity labels used to gain a sense of identity recognition. Xintiandi developers, driven by the demands of capital circulation and multiplication, have commercialized the transformation of the district's form and function, targeting the middle class as the primary consumers. The businesses established within Xintiandi are predominantly mid to high-end brands, catering to the middle class. When "Xintiandi" becomes a symbol, it encapsulates meanings associated with the "middle class,"

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

“old Shanghai nostalgia,” and “petit bourgeois lifestyle,” which are also perceived as exclusive to the middle and elite classes. This repositioning not only redefines the space but also aligns it with specific social identities, enhancing its appeal to a targeted consumer demographic. As scholars such as Zhu and Miao have noted in their paper, “The substantive consumption activities within the space are confined to a select group of individuals—the middle class—thus, the carefully constructed 'alienated' architectural symbols are linked to this minority consumer class, becoming labels that affirm their social status.”<sup>46</sup>

However, the pursuit of symbolic meanings and identity recognition in the commodification of space inevitably leads to the homogenization of space and identity, necessitating continuous efforts to seek new differentiation to sustain the operations of the consumption system. This is evident in Xintiandi's commercial strategy that caters to a younger consumer demographic. As the consumption patterns of the middle class subtly permeate downwards, contemporary youth have emerged as a new powerhouse in consumption. According to a report jointly released by the Alibaba Research Institute and Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in May 2017, titled “China's New Consumption Trends,”<sup>47</sup> new-generation consumers are identified as one of the three main drivers of consumption for the 2016-2020 period. In December 2023, China Business News<sup>48</sup> highlighted that individuals represented by the new middle class and new professionals align nearly perfectly with the “new forces” profile described in consumer trend reports. With the expansion of this group, their economic capital and purchasing power are increasing, and it is projected that they will contribute to 80% of future consumption. There is also a shift in consumption philosophy among these groups, with a greater emphasis on “functional and emotional value,” and an increased investment in “spiritual consumption.” According to a November 2023 report by McKinsey Greater China<sup>49</sup>, there is a shift in the brand preferences of Chinese consumers. Historically, Chinese consumers favored foreign brands, but this trend has shifted in recent years.

Unlike the traditional middle class, which focuses more on the identity symbolism of consumption, the youthful consumer style is characterized more by the pursuit of novelty, individualism, creativity, and sensory experiences in consumption, embodying symbols and labels of “individuality,” “self-expression,” and “a stylistic self-consciousness”<sup>50</sup>. The consumer atmosphere in the Xintiandi district generally exhibits a trend towards adapting to the demands of contemporary young consumers, with themed consumption spaces that match their aesthetics and tastes, and decorative elements that are visually

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<sup>46</sup> Zhu and Miao, "Discussion about the Alienation Phenomenon of Critical Regionalism in Urban Renewal."

<sup>47</sup> "Ali Research Institute & BCG: New Trends in Chinese Consumption, Three Major Drivers Shaping China's New Customer Base." Sohu, May 26, 2017. [https://www.sohu.com/a/143754437\\_483389](https://www.sohu.com/a/143754437_483389).

<sup>48</sup> "New Forces - New Observations - New Choices: Consumer Trend Watch 2023." December 14, 2023. <https://www.yicai.com/news/101926595.html>.

<sup>49</sup> "Five New Trends That Will Shape China's Consumer Growth." McKinsey Greater China, November 29, 2023. <https://www.mckinsey.com.cn/%e4%ba%94%e5%a4%a7%e6%96%b0%e8%b6%8b%e5%8a%bf%e5%b0%86%e5%a1%91%e9%80%a0%e4%b8%ad%e5%9b%bd%e7%9a%84%e6%b6%88%e8%b4%b9%e5%a2%9e%e9%95%bf/>.

<sup>50</sup> Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism.

striking or fashion-forward. These trends are increasingly replicated and "proliferated" within the renovated historic district.

3. **The role of media in promoting symbols is pivotal.** In 2001, the "International Finance News" described Shanghai Xintiandi as "the best place for both Chinese and foreign visitors to appreciate Shanghai's historical culture and modern lifestyle, and a gathering place for culturally inclined locals and expatriates."<sup>51</sup> The renovation of Xintiandi essentially designed a new lifestyle. Through media promotion, this lifestyle has been embraced and celebrated by the public. As noted in media consumer promotions, Xintiandi is portrayed as a space filled with diverse imaginative possibilities that cater to the tastes and symbolic needs of different consumer groups—whether they are tourists or locals seeking novelty, curiosity, or a means to affirm their identities through consumption<sup>52</sup>. Unconsciously, consumers engage with the subjectively implanted and creatively constructed symbolic meanings within Xintiandi—young people enjoying the fashionable atmosphere, the elderly reconnecting with nostalgic memories, foreigners savoring the essence of Eastern culture, and Chinese individuals immersing themselves in fantasies of Western culture.

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<sup>51</sup> "Urban Leisure: Shanghai Xintiandi Leisure Walk." International Finance News, March 08, 2001. <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shenghuo/80/103/20010308/411619.html>

<sup>52</sup> Shiwen Sun, "The Embedding of Public Space and the Reversal of Spatial Patterns: A Review of the Planning of Shanghai's 'Xintiandi'" [共空间的嵌入与空间模式的翻转——上海“新天地”的规划评论], \*City Planning Review\* 31, no. 8 (2007): 80-87, <https://doi.org/10.3321/j.issn:1002-1329.2007.08.013>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

1.signifier	2.signified	} langue
3.sign I SIGNIFIER		
II SIGNIFIED		
III SIGN		

Table 3.1 The semiological scheme of myth in Barthes's *Mythologies*.

1.architectural form	2.original function	
3.architectural sign I SIGNIFIER		II secondary function
III NEW SIGN(SYMBOLISM)		

Table 3.2 Architectural semiotic system suggested by Amos Rapoport.



<i>signifier</i>	<i>signified</i>	
	Shikumen	
<i>sign</i>		<i>signified</i>
residential area in Old Shanghai (Haipai culture, poverty, colonization)		Renovation Strategy 1. 2. 3. 4.
→ 		
<i>sign</i>		<i>signified</i>
Shikumen (after renovation) + Various brand symbols		commercial leisure pedestrian zones
→ 		
<i>sign</i>		<i>signified</i>
"Xintiandi" "old Shanghai", "nostalgic", "high-end" and "petit bourgeois"		the replication and expansion of the Shanghai Xintiandi model
<i>sign</i>		
Pan-Xintiandi (successful commercial transformation of historic cultural districts)		

Table 3.3 Significance evolution of Xintiandi.(source: Author's own creation)



### *The Transformation of Social Relationships*

The Xintiandi project, by preserving the external formal language of historical buildings while transforming their interior spaces and functions, has crafted an experiential, nostalgic setting using the facade of Shikumen structures. Beneath this traditional exterior, the conventional living forms and functionalities have been replaced by consumption spaces constructed from modern architectural vocabularies, refilled with hedonistic consumption connotations. Xintiandi's narrative capitalizes on the old city's residents to fabricate a consumerist myth of a new world, which, however, does not belong to the urban poor but rather to tourists and foreign "cultural others." This myth is set against a backdrop constructed from the history of the impoverished.

The renovation of historic districts initially brings about a redefinition of the neighborhood's environment and functionalities. During this process of functional transformation, "new social groups enter as the district is renovated, leading to the dissolution and restructuring of existing social relationships. Balancing the interests of different social groups within the district becomes challenging, particularly as conflicts over interests and values between original residents and newcomers impact the preservation of the district's culture and its sustainable development"<sup>53</sup>. In this context, the historic Shikumen district of Xintiandi has been transformed into a new type of consumer space, which has also led to changes in social relationships.

From the perspective of urban development, the renovation has achieved the goals of environmental transformation and functional renewal, serving Shanghai's commercial development in the city center. "The conservation-oriented renovation of Xintiandi is purposeful within the broader context of achieving a balance in the overall area: it stimulates the development of the entire Taipingqiao area, enhancing the value of surrounding plots and increasing overall returns."<sup>54</sup> Xintiandi has also become a landmark and a model for urban management in Shanghai. The government aims to improve the old district's appearance and living conditions of its residents, and to maximize land benefits in the central urban area through this project. For the Shui On Group, the fundamental goal is to achieve investment profits and returns.

From the perspective of power distribution, the renovation exhibited a top-down characteristic. The redesign project, led by the international architect Benjamin Wood and his team, was planned and designed without involving the original residents from the outset, lacking a bottom-up approach to reflect, amend, and facilitate interaction between the space and its users. Throughout the development process, the initiative was consistently dominated by the government and developers, with the residents, the original property rights holders of the developed area, remaining in a passive position, subjected to arrangements made for them. The relocation plan resulted in "the displacement of over 70,000 original inhabitants and the introduction of 33,000

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<sup>53</sup> Xiang Kong and Junjie Qian, "Analyzing the Development of Cultural and Creative Industries and the Spatial Remodeling of Tianzifang Area in Shanghai," *\*Humanities and Geography\** 26, no. 03 (2011): 46-50, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>54</sup> Dunhuang Zhu and Chenhong Huang, "Edge to the Subject: Thinking of the Native's Role Change in the Urban Renewal" ["'边缘'到'主体': 城市更新背景下原住民角色变化的思考——以上海新天地和田子坊为例"], *Architecture & Culture* 8 (2015): 172-173, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-4909.2015.08.055>, accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd.

members of a new affluent class"<sup>55</sup>. The marginalization of the original residents illustrates a societal preference towards economic benefits over social values.

From the perspective of the original residents, the radical transformation of spatial forms during urban gentrification often deprives them of the social structures essential for their livelihood—a common issue in many urban gentrification processes. The displacement of original residents leads to a complete overhaul of the active population, business operations, and management mechanisms. Xintiandi has become disconnected from its original residents, who are unable to get the benefits derived from the renewal of the old city. The relocation of these residents effectively severs the cultural and spatial memory of the place, distancing them from their familiar daily routines. Although they received compensation prior to relocation, the social structures that embodied the historical and cultural essence of the area have been irreversibly lost.

From the perspective of the utilization of consumer space, the impoverished original residents have been completely excluded. To expediently recuperate the significant costs of renovating old alleyway buildings under the "restore as it was" approach, developers introduced businesses centered on high-end consumption. Before its transformation, Xintiandi primarily functioned as a residential area for Shanghai's local residents who maintained simple neighborhood relations through daily interactions, trade, and social activities. However, the redevelopment of Xintiandi repositioned it as an upscale venue for both local and foreign professionals, evolving into a pedestrian zone that integrates dining, commerce, entertainment, and culture. This redevelopment led to the displacement of the original residents, who were dispersed to other parts of the city, replaced by a fluid, uncertain, open, and upscale consumer demographic. Consequently, the traditional neighborhood relationships within the district have transformed into modern relationships characterized by interactions and consumption among strangers.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Pan-Xintiandi renovation in China***

The success of the Xintiandi project sparked a trend of old city renovations, leading to a reappraisal of historic districts by local governments, developers, and consumers alike. "From the perspective of urban political economy, in pursuit of maximizing surplus value, excessive capital inevitably turns to investment in the built environment, leading to the homogenization of space when it becomes commodified."<sup>57</sup> Following the success of Shanghai Xintiandi, it became a model emulated nationwide, with similar redevelopment projects based on the Xintiandi prototype continuously emerging across the country. The Shui On Land subsequently initiated projects such as Hangzhou West Lake Xintiandi, Chongqing Xintiandi, Wuhan Xintiandi, and Dalian Xintiandi. While each project varies due to differences in city, location, and positioning, they share commonalities in project models and urban design principles. Their business operation models are similar, and the naming similarities further imply the replication and expansion of the Shanghai Xintiandi model across the nation. See Table 3.4 below for a listing and description of the major "Tiandi" projects across the nation.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Shi Yaling and Huang Yong, "Spatial Reshaping in the Renewal and Reconstruction of Historical Neighborhoods."

<sup>57</sup> Jiang, Chen, and Ma, "Study on the Spatial Production of Urban Renewal in China."

Name	Original Function	Function After Transformation	Main Consumption Content	Advertising Slogans
Shanghai Xintiandi	Residential	An internationalized leisure, cultural, and entertainment center integrating culture, life, dining, and fashion	High-end restaurants, bars, brand stores, fashion shops, clubs, and boutiques	Yesterday, Tomorrow, Meet Today
Chongqing Tiandi	Residential, Commercial	A multi-functional complex combining trade, residential, and leisure shopping	High-class star-rated hotels, cultural facilities, dining, entertainment, shopping, and leisure facilities	The urban fashion highlight of Chongqing's main city, a new international fashion leisure and entertainment landmark
West Lake Tiandi	Residential	A comprehensive fashion leisure and tourism area with international standard dining, retail, cultural, and entertainment offerings	Main Consumption Content: Cafés, clubs, restaurants, entertainment venues, and shops	A comprehensive fashion landmark where style meets nature
Nanjing 1912	Residential	A fashionable commercial leisure district integrating leisure, entertainment, and sightseeing	Bars, cafes, restaurants, and fashion consumption shops	Yesterday the Presidential Palace, today the city's living room
Wuhan Tiandi	Residential	A leading fashion district for living, working, culture, and leisure entertainment	Fashion dining, high-end retail, restaurants, and leisure entertainment facilities	Wuhan's New Urban Landmark
Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu	Residential	An open, low-density district shopping center	International fashion retail, gourmet dining, cultural brands, high-end luxury consumption	A dual experience of quick fun and slow living, a popular spot for social media check-ins

Table 3.4 Description of the major “Tiandi” projects (Source: Adapted from Wen Li, 2020, p.33)

Pan-Xintiandi renovation projects exhibit several common characteristics:

1. **Possesses distinct historical and cultural attributes.** Such architectural ventures are not standalone; they depend on a specific historical and cultural context. For instance, Shanghai Xintiandi is based on Shikumen residences and the site of the First National Congress of the Communist Party, while Nanjing 1912 draws on the historical backdrop of the Presidential Palace in Nanjing. These projects are planned with an emphasis on the integrity and continuity of the historical environment, ensuring that buildings styled after the Xintiandi model are seamlessly integrated into the overall cultural atmosphere and complement the surrounding

architecture, fostering a mutually enhancing relationship.

2. The primary goal of redevelopment projects is commercialization, with cultural and symbolic consumption serving as the key drivers. Prior to the renovation, these areas primarily served residential purposes; post-renovation, they are transformed into leisure pedestrian streets that integrate various commercial functions, designed to be high-end commercial hubs and city landmarks. For instance, Chengdu's Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, located within the historic Daci Temple cultural district, incorporates elements of Western Sichuan architecture such as gray tile



Figure3.6 Gucci in Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu (Source: Archidaily)

sloping roofs and lattices, complemented by modern architectural elements like large glass facades and stone walls. The area hosts flagship stores of high-end brands such as Gucci, Cartier, and Starbucks, and is dotted with postmodern sculptures and artworks. Some scholars have criticized this trend towards symbolization, arguing that it causes local culture to lose its inherent meaning and authenticity, disrupted by the pervasive symbols of consumer culture, and turning the district into an enclave that, while physically located within the Daci Temple historic district, is overwhelmed by purely symbolic consumption.<sup>58</sup>

3. The transformation model is top-down, led by investors and the government. During this process, urban planning and policy-making are employed as key tools for spatial intervention, setting the primary direction for district redevelopment and acting to regulate capital and market actions.
4. Similar renovation strategies include preserving the external historical and aesthetic characteristics of old buildings while repurposing their interiors. For instance, in the case of Shanghai Xintiandi, techniques such as cleaning and injecting damp-proof treatments have been used to preserve much of the original brickwork of the Shikumen architecture (Figure 3.7). Additionally, most of the outdoor paving in Xintiandi has been constructed using bricks salvaged from demolished buildings (Figure 3.8). The internal structures and functions of these

<sup>58</sup> Wen Li, "Research on the Symbolization of Yongqing District, Enning Road, Guangzhou" [广州市恩宁路永庆坊的符号化研究], Master's thesis, South China University of Technology, 2020, accessed via CNKI.

old buildings have been extensively modified and replaced. By utilizing atriums, mezzanines, additional floors, and developing underground spaces, the interiors of these buildings have been repurposed. The interiors are often decorated with traditional furniture and ornaments, creating a quaint and historic atmosphere.



Figure3.7 The brick walls of Xintiandi  
(Source: you.ctrip.com)



Figure3.8 Xintiandi outdoor paving  
(Source: Ding Guangming. 2006. Fig 2)

From the commonalities observed in the Shanghai Xintiandi and broader Pan-Xintiandi projects, it is evident that the cultural capital and symbolic value of historic districts form the foundation for the logic of consumerization transformation. Indeed, in the process of cultural commodification-driven neighborhood renovations, culture serves merely as a tool to attract capital investment. This involves packaging historical fragments, local materials, and popular elements collectively, using cultural symbols to create an overall consumer atmosphere. By integrating cultural elements with various carriers, these areas are transformed into a wholly symbolized consumption space, a heterotopia that diverges from reality. This transformation cultivates a richly symbolic and theatrical space experience, catering to the diverse symbolic consumption needs of different consumer groups. In the age of media, such artificially crafted spaces of consumption are further transformed through media space marketing into synonyms like nostalgia and fashion, or as symbols of certain group tastes and identities. These spaces become a consumerist spectacle with characteristics of popularity, allure, and sensationalism, bearing the "gaze" of the public, and in the continuous dissemination process, reinforcing the diversified symbolic value and social impact of the district. Simultaneously, they stimulate the varied spatial consumption desires of people in the postmodern context. Ultimately, under the multilayered symbolic construction of space, culture is reduced to a backdrop for consumption-oriented motives, turning the district into a thoroughly commodified entity.

### 3.3 The analytical framework of the consumerization of historical districts

In contemporary consumer society, consumerism, with its distinctive operational logic, dominates the production, marketing, and consumption of space in historic districts.

From the perspective of spatial production, the commodification of historic districts represents a process of reshaping symbolic value. The production of symbolic consumer goods necessitates "encoding," which involves "establishing a system of symbols through some agreed-upon rules

among users, thus generating symbolic meaning based on differential relations.<sup>59</sup> This is akin to the construction of the differentiated system in Xintiandi, which is an "encoding" process.

From a marketing perspective, space necessitates "dissemination" and "decoding" — specifically, "establishing informational connections through media between the few production centers and the numerous and widely dispersed consumers"<sup>60</sup>. This approach ensures that symbolic meanings are continuously produced and universally communicated to consumers. Moreover, it "educates" them to interpret these symbols promptly, facilitating the ongoing process of consumption.

From the consumption standpoint, the spatial consumption of historic districts revolves more around the atmospheric experience associated with their spatial perception. When "encoding," "dissemination," and "decoding" come together, they constitute the entire process of producing the consumptive space of the district.

### ***The space production***

“In Marx's perspective, production primarily refers to material production, with space typically regarded as the vessel and medium for this material production.”<sup>61</sup> Lefebvre expanded the conception of space, arguing that “space is a triadic integration of physical space, mental space, and perceived space, possessing social, historical, and productive dimensions. The meaning and value of space are produced and created through social practice, establishing a dialectical unity with society”<sup>62</sup>. In the case of Xintiandi, the production of space initially stemmed from motives aligned with societal visions, while the historical and social qualities of the Shikumen were continued and further processed in the Xintiandi redevelopment project. The productivity of the Xintiandi space is more apparent after its completion, as the space itself possesses the capability to manufacture and produce meaning. For instance, the continuously evolving brand commercial spaces in Xintiandi and the emerging renovation projects of historic cultural districts modeled after Xintiandi represent a cyclical repetition of consumer-oriented transformations based on the Xintiandi blueprint. The convergence of material consumption, spiritual consumption, and experiential perception within this space collectively produces a space that is meaningful and valuable.

The production of space requires the motivation of multiple stakeholders. In the renovation of historic districts, the primary actors are the government, developers, and residents, whose aligned motivations serve as the starting point for spatial production. In the case of Xintiandi, there is a convergence of various ideas from key participants such as the government and developers. Urban development is supported by concepts that manifest as developmental mechanisms and translate into spatial quality. The essence of urban space production is the material manifestation of the positions held by various social classes in the city. The renovation of Xintiandi typifies the pursuit

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<sup>59</sup> Han, *Consumption, Space, Urban Design*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Feng Gao, "The Operational Logic of Urban Spatial Production: An Analysis Based on Neo-Marxist Spatial Theory" [城市空间生产的运作逻辑——基于新马克思主义空间理论的分析], *Learning and Exploration* 01 (2010): 9-14, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>62</sup> Jiang, Chen, and Ma, "Study on the Spatial Production of Urban Renewal in China."

of interests by various major interest groups. Government motives can be summarized as seeking the integrated development of urban benefits, government interests, and public interests. The government's role is primarily manifested in defining spatial positioning, introducing redevelopment capital, and using power to assist the smooth progress of old town renovation. Developers are motivated by capital appreciation. They invest capital, overseeing the entire process from space design to construction, to capture the increased value of space. Residents have very limited say in the renovation of Xintiandi, with government power occupying a certain position in their consciousness, which also leads to subsequent discussions on whether the renovation has preserved its authenticity. Some researchers believe that the internal structure and external scale changes in Xintiandi have destroyed the authenticity of traditional alleys. It has not only altered its appearance but also changed its way of life and purpose. "Another view suggests that Xintiandi is a successful case that has initiated an alternative thinking concept of spatial reorganization, achieving both development and protection."<sup>63</sup> However, this paper does not qualify the outcomes of spatial production; instead, it focuses on how the construction process of the "simulacra" scenario operates, what it is based on, and the necessary conditions for the viability of consumer-oriented transformations.

### ***Encoding: The differentiation construction***

The production of space, beyond the motivations of various actors, necessitates the encoding of spatial meaning, requiring the construction of a unique system of symbols. The successful construction of a symbolic system in "Shanghai Xintiandi" is marked by both its distinctiveness and limitations: "nostalgic dreams of old Shanghai, the potent symbolic significance of Shikumen, an international urban identity, a commercially valuable location, and the congregation of white-collar crowds."<sup>64</sup> These factors underpin the "simulacrum" of a rich commercial space despite the area's low floor-area ratio and enable an organic integration of East and West, tradition and modernity, commerce, and culture. It is not feasible to completely replicate the "Xintiandi model" in the renovation of historic districts under different regional conditions; otherwise, it results in severe alienation and loss of unique urban cultural characteristics, leading to uniformity across cities despite an outwardly distinctive and lively appearance. Therefore, this chapter focuses solely on summarizing and suggesting analyses on the use of symbols at the architectural and planning levels.

#### **A. Symbol extraction and application of traditional cultural elements**

The process involves excavating, identifying, and refining local cultural elements with regional characteristics, such as the shapes and styles of historical buildings, colors, decorative components, and materials. These elements are then repurposed as new symbolic elements in the renovation of district environments, thus "recreating" the old streets and architectural styles. "Essentially, it involves the selective editing and collage of local materials and cultural symbols to 'restore' historical scenes, displaying 'temporal memory evoked by a

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<sup>63</sup> Dandan Zou, "Space Production of Modern Nostalgia and Memory: With Xintiandi in Shanghai as an Example" [现代性怀旧和记忆的空间生产——以上海新天地为例], *Modern Urban Research* 2 (May 2012): 24-29, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Zhu and Miao, "Discussion about the Alienation Phenomenon of Critical Regionalism in Urban Renewal."

set of symbols' with their uniqueness and scarcity” (Zhan zhihong, 1996), thereby creating a spectacular experience of consumption and a consumptive atmosphere.

**B. Superposition of modern symbolic elements and reorganization of internal space**

This involves incorporating modern architectural vocabulary and new environmental elements to create a blended space of old and new symbolic imaginations. For example, during architectural renovations, elements such as glass curtain walls and steel structures are combined with traditional architectural prototypes to form a collage-like modern symbolic landscape. Additionally, internal spaces are reconfigured and repurposed to meet the demands of modern functionalities and business formats, adjusting the internal layout to align with contemporary uses and enhancing the utility of the space while preserving its historical essence.

**C. The implantation of modern consumer space and the recreation of space**

This process involves introducing modern commercial spaces that cater to the target consumer groups. Within these spaces, various businesses engage in stylized symbolic shaping of their spatial atmospheres and settings. This effort includes a substantial amount of recreation involving the overall environment of the district and architectural details. This process to some extent fosters new symbolic connotations that symbolize unique personal tastes, identity distinctions, and value recognition, reshaping the space to reflect contemporary consumption patterns and aesthetic preferences.

It is essential to understand that the symbolic system is not confined to the interiors of individual buildings but pertains to the broader architectural phenomena. As Hua XiaHong asserts, “Architecture is not a self-sufficient system; it is part of the broader social and cultural system. Architectural symbols are not only a component of the built environment's symbolic system but also of the overarching social and cultural symbolic systems.”<sup>65</sup> The establishment of symbolic value in historical cultural districts is not limited to the extraction and replication of historical imagery but also involves creating a differentiated system for its unique culture. Moreover, the commercialization of these spaces, following the establishment of symbols, also involves the pursuit of social identities. The transformed district spaces must develop unique identity markers tailored to consumers, and to avoid homogenization of these markers, there must be a continuous renewal of differentiated meanings to sustain long-term operation.

***Dissemination and Decoding***

In the transformation of historical district spaces into symbolic consumer goods, the differentiation is constructed through visual forms, functions, and activities, shaping an urban space symbol consumption system. This process is termed "encoding." Once encoding is complete, the dissemination and decoding of these differentiations through media are indispensable steps.

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<sup>65</sup> Hua, "Melting and Transforming."



Scholarship on consumer society widely acknowledges an intrinsic connection between the evolution of modern media technology and the development of consumer society. During the significant societal shift from production-oriented to consumption-focused paradigms, the role of "media" becomes profoundly evident. Media craft a world saturated with an abundance of information and symbols, playing a critical role in the journey from production to consumption of symbolic goods. The involvement of media allows urban spaces to manifest in more enriched forms within "simulated environments," also enabling their representation and dissemination across temporal and spatial boundaries.

In the dissemination of differentiated historical district consumer products, media can take various forms:

- A. **The district space itself acts as media.** In "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture," Eco noted that architecture can be described as a mass communication medium. When developed under the provided societal conditions, it becomes highly innovative and uniquely informative, surpassing other forms of mass communication<sup>66</sup>. In a consumer society, historical spaces as symbolic consumer goods function similarly. The symbol itself is used to transmit specific information, and when urban spaces are integrated into the symbolic consumption system, they become symbolic consumer goods, implying that they possess enhanced communicative capabilities, able to serve directly as media, disseminating their inherent "information": the symbolic meanings based on differentiation. Unlike other media such as the internet, newspapers, or television, which are mobile, the location of historical district spaces is fixed. The district space as media needs to utilize "human mobility" to facilitate widespread information replication and transmission. This explains why utilizing the visual forms and imagery of historical elements in district spaces to construct symbols and visual differentiation is effective. The visibility of historical elements is also a crucial component of the media's ability to transmit information.

In addition to showcasing regional characteristics, the integration of advertisements laden with consumer information into the facade of buildings is possible. Billboards are meticulously designed to become critical components in the exchange of consumption symbol information. The facades of shops in district spaces are blended with brand characteristics. Through deliberate arrangement, a small portion of the space becomes a conveyor of the brand's symbolic messages. This method enhances the symbolic interaction within the consumer landscape.

- B. **Manufacturing Media Events.** The production process of historic district spaces as consumer goods can become a significant subject for media events, attracting considerable media coverage. Urban events act as channels for disseminating information to the public. For instance, Shanghai Xintiandi extensively promoted its development concept before its opening, attracting widespread attention from numerous domestic and international newspapers and magazines, creating a successful marketing buzz, and securing a pool of potential customers prior to its opening. Additionally, during the APEC conference in Shanghai in October 2001, the newly completed Shanghai Xintiandi was designated as an official site for hosting distinguished guests.

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<sup>66</sup> Umberto Eco, "Function and Sign: Semiotics of Architecture," in *The City and the Sign*, ed. M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Many high-ranking officials from various countries and multinational corporations visited; prominent media outlets including Xinhua, China CCTV, and the BBC covered the site extensively, significantly enhancing Shanghai Xintiandi's social visibility and impact.

C. The marketing of contemporary spatial consumer goods is deeply intertwined with **mass media**. Traditional media dissemination methods, such as films, television, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements, broadcast the symbolic significance of spaces to a wider audience. This is supplemented by the integration of text, sound, and visual and video images, which accelerates the decoding of information. For example, the phenomenon of 'Internet-famous' historical districts is a result of the fusion of media-driven marketing and the distinctive symbolic characteristics of these districts. Fundamentally, this process entails the media-driven re-symbolization and re-spectacularization of physical spaces, pushing the continuous expansion and extension of their meanings.

- (a) **Spatial symbolic marketing by mainstream media.** Mainstream media's marketing of "internet fame" effectively serves as a novel spatial marketing strategy to "empower" and "generate momentum" for historic districts. This strategy ingeniously integrates the renown associated with 'internet fame' with the symbolic landscapes of renovated districts. On one hand, it enhances the symbolic value of these districts; on the other, it leverages the inherent topicality and online popularity associated with 'internet fame' to foster image-based and culturally oriented promotional activities. This increases their online visibility and impact, thereby establishing them as standout destinations in the tourism market.
- (b) **Transmission of Spatial Symbols by the General Public.** The general public, particularly young consumers, are drawn to the trend of visiting "Instagrammable spots" for spatial consumption. Their engagement, predominantly through interactive means like sharing and retweeting on social media, generates a collective force for communication and diffusion. This process not only perpetuates the cycle of circulation, consumption, reproduction, and re-dissemination of spatial symbols but also continually reinforces the recognition of their symbolic value.

"When the varied symbols of a district are widely recognized through media dissemination, whether those symbols construct a nostalgic or fashionable atmosphere, the physical districts and buildings that carry them, or the consumer spaces infused with nostalgic or fashionable themes, all can become a new form of commodity involved in capital operations,"<sup>67</sup> thereby enhancing the social influence and commercial value of the district.

### ***Touristification of Space and Experiential Consumption***

The transformation of historic cultural districts into tourism, thematization, and stylization invariably leads to consumer activities dominated by experiential engagement, diverging from traditional consumption models by emphasizing emotional responses. It is essential to recognize

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<sup>67</sup> Wu, Xia, and Luo, "Alienation and Rethinking of Cultural Symbols."

that the touristic experience of a district is distinct from its symbolization. As Han Jing articulates, "Symbolization results from the complete external manipulation of symbolic meanings. A symbolized urban environment is detached from social life experiences,"<sup>68</sup> leading to an overshadowing of spatial commercial attributes that results in a loss of living experiences and perceptions. The Xintiandi series, for instance, through its consumerist makeover of spaces in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Chongqing, has created dazzling globalized landscapes that merge fashion and commerce. "This model of 'placelessness,' once established and replicated, has fostered a robust mechanism of spatial consumer culture that has proliferated across the nation (Bao Yaming, 2006)." This use of local elements concurrently disassembles and subverts the diversity of social life and local cultural traditions.

The symbolic meaning of "tourismification" stems from the intensified focus on a city's daily life, natural environment, and historical and cultural resources<sup>69</sup>. Henri Lefebvre in his work *The Production of Space* identifies three fundamental dimensions of space: the "Lived," "Conceived," and "Perceived." These dimensions represent space as "experienced in everyday social life," as "conceptualized by space producers through text or symbolic systems," and as "represented by abstract spatial images," respectively<sup>70</sup>. Therefore, the essence of "tourismification" can be understood as the intertwining of these three value attributes—preserving everyday life experiences and the diversity of spatial perceptions, while also emphasizing the capitalistic notion of space as a consumable product for profit generation. From the perspective of experiential consumption psychology, it is precisely this thematization that distances from everyday life that piques consumer curiosity, stimulating their interest to explore and experience. An example of such an experiential historical district is Suzhou's Pingjiang Road, which, by not displacing its original residents extensively and preserving a significant amount of the alleyway living spaces and daily residential functions, maintains the authenticity of the Jiangnan water towns as an intangible consumer experience, fulfilling the demand for "place experience."

In the context of experiential consumption in urban spaces, two analytical dimensions can be identified:

A . Elements that contribute to the creation of thematic spaces. Touristified district spaces are narrative-driven, not only fulfilling functional requirements but also enriching emotional and meaningful content through dramatization. This narrative approach shapes a thematic ambiance and scene, deeply engaging visitors and providing intense experiences. To achieve this, the differentiation in visual forms, functions, and activities must be organized experientially, crafting spaces that are "viewable," "explorable," and "experiential." According to the theory of urban space consumption, these elements derive from an intensification of everyday life, historical culture, and natural environmental characteristics, ensuring that the narrative of the space is deeply rooted in cultural history, everyday life, and local features.

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<sup>68</sup> Han, *Consumption, Space, Urban Design*.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Zhu Chen and Min Ye, "Home or Theme Park? Reflections on the Construction of Unrealistic Spatial Imagery in Contemporary Chinese Urban Settlements" [家园还是主题公园? ——对当代中国城市住区非现实空间意象构造的思考], *International Urban Planning* 24, no. 4 (2009): 46-50, 68, accessed via CNKI.

B . In the analysis of experiential consumption within urban district spaces, it is crucial to integrate the material environment with psychological perceptions. Drawing from Kevin Lynch's seminal work *The Image of the City*, one can employ the five key elements he identified—Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, and Landmarks—to construct an image of the city. “Current applications of this theory focus primarily on three major areas: structural studies of urban spaces, investigations into the emotional and psychological perceptions of spaces, and research on the local characteristics of spaces,” as Xu Leiqing notes. Thus, analyzing the spatial significance and perception in historical districts allows for the dissection of the space into 1. Pathways that dominate the spatial flow (Paths), 2. Architectural facades and linear elements like rivers that define boundaries (Edges), 3. Zones formed by shops or plaza spaces (Districts), 4. Critical points of spatial transition within the district (Nodes), and 5. Prominent features that serve as focal points (Landmarks).

### **3.4 Summary of analysis framework of consumerization of historical blocks**

Analyzing the transformation of the Xintiandi district in Shanghai provides a foundational logic for the examination of the consumerization of historic urban districts, which can be divided into three interpretative steps: spatial production (encoding), spatial marketing (dissemination), and spatial consumption (decoding). See Table 3.4 below, which describes the overall steps of the analytical framework.

Initially, spatial production involves establishing a differentiated symbolic system that interprets spatial characteristics and meanings. Subsequently, the intervention of media in spatial marketing plays a crucial role in the evolution of space into a consumable entity. Lastly, the analysis of consumer spatial cognition and experience highlights that experiential consumption by users is the final step in this logic. Together, these elements form a complete system of consumerization in historic districts.

### 3 Steps of consumerization of historical blocks

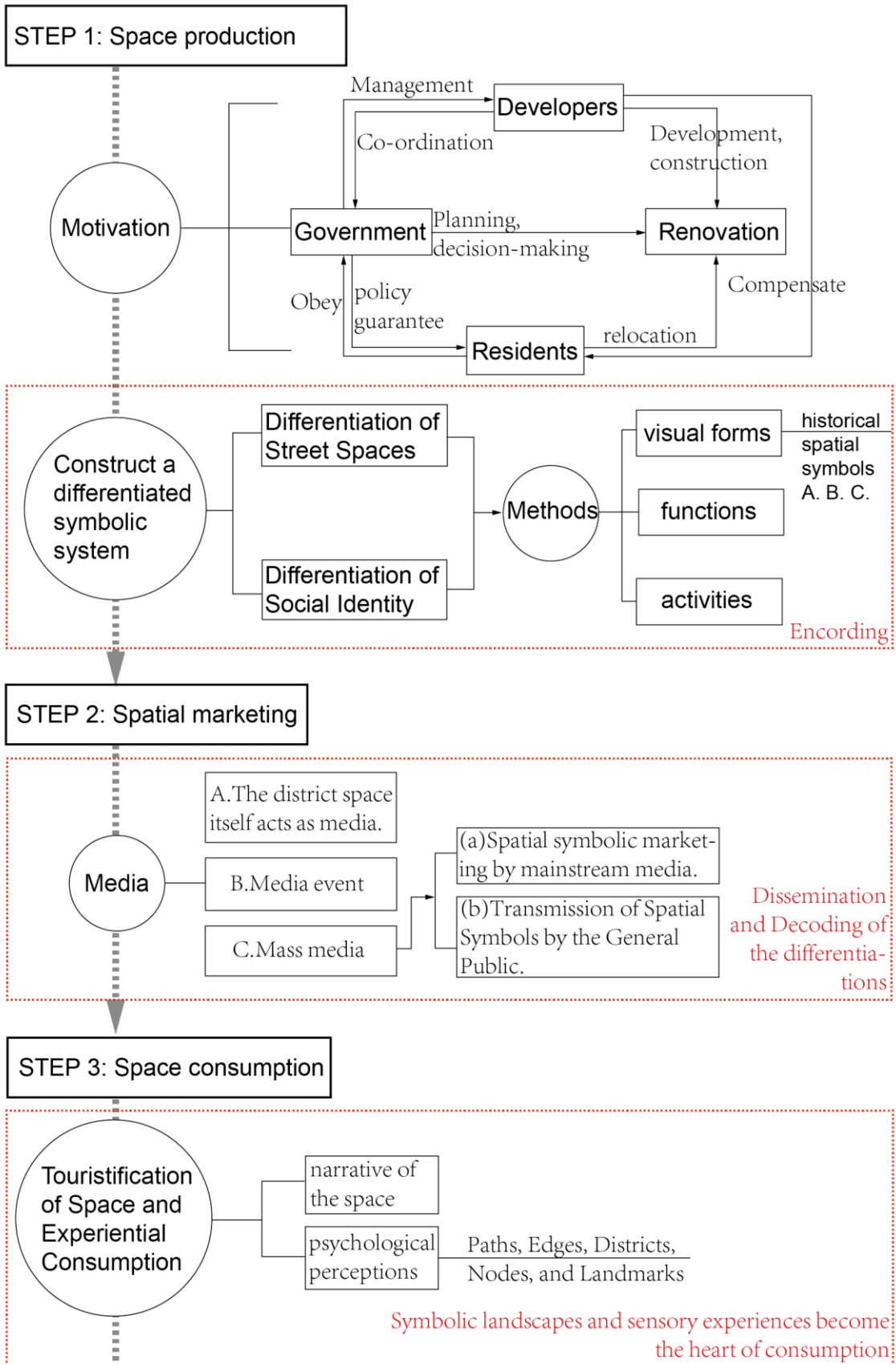


Table 3.4 Analytical framework of consumerization of historical blocks( Author's own creation)

## Endnotes

Figure 3.2 "Haipai Fashion in the 1900's Exhibition." *That's Online*. Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://www.thatsmags.com/shanghai/event/detail/45893>.

Figure 3.3 Gu, Xing. "Haipai School's Art on Display in Hangzhou." *Chinadaily.com.cn*. Accessed April 26, 2024. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/18/WS5a371e73a3108bc8c67353a8\\_10.html](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/18/WS5a371e73a3108bc8c67353a8_10.html).

Figure 3.4 Liu, Fuping. "'Series Album' Old Shanghai Shikumen" [老上海石库门,历史遗迹,建筑摄影,摄影素材]. *Huitu*. Accessed April 05, 2024. <https://www.huitu.com/photo/show/20211101/085447872020.html>.

Figure 3.5 Jiang, Wenjin, Chen Keshi, and Xueguang M. A. "Research on Space Production in the Renovation of Old Cities in My Country: Taking Shanghai Xintiandi as an Example" [我国旧城改造的空间生产研究——以上海新天地为例]. *Urban Studies* 18, no. 10 (2011): 84-89, 96. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1006-3862.2011.10.015>. Accessed via Beijing Wanfang Data Co., Ltd. Fund Project: 41001091: National Natural Science Foundation of China.

Figure 3.6 Watkins, Katie. "世界建筑节首日奖项公布." *ArchDaily*, November 6, 2015. [https://www.archdaily.cn/cn/776634/shi-jie-jian-zhu-jie-shou-ri-jiang-xiang-gong-bu?ad\\_medium=gallery](https://www.archdaily.cn/cn/776634/shi-jie-jian-zhu-jie-shou-ri-jiang-xiang-gong-bu?ad_medium=gallery).

Figure 3.7 "Xintiandi." *Ctrip Tips*. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://you.ctrip.com/sight/shanghai2/18739.html>.

Figure 3.8 Ding, Guangming. "Analysis of the Nostalgic Phenomenon of Pan-'Xintiandi' Type Buildings" [泛“新天地”类建筑怀旧现象剖析]. *South Architecture* (6) (2006): 116-118. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1000-0232.2006.06.048>.

Table 3.1 "Roland Barthes - The Signification Process and Myths." *Media Studies*. November 4, 2022. <https://media-studies.com/barthes/>.

## Chapter 4

# The main case study of the thesis: the historic block in Suzhou Pingjiang Road

Following the successful transformation of Shanghai Xintiandi, various historical and cultural districts have also seen a growing trend towards consumerization. Transformed districts have become tourist destinations with commercial attributes. This paper selects Suzhou Pingjiang Road Historic District as a typical case, adopting the analytical framework of Xintiandi, aiming to validate the feasibility of analyzing the consumerization transformation steps of historical districts.

The selection of Pingjiang Road historic district as the research subject stems from several resemblances it shares with Xintiandi: firstly, both are situated in the downtown area, representing typical remnants of traditional urban residential neighborhoods. Additionally, Pingjiang Road maintains historical and spatial patterns dating back to the Tang and Song dynasties, boasting a richer abundance of historical structures and a profound cultural heritage compared to Xintiandi, serving as a carrier of Suzhou's urban heritage. Furthermore, in terms of commercial success, Pingjiang Road has already achieved significant milestones, successfully transitioning towards consumerism. During the National Day holiday in 2023, Pingjiang Historic Cultural District received a total of 1.07 million visitors, with a daily average of 133,800, marking a 144% increase from the same period in 2022 and a 73% increase from 2019. On October 1st, the highest daily flow reached 172,000, setting a new record in history<sup>71</sup>. During the May Day holiday period in 2024 (May 1st to May 5th), as of 7:00 pm on May 5th, Pingjiang Road attracted over 1.08 million visitors.<sup>72</sup>

However, merely selecting cases similar to Xintiandi is not sufficient to demonstrate the universality of the analytical framework summarized in the previous chapter. The original intention and process of Pingjiang Road's transformation differ from those of Xintiandi. While Xintiandi actively pursued a comprehensive transformation towards consumerization, Pingjiang Road, on the contrary, initially did not have a strong intention to develop into a tourist commercial street. However, it was still influenced by globalized landscapes under the force of capital, with a growing trend. Professor Ruan Yisan, who led the planning, once stated, "This kind of homeland is an important aspect of modern life. It is modernized, and at the same time, its culture is extremely noble. Do not regard Pingjiang Road as a tourist commercial street; it is an important life harbor where people yearn for another kind of life." How did Pingjiang Road gradually break away from its tranquil space and passively or actively move towards a consumerized outcome?

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<sup>71</sup> "During the Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day Holiday, Over 2 Million Visitors Flooded into Pingjiang Road and Guanqian Street" [中秋国庆假期, 超 200 万人次涌入平江路观前街], *Jiangsu News*, October 7, 2023. [https://jsnews.jschina.com.cn/sz/a/202310/t20231007\\_3295317.shtml](https://jsnews.jschina.com.cn/sz/a/202310/t20231007_3295317.shtml).

<sup>72</sup> "During the May Day Holiday, Pingjiang Road, Guanqian, and Cang Streets Collectively Attracted Over 2.1 Million Visitors," *Mingcheng Suzhou News Center*, May 6, 2024. <https://news.2500sz.com/doc/2024/05/06/1080815.shtml>.

For the analysis of the consumerization of Pingjiang Road's historic district transformation, it still follows the interpretation of the three steps: "space production - space marketing - space consumption," exploring the necessary conditions for the consumerization shift of historic cultural districts. It can be demonstrated that sometimes these necessary conditions are accomplished imperceptibly, arguably as a result of being engulfed by consumer society, conforming to the development mechanism of consumer society.

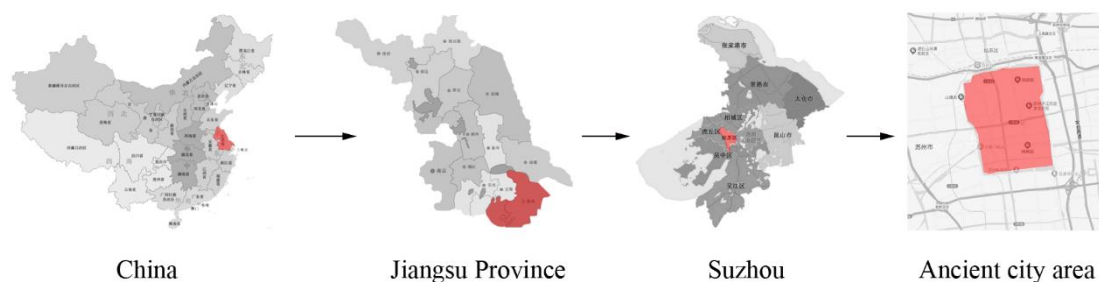


Figure 4.1 Suzhou geographical location diagram

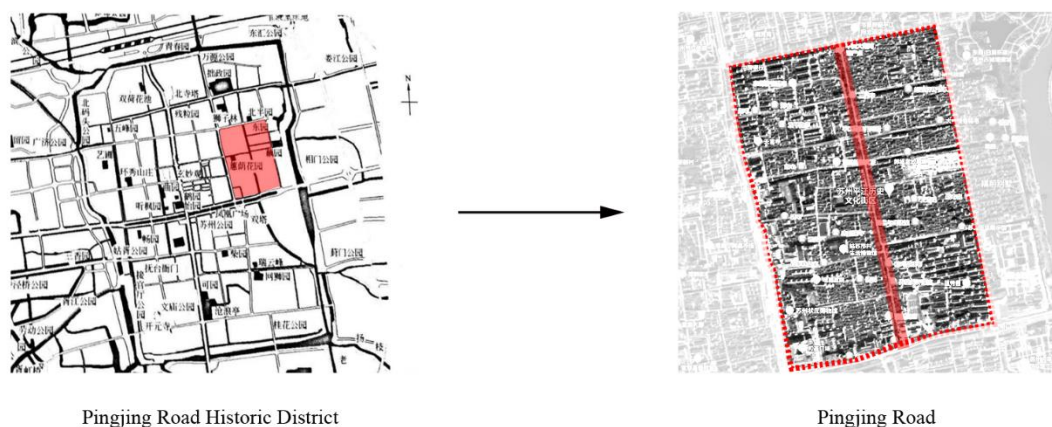


Figure 4.2 The location of Pingjiang Road Historic District within the ancient city

#### 4.1 Overview of Pingjiang Road

Suzhou boasts a rich history and is one of the first batch of historical and cultural cities in China. Renowned as the "City of Classical Gardens" for its unique garden landscape resources, Suzhou's classical gardens were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. The ancient city of Suzhou was founded in 514 BC and has a history of over 2500 years, making it one of the oldest extant cities in China. It houses numerous cultural heritage sites within its ancient city walls, ranking among the top in the country.

The historical Pingjiang Road district has been situated within the ancient city of Suzhou for over 800 years. In 2002, the government officially initiated a project for preserving the historical appearance and environmental improvement of Pingjiang Road. In 2005, Pingjiang Road was honored with the Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Conservation Award. In 2009, it was designated as one of the first batch of historical and cultural streets in China, and in 2011, it was rated as a



national 4A-level scenic area. The present Pingjiang Road district mainly refers to a section extending from Baisha East Road in the north to Ganjiang Road in the south, with the outer city moat to the east and Lindun Road to the west, covering a total length of 1606 meters. Centered around Pingjiang Road and Pingjiang River, the district is vertically divided into several narrow alleys of varying widths, extending from Dong Street to Lindun Road. Dominated by residential houses, these alleys are home to cultural heritage sites such as the Couple's Retreat Garden, as well as over 10 cultural relics protection units and more than 40 controlled protection buildings. The historical district maintains a dual chessboard layout of "water and land parallel, river streets adjacent," serving as a microcosm of Suzhou's ancient city and embodying a rich cultural heritage. Hence, Pingjiang Road is referred to as "a Jiangnan architectural urban museum without venues."<sup>73</sup>

### ***History of Suzhou and Pingjiang road***

Suzhou, formerly known as Wu, also known as Gusu, Pingjiang, etc., is located in the southeastern part of Jiangsu Province, in the middle of the Yangtze River Delta, east of Shanghai, south of Zhejiang, embracing Lake Taihu to the west, and bordering the Yangtze River to the north. The total area of the city is 8488.42 square kilometers. The ancient city area of Suzhou refers to the area surrounded by the ancient moat, starting from Moxie Road in the east, to Changxu Road and Panxu Road in the west, Nanmen Road in the south, and Donghui Road and Xihui Road in the north, which is the ancient city of Suzhou. The Pingjiang Historic District is situated at the northeast corner of the ancient city area, spanning a length of 1606 meters and covering an area of approximately 116.5 hectares. Adjacent to the Humble Administrator's Garden and the core commercial area of Guanqian Street, it stands as the most intact and largest historical area preserved within the Suzhou ancient city area to date.

During the Spring and Autumn Period, King Helü of Wu instructed Wu Zixu to construct the city of Helü. Wu Zixu employed principles such as "observing the land and tasting the water" and "aligning with the heavens and conforming to the earth" (相土尝水、相天法地) to select the city site. Covering an area of approximately 14.2 square kilometers, the city walls were 2 zhang 7 chi wide at the base and 4 zhang 7 chi high, with eight land gates representing the "eight winds of heaven" and eight water gates imitating the "eight trigrams of the earth."<sup>74</sup>

During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the county city of Wu was rebuilt based on the capital city of Wu during the Spring and Autumn Period, generally known as Wuzicheng, which encircled an area of five li and was located in the central part of present-day Suzhou. In the sixth year of Emperor Gaozu of Han (201 BC), Liu Jia, the son of Liu Bang, constructed a small city to the west of the market square in the north of the city, named "Dingcuo City." It was connected to the southeast with the sub-city and directly led to Pingmen in the north, serving as a residence for the

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<sup>73</sup> Jia Zhang, "Analysis on the Featured Urban Space: Case Study of Pingjiang Road, Shantang Street and Ligong Causeway" [城市特色空间解析——以苏州平江路、山塘街和李公堤为例], Master's thesis, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Tianci Zhang, "Research on the Regional Culture of Historical Block Landscape Design: A Case Study of Ping Jiang Road" [地域文化语境下的历史街区景观设计研究——以苏州平江路为例], Master's thesis, Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, 2015.

royal family and nobility. During the Qin and Han periods, two markets, East and West, were established northeast and northwest of the sub-city, serving as specialized commercial areas. The East Market was located near the intersection of Lindun Road and Ganjiang Road, while the West Market was situated near the western end of Ganjiang Road and Leqiao. These two markets became the economic centers of the city.

In the ninth year of the Kaihuang era (589 AD) after the conquest of the Chen Dynasty, Wu County was abolished and replaced, due to the presence of Mount Gusu to the west of the city, renaming Wu Prefecture to Suzhou, marking the beginning of Suzhou's name.

During the Tang Dynasty, Suzhou City had convenient water and land transportation, divided into 60 districts. The book "Wu Di" by Tang author Lu Guangwei detailed the names of each district, with districts like Ganjiang, Wuqu, Jiayu, and Huangli being major residential and commercial areas. Each district had walls and gates managed by district officials. Due to population growth, streets and lanes in Suzhou became increasingly dense. "The city has three major rivers running horizontally and four main streets running vertically, with more than three hundred lanes within the county walls." These districts, waterways, and streets formed Suzhou's unique urban landscape.

During the Song Dynasty, the sub-city of Pingjiang Prefecture was still built on the site of the original Heliu sub-city. In the second year of the Shaoxing era of the Southern Song Dynasty (1229), the prefect of Suzhou, Li Shoupeng, drew the first urban planning map in China, the "Pingjiang Map." (see Figure 4.3) The Pingjiang Map, using Pei Xiu's map-making technique, is the oldest and most complete urban map in Chinese urban construction history. It depicts the plan and layout of Pingjiang City in the Song Dynasty in detail, including city walls, moats, Pingjiang Prefecture, Pingjiang Army, Wuxian County Office, streets, temples, pavilions, towers, bridges, and more. There were 359 bridges, 20 rivers, and more than 250 temples and halls. Many alleys

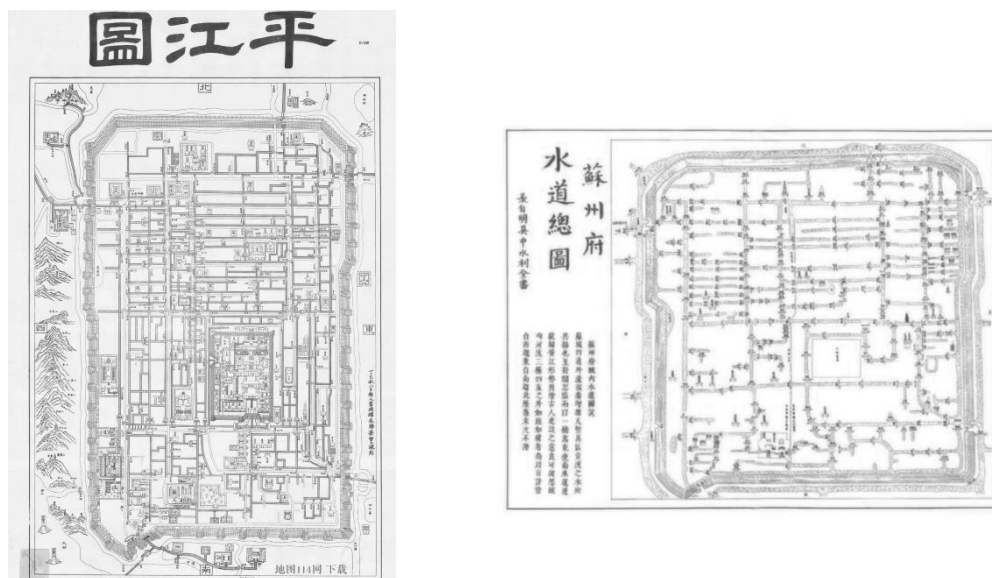


Figure 4.3 The "Pingjiang Map" from the Song Dynasty (left) and the "General Map of Waterways in Suzhou Prefecture" from the Ming Dynasty (right)

were built along the river. The crisscrossing streets divided the city into various-sized residential areas known as "districts," which existed during the Song Dynasty. Pingjiang Road is depicted in detail on the "Pingjiang Map," located in the northeastern part of Suzhou's ancient city (within the current Pingjiang District), accurately reflecting the "double chessboard" pattern and scale of society at that time.

During the Qing Dynasty, the urban layout of Suzhou remained unchanged, but there was rapid development in the suburbs. New commercial and handicraft areas emerged around Changmen, while Shangxiashantang Street outside the gate became a concentrated area for textile production. In the late Ming Dynasty, Jiangnan governor Zhang Guowei compiled the "Waterway Map of Suzhou Prefecture City," which is the most detailed map of waterways and bridges in Suzhou's history.

"Comparing the Southern Song 'Pingjiang Map' with the late Ming 'Total Map of Suzhou Prefecture City Waterways,' it can be seen that the spatial layout of Pingjiang Road basically continued the city block pattern since the Tang and Song Dynasties." Some street names, waterways, and bridges correspond one-to-one on the "Pingjiang Map." The historical streetscape, consisting of city moats, walls, waterways, bridges, streets, residential areas, gardens, guild halls, temples, ancient wells, ancient trees, and archways, reflects the urban characteristics and value of ancient Suzhou. As the "main urban artery of the eastern half of Suzhou at that time, Pingjiang Road was built along the river, preserving the water town pattern of 'parallel waterways and adjacent river streets' intact." After conservation and renovation efforts, the Pingjiang District still maintains its vitality today.

### ***The Historical Elements in Pingjiang Road***



Figure 4.4 Distribution map of historical and cultural heritage in Pingjiang historical and cultural district

The Pingjiang Historical Block contains numerous elements of historical heritage scattered throughout. It currently includes 1 UNESCO World Heritage Site, 1 national-level cultural

heritage unit, 1 provincial-level cultural heritage unit, 9 municipal-level cultural heritage units, 44 municipally controlled protected buildings, and 10 celebrity residences. Additionally, the "Protection and Renovation Plan for the Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block in Suzhou Ancient City" compiled in 2003 explicitly includes 9 ancient bridges, 3 ancient embankments, 59 ancient wells, 4 ancient archways, 1 city wall relic, 2 brick-carved gatehouses, and 27 ancient trees within the scope of historical environmental element protection. The plan underwent comprehensive initial surveys and recordings of the current situation, objectively assessing the landscape, age, quality, population, use nature, and property rights of each building. Consequently, the protection objects were categorized into four classes: cultural heritage protection units, historical buildings, historical structures (such as ancient bridges, embankments, ancient water outlets, ancient archways, brick-carved gatehouses, ancient wells, and city wall relics), and historical blocks, and based on the evaluation results, all protection boundaries were delineated into two levels: protection zones and construction control zones. This facilitates future block planning to ensure appropriate protection of all historical and cultural relics according to their individual circumstances while also clearing adequate and appropriate development space, laying a solid foundation for the continuation of the cultural context. Currently accessible sites include the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Couple's Retreat Garden, the oral and intangible cultural heritage representative Kunqu Opera display area - China Kunqu Museum (Quanjin Club), the Pingtan Museum, the former residence of Ming Dynasty Zhuangyuan Shen Shixing, the residences of Qing Dynasty Zhuangyuan Pan Shien, Wu Tingchen, and Hongjun, the former residence of modern Confucian master Gu Jiegang, the residence of literary critic Guo Shaoyu, the renowned physician Qian Boxuan, and the former residence of film critic Tang Na, among others.

#### **4.2 Cultural Context of Suzhou**

Various traditional cultures in Suzhou find excellent continuation and manifestation on Pingjiang Road, such as the opera culture, garden culture, tea culture, calligraphy and painting culture, and more. It is precisely the profound Suzhou cultural heritage embodied in Pingjiang Road that has successfully shaped an atmosphere and environment conducive to experiential consumption.

- 1. Opera Culture:** Suzhou's opera culture boasts a long history, particularly Kunqu Opera and Pingtan. Kunqu Opera, one of China's oldest dramatic forms, originated in Kunshan, Suzhou, during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties, integrating singing, speaking, acting, dance, and martial arts. Pingtan encompasses Suzhou storytelling and ballad singing. Storytelling typically features a solo performer recounting historical epics and chivalrous heroes' exploits, while ballad singing involves two performers, one playing the sanxian and the other holding the pipa, singing and playing traditional melodies, often recounting romantic legends and folk tales. The Suzhou Pingtan Museum on Pingjiang Road houses over 12,000 precious historical artifacts related to Pingtan, including numerous unique scripts and manuscripts. Similarly, the China Kunqu Museum, located within the Zhang Family Alley, a nationally protected cultural relic site in the Pingjiang Historical Block, serves as a repository for Kunqu Opera artifacts and materials. In May 2001, Chinese Kunqu Opera was recognized as one of the first "Representative Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO. The museum's mission is to rescue, protect, inherit, and promote the ancient art of Kunqu Opera through exhibition, collection, research, and inheritance activities, showcasing both tangible

artifacts and intangible traditional Kunqu Opera arts. Currently, there are countless tea houses on Pingjiang Road hosting various Pingtan and Kunqu Opera performances, making attending these performances on Pingjiang Road a fashionable trend.

- 2. Tea Culture:** Suzhou's tea houses have a long history, with their beginnings traceable back to the Jin Dynasty. The earliest documented tea houses appeared during the Tang Dynasty, known as "ming pu." Suzhou residents traditionally spent extended periods in tea houses in the morning, leading to a proliferation of tea houses throughout the city, from bustling tea houses in the city center to tea stalls in alleys, tea pavilions in gardens, and tea houses lining the streets, creating a unique scenic landscape in old Suzhou. By the Qing Dynasty, during the Daoguang era, Suzhou boasted dozens of tea houses and reading rooms, serving not only as places for leisure and entertainment but also as carriers of Wu culture. Wu culture, represented by Pingtan storytelling and Kunqu Opera performances, became a distinctive feature of Suzhou's tea houses. Pingjiang Road hosts numerous tea houses, including Pingfang, Han'eryuan, Laocong Tea Garden, Xinxin Tea House, Pingjiang Riverside Tea House, Half Garden Art Living Hall, Gu Fengju, Zhibai Xuan Tea Room, Xiangsige Tea House, and Fuxi Guqin Cultural Museum.
- 3. Garden Culture:** Suzhou boasts numerous private gardens, renowned for their artistic excellence, making them the epitome of ancient Chinese private gardens, rivaling imperial gardens represented by those in Beijing. Originating from the nobility, literati, and affluent merchants seeking seclusion and elegance, Suzhou's private gardens resonate with the melodies of reclusion and the aura of hermits. Within these meticulously crafted works, a second nature is created through artistic representation, allowing people to experience the tranquility of mountains and waters within the city, and the serenity of forests and springs amidst urban bustle, fulfilling their leisurely and contented spirits within the objectified artificial nature.

As the sole UNESCO World Heritage Site within the planned area, Couple's Retreat Garden serves as an important scenic spot and a daily leisure destination for local residents. Situated deep in the lanes of Cangjie Xiaoxinquiao, Couple's Retreat Garden is surrounded by water on three sides, offering relative seclusion. Its name, "Ou," meaning "pair" or "couple," was chosen by its Qing dynasty owner, Shen Bingcheng, to signify the concept of a harmonious couple enjoying retirement together, embodying the idea of conjugal bliss and poetic elegance. With its elegant scenery and exquisite layout, Couple's Retreat Garden is one of the best-preserved classical residential gardens in Suzhou, featuring distinctive characteristics of Suzhou's "homes by the river." Its western side faces the street and is adjacent to residential areas, where most of the houses were built in the 1930s and 1940s, preserving the typical architectural style of the water town. Unlike well-known tourist attractions such as Humble Administrator's Garden and Lion Grove Garden, Couple's Retreat Garden more fully embodies the tranquil and elegant cultural charm of Jiangnan's private gardens.<sup>75</sup>

- 4. Calligraphy and Painting Culture:** Suzhou, renowned for its cultural prosperity, has fostered

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<sup>75</sup> Guotai Yan and Xibing Zhu, "Research on the Protection and Planning of Context of Historical Blocks: Analysis of the Cultural Heritage of Pingjiang Historical Block of Suzhou" [历史街区“文脉”保护规划研究——解读苏州平江历史街区文化遗产], *Chinese Landscape Architecture* 30, no. 11 (2014): 82-84, accessed via CNKI.

a tradition of valuing literature and education. According to statistics, over the course of 1,300 years from the Tang to the Qing Dynasty, China produced a total of 596 Jinshi (imperial scholars), among which Suzhou alone accounted for 45. Data from 2013 shows that the comprehensive reading rate among adults in Jiangsu Province was 82.2%, exceeding the national average by 5.5 percentage points. Six cities exceeded the provincial average in comprehensive reading rates, with Nanjing ranking first in the province with a score of 92.3%, and Suzhou ranking second with a score of 87.6%. In addition to initiating a reading festival, Suzhou also had a tradition of "sun-drying books" in earlier years. In early summer, scholarly families would air their books, ordinary households would dry their laundry, and temples would spread out Buddhist scriptures. This was once a unique sight. To continue this custom and provide modern people with opportunities for communication and sharing, the Sun-drying Books Festival on Pingjiang Road was established in 2007, receiving high praise from residents and tourists alike.<sup>76</sup>

5. **Street Culture:** The anecdote of Wu Zixu "playing the flute to beg in the market of Wu" recounts his arrival in the Wu territory after fleeing from the Chu state, where he, in poverty, played the flute to beg in the market while seeking opportunities to connect with the nobility of Wu. This illustrates the bustling market economy that had already emerged in Suzhou at that time, characterized by the phrase "Jostling and joyous, The whole world comes after profit; Racing and rioting, After profit the whole world goes!". (Sima Qian. 145-90 BCE) With the emergence of markets came street culture. Street culture is a natural, informal, and disorderly form of urban culture originating from neighborhood alleys with a commercial inclination, characterized by its accessibility and constantly changing and chaotic nature. Originally denoting vulgarity, "street culture" has now become a revered traditional and simple way of life, often imbued with a sense of cultural identity, as it authentically reflects people's daily lives and emotions. In the historical streets of Pingjiang, the original social structure is preserved, allowing one to observe firsthand the depiction of daily life, such as fetching water and washing clothes at the water's edge, gathering in the streets and alleys for casual conversations, observing chess games in small squares, and sitting on bamboo lounge chairs on summer nights, fanning themselves while sipping tea.<sup>77</sup>

### 4.3 Transformation Motivation and Participating Entities in Pingjiang Road

The motivation and participating entities in the transformation of Pingjiang Road can be analyzed using the Xintiandi framework. The main participants include the government, investors, and residents, each with distinct motivations and roles. Government involvement ensures the cultural foundation of the space, while capital participation leads to the globalization of the landscape. Resident involvement in spatial transformation contributes to the experience-oriented consumption. The overall development strategy for Pingjiang Road follows a gradual approach, emphasizing preservation, diversification of commerce, and resident participation.

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<sup>76</sup> Zhang, "Research on the Regional Culture of Historical Block Landscape Design."

<sup>77</sup> Su Wei and Nan Hu, "Sustainable Development of Classical Commercial Streets in Cities: A Case Study of Pingjiang Road, Suzhou" [城市古典商业街区可持续发展研究——以苏州平江路为例], *Journal of Xi'an Technological University* 33, no. 11 (2013): 914-921, accessed via CNKI.

### ***Government: the Foundation and Guarantee of Transformation***

From the historical urban evolution of Suzhou, it can be observed that despite several administrative changes, the city's location and layout have remained largely unchanged. Throughout history, Suzhou has been a populous, economically developed, and socially prosperous city. By the beginning of the 21st century, the Pingjiang Road historical district had become the oldest representative of Suzhou's ancient cityscape, having undergone several dynastic changes. However, it faced significant challenges due to the impact of urban modernization, resulting in poor environmental conditions, high tenant density, heritage destruction, lack of diverse business formats, and discontinuity of historical context.

“Pingjiang Road's historical district stands as one of the few remaining areas in Suzhou that authentically embodies the traditional urban residential layout of ‘water and land parallel, river streets adjacent’”<sup>78</sup>. Faced with abundant historical artifacts and cultural landscapes, comprehensive and systematic preservation and renovation efforts are urgently needed, especially for dilapidated ancient residences. As one of the five key historical and cultural street areas identified in the "Suzhou Historical and Cultural City Protection Plan (1996-2010)," the protection, renovation, and development of Pingjiang Road and its historical district have garnered widespread attention from various sectors of society.

Space itself serves as an organization and management framework for power relations. Among the guardians of the Pingjiang historical district, local government stands as the most significant authority. Since the inception of the planning and renovation efforts, the government has been aware of the multifaceted value of the traditional residential cluster area of Pingjiang Road, prioritizing protection and restoration work. “From the perspective of architectural art, the traditional residences on Pingjiang Road embody unique architectural concepts, styles, and material choices, possessing distinct architectural artistic value. Furthermore, from the perspective of Suzhou's urban context, these traditional residences on Pingjiang Road are a concentrated reflection of Suzhou's unique history and culture, encapsulating rich, underlying information about the values and lifestyles of local residents”<sup>79</sup>. In the process of urban development and renewal, Pingjiang Road needs to align with the modern development of Suzhou by seeking a balance among improving living standards, preserving historical culture, and meeting regional development needs. Therefore, the government positions the planning and design of Pingjiang Road to make rational use of its historical and cultural resources, develop culturally enriched and high-quality tertiary industries, and transform it into a vibrant urban area with unique cultural landscapes.

The transformation process, initiated in 2002, underwent two developmental phases:

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<sup>78</sup> Qi Jin and Mingfei Wang, "The Protection and Utilization of Traditional Residence in City: Take No.31 Pingjiang Road in Suzhou as an Example" [城市传统民居的保护与再利用——以苏州平江路 31 号改造为例], *Fujian Architecture* 06 (2010): 33-35, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>79</sup> Meng Li and Huixia Xu, "On the Tourism Development of Traditional Urban Dwellings: Taking Shanghai Shikumen as an Example" [论城市传统民居的旅游开发——以上海石库门为例], *Academic Exchange*, no. 10 (2007): 119-22, accessed via CNKI.

During the first phase (late 2002 - 2006), the government, adopting a gradual approach, prioritized the protection of historical and cultural assets while exploring the most suitable development direction for Pingjiang Road. In 2003, under the leadership of Professor Ruan Yisan, Tongji University's National Historical and Cultural City Research Center completed a new round of the "Protection and Renovation Plan for Suzhou's Pingjiang Historical Street District," profoundly influencing the protection and renovation efforts of Pingjiang Road and its historical district. Professor Ruan advocated a principle of "step-by-step progress" aimed at guiding the district towards sustainable development. Subsequently, under the guidance of this plan, the Suzhou Urban Planning and Design Institute successively formulated the "Detailed Construction Plan along Pingjiang Road" (2004.1) and the "Commercial Layout Plan for Pingjiang Road" (2006), guiding the transformation and development of Pingjiang Road. Additionally, Suzhou University's Tourism Development Research Center prepared the "Tourism Planning Scheme for Pingjiang Historical Street District," clarifying the tourism development positioning of Pingjiang Road.<sup>80</sup> During this period, starting from late 2002, the renovation of Pingjiang Road was officially launched, focusing on property rights transfer from private to state-owned properties along both sides of the street. By 2003, infrastructure installation commenced along the entire street. In 2004, protective renovation of surrounding neighborhoods began, mainly involving infrastructure installation, industrial land replacement, and renovation of dilapidated houses. By 2006, the physical transformation of Pingjiang Road and its surrounding environment was largely completed.

The second phase (2006 - present) is characterized by a period of nurturing and development. In 2006, the Pingjiang Command Center took charge of investment promotion, strictly controlling the business layout of Pingjiang Road. Following a protection-oriented approach, businesses were selected without engaging in promotional advertising, focusing on themes of "tourism, culture, and leisure" to gradually cultivate the commercial atmosphere of Pingjiang Road, ensuring alignment with the street's historical significance. In 2009, Pingjiang Road was recognized as a "China Historical and Cultural Street," marking recent years of rapid development, heightened popularity, and significant social influence.

Government commands and policy measures for the district are mandatory and regulate the participation of capital, residents, and tourist groups. "Local government mandates, enforced through urban planning, legal regulations, and administrative institutions, ensure the mandatory protection of Pingjiang Historical Street District's water bodies, vegetation, landforms, environment, cultural heritage buildings, and residents' way of life, among other aspects. By issuing mandatory directives, the government successfully restored and protected a series of cultural relics and world cultural heritage sites, utilizing spatial entities to develop platforms such as the 'Zhuangyuan Museum,' 'Kunqu Opera Museum,' and 'Pingtan Museum' for cultural exhibitions and performances, ensuring the effective inheritance and transmission of cultural connotations."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Zhang, "Analysis on the Featured Urban Space."

<sup>81</sup> Xing Zhao, "Tourist Perception and Space Construction of Cultural Blocks: Taking 'Jiangnan Ancient Alley' Pingjiang Road as an Example" [文化街区的游客感知与空间建构——以“江南古巷”平江路为例], Master's thesis, Nanjing Normal University, 2021, accessed via CNKI.



***Capital intervention brings about a globalization of the landscape.***

Unlike Xintiandi, at the outset of the transformation of Pingjiang Historical Street, there was no involvement of large-scale investment developers like the Shuion Land. Instead, the government took the initiative in controlling the business format, adopting a leasing-only approach. "In the management of attracting investment and choosing capital, the principle of preferring scarcity over surplus was upheld, and strict screening criteria were established. The usage of shops was limited to having certain local historical, cultural, and artistic characteristics that align with the concept of protecting the entire historical street."<sup>82</sup> Examples include boutique projects such as architectural clubs, inns, teahouses, galleries, and handicraft shops. In the government's planning blueprint, "persistently positioning 'culture' and 'leisure' as the main focus, and 'diversification' as the development direction,"<sup>83</sup> the promotion of Kunqu opera, Pingtan storytelling, and other commercial forms with Suzhou cultural connotations ensured the genuine implementation of cultural leisure concepts.

While the government can be considered the cornerstone of principled guarantee and top-level design, compromises were still made in fundraising and operating tourism to achieve the goal of sustainable protection of local cultural heritage when accepting capital injection. "In the process of capital participation, driven by market revenue, the excessive development aimed at attracting tourists actually undermines the authentic cultural temperament of the classical street blocks and the elegant spatial style of the ancient lanes of Jiangnan, while also introducing excessive globalization of the landscape."<sup>84</sup> The ideal of capital seeking returns conflicts with the traditional cultural temperament of Pingjiang Road itself, ultimately balancing each other at the level of market operation. However, on the other hand, the participation of diverse capital objectively helps local governments alleviate the economic pressure of heritage protection, improves the living environment for local residents through revenue, and enhances Suzhou's core competitiveness in the tourism industry.

***Residents' participation marks the beginning of experiential consumption.***

Residents' participation serves as the baseline for the authenticity of the neighborhood space and the beginning of experiential consumption. Considering that Pingjiang Historical Street has historically been primarily a residential area, the planning did not adopt a strategy of relocating all original residents for a completely new renovation. Instead, it controlled the return rate of residents to 50%, thereby ensuring that 50% of neighborhood relationships remained unchanged and 80% of houses remained untouched or minimally altered, thereby preserving the residential function of the area.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, some functions conflicting with the historical features or unsuitable for the times, such as factories and dilapidated buildings, were removed or relocated. The integrated space was then transformed into landscaped green spaces and appropriately themed commercial spaces suitable for the historical character of the district, optimizing the neighborhood environment and further enhancing the historical atmosphere.

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<sup>82</sup> Yu Chen, "Planning Characteristics and Differences between Pingjiang Road and Shantang Street in Suzhou" [苏州平江路与山塘街规划特点与差异], *Xiandai Horticulture*, no. 02 (2013): 75-76, accessed via CNKI.

<sup>83</sup> Su and Hu, "Sustainable Development of Classical Commercial Streets."

<sup>84</sup> Zhao, "Tourist Perception and Space Construction of Cultural Blocks."

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

“As a true living world of urban history, Pingjiang Road maintains consistency with traditional cultural preservation, its own development planning, and the real-time and spatial needs of urban residents. The formulation of its realistic goals also aligns with the life requirements of local residents”<sup>86</sup>. Pingjiang Road fully preserves the living rights of residents in the area, allowing them to fully participate in the dynamic activities of the urban ancient street, ensuring that Pingjiang Road remains lively in every corner and at every time, rather than becoming an "empty street" at night. Pingjiang Road is not only a path for tourists but also a street for residents. Residents are the last line of defense in preserving the lively atmosphere and life of Pingjiang Road. Only by doing so can the authenticity of Pingjiang Road's space be maximally preserved and experiential consumption of historical and cultural spaces be fostered. As people traverse it, they will experience more authenticity and vitality, with dynamic sensory effects becoming more pronounced.

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<sup>86</sup> Su and Hu, "Sustainable Development of Classical Commercial Streets."

## Chapter 5

### The Space production on Pingjiang Road.

In the previous chapter, the complete process of Pingjiang Road's redevelopment and the associated Pingjiang culture were introduced. Additionally, the initial stage of spatial production on Pingjiang Road, including the motivations for spatial production and the roles played by various actors, was analyzed. This chapter will continue using the analytical framework from Chapter 3 to examine the second stage of spatial production on Pingjiang Road—the construction of differentiation within the space. The analysis will focus on two main aspects: first, the role of the symbolization of street space characteristics in driving spatial consumption; and second, an attempt to interpret the identity construction within the consumer spaces of Pingjiang Road.

In Roland Barthes' urban semiotics, space is meaningful; the symbols indicated by objects within these historical block spaces construct and maintain a culturally rich space, based on the fact that symbols can serve as the basis for dissemination. In Pingjiang Road, a large number of cultural relics and architectural heritage are part of a consumable culture, forming what Roland Barthes termed the “cultural text”. Deborah Stevenson defined it as a “space in which there is a weaving together of symbols to create an irreducible plurality of meaning”<sup>87</sup>. As a practice of signification, it blurs the distinction between writing and reading, production and consumption. Unlike a literary work occupying shelf space in a library, the text serves as the site where productive and signifying actions occur. “A cultural text, as a combination of signs, can be static and seemingly fixed, or dynamic, such as the same room observed at different times, a busy urban street, a building, or even an entire neighbourhood. An urban text, therefore, can be a physical structure, like an individual building, a monument or a building façade, or it can be a particular ‘lived’ space – a neighbourhood, a park or shopping plaza.”<sup>88</sup>

Pingjiang Road's historical block is precisely the place where production and meaning converge, where people, including natives, managers, and tourists, are the main actors of production behavior. Through the creation of symbolic block scenes rich in local sentiments and cultural connotations, such as historical relics, cultural activities, and traditional atmosphere, Pingjiang Road ultimately forms a complete cultural dissemination chain, providing a continuous writing space for urban texts.

The formation and dissemination of consumer space in Pingjiang Road are closely intertwined with symbols. “The symbols of a city are essentially its cultural symbols, usually presented in the form of some carrier,”<sup>89</sup>. The architectural style, spatial layout, narrative formed by tangible buildings or objects within the block, and the historical information and cultural significance

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<sup>87</sup> Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures* (United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003), 59.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>89</sup> Jiajia Tang, "Research on the Performance of Authenticity of Historical Blocks: Taking Suzhou Pingjiang Road Historical Cultural Block as an Example" [历史街区的原真性展演研究——以苏州平江路历史文化街区为例], Master's thesis, Soochow University, 2020.

carried by the objects themselves constitute a complete symbolic system, metaphorically implying the intrinsic logic of space structure and the real meaning inherent in space. This chapter will elaborate on how Pingjiang Road transforms cultural heritage into symbolized consumer space from various perspectives such as cultural relics, spatial patterns, architectural forms and features, and detailed components.

The structure of the analysis is as follows:

### 1. **Differentiation of Street Space**

The symbolic construction at the physical space level will revolve around the following three principles:

- A. Symbol extraction and application of traditional cultural elements
- B. Superposition of modern symbolic elements and reorganization of internal space
- C. The implantation of modern consumer spaces and the recreation of space

### 2. **Differentiation of Social Identity**

#### **5.1 Extraction and Application of Traditional Symbols in Pingjiang Road Space**

The primary strategy for the redevelopment of Pingjiang Road involves restoring the exteriors of traditional buildings while adapting the internal spaces to meet modern needs. This approach ensures the coexistence of traditional and modern elements within the space, successfully preserving classical features while incorporating modern symbols. On Pingjiang Road, one can find historical buildings rich in traditional cultural significance, traditional crafts, museums, the authentic riverside street atmosphere, as well as modern cultural elements such as creative crafts, bookstores, bars, tea and coffee shops, and vibrant scenes of everyday life that reflect the local street culture.

"In a postmodern society where spatial symbols are widely employed, space symbols that reflect local cultural characteristics and meet the needs of middle-class tourists in the postmodern era are crucial means to develop historic districts with unique personalities, avoiding standardized development approaches."<sup>90</sup> Pingjiang Road achieves this through the integration of historical cultural elements with modern urban leisure spaces, creating an atmosphere where visitors can experience traditional Suzhou life, embodying consumer symbols of "antiquity and nostalgia," "refinement and petit bourgeois lifestyle," and "the traditional life of the Jiangnan water towns".

*The authenticity preservation of the traditional spatial layout serves as the foundation for symbol construction.*

"Maintaining the historical layout since the Tang and Song dynasties, Pingjiang Road preserves a vast array of cultural relics and intangible cultural heritage, while its residents uphold traditional

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<sup>90</sup> Niu, "Tourism Spatial Evolution and Organization of Historical Streets."

lifestyles, imbuing the area with strong regional characteristics. It stands as a representative district that combines authentic cultural preservation with commercial development”.<sup>91</sup> The unique spatial layout of Pingjiang Road serves as the foundation for constructing architectural symbols and consumer culture. The water-town spatial pattern of ‘parallel waterways and adjacent streets’ embodies the cultural essence of Suzhou, the lifestyle of Pingjiang Road residents, and serves as the basis for experiential consumption rooted in tradition. Without the preservation of historical remnants, it would be challenging to recreate history in the modern context and would lose the window into traditional Suzhou living experiences.

The pattern of Suzhou's ancient cityscape, characterized by its juxtaposition of land and water, has endured since its inception during the Spring and Autumn Period. Despite numerous dynastic changes, it has retained its essence as a watery urban labyrinth, exuding the idyllic charm of "homes nestled by rivers, and streets graced by canals." This distinctive layout, depicted in the "Pingjiang Map," resembles a chessboard, with rivers forming one grid and streets the other. Where these grids intersect, bridges span the waterways. The main rivers run in three horizontal and four vertical lines, while numerous smaller canals, numbering in the hundreds, crisscross the area. These canals, all man-made, were meticulously excavated along natural watercourses, forming the foundation of Suzhou's aquatic fabric. See the Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.3.

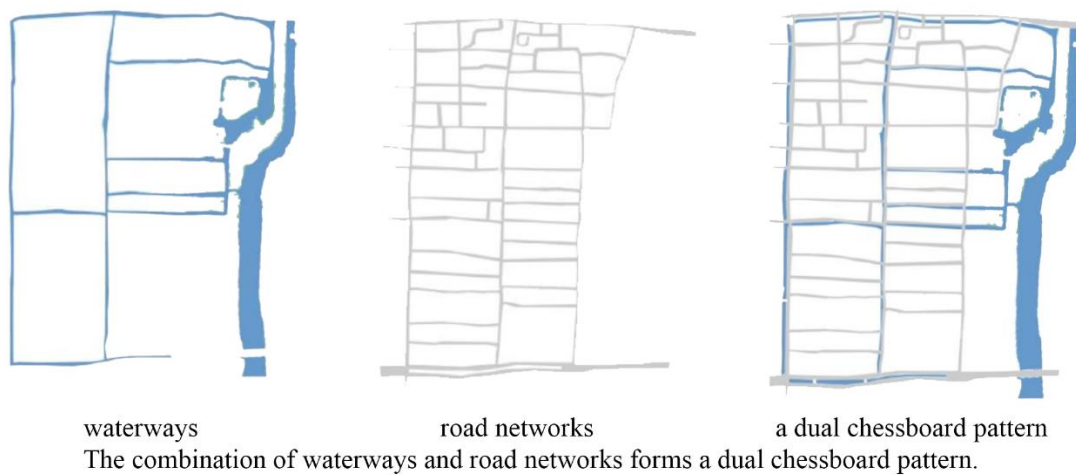


Figure 5.1 The dual chessboard pattern of Suzhou

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5.3 An aerial view of Pingjiang Road.

Lining the banks of these waterways are numerous well-preserved residential buildings, many dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. These dwellings, intimately intertwined with the water, are constructed along the waterfront, embodying the concept of living by the river's edge. As the Tang poet Du Xunhe immortalized in verse: "When you set foot in Suzhou fair, / Homes nestle by the rivers there. / Scarce are the idle spaces, old and wise, / But myriad bridges adorn the waterways' guise. / Night markets with lotus roots and more, / Spring boats laden with silk galore. / Far away, beneath the moon's gentle gleam, / Thoughts of home, in fishermen's songs, teem." These lines vividly capture the poetic essence of Suzhou's waterscapes, with the Pingjiang Historic District standing as their quintessential representation.



Figure 5.2 Pingjiang Road and Pingjiang River

The unique aquatic environment of the Pingjiang Historic District has fostered a distinctive water culture, characterized by its gentle and serene demeanor. This "water culture," with its nurturing and tranquil qualities, has shaped the gentle and refined disposition of Wu culture. The dense network of waterways within the district divides the land into numerous small plots, resulting in a landscape where homes seem to "rest upon the rivers." Without the appropriately scaled and authentically styled waterfront spaces, Pingjiang Road would lose its unique value and sever its historical continuity. In response, the Suzhou municipal government has imposed height restrictions, capping building heights within the ancient city area at 23 meters. Thus, efforts to mitigate the impact of modernization on Pingjiang Road's traditional spatial layout have been initiated.

### *Street and alley spaces*

The interpretation of spatial significance and symbolic perception of the streets and alleys of Pingjiang Road is examined from three perspectives: spatial layout and texture, spatial scale, and road paving.

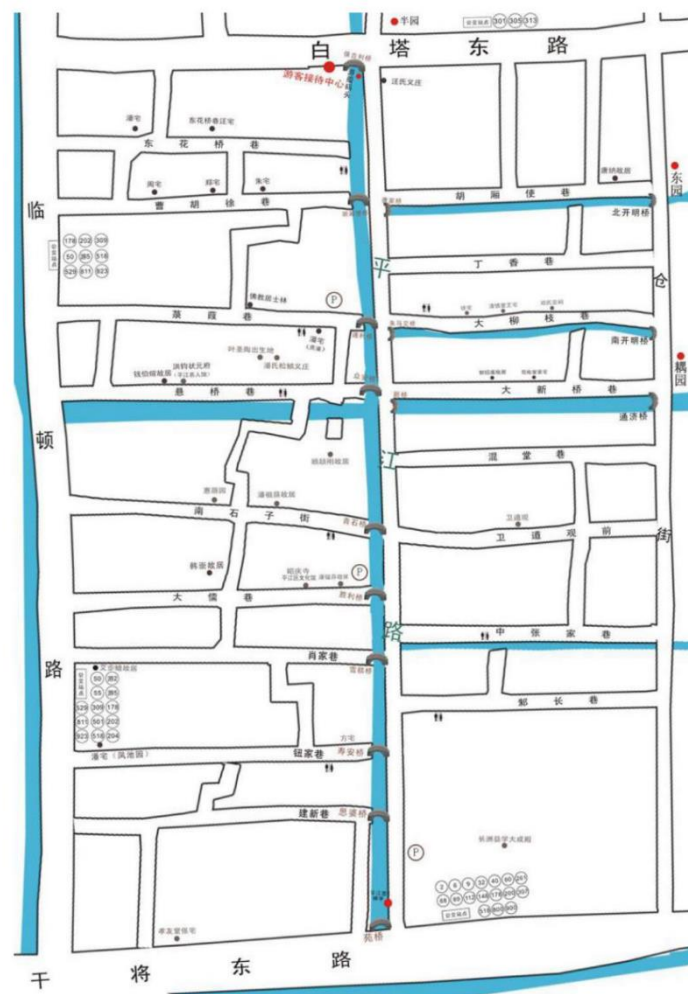


Figure 5.3 The Plan of Pingjiang Road

1. Pingjiang Road preserves and continues the fabric of Suzhou's ancient city, with waterways as its core and streets and alleys forming the city's overall layout. Stone slab bridges or arched stone bridges connect roads and waterways, creating a transportation network that combines pedestrian and water transport. "The historical district of Pingjiang Road exhibits a mixed and organic spatial layout overall, retaining the traditional spatial structure of 'residential houses - alleys - street blocks,' shaping a progressive level of interaction from privacy to openness, thus forming a typical Jiangnan street and alley interaction spatial form."<sup>92</sup> The historical district of Pingjiang Road features a typical fishbone-shaped street and alley pattern, with buildings and roads on both sides growing perpendicular to the main street, creating a fishbone-like fabric of the district. The fishbone-shaped street and alley pattern typically use the main street as a public space for people's interaction and life. The streets and alleys extending from the main line to both sides form relatively private residential spaces, namely, individual courtyard spaces, creating a landscape pattern of public spaces connecting courtyard spaces overall. The Pingjiang historical district is composed of water systems and road systems. The water system consists of a north-south river and five east-west rivers. The north-south river is the Pingjiang River, and the east-west rivers, from north to south, are the Dongqilin River, Huxiangshi River, Daliuzhi River, Xinqiao Lane River, Xuanqiao Lane River, and Zhongzhangjia Lane River. The main streets and alleys in the Pingjiang historical district include Pingjiang Road and Cang Street in the north-south direction, and Huxiangshi Lane, Dingxiang Lane, Daliuzhi Lane, Daxinqiao Lane, Huntang Lane, Weidaoguanqian, and Zhongzhangjia Lane in the east-west direction. The road network is roughly fishbone-shaped, and the road system is divided into three levels: streets (街 jie), lanes (巷 xiang), and alleys (弄 nong).

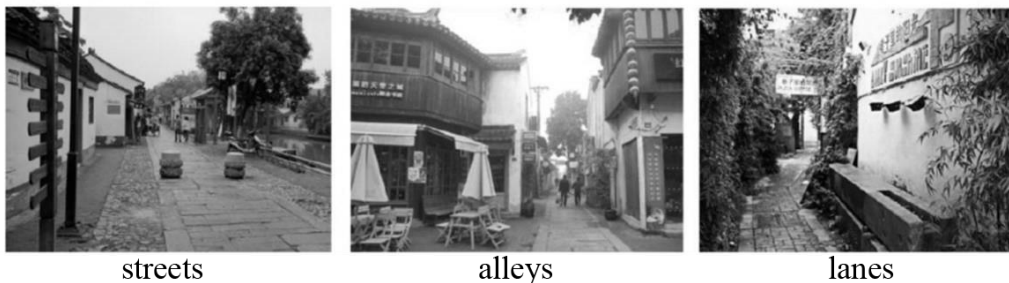


Figure 5.4 Three levels of the road system Pingjiang Road.

Prior to its renovation, Pingjiang Road's main thoroughfare was not solely residential but also had commercial attributes, mainly consisting of scattered spontaneous markets and storefront spaces. ( See figure 5.5, Pingjiang Road possessed commercial street attributes in the 1920s.) After the renovation, the organization of consumer spaces on Pingjiang Road still adheres to the ancient commercial spatial layout, maintaining the pattern of front streets and back rivers, with residences above and shops below. The only difference lies in the modification of commercial content, incorporating many elements of modern commerce to better meet the consumption demands of contemporary society. Additionally, more residential buildings have

<sup>92</sup> Qing He, "Space Perception of Pingjiang Road in Suzhou from the Perspective of Scale, Space and Behavior" [尺度·空间·行为视角下苏州平江路的空间感知], *Architecture & Culture* 11 (2021): 113-114, <https://doi.org/10.19875/j.cnki.jzywh.2021.11.043>.



been transformed into commercial shops, increasing the proportion of commercial space. Currently, the area includes a diverse range of functional formats such as residential, neighborhood interaction, production, commerce, and tourism. The urban fabric permeates and harmonizes with each other, portraying a vivid depiction of the intertwining of Jiangnan water town spatial form and modern urban life within the context of contemporary living.

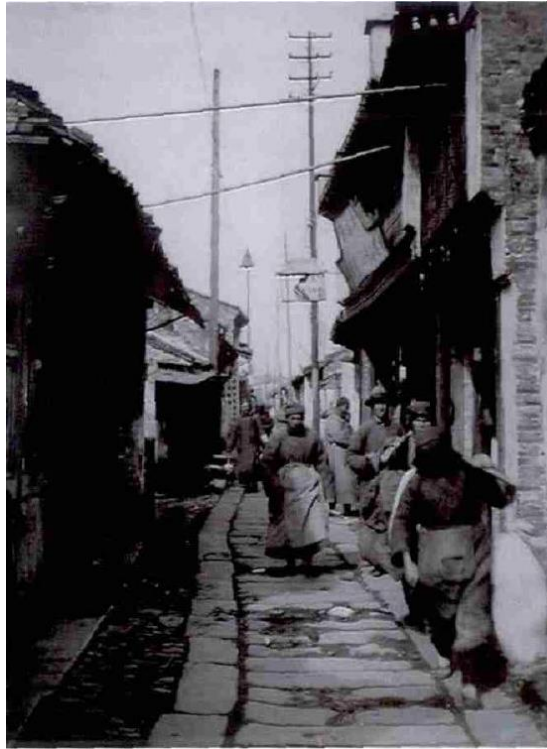


Figure 5.5 Pingjiang Road in 1920s.

2. The pleasant spatial scale of the Pingjiang historic district stems from the favorable proportionality inherent in traditional spaces. Unlike straight urban roads, the road lines of Pingjiang Road generally meander, with bends and curves, varying in width from wide to narrow, creating contrasting spatial forms of curves and straights, as well as expansion and contraction. The width ranges from 5 to 7 meters at its widest point, narrowing to only around 1 to 2 meters at its narrowest. The ratio of road width to building height ( $D/H$ ) remains relatively constant, preserving the tranquil and gentle spatial atmosphere characteristic of Suzhou's traditional streets and lanes.

Yoshinobu Ashihara's *The Aesthetics Townspace* presents a crucial observation: when  $D/H > 1$ , as the ratio increases, a sense of distance gradually emerges, and when it exceeds 2, a feeling of spaciousness arises. Conversely, when  $D/H < 1$ , a sense of proximity emerges as the ratio decreases. When  $D/H = 1$ , height and width create a sense of uniformity, with  $D/H = 1$  marking a pivotal point of transition.

The scale of Pingjiang Road is composed of the dimensions of its streets and lanes, the scale of its buildings, and the dimensions of its stone bridges. Here, the buildings are mostly one or two stories high, with the widest street being approximately 10 meters, and the bridges

spanning up to 7 to 8 meters at most. Traditional Suzhou streets and lanes are lined with mostly single-story homes. The D/H ratio of traditional Suzhou streets and lanes spaces is mostly around 1 (with the D/H ratio of riverside streets and lanes exceeding 2.5). In contrast, the ratio of roads, water lanes, bridges, and buildings in Pingjiang's historic district is approximately 1:1:0.5:1, with the ratio of street width to building height also being around 1, contributing to a comfortable walking experience and a strong sense of spatiality.<sup>93</sup> See the Table 5.1.





			
D/H=0.5/1	D/H=1/1	D/H=2/1	D/H > 2/1
In cases where buildings are two stories high and streets are relatively narrow, a sense of congestion and security is evoked, with attention focused primarily on the ground level.	Most buildings along Pingjiang Road are single-story. In instances where two-story buildings coexist with slightly wider streets, the similarity in scale between building height and street width still engenders a sense of familiarity.	In situations where roads are wider, the full view of buildings can be seen from a distance.	Such proportions typically occur at spatial nodes such as squares, where standalone buildings no longer serve as visual focal points, prompting the addition of landscape elements or other decorative features for visual enhancement.

Table 5.1 Spatial Scale Analysis of Pingjiang Road

- On the pavement level, traditional materials are predominantly used, including coordinated materials such as blue bricks, rough-faced jinshan stone slabs, strip stones, crushed gravel, and square bricks, which effectively reflect the traditional style and enhance the rustic naturalness of the paving on Pingjiang Road. The combination and variation of pavement materials in the commercial street space enhance visual appeal, achieving visual balance with the surrounding architecture through a stable gray-toned base color. This continuity preserves the quaint cultural ambiance, allowing visitors to fully immerse themselves in Suzhou's historical charm. Meanwhile, at the intersections of streets and alleys, the intact traditional cobblestone and strip stone pavement retains the distinctive cultural characteristics of traditional street paving.

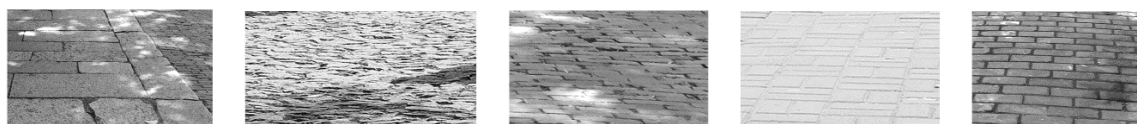


Figure 5.6 The pavement of Pingjiang Road.

<sup>93</sup> Zhang, "Research on the Regional Culture of Historical Block Landscape Design."

Overall, the street and alley spaces, through the restoration and continuation of texture, scale, and pavement, highlight the inherent characteristics representing the cultural material form of Suzhou, thus restoring the historical charm of the district. “The original street and alley forms express historical authenticity through the spatial arrangement of district texture, allowing visitors to experience the depth of history and the tension of time and space.”<sup>94</sup>

### *Architectural facades and rivers*

Traditional dwellings within the ancient city of Suzhou typically adopt a courtyard-style layout, with the courtyard serving as the basic unit of architectural grouping, and buildings generally ranging from one to two stories in height. Influenced by Taoist and Confucian cultures, these traditional structures adapt local building materials to fully exploit their colors, textures, and characteristics while accommodating Suzhou's hot and humid climate, resulting in a harmonious interplay of contrasting yet cohesive basic color tones, such as black, white, and gray. The traditional architectural style of Suzhou, characterized by distinctive roof and gable forms, appropriate building volumes, and simple yet elegant color schemes, epitomizes the unique characteristics of the ancient city's Jiangnan water town ambiance. Chinese master painter Mr. Wu Guanzhong extensively portrayed the landscapes of Jiangnan water towns in his artworks, perfectly capturing the essence of ancient Jiangnan towns. His paintings depict the classic Jiangnan scenery characterized by black rooftops, white walls, and waterlanes running parallel to residential houses (see Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7 《Waterlane》 by Wu Guanzhong



Figure 5.8 Pingjiang river and residential houses

Pingjiang Road, as a representative of Jiangnan water towns, predominantly exhibits traditional Suzhou residential architecture with white walls and black tiles, thereby maintaining the

<sup>94</sup> Junyan Yang, Ying Tan, and Mingwei Wu, "Urban Design Study of Traditional Urban Texture: Practice and Exploration of Nanbuting Block in Nanjing," *City Planning Review* 33, no. 12 (2009): 87-92.

monochromatic color scheme of black, white, and grey that defines the entire ancient city of Suzhou.

Within the Pingjiang Road neighborhood, numerous grand and well-structured traditional dwellings are meticulously preserved, while the main thoroughfare of Pingjiang Road primarily features lightweight and delicately proportioned individual residential buildings.

This section begins its analysis of architectural symbolic elements by examining their application and collage, as well as the intrinsic meanings of these symbols, starting from the building façade. As shown in the Table 5.1, the analysis is divided into four main parts: roofs and gables, doors and windows, facades and walls, and detailed decorations. Within the composition of architectural elements, the simultaneous participation of modern and traditional elements is crucial. On the one hand, while preserving the traditional architectural styles of Suzhou dwellings, the restoration and maintenance of individual buildings adopt a predominantly black-and-white color scheme to restore the texture of the facade. Symbolic collage techniques are extensively employed to reintroduce symbolic elements extracted from Suzhou architecture, such as Suzhou-style lattice windows, pitched roofs and gables, wooden doors, and windows, thus restoring the overall appearance of traditional Suzhou dwellings.

On the other hand, modern elements such as glass, steel components, and a richer color palette are integrated to better meet the functional needs of modern usage. Therefore, the analysis categorizes architectural elements into two main parts: Suzhou traditional architectural elements and the juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements or purely modern elements.

1. **Roofs and gables.** The roof forms of traditional Suzhou dwellings include double-sloped, single-sloped, long-short-sloped, and longitudinal-horizontal-sloped, each complemented by corresponding gables, horsehead walls, cloud heads, and Guanyin caps. The roof pitch generally follows a modulus of  $h$  (vertical height difference) /  $d$  (horizontal distance) =  $1/2$ , creating a sense of continuous order. Along the Pingjiang Road by the river, many buildings feature mixed walls, with curves and folds that follow the undulations of the embankments, forming a rustic and elegant exterior wall landscape. The roofs are covered with gray-black tiles, contrasting with the white gables, evoking the ink painting ambiance of Jiangnan water towns. The continuous connection between the roof and gables repeatedly emphasizes the characteristic symbols of traditional Suzhou architecture. In fact, the preservation of the integrity of architectural clusters along Pingjiang Road is the foundation for the expression of these symbols, allowing these details to be continuously repeated, thereby reinforcing the perception and experience they evoke in people.







As Wang pointed out, while the cultural distinctiveness of individual buildings in the historical area of Pingjiang Road may not be outstanding, its residential clusters and culturally preserved buildings have considerable scale.<sup>95</sup> This integrity and scale of cultural characteristics distinguish it from other historical areas characterized mainly by isolated or

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<sup>95</sup> Haobing Wang, "Research on Conservation Planning Model of Historical Area Based on Cultural Characteristic Value" [基于文化特色传承的历史地区保护规划模式初探], Master's thesis, Southeast University, 2016.

linear remnants. Although such historical areas with strong scale may not convey distinct individual cultural features to tourists, the shaping of the overall cultural atmosphere can provide visitors with a deeper cultural experience.

The integration of modern elements into roofs often prioritizes the continuation of traditional modulus and forms, ensuring the continuity of the roof, whether it is a flat or pitched roof, thus blending modern elements into tradition. For example, in Figures 5.11 and 5.13, depicting a traditional building dating back to the Qing Dynasty, the two buildings enclose a square traditional courtyard with two rows of eaves. The owner has transformed it into a tea house, adding independent and flexible new spatial elements while fully preserving the spatial layout and traditional components. An independent steel structure with a glass roof covers the courtyard, creating a semi-outdoor space sheltered from rain. This overlay of modern elements onto traditional space collectively creates a complete spatial atmosphere and experience.

	Suzhou traditional architectural symbols	traditional & modern symbols / modern symbols
1.roofs and gables	 <p data-bbox="437 1238 817 1305">Figure 5.9 longitudinal-horizontal-sloped roof</p>	 <p data-bbox="906 1238 1305 1305">Figure 5.12 steel structure with a glass roof</p>
	 <p data-bbox="437 1541 817 1574">Figure 5.10 double-sloped roof</p>	 <p data-bbox="906 1641 1305 1709">Figure 5.13 courtyard under a glass roof</p>
	 <p data-bbox="437 1899 817 1966">Figure 5.11 Combination of various roof forms</p>	 <p data-bbox="906 1933 1217 1966">Figure 5.14 Cangjie</p>

It's worth noting that within the historical district of Pingjiang Road, there are also entirely modern elements present. Located 350 meters south of the main entrance to Pingjiang Road, the large-scale commercial area known as Suzhou Yanlord Cangjie was constructed and opened for use in October 2023, designed by Woodsbagot. The design concept of its roof extracts minimalist lines and modern forms from the symbols of traditional Suzhou roofs, incorporating repetition, overlay, and displacement to interpret the elegant architectural aesthetics of Jiangnan tradition through modern techniques, as depicted in Figure 5.7. The undulating roofs adhere to the design of traditional sloped roofs, while introducing subtle variations to soften the eaves and infuse them with a more modern vitality. The continuous expanse of roofs throughout the commercial area resonates with the ancient city architecture (see Figure 5.14), contributing to a unified urban fabric. The emergence of Cang Street undoubtedly demonstrates the feasibility of utilizing Suzhou symbols in the shaping of commercialized districts.

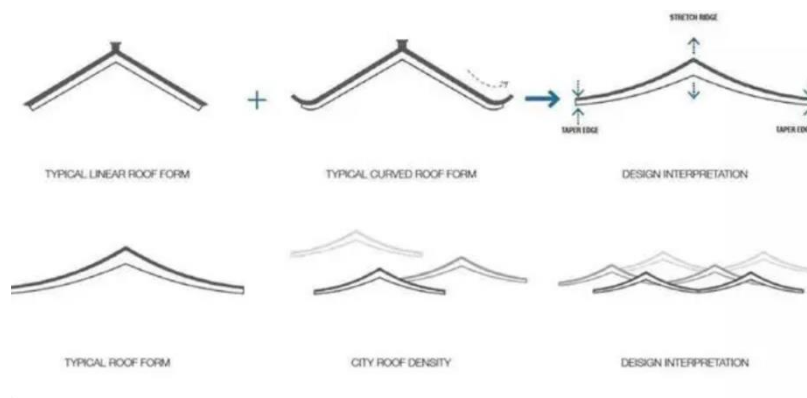


Figure 5.15 generation of roof form

## 2. Windows

In Suzhou architecture, various forms of wooden windows are a significant feature, renowned for their elegant design and exquisite craftsmanship, whether found in traditional residential buildings or Suzhou gardens. They exemplify the cultural essence and artistic charm of Jiangnan. Windows, as a finishing touch in ancient Chinese architecture, serve not only for ventilation and lighting but also as vital links connecting nature and humanity. They bring outdoor views into indoor spaces, achieving openness, transparency, and the transformation of



Figure 5.16 Window of Yuanxiang Hall in Humble Administrator's Garden



Figure 5.17 "Dongzhuang Atlas" by Shen Zhou, Ming Dynasty

solid into void. For instance, the windows of the Distant Fragrance Hall in the Humble Administrator's Garden, as shown in Figure 5.16, offer clear views of the surroundings through their lattice patterns. Such designs have been prevalent throughout history, evident even in ancient paintings. Shen Zhou, a Suzhou resident of the Ming Dynasty, depicted the integration of wooden windows with nature in his work "Dongzhuang Atlas," embodying the philosophical concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity."

In traditional forms, doors typically consist of full-length windows, divided into configurations of four, six, or eight panels, while shorter windows do not reach the floor. Traditional windows exhibit a diverse array of patterns and styles, as documented in Yingzao fayuan by Yao Chengzu, "Source of Architectural Methods" from the Qing Dynasty, detailing several common window styles (see Figure 5.18).

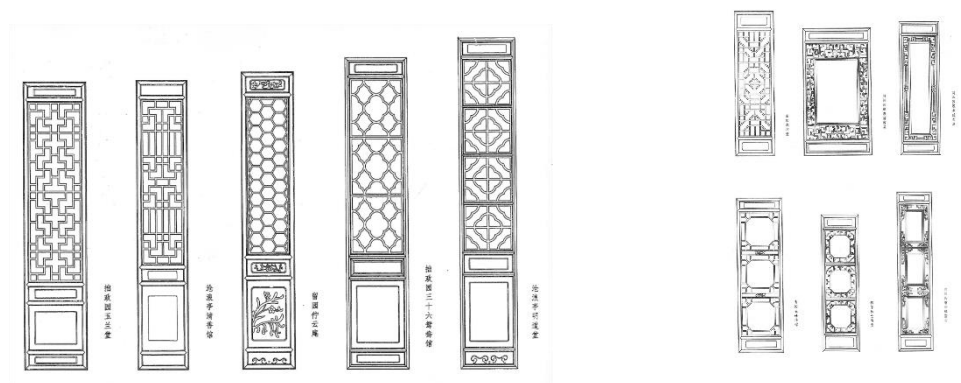


Figure 5.18 long window style (left) and short window style (right)

Architectural doors and windows along Pingjiang Road predominantly feature wooden structures, maintaining design principles that echo the understated elegance and antiquity found in Chinese ink wash paintings. Some doors and windows directly inherit old forms and patterns, as depicted in Figure 5.19. Others retain wooden frames but adopt simpler and more modern forms, reducing the complexity of old window patterns to basic geometric divisions, as shown in Figure 5.20.

	Suzhou traditional architectural symbols	traditional & modern symbols / modern symbols
2. doors and windows	<p>Figure 5.19</p>	<p>Figure 5.20</p>
	<p>Figure 5.21</p>	

thereby visually increasing the glass area (see Figure 5.20). Alternatively, some preserve purely ancient forms externally while incorporating a modern aluminum alloy window layer internally for practical purposes (see Figure 5.21). Overall, in the application of doors and windows, there is a concerted effort to preserve and showcase the distinctive cultural symbols and features of Suzhou architecture. Doors and windows occupy a significant portion of the street's facade, with their continuous replication and repetition enhancing Pingjiang Road's classical charm and enriching the visitor experience (for example, in storefronts shown in Figure 5.22).

### **3. facades and walls**

In traditional Suzhou residential architecture, the exterior walls are predominantly rendered in white-painted brick and wood. One style combines white walls with wooden window frames (see Figure 5.22), while another features entirely wooden facades (Figure 5.23). Along Pingjiang Road, the facades of commercial buildings no longer strictly adhere to traditional forms. While efforts are made to preserve historical architectural symbols, modern facades have been adapted. For example, the storefront "Su Gong Su Xiu" (Figure 5.24) extensively employs floor-to-ceiling glass windows, dominating the facade with transparency, while wooden frames serve as classical embellishments retaining traditional symbolism. However, a few storefronts deviate significantly from traditional architectural styles, such as the "Blan Bunny's Tea" shop (Figure 5.25), where the facade's form and color bear no resemblance to traditional architecture; the use of red somewhat disrupts the traditional atmosphere of the street. For instance, the official museum shop of the Suzhou Museum (Figure 5.26) opts for simple glass doors without any ornamentation. Such chain stores embed their unique symbols and ambiance into Pingjiang Road's historical environment, creating a diverse collage of classical nostalgia and modern architectural symbols.



	Suzhou traditional architectural symbols	traditional & modern symbols / modern symbols
3. facades and walls	 <p data-bbox="587 638 705 667">Figure 5.22</p>  <p data-bbox="587 1198 705 1227">Figure 5.23</p>	 <p data-bbox="1034 555 1145 584">Figure 5.24</p>  <p data-bbox="1034 846 1145 875">Figure 5.25</p>  <p data-bbox="1034 1198 1145 1227">Figure 5.26</p>

#### 4. Rivers

Pingjiang River runs parallel to Pingjiang Road, serving as a continuous scenic backdrop during the visit, and spatially acting as an integral boundary unique to Pingjiang Road. Within the overall consumer environment, Pingjiang River has also been developed as a consumable space. In ancient times, Pingjiang River played a crucial role in transportation, but in modern times, it has lost this function and instead serves as a route for sightseeing and experiential tours. Visitors can take hand-rowed boats on Pingjiang River to admire the banks of Pingjiang Road, offering an experience of Jiangnan water town life. The revitalization of Pingjiang River enhances interactive experiences with distinctive spaces and reinforces the atmospheric experience of Suzhou's unique cultural heritage (see Figure 5.27)



Figure 5.27 hand-rowed boats on Pingjiang River

Overall, Pingjiang Road's streets and lanes present a cohesive and continuous urban fabric, characterized by closely arranged building facades that exhibit similarities in style, scale, and detailed heights while avoiding identical replication, showcasing "unity in diversity." This arrangement creates a visual balance across multiple centers without absolute dominance in volume or height, emphasizing spatial dynamics through its continuous interface, which highlights rich variations in spatial transitions. The rhythmic patterns adhere to the basic principles of abstract formal logic, subtly influencing psychological and behavioral responses. The composite interplay between Pingjiang Road's architecture and waterways includes rich variations in setbacks, elevations, widths, and narrowings. Movement along the riverbank streetscape involves experiencing the rhythmic contrasts and psychological suggestions arising from the continuous variation in height, setbacks, and decorative styles of the commercial facades with their continuous small openings, contributing to a strong sense of rhythmic cadence and psychological implications within controlled unity.

#### ***Analysis of Traditional Symbolic Features and Connotations of Pingjiang Road***

In the street space of Pingjiang Road, the extensive preservation of traditional elements fills the entire area with a historical atmosphere. In addition to retaining the original traditional spaces, many modern elements have been derived from the abstraction and refinement of traditional symbols. These modern elements are then integrated with traditional ones, creating a blend of the old and the new. The modern elements that stem from traditional symbols—whether in the form of contemporary glass or metal additions—generally adhere to traditional styles, ensuring visual harmony within the district and emphasizing the cultural significance of historical symbols. For instance, phrases like "white walls and black tiles," "small bridges over flowing water," and "Jiangnan water towns," which subtly encapsulate the essence of Pingjiang, have become symbols that immediately evoke the character of the area.

The spatial characteristics of Pingjiang Road, in the medium's interpretation, point to a nostalgic and experiential spatial atmosphere: "On the second day of arriving in Suzhou, it happened to rain

lightly. On Pingjiang Road, girls dressed in Hanfu held up umbrellas. In the misty rain, 'ink and wash Jiangnan' became tangible." "Along the streets paved with bluestones, neighbors had already brewed tea, leisurely chatting while carrying bird cages." "With white walls, tiled roofs, and stone-paved roads, small bridges and flowing water near homes. In Pingjiang's historical and cultural district, one can shake a Suzhou fan, listen to Pingtan; or row a boat on the river, or stroll through the streets and alleys. Where else can one experience Jiangnan as authentically as here?"<sup>96</sup>

The street space characteristics of Pingjiang Road symbolize history and serve as symbols of Suzhou's Jiangnan water village life, evoking nostalgia and longing for traditional Jiangnan living. For people from other regions, it offers a novel and entirely different adventurous experience, with Pingjiang Road representing this distinctive lifestyle ambiance.

As outlined in Chapter Three, the old becomes "novel" due to its unfamiliarity, thus serving as a perfect example of using the old to create the new in the commercialization shift of the Pingjiang Road district. "The concept of 'nostalgia' has been transformed into a differential construction technique serving the creation of a consumption atmosphere."<sup>97</sup> By employing symbols to create spatial experiences different from everyday life, space consumption is stimulated. The commercial transformation of Pingjiang Road fully aligns with this trajectory, where the overall layout, spatial scale, and pavement texture of its street and alley spaces are metaphorically translated, symbolizing the gentle, poetic, and picturesque environmental atmosphere of traditional Suzhou life, laying the overall cultural groundwork for the district. Initially, Pingjiang Road's transformation did not aim to become a popular tourist attraction. However, through the symbolic expression of traditional street and alley forms and the guidance of media discourse, its spatial connotations were directed towards the longing for the spatial imagination of the Jiangnan water village, ultimately creating an experiential spatial consumption atmosphere.

	Space characteristics	Space signified	Space significance
Street spaces	Spatial Layout: The traditional layout is preserved.	Suzhou's traditional spatial layout.	Perceptual impression: A serene and gentle impression of the Jiangnan water town.
	Street and Alley Spaces: The original characteristics are maintained in terms of texture, scale, and pavement.		Cultural connotation: Preserving and continuing Suzhou's cultural heritage through traditional street and lane aesthetics.
	Architectural Facades: The traditional color scheme of white walls and black tiles is retained, with windows and doors that combine ancient wooden		Symbolic associations: Authentic representation of the traditional ambiance and experience of Suzhou's Jiangnan water town life.

<sup>96</sup> 文化中国行 | 一眼千年平江路 Cultural Journey in China | A Glimpse of Millennium Pingjiang Road, Xinhua News Agency, 2024-04-20 19:17, Beijing, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1796852275670158665>

<sup>97</sup> Fan Li, Rong Yang, and Liping Huang, "A Comparative Research on Local Construction of Space of Nostalgia and Consumption: A Case Study of Nostalgic Restaurants in Guangzhou," *Progress in Geography* 34, no. 04 (2015): 505, accessed via CNKI.

	components and modern materials.		
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## 5.2 Superimposition of Modern Symbolic Elements and Reorganization of Internal Space

### *Interior space renovation*

During the transformation of traditional residential buildings in Pingjiang Road into modern consumer spaces, the integration of traditional architectural exteriors with modern interior functionalities has reinforced a fusion of tradition and modernity. This process has also expanded consumers' imaginative spaces significantly. For instance, the case of No. 31 Pingjiang Road (now “Zhuyuan Assembly Hall” “筑园会馆”) exemplifies the renovation process of traditional residential interiors into contemporary consumer spaces.

Pingjiang Road No. 31, originally the residence of the Zhang family, features late Qing architectural style and currently serves as a multifunctional building integrating leisure, accommodation, and club facilities. Dating back to the Tongzhi period through the early years of Guangxu, the Zhang family residence comprised a large complex with multiple courtyards. During the Republican era, the house gradually deteriorated, and after liberation, it became a residence shared by multiple households of different surnames due to chaotic property ownership structures, arbitrary housing modifications, and natural decay of the buildings. By 2003, prior to the comprehensive renovation project of Pingjiang Road, only one courtyard section of the original Zhang family residence remained intact (see Figure 5.28). In 2003, as part of the Pingjiang historical street area comprehensive renovation project, efforts were made to restore the exterior appearance and the main interior layout (see Figure 5.29). In 2007, Shanghai ZF Architectural Design Co., Ltd. conducted a comprehensive renovation and modernization of both the exterior and interior, introducing new functionalities, resulting in its current appearance and renaming it Zhuyuan Assembly Hall.<sup>98</sup>



Figure 5.28



Figure 5.29

<sup>98</sup> Jin and Wang, "The Protection and Utilization of Traditional Residence in City."

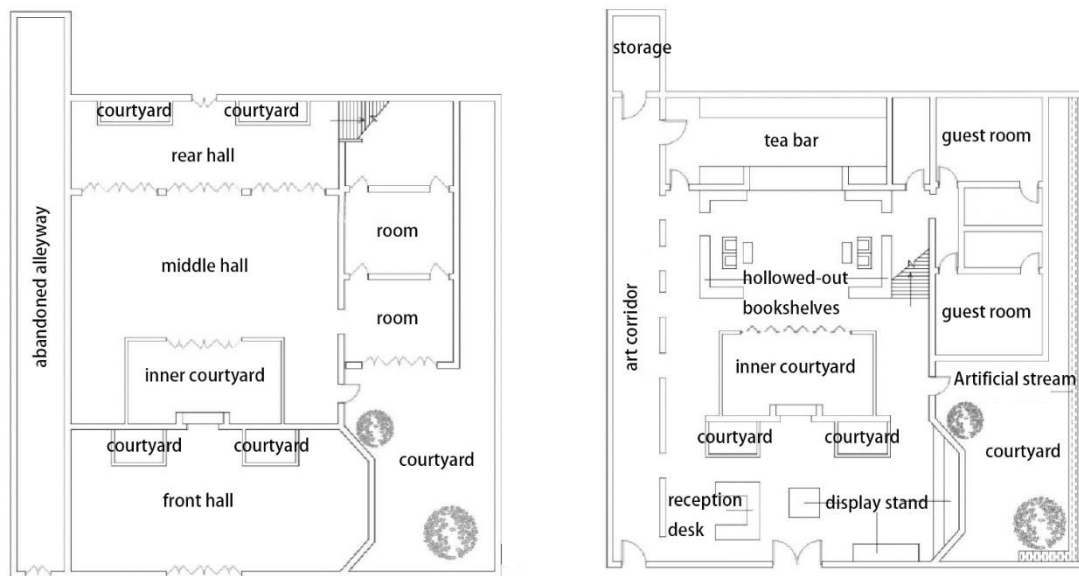


Figure 5.30 the floor plan before (left) and after renovation (right)

Through renovation, the interior functionality has been adapted to meet the demands of modern consumption. The original spatial layout has been preserved, including the inner courtyard and two small courtyards. The front hall of the building has been transformed into a space that integrates gathering and exhibitions, while the middle hall has been converted into a tea bar and lounge surrounded by hollowed-out bookshelves, catering to both quiet reading and tea tasting activities. The two small courtyards behind the main hall have been redesigned into a bar area along with the rear hall (see the floor plan). The abandoned alleyway on the north side of the building, between it and the adjacent structure, has been repurposed by designers into an . The varying contours of the building's side walls have been utilized to design a modern geometric steel roof structure. The southern rooms have been transformed into deluxe guest rooms equipped with modern amenities. The interior design theme revolves around black and white colors, echoing the architectural appearance of pink walls and dark tiles while embodying minimalist and modern architectural concepts. Underneath all these renovation methods, despite the addition of modern furniture and equipment, the interior space retains the ancient traditional Suzhou characteristics with its preserved ancient wooden structure ceilings, including exposed wooden rafters, beams, and columns, thereby maintaining the authenticity of the space to the greatest extent possible.

The renovated Zhuyuan Assembly Hall conveys a refined, artistic, and traditional taste and value identity, catering to specific consumer groups' needs. Consumers can experience living in traditional Suzhou residences, engage in leisure activities, and immerse themselves in Suzhou tea culture. By reimagining traditional spatial symbols, it creates a nostalgic atmosphere for spatial consumption, transporting consumers into an imagined traditional Suzhou lifestyle. The overlay of modern architectural symbols enhances this environment, presenting a reprocessed and idealized place from memory. Despite its theme of experiencing Suzhou life, it remains far removed from real-life experiences. The entire environment and theme leverage local spatial characteristics but ultimately point towards a "non-places space."



Figure 5.31 art corridor



Figure 5.32 Front hall



Figure 5.33 Middle hall



Figure 5.34 The exterior of Zhuyuan

### 5.3 The implantation of modern consumer space

The commercial spaces on Pingjiang Road are primarily oriented towards tourists and are designed to align with modern consumer trends. Detailed statistical analysis of the types of commercial layouts can be found in Tables 6.1 and 6.2 of Chapter 6. During the initial stages of Pingjiang Road's redevelopment, many of the incoming businesses included coffee shops, casual clothing stores, restaurants, and craft experience shops, with the overall transformation focusing on creating consumer spaces that meet contemporary needs. The shops on Pingjiang Road exhibit thematic and stylized characteristics, with each type of business engaging in the symbolic construction of its style within the space. The combination of these stylistic symbols across different shops constitutes a secondary transformation of the overall environment of the street.

For example, the Starbucks branch on Pingjiang Road combines elements of modern Chinese design with the brand's signature simplicity and brightness. Stores like Starbucks, with their strong brand identity, act as fixed symbols within the district. When these brand symbols are juxtaposed with traditional ones, they create a new attraction for tourists, offering a unique space that distinguishes itself from a typical Starbucks.

The second example is Blan Bunny, a chain store specializing in floral teas and tea sets with an English vintage theme. The brand's design features a dreamy, fairy-tale aesthetic, and it promotes its products as European-style premium teas. The presence of such a store, with its strong foreign flair, in a traditional Chinese street creates a striking contrast. These highly recognizable themed environments shape the store's unique style, offering modern young consumers a symbolic vision of fashion and aesthetic taste. This adds a layer of "individuality" and "taste" to the existing "classical" and "nostalgic" symbolic elements of the district.

When a single consumer symbol fails to satisfy the demand for personalized experiences, a variety of symbolic spaces emerge, each emphasizing its unique style. This leads to a mix of diverse symbolic meanings within the district, further intensifying the consumerist character of the area.



Figure 5.35 Starbucks and its interior space



Figure 5.35 Starbucks and its interior space

## 5.4 Differentiation of Social Identity

1. The differentiation in spatial perception contributes to the construction of identity. The Pingjiang Road Historic District establishes its symbolic meaning through the extraction and

replication of historical elements. The establishment of these symbolic meanings relies not only on the unique cultural attributes of Pingjiang Road but also on media dissemination and the interpretation by its audience. "A survey shows that 88.6% of visitors to Pingjiang Road agree that they 'fully experience a refined, romantic, cozy, and exquisite consumer atmosphere in the district'"<sup>99</sup>. This indicates that the symbolic meanings of Pingjiang Road are centered around "traditional classical," "romantic," "gentle and graceful Jiangnan water town," "slow life," and "coziness." These impressions, based on the district's overall spatial characteristics, allow visitors to distinguish Pingjiang Road from other urban spaces. When people recognize these differences, and they are further amplified through social media, it can foster a sense of identity within a specific community. This type of identity, rooted in a traditional environment, is fundamentally tied to people's sense of nostalgia. In modern society, "nostalgia" has become a significant "weapon" against the intrusions of modernity, even though this weapon is powerless to halt the advance of the modern world. However, it is often employed by those weary of modern life. Through nostalgia, people "long for the past," express "a sense of mourning for history," and construct a sense of self through this longing: "Nostalgia (like memory, reminiscence, and recollection) is deeply involved in our understanding of who we are, what we are doing, and... where we are going. In short, nostalgia is a method we use in the endless process of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identity"<sup>100</sup>. The ancient city of Suzhou is not only a "city of home" connected to the self but also a reflection of the spirit of traditional Chinese culture.

Here are some tourist reviews sourced from the internet:

"Walking down this ancient street feels like stepping into a long street from ancient times. The traditional houses with their elegant architecture, the flying eaves and intricate woodwork, the small bridges over flowing water, the ancient temples and teahouses along the way—these old facades have stood for centuries. You get a real sense of the deep cultural heritage of this ancient city, as if time has reversed, taking you back to ancient Suzhou." — Review by user "游侠 kk" from gs.ctrip.com

"Strolling along Pingjiang Road feels like being pulled back into the past." — Review by user "世纪闲人" from gs.ctrip.com

"This is a very historic old street, and the locals are very kind. Walking down the street feels like time travel; it's a great place to soak in the atmosphere." — Review from www.tuniu.com

2. The constantly evolving differentiation within consumer spaces. As analyzed in the previous section, the numerous shops on Pingjiang Road each have their own style and theme, aiming to distinguish themselves from others. The evolution of store styles is, to some extent, related to societal fashion trends. Since the identity conferred by symbols of fashion and individuality is constantly shifting, these commercial spaces are continually being updated and renewed, consistently creating new differences and symbolic labels. The diversity of identity that Pingjiang

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<sup>99</sup> Niu, "Tourism Spatial Evolution and Organization of Historical Streets."

<sup>100</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University Presses Marketing, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.19872>.



Road offers helps to avoid the homogenization of labels, ensuring the long-term viability of its commercialization.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter analyzes the symbolic characteristics and connotations of Pingjiang Road, including its traditional spatial layout, street interface, rivers, architectural features, and shop styles. It reveals that Pingjiang Road embodies a layered presentation of symbols such as "traditional," "Suzhou characteristics," "Jiangnan water town," "retro," "refined," and "niche and individuality" within its district. The spatial configuration of Pingjiang Road no longer resembles its initial blueprint as a place primarily for relaxation for local residents but has entirely transformed into a space for consumerism aimed at tourists from outside the area. Pingjiang Road, characterized by its unique spatial layout and architectural features, conveys a nostalgic, strongly regional atmosphere to visitors. For these visitors, it fulfills their imagination of Jiangnan water town life, serving as an escape from reality. This successful differentiation constructs Pingjiang Road into an object of experiential spatial consumption. Pingjiang Road has transformed into a "Disneyesque themed experiential space" where symbols guide maximum consumption, with themes and experiences becoming the focal points of consumption on Pingjiang Road.

## Endnotes

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## Chapter 6

# The Media Marketing and Experiential Consumption on Pingjiang Road

### 6.1 Spatial marketing and spatial consumption

This section will analyze how Pingjiang Road effectively utilizes its spatial characteristics and various media, including mass media, to bridge the gap between spatial production, renovation, and spatial consumption. The analysis of Pingjiang Road's spatial marketing strategies will follow the analytical framework established in Chapter 3, which includes:

- A. **The district space itself acts as media.**
- B. **Manufacturing Media Events.**
- C. **The marketing of contemporary spatial consumer goods is deeply intertwined with mass media.**
  - (a) **Spatial symbolic marketing by mainstream media.**
  - (b) **Transmission of Spatial Symbols by the General Public.**

#### *The district space itself acts as media.*

Pingjiang Road's distinct Jiangnan architectural symbols have long been primed for widespread dissemination. Its regional characteristics create an evocative, secluded world that fulfills people's imaginative desires for a spiritual refuge. As Roland Barthes suggests, cultural texts, as collections of symbols, are not singular; an urban text can take the form of a physical structure, such as a building, or a specific "living" space, like a street. The Pingjiang district itself has become a "cultural text"—a collection of symbols, where the historical space, unlike other media, remains relatively static, encapsulating the past civilizations of the space.

Pingjiang Road serves as a medium in itself. The interpretation and dissemination of its cultural significance rely on the space as a carrier and on the meanings deliberately crafted by space producers. As Charles Sanders Peirce posits, the interpretation of symbolic meaning sometimes emerges within the communication process between the interpreter and the sender. The agency of the communicator plays a decisive role in shaping the interpretation of symbolic meaning. For example, Pingjiang Road is home to numerous historic sites, such as former residences of famous figures, ancient bridges, and wells, each accompanied by a captivating story.

The historical district of Pingjiang preserves thirteen ancient bridges, some nearly eight hundred years old. These bridges, whether arched, flat, curved, or straight, bear the weathered traces of time on their surfaces. Today, Pingjiang Road highlights its cultural charm of a humanistic water town, also showcasing urban culture that can be consumed. During the initial planning and renovation in 2003, the stone bridges within the district were renamed and accompanied by explanatory inscriptions. For instance, as depicted in Figure 6.1, a plaque next to the bridge states,

“Sipo Bridge,formerly known as Shipo Bridge, was named after a nunnery called Zifu Temple to the west of it in Tang Dynasty.In Suzhou dialect, "Shipo" is homonymous with "Sipo", which is falsely renamed. On the bridge, there are rows of pillars made of Wukang stone and Changxi stone carved with patterns of Ganoderma lucidum and lotus, both of which are relics of the Song Dynasty, meaning the bridge is over one thousand years old.”

Each historical site is accompanied by similar explanatory plaques, supplementing the understanding of historical changes and the origins of names associated with the bridges through storytelling. While aiding in the understanding of the district's history, these actions define and interpret the symbolic significance of space, imbuing previously vague spaces with cultural meaning and preserving ancient myths, providing modern individuals with imaginative spaces that point towards richer spatial significance."

Thus, the numerous historical sites and interpretive signage along Pingjiang Road complete the process of conveying symbolic meanings. These meanings are received and further disseminated through the continuous flow of visitors.



Figure 6.1 Sipo bridge

In addition, Pingjiang Road is filled with advertising signs that are designed to induce consumption, most of which are spontaneously produced by the shops within the district. These signs are often carefully crafted with visual elements that reflect Suzhou's regional characteristics, becoming an important component in the dissemination of symbolic information. For example, various lantern decorations (Image 6.2) can be seen throughout the street, often inscribed with the name "Pingjiang Road" in calligraphy or advertising the goods being sold. Similarly, antique-style shop signs (Image 6.3) mimic the appearance of traditional storefronts, with shop names written in traditional Chinese characters. Decorative paintings on white walls (Image 6.4) depict the iconic scenes of the Jiangnan water towns, featuring white walls and black tiles, with the words "Suzhou" and "Pingjiang Road" inscribed to continually remind visitors of the cultural essence of the area. As shown in Image 6.15 (Starbucks), this is a typical example of how brand symbols are integrated into the façade of a commercial space. This part of the space not only acts as a transmitter of the brand's identity but also imbues Starbucks with Suzhou characteristics. Through

the influence of the Starbucks symbol, elements of Jiangnan culture are conveyed, blending the global brand with the local cultural essence.



Figure 6.2 advertisements on lanterns



Figure 6.4 Painted decorations



Figure 6.3 antique-style plaques



Figure 6.5 Starbucks

Thus, the space of Pingjiang Road itself is continuously producing and generating symbolic information. In this process, it effectively disseminates these symbols, leveraging the power of its own spatial characteristics.

### ***Manufacturing Media Events.***

While engaging in preservation and redevelopment efforts, Pingjiang Road has actively promoted various exchange and promotional activities, deeply exploring its cultural customs and values. In recent years, it has launched several themed cultural events, such as the "Pingjiang Book Festival," the "Mid-Autumn Pingjiang Music Festival," and the "Pingjiang International Cultural Week." By creating media events, Pingjiang Road has expanded its influence, striving to establish its own cultural brand. As a result of these efforts, Pingjiang Road has successfully positioned itself as a brand with significant influence nationwide.

For example, in 2024, Pingjiang continued its tradition by hosting the 16th "Pingjiang Book Festival," with the opening ceremony held at the Kunqu Museum within the district. "This year's festival brought together various bookstores, cultural markets, and distinctive cultural tourism enterprises within Pingjiang Street, aiming to attract visitors, boost commerce, and enhance the

vibrancy of the ancient city's culture."<sup>101</sup> The festival's goal was to strengthen the dissemination of the city's cultural heritage, promote the upgrade of cultural tourism consumption, and craft a new vision for the integrated development of culture, commerce, and tourism in Pingjiang. "Over the years, the Pingjiang Book Festival has consistently upheld the mission of 'showcasing books and culture, fostering exchange and friendship,' through organizing a series of distinctive reading activities. This has made the Pingjiang Book Festival a significant brand that showcases Suzhou's rich cultural heritage and fosters a strong reading culture in 'Book Fragrant Suzhou.'"

By hosting cultural festivals like the Pingjiang Book Festival, Pingjiang Road effectively draws in tourist traffic, stimulates tourism-related consumption, and simultaneously works to establish its own cultural brand.



Figure 6.6 Pingjiang Book Festival

For example, in 2021, the "Design • Pingjiang Night" event was held at the China Kunqu Museum, with the theme of "Revival," focusing on urban renewal. The curatorial concept aimed to integrate design creativity into the Gusu Ancient City and Pingjiang Historic District through the format of Design Week. Exhibitions and installations were embedded within the ancient streets and old houses, blending with the local lifestyle to showcase a revitalized image of the ancient city through design. This approach sought to ignite the contemporary charm of the city and breathe new life into the historic town, as illustrated in Image 6.7.

"Adhering to the principle of 'Design for Use,' Suzhou International Design Week, through a series of organized activities, continues to promote the close integration of creative design with emerging consumer trends, effectively fulfilling the core mission of 'City of Design, Industrial Hub.'"

"A series of design and art creations centered around 'urban renewal' were showcased in the Pingjiang Historic District, offering a vibrant dialogue between contemporary creativity and traditional Jiangnan culture in the heart of the ancient city."<sup>102</sup>

<sup>101</sup> "Looking Forward to It! The 16th Pingjiang Book Festival Is Set to Kick off on May 31st." 期待! 第十六届平江晒书活动将于5月31日开幕-名城苏州新闻中心. Accessed August 10, 2024. <https://news.2500sz.com/doc/2024/05/30/1085848.shtml>.

<sup>102</sup> "The 2021 Suzhou International Design Week Kicks Off with a Focus on "Design for Use" to Promote Urban Culture" "2021 苏州国际设计周活动全面启动 以"设计致用"传播城市文化." ELLE China, December 6, 2021. <https://www.ellechina.com/fashion/news/a38439375/1638803086/>.

Through this event, modern elements were integrated with traditional historical features, creating a contrast with traditional life. This contrast aligns with the aspirations of modern living, adding a layer of difference that resonates with contemporary tastes.

It is evident that Pingjiang Road has effectively leveraged urban culture as capital to attract and stimulate consumption, particularly by hosting various cultural events as a marketing strategy. The aim is not only to enhance the renewal of the ancient city but also to encourage the emergence of creative consumer spaces, thereby increasing tourism appeal. Ultimately, the goal is to establish "Pingjiang Road" as a representative and widely recognized symbol.



Figure 6.7 2021 Suzhou Design Week

***Mass media in the spatial marketing.***

The most typical way mass media operates is through the dissemination of information via newspapers, television, and advertisements. Since the beginning of its redevelopment, Pingjiang Road has been promoted through mass media, but in its early stages, the reach of newspapers and television was limited, and the scope of information dissemination was not broad enough. Over the two decades of its renewal, the methods of communication have continually evolved. With the rise of digital electronic media, represented by the internet and new media, these channels have increasingly become the primary means through which people engage with social life. Consequently, the influence and promotional reach of Pingjiang Road have been greatly expanded.

**(a) Spatial symbolic marketing by mainstream media.**

In today's trend of "Trendy social media check-in spots," any location that becomes labeled as "trendy" and gains popularity on social media can quickly spark a wave of followers. Mainstream media has clearly recognized this phenomenon, and both in their reporting and promotional activities, they have deliberately catered to and encouraged this trend of social media-driven consumption.

For instance, some relevant news reports include:

News Title	Date & Source	Keywords
The Rise and Fall of Trendy Stores on Pingjiang Road, 2002-2019!	March 8, 2019 Gusu Network	Popular Internet-famous Shop, Suzhou Old Street

This Is the True Face of "Pingjiang Road"	December 31, 2022 The Paper	Everyday Life Atmosphere, De-Influencing, Authenticity
Tasting Trendy Food on Pingjiang Road: So Delicious It Keeps People Coming Back!	May 22, 2020 Sohu	Internet-famous Food
"Pingjiang Nine Alleys" Night Tour Launched, with a Detailed Check-in List!	August 2, 2023 Sohu	Microcosm of Suzhou Ancient City ,
Pingjiang Road Becomes a Popular Destination for Couples	May 21, 2023 Gusu Evening News	Check-In List of Pingjiang Road
The Popular Alley Near Pingjiang Road Is Set for an Upgrade!	May 28, 2023 2500sz	Popular Internet-famous Alley

Source: Author's own compilation

In addition to publishing reports to stimulate the public's desire for spatial consumption, mainstream media actively organizes check-in activities for consumption spaces. For instance, during the 2021 "Design • Pingjiang Night" event, the "Q4 Ancient City Discovery Tour" was planned and organized. This tour recommended 68 creative consumption spaces scattered throughout the ancient city, along with three urban walking routes. The tour combined the textures of Gusu District's ancient alleys with achievements in urban renewal, creative cultural content, and design-oriented consumption spaces. Visitors could follow the map to explore the recommended consumption spaces and participate in check-in activities to redeem gifts.

"The 68 creative consumption spaces were themed around 'New Creative Consumption,' 'New Art Concepts,' and 'New Cultural Tourism Integration,' showcasing diverse interpretations of contemporary Suzhou life for different groups." The recommendations were infused with various symbols unique to Suzhou, and the three city exploration routes were named "New Rhythms of the Ancient City" (focusing on architectural heritage and urban renewal), "Cultural Arts and Crafts" (emphasizing literature, performing arts, and craftsmanship), and "Historical Anecdotes" (telling legends and local stories). The official report stated that the event aimed "to explore new cultural consumption scenarios around 'space, craftsmanship, and culture, as well as cultural tourism in the Yangtze River Delta.'"

"The "Q4 Ancient City Discovery Tour" sought to connect a series of "beautiful, fun, and interesting" characteristic streets, historical sites, and creative consumption spaces, collectively painting a captivating picture of contemporary Suzhou life."<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> "Suzhou International Design Week's Q4 Ancient City Discovery Tour Unveiled: Rediscovering the Ancient City and the Unknown 苏州国际设计周 Q4 古城发现之旅内容大公开 在古城与未知重逢." 苏州国际设计周 Q4 古城发现之旅内容大公开 在古城与未知重逢 | 界面新闻. Accessed August 20, 2024. <https://m.jiemian.com/article/6861113.html>.



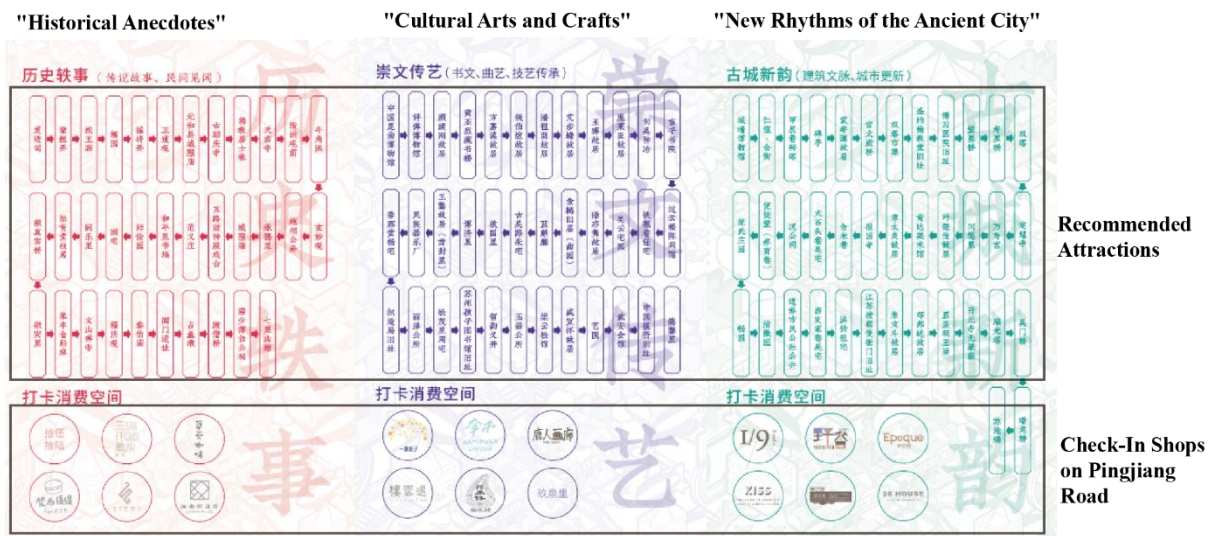


Figure 6.8 three urban walking routes



Figure 6.9 Event Promotional Poster and Recommended Shops for Check-Ins

This activity, based on the symbolic transformation of the district's space, revitalized the symbolic value of Pingjiang Road's historical and cultural heritage through the extraction and portrayal of architectural symbols following urban renewal. At the same time, it promoted new creative consumption spaces, reinforcing new symbolic meanings and consumption labels such as "fashion," "individuality," "trendiness," and "artistry." While highlighting the deep historical significance of the area, the event redefined the spatial connotations of Pingjiang Road, aligning with the new cultural and tourism demands of the old city's revival.

**(b) Transmission of Spatial Symbols by the General Public.**

The public, as active participants in society, also plays a crucial role in the dissemination of spatial symbols. Through a series of actions such as posting, sharing, and browsing on social media platforms, they accelerate the circulation and diffusion of spatial consumer goods. This dissemination mechanism promotes the spread of "check-in" style consumption, stimulating the desire for on-site experiences among the public. In this process, individuals continuously and spontaneously generate new consumption symbols, contributing to the reproduction of spatial symbols within consumer spaces, thus creating a viral effect in the spread of these symbols.

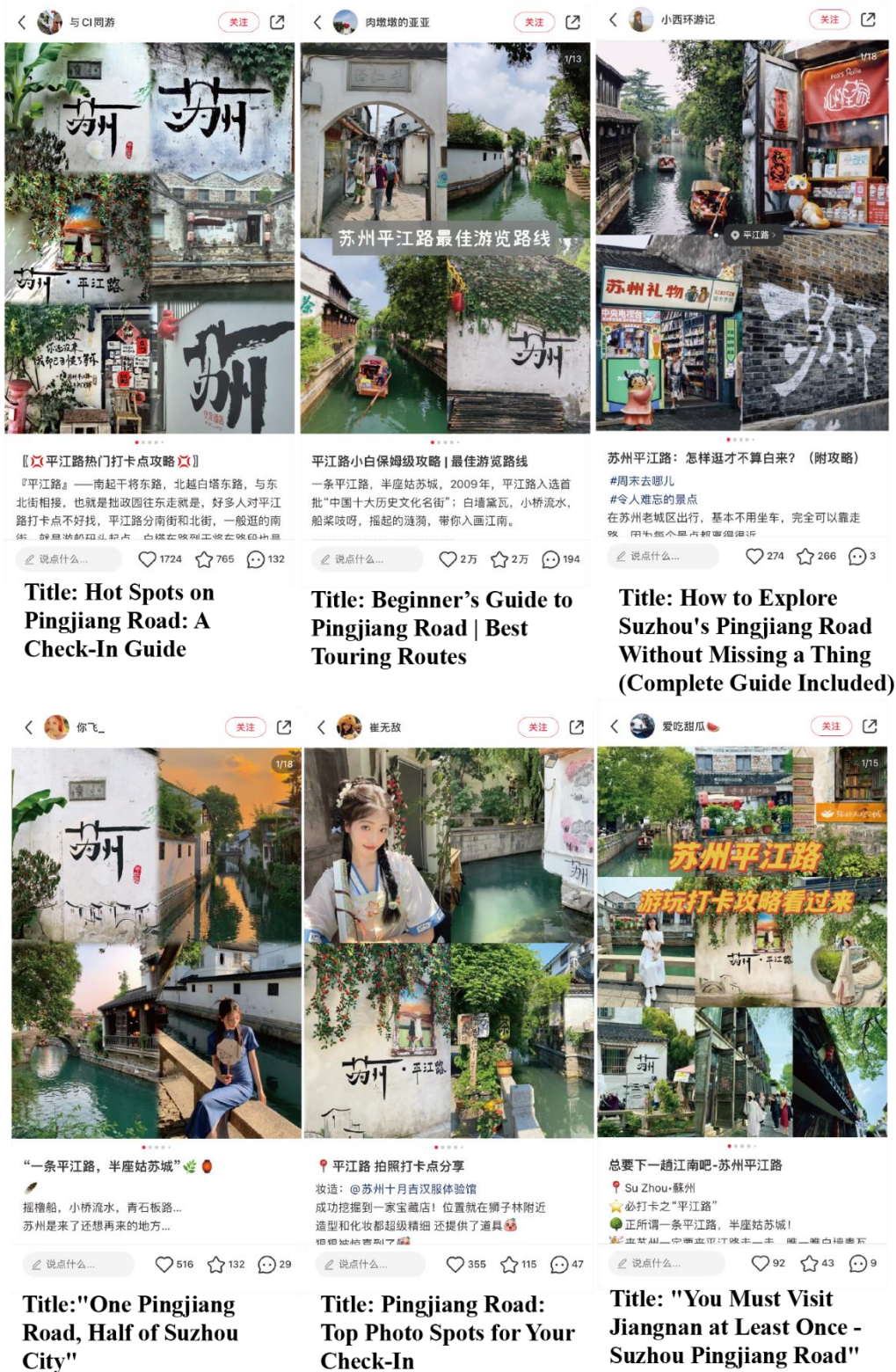


Figure 6.10 The "check-in" behavior on Pingjiang Road as seen on social media platform Xiaohongshu

In this dissemination mechanism, "trendy check-in spots" have a strong group orientation, primarily targeting young people. For this demographic, "check-in" consumption is a way to express their lifestyle, gain peer recognition, and engage in social exchanges. Through sharing and reposting on the internet, "check-in" culture constructs a sense of belonging to a specific social group, representing a trendy and fashionable lifestyle. For example, taking photos on the traditional and picturesque Pingjiang Road is seen as a trendy activity, leading to numerous recommendations for specific photo spots. The outcome is a convergence in photo-taking behavior, with many people following online recommendations to take pictures at the same locations, resulting in a large number of similar and repetitive images, as seen in the check-in recommendations in Figure 6.10.

The power of media significantly influences individuals' understanding and experience of the Pingjiang Road space, and the rise of such trends is often arbitrary and spontaneous. Any given space can be suddenly imbued with special meaning. As a result, the involvement of the broader public has infused Pingjiang Road with a diverse range of interpretations and imaginations.

## **6.2 Experiential consumption on Pingjiang Road**

The historical and cultural heritage, along with the unique spatial characteristics of Pingjiang Road, make it well-suited to become a themed environment with a distinctive atmosphere. As summarized in Chapter Three, the thematization, tourism-oriented development, and symbolization of spaces within historic districts are closely linked to the rise of experiential consumption. As mentioned earlier, social media platforms play a crucial role in spreading people's consumption behaviors and experiences, creating a chain reaction both online and offline, and fostering a desire for the symbols encountered on the internet.

This "check-in" style consumption behavior on social media has further fueled the growth of experiential consumption within these spaces. The turnover of shop types and businesses on Pingjiang Road has been significantly influenced by this factor, as the desire to create and capture unique experiences drives changes in the commercial landscape.

### ***The Impact of Experiential Consumption on Spatial Business Dynamics***

Pingjiang Road's commitment to preserving its traditional spatial heritage allows it to market the "classical" and "nostalgic" experiences as consumer products. Beyond this, the atmosphere of experiential consumption on Pingjiang Road is also carefully cultivated through the regulation of commercial businesses and the control over shop renovation styles. Businesses in the Pingjiang Historic District are not allowed to set up shop randomly; rather, they undergo a rigorous selection process by the government. The types of businesses permitted to operate are carefully chosen, ensuring that they align with the district's cultural and aesthetic values.

Furthermore, the design and materials used in shop renovations are strictly regulated by government authorities. The renovation styles must not only preserve the elegant, ancient charm of Pingjiang Road but also be rich in cultural content. Only commercial spaces that meet these criteria are allowed to operate within the Pingjiang Historic District. Additionally, the facades,

structural systems, basic layout, courtyard relationships, and distinctive interior decorations of the residential buildings that house these businesses must remain unchanged. This meticulous attention to preserving the historical integrity of the space while fostering a rich cultural atmosphere ensures that Pingjiang Road remains a unique and authentic destination for experiential consumption.

A systematic survey was conducted on 120 commercial shops between the Ganjiang Road entrance and the Bai Dongta Road entrance, analyzing the business operations of these shops, see the table 6.1&6.2. It was found that nearly all commercial activities are now geared towards tourists. Compared to 2012, when there were 69 shops<sup>104</sup>, the number of shops has increased by 74%. The variety of services offered has also expanded, aligning more closely with current trends to meet the ever-changing demands of young consumers. Additionally, there is a noticeable emphasis on symbolic content and experiential consumption. For example, compared to 2012, many more shops now combine tea houses with Pingtan performances, whereas in 2012, cafés dominated the scene, catering to the trend of appreciating "bourgeois lifestyles" with Western influences. Today, the experience of traditional culture has become more popular. The turnover of businesses on Pingjiang Road is closely related to shifts in consumer trends. According to statistics, Hanfu experiences have become a major contemporary consumption trend.

According to statistics, hanfu experiences have become a major trend in contemporary consumption. "The market for Chinese hanfu, or traditional Chinese costumes, is growing steadily. It's expected to be worth 144.7 billion yuan in 2023 and might reach 241.8 billion yuan by 2027"<sup>105</sup>. "Hanfu has transformed from a niche Gen-Z hobby to a massive consumer market of 400 million people in just a few years. The rise of Hanfu is driven by a mix of rising nationalism, savvy local brands, and amplified social hype amongst Chinese Gen Zers. ... Consumers want brands to recognize their cultural heritage and break away from a Western-centric beauty standard"<sup>106</sup>.

This new consumption trend largely stems from the contemporary youth's pursuit of traditional Chinese culture, which contrasts with the consumer trends during the era of Xintiandi's redevelopment. Back then, Chinese consumers sought to establish social identity and recognition through Western culture. One of the key factors behind Xintiandi's success in the early 21st century was the fascination and desire among Chinese people for Western culture. Consequently, the focus of clothing shops has shifted towards traditional attire, such as Hanfu, qipaos, and Republic-era fashion, all of which emphasize a nostalgic aesthetic. There are now 14 shops on Pingjiang Road that specialize in providing full services, including renting traditional clothing, makeup, and photography, primarily catering to customers who wish to take photos while wearing

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<sup>104</sup> Data from Ting Wang, "The Commercial Space Integrate into the Residential Environment: Artistry in Pingjiang Historic District Improvement and Protection Research" [融入人居环境的商业空间——苏州平江历史街区改造和保护的艺术性研究], Master's thesis, Soochow University, 2012.

<sup>105</sup> "China's Major Consumption Trends in 2023." Chinadaily.com.cn. Accessed August 5, 2024. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/02/WS65933f35a3105f21a5079fa2\\_3.html](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/02/WS65933f35a3105f21a5079fa2_3.html)

<sup>106</sup> Luo, Jiaqi. "Why China's Hanfu Trend Won't Cool Down." Jing Daily, June 6, 2021. <https://jingdaily.com/posts/hanfu-trend-nationalism-china-genz>.

Hanfu on the historic street. This greatly satisfies consumers' desire to experience and engage with traditional culture, fostering a sense of cultural identity.

The media also promotes the commercial experiences available on Pingjiang Road. "After arriving at the train station, I headed straight to Pingjiang Road with my suitcase. I had done my research, comparing the makeup and prices of several Hanfu shops, and I wanted to arrive early to choose my favorite outfit and accessories," a tourist from Shanghai, Wang Xiaowen, told reporters. "Wearing Hanfu while strolling along Pingjiang Road is a special experience. You can feel the charm of the ancient city and the allure of Hanfu, and you can take beautiful photos to capture the memories"<sup>107</sup>.



Figure 6.11 Hanfu-Clad Photo Check-In Behavior

Figure 6.12 Hanfu Shop Interior Scene

However, in reality, the connection between Hanfu culture and the regional characteristics of Suzhou is minimal. Imagine that the same traditional attire could be worn in any historic tourist district across China without appearing out of place. For example, the floral hairpins (zanhua) are a cultural feature specific to Quanzhou, yet many people on Pingjiang Road can be seen wearing them—a trend driven entirely by the popularity of zanhua culture on social media. A reporter from the \*Yangtze Evening Post\* interviewed two tourists who had chosen the zanhua style: "Suzhou is a city with an ancient charm, and we chose the zanhua style mainly because of the saying, 'Wearing zanhua in this life, beauty in the next.'" In an interview with a Hanfu shop owner: "After zanhua styling became popular online, we realized that it complements the scenery here in Suzhou quite well, so we added this service. Now, about 40% of our customers, whether they book online or walk into the store, choose the zanhua style."

This phenomenon not only demonstrates the power of media in shaping consumption but also reflects the limited understanding tourists have of Suzhou's culture, which often remains confined to an idealized image of "tradition" and "antiquity." Their desire for a travel experience is merely

<sup>107</sup> "Hanfu + Flower Hairpins: Suzhou's Old Town Streets Offer a New Experience" ['汉服+簪花围' 苏州古镇老街又有了新玩法], *Mingcheng Suzhou News Center*. Accessed August 15, 2024. <https://news.2500sz.com/doc/2024/02/02/1062477.shtml>.

an attempt to fulfill this "imagination," an imagination largely fueled by the influence of social media.

Name of shops	Type of business	symols of consumption
1. Cai Jinxing Yan Carving Studio (蔡金兴砚雕工作室)	Traditional Handicrafts	Suzhou Traditional Features
2. Su Gong Su Xiu (苏工苏绣)	Su Embroidery	Suzhou Traditional Features
3. Yitang Silk (羿唐丝绸)	Silk	Silk Culture
4. Heyan Qipao Cultural Hall (荷言旗袍文化会馆)	Traditional Costumes	Experience, Vintage
5. Yuesu Meiju Internet Hotel-style Apartments (悦宿美居互联网酒店式公寓)	Hotels	
6. Gegesu Handmade Life Hall (格格苏式手作生活馆)	Nucleus Carving, Purple Sand, T	Suzhou Traditional Features
7. Misty Holiday Villa (Suzhou Pingjiang Road Store) (蜜思缙度假别墅 (苏州平江路店))	Hotels	
8. Starbucks (Suzhou Pingjiang Road Store) (星巴克 (苏州平江路店))	Dining	Chain Brands
9. Encounter Pingjiang Road (遇见平江路)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
10. Dyeing, Weaving, Planing, Casting, and Pinching (梁织刨铸捏)	Traditional Clothing	Suzhou Traditional Features
11. Cat's Sky City Concept Bookstore (Suzhou Pingjiang Store) (猫的天空之城概念书店 (苏州平江店))	Bookstore, Bubble Tea, Coffee	Exquisite, Artistic, Trendy, Chain Brands
12. YoYo (Pingjiang Road Store) (呦呦 (平江路店))	Hotels	
13. Suzhou Mingtang International Youth Hostel (苏州明堂国际青年旅舍)	Hotels	
14. Feimiao Collection · Coffee · Curry Rice · Sticky Rice (飞鸟集·咖啡·咖喱饭·糯米)	Dining	No Regional Characteristics
15. Lazy Nest Life (懒窝生活)	Hotels	
16. Mingtang Jin Yi Hanfu Travel Photography (明堂锦衣汉服旅拍)	Makeup, Photography	Experience, Vintage
17. Caihe Flower Shop (采和花店)	Flower Shop	Exquisite, Artistic, Trendy
18. Lingyun Society Pingtan Tea House (聆韵社评弹茶馆)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
19. Embroidery Lady Silk (绣娘丝绸)	Silk	Silk Culture
20. Pingjiang Shangyuan Homestay (平江上院民宿)	Hotels	
21. Alley Pavilion Pingtan Hall (弄堂阁评弹馆)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
22. March Ceramic Studio (三月陶艺工作室)	Dessert Shop	No Regional Characteristics
23. Qingka Xiaowu Apartment (清咖小屋公寓)	Hotels	
24. Suzhou Zhuozheng Gatekeeper Inn (苏州拙政守门员客栈)	Hotels	
25. Lu Fuying Su Embroidery Production Center (卢福英苏绣制作中心)	Su Embroidery	Suzhou Specialty
26. Mimi Gusu Museum (蜜秘姑苏馆)	Beverage Shop	No Regional Characteristics
27. Su Xiangji (苏香记)	Delicatessen	Suzhou Specialty
28. Modern Celebrity (摩登红人)	Souvenirs	Chain Brands
29. Chicken Foot Corner (鸡脚叁只)	Suzhou Specialty Snacks	Suzhou Specialty
30. Hanxiang Club - Pingjiang Road Employment Base for the Disabled (寒香会社——平江路残疾人就业基地)	Artworks	Art
31. Fangzhou Coffee House (方舟咖啡屋)	Coffee	Artistic, Trendy
32. Pingjiang Shangyuan Homestay (平江上院民宿)	Hotels	
33. Wei Ji Guihua Cake (魏记桂花糕)	Traditional Dim Sum	Suzhou Specialty Foods
34. Yongtai Shangdian · Handmade Pastry (甬泰尚点·手工糕点)	Traditional Dim Sum	Suzhou Specialty Foods
35. Qu Garden Bookstore (曲园书苑)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
36. Wanzhi Coffee (顽植咖啡)	Coffee	Artistic, Trendy, Experience, Vintage
37. Seven Sisters Hanfu Travel Photography (七姑娘汉服旅拍)	Hanfu Photography	Experience, Vintage
38. Pillow Narcissus Bean Cake (枕水仙豆糕)	Traditional Dim Sum	Suzhou Specialty Foods
39. Tea-colored Misty Rain (茶色烟雨)	Bubble Tea	
40. Yanyu Jiangnan Hanfu Museum (嫣羽江南汉服馆)	Hanfu	Experience, Vintage
41. Guiyuqiu Lai (Suzhou Osmanthus Bi Luo Chun Specialty Store) (桂雨秋来 (苏州桂花碧螺春专门店))	Suzhou Specialty Tea, Ice Cream	Tea Culture
42. Xianya Garden Kunqu Pingtan (闲雅苑昆曲评弹)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
43. Si Wan · Pure Cloth Doll Cat Cafe · Cat House (四寓·纯布偶猫咖·猫舍)	Pets, Coffee	Experience
44. gridcoffee	Coffee	Exquisite
45. Pinmingyuan Tea Shop (品茗苑茶叶店)	Tea Leaves	Tea Culture
46. Chunzhi Yuyi Hanfu Experience (春织羽衣汉服体验)	Hanfu	Experience, Vintage
47. Mei Yue Xuan · Plum Blossom Cake (梅月轩·梅花糕)	Traditional Dim Sum	Suzhou Specialty
48. Wan San Ti (万三蹄)	Chinese Cuisine	Chain Stores
49. Seven Sweet (七分甜)	Bubble Tea	Chain Stores
50. Han'er Linglong Tea Bureau (翰尔玲珑茶局)	Tea House	Tea Culture
51. Yifeng Tang (倚风堂)	Agarwood, Tea	Traditional Features
52. Old Beijing Beef Tripe (老北京爆肚)	Traditional Beijing Snacks	Beijing Specialties
53. CoCo都可	Bubble Tea	Chain Stores
54. Han'er Yuan · Pingtan Tea House · Theater (翰尔园·评弹茶馆·剧场)	Tea Drinking, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
55. Crab Delight & Crab Roe Noodles (蟹兹味·蟹黄面)	Noodle Shop	Suzhou Specialty Foods
56. Fish Food Rice Dao & Jiangsu and Zhejiang Cuisine (鱼食饭稻·江浙土菜)	Restaurant	Chain Stores
57. Moqi (茉沏)	Bubble Tea	Chain Stores
58. Qianzhi Studio (乾芝斋)	Bakery	Suzhou Specialty Foods

59. Hong Dengji - Intangible Cultural Heritage Suzhou Cuisine Restaurant (洪登记·非遗苏帮菜餐厅)	Suzhou Cuisine	Suzhou Specialty Foods
60. Tong Dexing - Suzhou Noodle Shop - Three Shrimp Noodles (同得兴·苏式面馆·三虾面)	Suzhou Noodles	Suzhou Specialty Foods
61. Xianyayuan Tea House (闲雅苑茶馆)	Tea House	Tea Culture
62. Chuanmen (串门)	Snacks	No Regional Characteristics
63. Haner Bar Suzhou - Cocktails & Folk Guitar (苏州翰尔酒吧·鸡尾酒·民谣吉他)	Bar	Artistic
64. Huashangrong Hanfu Experience Center (花裳容汉服体验馆)	Hanfu Experience Center	Experience, Vintage
65. Writing Channel (写字台)	Souvenirs, Brush Pen	Artistic, Vintage, Traditional Features
66. Huabaozhai (华宝斋)	Traditional Accessories	Vintage, Traditional Features
67. Yishizhai (艺石斋)	Antique Artifacts	Vintage, Traditional Features
68. Huawuque Arts & Crafts Store (花无缺工艺品店)	Crafts	Exquisite
69. San Wanchang (三万昌)	Tea Shop	Tea Culture
70. Jiangnan Rice Bureau (江南米造局)	Qing Bar	Artistic
71. Suzhou Museum Official Cultural and Creative Shop (苏州博物馆官方文创商店)	Cultural and Creative Shop	Brands
72. Suzhou Su Fan Museum - Cultural and Creative Shop (苏州苏扇博物馆·文创店)	Cultural and Creative Shop	Brands
73. Pingjiang Herun Inn (平江和润民宿)	Hotels	
74. You Su Art Museum (友苏美术馆)	Art Gallery	Art
75. Zhencai Hall (祯彩堂)	Gift Shop	Suzhou Specialty
76. Huaxu Tea Room (花溯茶室)	Tea Room	Tea Culture
77. Dongwu Silk (东吴丝绸)	Silk	Silk Culture
78. Zhuolinli Sugar Congee (拙林里糖粥)	Suzhou Snacks	Suzhou Specialty Foods
79. Taohuawu Tea Culture Hall (桃花坞茶文化坊)	Tea House	Tea Culture
80. Taohuawu Cheongsam Tailoring (桃花坞旗袍定制)	Custom Clothing	Suzhou Traditional Features
81. Taihu Meisi Silk (太湖美丝绸)	Silk	Silk Culture
82. Xianyayuan (闲雅苑)	Tea House	Tea Culture
83. Chantui Cultural Space (蝉蜕文化空间)	Tea House	Tea Culture
84. Shen Wansan - Jiangnan Braised Foods (沈万三·江南卤)	Dining	Chain Brands
85. Xiuniang Silk (绣娘丝绸)	Silk	Silk Culture
86. Pingjiang Road Herun Inn (平江路和润民宿)	Hotels	
87. Suzhou Impression (苏州印象)	Handcrafted Porcelain, Tea, Cof	Exquisite, Artistic, Trendy
88. Cat's Sky City Concept Bookstore (Suzhou Lilac Store) (猫的天空之城概念书店(苏州丁香店))	Bookstore, Bubble Tea, Coffee	Exquisite, Artistic, Trendy, Chain Brands
89. Yixi Global Original Jewelry Collection Store (一玺全球原创首饰集合店)	Jewelry Shop	No Specific Regional Characteristics
90. Tang Xiaofei Designer National Style Pavilion (唐小妃设计师国风馆)	Traditional Costumes	Suzhou Specialty
91. Yidecheng Snuff (益德成鼻烟)	Snuff	No Specific Regional Characteristics
92. Fuguangjin Hanfu Experience Center (浮光锦汉服体验馆)	Hanfu Experience Center	Experience, Vintage
93. Yiman Hotel (艺漫酒店)	Hotels	
94. Yitang Silk (羿唐丝绸)	Fans	Vintage
95. Muxitang Seal (木樨堂印)	Cultural and Creative Shop	Artistic, Chain Stores
96. Chu Jian Pingjiang Cultural and Creative Space (初见平江文创空间)	Cultural and Creative Shop	Artistic
97. Suhongxiang (蘇泓祥)	Bakery	No Regional Characteristics
98. Pingjiang Xiangchun Ming Tea Shop (平江香春茗茶叶)	Tea	Tea Culture
99. Dongli Republic of China Clothing (东篱民国服装)	Traditional Costumes	Experience, Vintage
100. Yang Hui Arts & Crafts Store (杨慧工艺品店)	Gift Shop	Exquisite, Artistic
101. Yangxinzhai Pingtan Hall (养心斋评弹馆)	Tea House, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
102. Three Cats Youth Hostel (三只猫青年旅舍)	Hotels	
103. Yunluo Sheng (云罗生)	Traditional Clothing	Suzhou Specialty
104. Hefu Fishing Noodles (和府捞面)	Noodle Shop	Chain Brands
105. Zijin Wanxiang Golden Nanmu Pavilion (紫金万象金丝楠木馆)	Golden Nanmu Wood	Ancient Characteristics
106. Sunshine in the Alley (巷子里的阳光)	Dining	Exquisite, No Regional Characteristics
107. Pingjiang Garden Tea House (平江园茶馆)	Tea House	Tea Culture
108. Lost City Inn (迷失城市民宿)	Hotels	
109. Silent Studio (无言斋)	Antique Artifacts	Ancient Characteristics
110. Jiang Sheng (姜生)	Traditional Costumes	Ancient Characteristics
111. Gui Xiang Village (桂香村)	Fast food	No Regional Characteristics
112. Sugar Bubble · Taro Brain (糖泡·芋泥脑袋)	Bubble Tea	No Regional Characteristics
113. Miss Su Hanfu Experience Store (苏姑娘汉服体验馆)	Hanfu Experience Center	Experience, Vintage
114. Spring Tea Event (春上茶事)	Tea House	Tea Culture
115. Qingyu Hall Pingtan Tea House (清语堂评弹茶座)	Tea House, Pingtan	Tea Culture, Traditional Opera Culture
116. Su Fang (苏坊)	礼品店	Exquisite, No Regional Characteristics
117. Time Code Creative Grocery (时光密码创意杂货)	礼品店	Exquisite, No Regional Characteristics
118. Ruoxi and Tea (若溪和茶)	Tea House	Tea Culture
119. Subtle Grace Qipao Customization (素雅顾顾旗袍定制)	Traditional Costumes	Ancient Characteristics
120. Wanchun Gui Hanfu Qipao (挽春归汉服旗袍)	Traditional Costumes	Ancient Characteristics

Table 6.1 Business operations on Pingjiang Road in 2024

**Statistical Table of Commercial Spaces on Pingjiang Road in 2024**

Types of business	Quantity	Percentage
Tea house & Pingtan	22	18%
Traditional custome	22	18%
Hotel	16	13%
Dining	26	22%
Handicrafts	13	11%
Coffe	8	7%
Galleries	1	1%
Others	13	11%
Chain Stores	16	13%

**Statistical Table of Commercial Spaces on Pingjiang Road in 2012**

Types of business	Quantity	Percentage
Coffe	26	37%
Casual attire	2	3%
Hotel	5	8%
Dining	4	6%
Handicrafts	25	37%
Galleries	5	8%
Others	2	1%

Table 6.2

### *Experiential Atmosphere in Interior Spaces*

Data indicates that most businesses incorporate elements that highlight Suzhou's regional characteristics, such as tea culture, traditional performing arts, and local specialty foods. Additionally, many shops have integrated modern commercial functions, including cafés, dining, boutique retail, and craft experiences. A smaller number of shops are chain brands that carry their own symbolic value, offering trendy products with no specific regional characteristics. Beyond the selection of business types, the majority of these shops use thematic and scenographic design approaches to enhance a sensory-based consumer experience within their internal spaces. For example, there are 22 shops on Pingjiang Road where visitors can experience Suzhou's tea culture while listening to Pingtan performances. The interior design of these shops often imitates the setting of an ancient teahouse, providing visitors with a traditional and nostalgic spatial experience (as shown in figure 6.13, depicting the interior of the Quyuan Shuyuan bookstore). The structural features of old buildings are preserved, and the furniture is typically selected to be in a classical Chinese style, using wooden furniture. Even the stage setup adheres to traditional designs. Visitors can enjoy tea indoors while watching opera or Suzhou Pingtan performances.



Figure 6.13 Quyuan Shuyuan



Most of the shops on Pingjiang Road are clearly designed to cater to the contemporary young consumer demographic, which values refined, high-quality experiences and personalized aesthetics. For example, as shown in Images 6.14-67., several creative boutiques with their own distinctive styles mainly sell artisanal and artistic handcrafted products. These consumer spaces, through their unique styles, infuse the district with fashion-forward, avant-garde, or bourgeois, artistic, and vintage consumption symbols. These new symbolic meanings are added to the traditional and modern symbols already conveyed by the alleys and architecture, representing a further evolution of the district's significance. They implicitly appeal to and resonate with a lifestyle that seeks fashion and refinement, thereby reinforcing Pingjiang Road's spatial symbolism and its ties to consumerism. Additionally, many elements branded with labels such as "traditional," "Suzhou specialty," and "Jiangnan characteristic" are being extensively marketed, creating, together with the alley spaces, a "Disneyfied" environment perfectly suited for experiential consumption.



Figure 6.14 Huashu Tea house



Figure 6.15 Yuiliangwan Grocery store



Figure 6.16 creative Grocery



Figure 6.17 Hanfu shop

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The media wields significant power in promoting spatial consumption on Pingjiang Road, playing a crucial role in shaping public perception. As consumption trends and fashions rapidly evolve, the consumer spaces on Pingjiang Road also undergo changes and iterations to keep pace with these trends. The recent surge in experiential consumption projects, such as Pingtan teahouses and Hanfu photography, can be attributed to the media's influence and the growing cultural appreciation for traditional lifestyles. While these trends appear to revive and restore the authentic experience of life on Pingjiang Road, in reality, they rewrite the district's original authenticity.

The symbolization and commercialization of culture and space result in a simulation and reconstruction of Pingjiang Road's historical essence. Under the broader context of a consumer society, the material and cultural resources of Pingjiang Road have been easily reorganized and redefined, transforming into fashionable symbols. Consequently, the space of Pingjiang Road, though wrapped in local characteristics, has effectively become a modern, placeless space.

## Endnote

Figure6.6 "Books Meet on Pingjiang Road | This Year's Pingjiang Book Festival is Truly Unique!" [平江路上 书里相逢 | 今年的平江晒书节, 大不一样! ], Sina, April 14, 2019. Accessed August 15 2024. [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_2056346650\\_7a915c1a02000xzre.html](https://k.sina.cn/article_2056346650_7a915c1a02000xzre.html).

Figure6.7 "The 2021 Suzhou International Design Week 'Design • Pingjiang Night' Event Held" [2021 苏州国际设计周"设计•平江之夜"举行], *China Daily*, Accessed August 11, 2024. <https://js.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202112/08/WS61b0740ea3107be4979fc0b0.html>.

Figure6.8&6.9 "Suzhou International Design Week's Q4 Ancient City Discovery Tour Unveiled: Rediscovering the Ancient City and the Unknown" [苏州国际设计周 Q4 古城发现之旅内容大公开 在古城与未知重逢], *Jiemian News*, Accessed August 20, 2024. <https://m.jiemian.com/article/6861113.html>.

Figure6.11&6.12 "Hanfu + Flower Hairpins: Suzhou's Old Town Streets Offer a New Experience" [‘汉服+簪花围’苏州古镇老街又有了新玩法], *Suzhou News Center*, Accessed August 15, 2024. <https://news.2500sz.com/doc/2024/02/02/1062477.shtml>.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusion and Future Outlook

### 7.1 Research Findings

This study examines the phenomenon of the renewal and redevelopment of Chinese historic districts from the perspective of a consumer society. By leveraging concepts such as consumer culture, symbolic consumption, and media, the research analyzes the underlying consumption logic and provides a fresh interpretation of the new consumption spaces that have emerged from the transformation of historic districts. Shanghai's Xintiandi and Suzhou's Pingjiang Road are used as primary case studies to explain the factors driving the commercialization of contemporary historic districts. The focus is on exploring the commercialization process of these spaces, their spatial characteristics, and the impacts of these changes.

**(1) The transformation of contemporary Chinese historic districts follows the consumption logic of "space production - space marketing - space consumption."**

Within the context of a modern consumer society, the trend of spatial commercialization in the redevelopment of historic districts generally adheres to the logic of consumption. This study approaches consumer theory from the perspective that consumer culture is the dominant culture in a consumer society, with consumerist values at its core. In a consumer society, individual consumption becomes the focal point of social life, driving economic growth and serving as the primary basis for social differentiation and identity. In this process, the symbolic value of goods plays a crucial role, with the production and consumption of cultural symbols forming the core of consumer culture.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the cultural capital of historic districts is cultivated into cultural symbols that play a crucial role in both production and consumption. The cultural capital of historic districts includes their tangible heritage, such as traditional residences, streets, ancient bridges, and wells, as well as spatial layouts and characteristics. It also encompasses intangible heritage, such as historical narratives, performing arts, and tea culture. All of these elements can be transformed into symbols that can be disseminated, thereby driving the formation of space consumption.

Starting with the redevelopment of Xintiandi, historic districts have transformed into new types of consumption spaces by leveraging their unique cultural atmospheres through renewal efforts. These historic districts increasingly exhibit characteristics of symbolization, thematization, and experiential consumption. The Xintiandi model demonstrates that the reproduction of historic spaces centers on the "symbolization" of the space. On one hand, this is achieved by abstracting cultural symbols and overlaying them with modern elements, resulting in a comprehensive cultural "packaging" of the district, while embedding modern consumer functions beneath this cultural "facade." On the other hand, the introduction of high-end brand symbols drives consumption and deepens individuals' sense of identity.

In terms of space marketing, media plays a crucial role in guiding spatial consumption by infusing the district with new consumer meanings, such as associating it with notions of "nostalgia," "fashion," "romance," or depicting it as a symbol of personal taste or lifestyle, thus catering to the contemporary public's spatial consumption needs. At the consumer level, the activities within these districts increasingly reflect a trend toward experiential consumption, where the focus is more on consuming the overall atmosphere of the district. This indicates that the symbolic meaning of the district itself has become a significant component of spatial consumption.

### **(2) Loss of Authenticity in Historic Districts Following Consumer-Driven Transformation**

The redevelopment of historic districts under the logic of a consumer society is inherently driven by economic considerations, focusing on enhancing the value of these areas through spatial consumption. By producing and consuming the symbolic value of historic districts, the process accelerates capital circulation and utilizes cultural uniqueness to package these districts as commodities, thereby enhancing the city's cultural and tourism image to generate economic benefits. When the aesthetics and information encoded in cultural symbols become the primary content of the production and consumption of historic districts, the process follows a logic of differentiation and fashion, where uniqueness and novelty are the main pursuits. This approach is indifferent to questions of morality or aesthetics, as the popularity of symbols is arbitrary and unpredictable. Consequently, while catering to consumer demands and revitalizing the economy of old towns, this process also risks reducing regional culture to a superficial level. The district may become a "consumerist theme park" with a "pseudo-historical" facade detached from its local context. For example, the increasing number of teahouses on Pingjiang Road makes it appear more like a stage showcasing tea culture rather than a genuine representation of traditional local life.

### **(3) From Shanghai's Xintiandi to Suzhou Pingjiang Road: From Compliance to Resistance**

From a value perspective, the positive aspect of consumer-driven transformation is that it revitalizes historic districts, giving them new functions and roles in contemporary times, making them more accessible to the public, and ensuring the preservation and use of historical buildings. However, the downside is that the contemporary role of historic districts should not be limited to providing "imagination" for outsiders at the expense of authenticity. The symbolic value of Xintiandi in Shanghai derives from its cultural characteristics and the high-end brands introduced into the space, creating consumer symbols. In contrast, Pingjiang Road relies more on the atmospheric symbols generated by its spatial characteristics, emphasizing experiential consumption over the commercialized focus seen in Xintiandi. When the space of a district is entirely consumed by commercial functions, all cultural elements are, to some extent, absorbed into the realm of consumption, transformed into symbolic capital that serves the creation of a consumer atmosphere, thereby losing their authentic essence.

From the inception of the Xintiandi redevelopment model to the rise of Pingjiang Road, the commercialization of historic districts can be seen as a response to societal trends and the demands of the times. Xintiandi represents a completely fabricated historical space, devoid of authenticity, and exemplifies a mode of spatial production that lacks a sense of place. In contrast,

Pingjiang Road has retained some degree of authenticity due to the preservation of its original residents' living spaces. However, even Pingjiang Road, in the process of transformation, has gradually experienced a loss of authenticity. As a result of government-driven cultural tourism promotion and market forces, Pingjiang Road has undergone a significant shift toward commercialization, evolving from a local recreational area into a tourist-oriented pedestrian street. It has effectively become a theme park designed to fulfill consumer fantasies.

In the redevelopment of Xintiandi, the driving forces were primarily the local government, developers, and consumers, with the original residents playing the role of the displaced. As a result, Xintiandi has been entirely filled with the consumer functions demanded by the new era. In contrast, the redevelopment and marketing of Pingjiang Road were driven by the local government, individual business owners, and consumers, with some original residents remaining during the transformation process. However, as consumer culture fully permeates, Pingjiang Road has gradually become dominated by consumer spaces, leading to the compression of the living spaces for its original residents.

Pingjiang Road's strategy for resisting full-scale commercialization is rooted in the ongoing daily lives of residents in the surrounding streets and alleys. If one explores the other lanes within the district, traces of vibrant daily life can still be found. While the lives of local residents have been constrained and altered by the historic district's redevelopment, they often disregard the consumer-oriented symbols and continue to use the space as a public area, fulfilling the most authentic and original functions of the street. This is primarily manifested in non-consumptive activities by residents within the consumer spaces. For instance, early morning dog-walkers in the alleys of Pingjiang Road, elderly men enjoying tea and sunshine outside their homes in the afternoon, casual conversations, and relaxing in the shade—these activities fall outside the consumer-oriented behavior that Pingjiang Road, as a commercial space, aims to regulate.

## **7.2 Limitations of the Study and Future Outlook**

### ***Study Limitations***

This research primarily focuses on interpreting the underlying principles and logic behind the phenomena discussed, with relatively little emphasis on practical guidance for architectural renovation and planning. While the spatial analysis offers a fresh perspective, its connection to practical spatial renovation techniques is somewhat limited, making it difficult to provide constructive advice on macro-level planning.

The situation in Chinese cities is highly complex, with influencing factors extending beyond consumerist culture. Economic, social, political, and cultural factors are deeply intertwined, all of which significantly impact architectural design and planning decisions. This study approaches the subject from the perspective of a consumer society, using these factors as supplementary angles for examination, but it lacks a comprehensive and detailed investigation into the formation of the current state of historic districts.

### ***Planning Recommendations***

1. While the restoration and preservation of historical buildings in historic districts have achieved a high level of completion, the utilization of cultural capital within these areas is a double-edged sword. Alongside generating economic benefits, it is crucial to focus on the transmission of cultural heritage and the preservation of the living spaces for original residents. For instance, the gradual decline of the original residents in Pingjiang Road is a significant concern, attributable to several factors. On one hand, the pressure from modern consumer spaces has encroached upon their living areas; on the other hand, the traditional classical residential structures are no longer suitable for the lifestyle needs of modern inhabitants. The social fabric and community relationships within these areas are gradually weakening, especially given that the majority of current residents in Suzhou's ancient city are elderly.
2. The consumer trends within historic districts are largely spontaneous in their formation and spread, with the creation of symbols being arbitrary and unregulated. It is important to provide proper guidance for the culture being consumed by the public, ensuring that the transmission of cultural heritage is positive and meaningful.

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