Exploring Influential Factors for Decision-Making in Urban Development: Urban Heritage Protection and Displacing Living Communities

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Abstract

Rapid urbanization is one of the main characteristics of the 21st century. Urban systems are critical in creating urban displacements during such rapid processes. In most cases, urban displacements are triggers and catalysts of some urban crises, generating extra obstacles and pitfalls to humanitarian and sustainable development in urban areas. One of the major impacts of the rapid urbanization process is the process of urban house displacement. In historic and heritage cities, towns, or villages, we see the trend of displacing urban homes as a result. In the name of urban heritage protection, cities and towns/villages are converted into large-scale open-air museums, where the local residents are often evicted. To understand the connections and interactions between urban house displacement and urban heritage protection, this study explores key influential factors of decision-making in the directions of urban development, using the grounded theory for cause extraction and categorization and providing political implications for urban planning and regeneration projects. The case studies for this brief study are three cities of Dali, Lijiang, and Shangri-La in western parts of Yunnan Province, China. This paper utilizes mapping studies of the heritage sites of these three cities based on the surveys conducted in July 2022. Issues of urban regeneration and displacement scenarios are observed, assessed, and discussed for us to open up further debates on what causes the displacement of local residents in such contexts.

Keywords: Urban housing, Displacement, Heritage Protection, Sustainable Development, Decision-making

1. Introduction

Over 55% of the global population now lives in cities, while it is expected that 2/3 of the world's population, or approximately 6.3 billion, will be living in urban areas by the year 2050 (National Research Council, 2000). Aligned with this progressive trend, the number of displaced people living in urban environments also increases. For instance, it is claimed that about 60-80% of internally displaced people live in urban areas (Sarzin, 2017), where marginalization, criminal violence, conflicts, and disaster risk have been deepening and concentrating on potentially growing poverty and inequalities.

This displacement phenomenon is common in cities or places with a heritage value or historic importance, mainly because the officials often aim to create room for tourism opportunities and replace the old residential buildings with refurbished hotels or new urban development areas. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether a property or an area has "cultural", "social", "historical" or "memorable" values to be considered as a heritage. As it is one of the intangible dimensions associated with a particular space or place, while the meaning or value to some groups of people is very objective to different stakeholders and/or relatives. Besides those got authorities to form governmental institutions' awards and recognition, the remaining parts of some land/area that have not met the criteria of being recognized as

a "historical heritage" may face a difficult situation, especially some areas with only historical importance (or cultural identity), not outstanding heritage values. There is a gap in determining the turning point of perceiving the significance of the buildings/areas. Moreover, during the process of urban development and land exploitation, some areas lose their "development value "/"development rights" and/or political preferences & privileges in the eyes of property developers, urban planners, and governments. Meanwhile, the area/region will lose its attractiveness to business and development, turning into a "zone of recession"/" behindhand area" and becoming a home of urban displaced people due to its cheap rentals and low living costs during the transition. However, due to the speed, level, and process of urbanization and development, developed countries and developing countries have significant differences and variations in the decision-making, actions, authorization, policymaking, and implementations regarding urban planning and land use with respect to historical heritage protection, demolition (of original settlements) and placement (of residents). For example, countries in Europe have done well in this. In contrast, due to the rapid speed of urbanization and relatively large population and urban residents' density, some cities in developing countries have failed to protect some historical heritage and secure development equity in certain areas, leaving/making urban slums and/or displacing living communities in areas of intangible values.

There is a lack of a standard way to recognize a place/space/area's intangible values, not only by the minorities, scarcities, uniqueness, and significance within different contexts. According to (Munasinghe, 2002), the heritage value of urban space stems from the cultural dwelling patterns that prioritize environmental quality over physical elements. However, traditional conservation approaches tend to focus on physical elements while disregarding the evolved activity patterns and concepts that contribute to the phenomenological values of the urban space. In order to ensure the preservation of urban space and maintain cultural continuity, conservation efforts should be regarded as a cultural activity that respects the current cultural consciousness and enhances its continuity (Munasinghe, 2000).

Displacement means involuntary relocation of current residents or businesses, which often occurs in places where there are traces of history or heritage sites for visitors. There are many cases of forced urban house displacement due to unplanned urban development, poor previous urban planning, major changes in regional/national development strategies and/or other uncontrollable factors. However, some of those "unnecessary" urban house displacements and relocations could be avoided during the decision-making process in a precautionary manner. In many cases, the regenerative city transformations (Cheshmehzangi, 2022). become inevitable processes where the movement from global to local is confused with local to global development – i.e., the same generic approach for urban regeneration and heritage protection at a smaller scale. On the other hand, urban heritage protection remains another critical urban issue. Understanding whose heritage and why heritage should be protected as well as rating tourism as a windfall gain of heritage protection decision-making becomes better focused. It is hard to tell the balancing point and/or indicate criteria to rebuild, replace, renovate, or preserve the urban environments, particularly in old downtown centers and growing metropolitan areas. Notably, there are no clear boundaries or standard criteria to estimate the monetary value and cultural and social value of a certain area/land. But the process of decision-making can be tailored into a more practical and applicable way to reduce the errors to the minimum.

2. Methodology

The case studies for this brief study are three cities of Dali, Lijiang, and Shangri-La in western parts of Yunnan Province, China. This paper utilizes mapping studies of the heritage sites of these three cities based on the surveys conducted in July 2022. The sampling method used for this study was based on a selection process, including the selection of old towns in each city, urban blocks within those selected old towns, and communities or residents that reside in each selected area. The selection is based on one old town per city, ensuring the zones in each old town are accessible for surveys and conducting research. Each selected site is a regeneration site within the last 1-5 years, allowing us to trace any recent changes, alterations, or urban transformations. The mapping is conducted for one day per case study, where a research team of six members was trained and deployed to map, record, and survey regenerated old towns of the selected three cities. All samples are taken from regenerated sites where tourism is the primary driver of heritage protection.

3. Results

3.1. China's Model: Where Tourism Plays a Major Part in Heritage Protection

Since China's rapid development in the 1990s, we have seen extensive urban renewal and urban expansion projects across many Chinese cities. Some of these projects have led to the complete displacement of local and traditional communities, often through a sort of urban modernization process – also known as physical urban upgrade. Heritage protection has gained more popularity in smaller cities and towns where tourism has become more prevalent in recent years. Hence, smaller cities and towns are experiencing a process of commercialization through new tourism industry initiatives. In some cases, local heritage protection and socio-economic development have become the primary

approach to imagining and re-imagining old towns (Krishnamurthy, 2021). Despite many attempts to explore and embed community participation within urban management in such cases (Krishnamurthy, 2020), we see many top-down decision-making processes or directions in cities and towns where tourism is still booming. Some argue the importance of international influence and local response (Fan, 2014) has led to a better understanding of community involvement in such processes. We also witness rapid developments and transitions that could potentially fast-forward the urban house displacement for urban heritage protection (i.e., for houses and communities). The renovation of such areas, particularly for the residential communities, often leads to the development of popular homestays, art hotels, boutique hotels, hostels, etc. Cities or communities of such types struggle between keeping their visual and cultural identities and the social identities that focus on local communities (Cheshmehzangi, 2020). Sometimes this leads to the result of protecting the physical heritage without its inherent cultural values, implying that commercialization/tourism industrialization-orientated approach of heritage protection can neglect the inherent cultural values and eventually some intangible cultural values particularly for those who have close connections/relevance/dependence, with particular space and place (e.g., cultural activities celebrating events in the ancestral temple) could become extinct very fast.

In some cases, the projects are entirely refurbished with different land uses, different activities, and even different characteristics and spatial layouts. The so-called urban regeneration approaches have other influential factors that regenerate the communities, but rather tailored-made or driven towards enhancing the local – or sometimes non-local – tourism industries. The political implications for the local authorities and developers are somewhat of a major challenge, indicating an upraise of urban entrepreneurialism and commodification (Su, 2015) of urban

heritage sites and cities in China. The current development model also occurred elsewhere and is not only unique to the context of China, indicating that tourism plays a major part in heritage protection, or at least for the old town preservation opportunities. More for the smaller cities and towns, where there are still traces of traditional and old urban fabrics, such a model appears to become a by-default practice that boosts regeneration and, thus, tourism industries and old town refurbishments. The results, however, affect urban house displacement processes, which we highlight in the following section of case study observations.

3.2. Case Studies in Yunnan Province, China: Observations from three cities of Dali[1], Lijiang[2] and Shangri-La[3]

The local tourism industry is a significant part of Yunnan's economic revenue, and cities like Dali, Lijiang, and Shangri-La have become major touristic hubs in the province. All three cities are located in the western parts of Yunnan province in the south of China. While the cultural diversity and tourism development in Yunnan province (Chow, 2005) have long developed the region's development patterns, there is a growing pattern of "*economically incorporated tourism*" (Donaldson, 2007). that motivates local and non-local developers to consider urban house displacement projects. In this process, most of the local residents are moved out of the renovated old towns and are replaced by tourism industries, such as hotels, shops, restaurants, etc.

The Italian approach to historic preservation distinguishes itself from that of Central-European cities in that it considers the entire territory as historically significant, rather than solely focusing on the historic center. This unique perspective has led to the successful conservation of historic towns such as Bologna, Ferrara, Rome, and Venice. In the 1950s, Italy

implemented an urban master plan for Assisi and Rome followed by a centralized plan in 1964, both of which were subsequently revised to prioritize strengthening local centers and decentralizing functions and services. As a result, protective measures, including planning regulations, now extend to the entire municipal area rather than being limited to the historic center alone. In contrast, certain Central-European cities have permitted the construction of high-rise office buildings near protected areas, indicating the necessity for a new UNESCO recommendation that addresses the "historic urban landscape" comprehensively. The city is considered a historical entity as well as a product of social production. It is viewed as a component of a larger space that is constantly evolving through a series of changes (Jokilehto, 2007).

The preservation of Bologna's historic center is considered a significant project because it aimed to conserve not only the historic buildings but also the living environment of the local residents (Cervellati, 1973). In 1976, UNESCO introduced the International Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas, also known as the 'Nairobi Recommendation.'(UNESCO, 1976) this recommendation broadened the scope of conservation to include various types of sites, such as prehistoric sites, historic towns, old urban quarters, villages, hamlets, and cohesive groups of monuments. It emphasized the need for historic areas to be seamlessly integrated into modern life, promoting a harmonious coexistence between the past and the present (Xie, 2020).

The three cases we observed in this brief study have very different approaches. The main similarity is the argument between urban house displacement vs. urban heritage protection, which creates new

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[1] (大理)

[2] (丽江)

[3] (香格里拉)

opportunities for new development, urban regeneration projects, and building or urban cluster renovations. The commercialization process in the name of tourism is somewhat inevitable, and we can see the effects are also quite similar in all three cities.

In Dali, earlier developments represent identities through tourism (Doorne, 2003), developing the opportunities for renovated old towns around Erh[4] Lake (or Er Lake). Benefitting from a very diverse geographical setting, Dali has expanded mainly around the lake, where older villages and traditional towns have become hubs for local tourism. In these old towns and villages, there are representations of unique local characteristics, traditions, and cultures. These are usually what we lose when their habitat is replaced with tourist-oriented activities. Some of these renovated old towns include new developments, often in the form of larger hotel corporations, new temples, and new mid-rise to high-rise residential compounds. Losing the urban morphology that represents the evolved culture indicates changes in urban setting and living environments. Only a few exceptions show that a traditional village is entirely renovated without any new development projects. On the north-eastern side of the Erhai Lake, we could see the emergence of high-end housing and villa-type projects, where the traditional setting or layouts are less visible. While most of the city's new and regeneration projects are alongside the southern edges of the Erhai Lake, there are patches of village or town regeneration on both sides of the lake. Between these renovated villages, where tourism is the primary industry, there are new housing projects, farms, and other green environments.

(1)   (2)

(3)   (4)

Figure 1 - 4: Examples of renovated or under renovation projects of residential units into tourists facilities, hotels, shops, and homestays in various old town and villages of Dali.

In Lijiang, we see a different type of development, but again through urban house displacement processes. A study from more than a decade ago explores and examines the multiple ways in which residents dwell in displacement (Su, 2012). Until today, the trend continues to remake Lijiang's cultural space in various resettlement community projects (Liu, 2016), meaning that displacement and resettlement have been very prominent. In a city like Lijiang, there are this prolonged and evident pockets of discontent, where the local residential areas are taken over by shop-houses, hotels, homestays, tourist facilities, etc. (Su, 2008). In a way, Lijiang has developed uniquely by creating several almost-enclaved old towns in large urban clusters in a relatively large urban setting. Between these renovated old towns are new urban development projects of mixed uses, but mostly residential units, displaced

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[4] (洱海)

communities, larger hotels and tourist facilities, other industries, etc. (Munasinghe, 2001) claims that the prevailing idea of planning, which focuses solely on practical considerations and neglects a human-centered approach to city life, must be reconsidered and replaced with new options. This approach to decision-making has resulted in a lack of vitality in urban areas (Munasinghe, 2001).

(5)   (6)

Figure 5 – 6: Lijiang renovation and tourism industries in confined urban clusters in the form of enclave and protected old towns.

(7)   **(8)**

Figures 7 – 8: Typical renovated settings in an old town in Lijiang with historical residential buildings converted into new retail or tourist facilities, green landscape, water steams, and an organic urban configuration.

In Shangri-La, a vast part of the old town in the central parts of the city is renovated in a coherent urban setting. Different from Dali and Lijiang, the city benefits from a large area of the old town, but mostly without the presence of local residents and houses. On the other hand, Bruges in Belgium and Bath in the UK, showcase of continuous planning in operation (Beernaert, 1992). This approach is helpful for long-term planning leading to a gradual

pace of development rather than transformative and sudden changes.

The low-rise central parts of the city are infested with tourist facilities and industries, where commercialized areas represent the vast majority of Shangri-La's downtown. The city has more normative and narrative values than Dali and Lijiang, making it more special for tourists. While it is located in a remote part of the province, it also benefits from Tibetan architectural characteristics and community settings. In particular, the larger vernacular housing units with local material use play a major part in creating a unique atmosphere of a genuine heritage zone in the province. In making Shangri-La to become what it is now, there has been major tourism development, and economic growth motivations have lasted for more than two decades (He, 2021). The name of the city itself is based on a "*new economic development strategy based on domestic tourism*" (Golley, 2018), indicating that it has been strategically selected for new development and tourism projects. Debates on the earlier politics of cultural production also show criticism of the pragmatic use of the Shangri-La myth (McGuckin, 1997) for the later – but eventual - displacement processes.

Figure 9: A view of larger residential units on the edge of Shangri-La's old town

(10)   (11)

Figures 10 – 11: Renovated old town area of Shangri-La with many spots for tourists and photo shooting opportunities

(12)   (13)

Figures 12 – 13: Day and night of Tibetan alleyways of Shangri-La's old town, where the local characteristics, architecture, colours, and materials are visible.

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Urban Heritage Protection for Whom?

The overall discussion from this study goes back to one of our questions a few years ago, i.e., urban heritage protection for whom? Here, we see the growing urban house displacement is changing the characteristics of old towns and villages into tourist hubs where the local residents and their everyday living and livelihoods are often absent. These communities refer to local aborigines, called national minority in China, living in Yunnan Province. For instance, there are national minorities such as the Dai [5] nationality, Tibetan [6] nationality, etc. This process is irreversible, and the heritage conversation has only helped the locals to be displaced to more

modern living areas, (where they have not connections or social kinships) with perhaps better living conditions and upgraded environments (what about their livelihoods?). Nonetheless, the displaced communities need help with the process of decision-making pathways that neglect their role in upgrading their existing living environments, and instead, they are displaced with few options in hand. Through some general observations of three case study cities, we highlight here a genuine reflection on how urban heritage protection pushes the idea of urban house displacement. In addition, we could see the physical and visual attributes of some of these old town regeneration sites, such as the issues between global values and local values. Still, the spiritual, social, and cultural attributes have evolved to be other than what the local residents could consider their home. The landscape of such urban heritage sites and old town regenerated areas could simply be seen through the visual and physical attachments, where the old settings remain almost the same or close to their original looks, and the old fabrics are experienced through vernacular characteristics, identities, and traces of experiences of the local contexts. However, the displacement phenomenon, particularly associated with urban house displacement, challenges the social and cultural attributes of such regenerated areas, where heritage protection often feeds tourism and larger plans for economic development.

The locals are often relocated to designated communities where they can often access these newly regenerated old towns. In a way, such areas are cherished by people who may only visit the sites for a few days, while the ones who used to reside there could be elsewhere, in the vicinity or far away. There are clearly certain influential decision-making factors in the direction of urban development in such conservation projects. Some challenges often create inevitable conflicts between the local residents and authorities, providing political implications for urban planning

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[5] (傣族)

[6] (藏族)

and regeneration programs that could become more bottom-up in the future. In this brief study, we highlighted issues of urban regeneration and displacement scenarios to open up further debates on what causes the displacement of local residents in such contexts. The over-commercialization approaches could be critical to how far tourism could displace a place's identity, experiences, and characteristics. Hence, we have to consider methods that could meet both the top-down decision-making of economic development as well as the bottom-up values and livelihoods that may soon be forgotten.

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