

The Dilemma of Authenticity: The Conservation and Reconstruction of Traditional Residences in China –Taking Pingyao, Shanghai and Suzhou as Examples

Shuyin Li

School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University

Email: happylishuyin@163.com

Abstract

Thirty years after the release of the Nara Document on Authenticity, the concept of authenticity still faces many difficulties in its localization in China, which are manifested in three aspects: the contradiction between absolutization and relativization, materiality and spirituality, and authority and popularization. In China's historic cities, there are a large number of traditional residences, which constitute the background of the "authenticity" of urban heritage. However, due to the traditional wooden construction in China, these traditional residences have undergone nearly a century of historical changes and suffer from problems such as structural aging and long-term disrepair. Unlike the legally protected historical buildings in China, which are maintained by the state, most traditional residences are protected by individuals, and often encounter difficulties such as lack of funds and high maintenance costs during the conservation process. To a considerable extent, there are also calls for demolition and reconstruction among the public. How to maintain the authenticity of traditional residences? This paper takes three historic cities in China - Pingyao, Shanghai and Suzhou - as examples to explore three different conservation models caused by the different aspects such as construction history, construction scale, land values: comprehensive conservation, limited conservation, and "Three Original" conservation. It also discusses the similarities and differences in the attitudes of the government, experts and the public towards the protection of traditional residences, and how they maintain a delicate balance like walking on a tightrope to the greatest extent possible to preserve the authenticity of traditional residences.

Keywords: Authenticity; Dilemma; Traditional dwellings; Conservation; Reconstruction

After the release of the Nara Document in 1994, there was more attention and discussion on the adaptability of the concept of "authenticity" in the field of international heritage conservation to different civilizations around the world. The concept of "authenticity" originated from the cosmology and spatial-temporal view of Western civilization, and is significantly different from the concept of "authenticity" in ancient Chinese cosmology and spatial-temporal view. Firstly, analyze how to express "authenticity" in traditional Chinese construction culture, then discuss the challenges faced by the concept of "authenticity" in the contemporary Chinese context, and finally illustrate the way of "authenticity" in the field of Chinese heritage conservation through three cases of traditional residential protection in historic cities.

1. The concept of "authenticity" in traditional Chinese construction culture

In the traditional organic holistic cosmology and cyclic space-time view of China, humans and nature, matter and spirit, are a unified whole and are in eternal change, known as the "turning the tide and bringing prosperity" and "the movement of the opposite path". The construction of urban architecture should conform to the reflection of the "the Tao of Heaven" in the human world, that is, it should conform to the "ritual system" and "feng shui". Architecture is a dwelling place for "people" in the present world. Compared to the material existence of "eternity", the Confucian emphasis is more on the spiritual inheritance of "eternity", which is known as the "Three Immortals" of "Set Moral Examples, Perform Great Deeds, and Spread Noble Ideas". Architecture does not pursue eternity through "solidity", but expresses the path of eternity through "replacement and reconstruction".

1.1 Organic holistic cosmology

The ancient Chinese organic holistic cosmology believed that humans and nature form an inseparable whole, jointly adhering to the principles of heaven and ethics. Human beings are a part of nature, and architecture is also a part of nature. The highest level of architectural aesthetics is "although created by humans, like Heavenly". People or buildings dissolve into nature to achieve "eternity", rather than standing in nature and resisting nature to achieve "eternity".

1.2 cyclic space-time view

The concept of cyclic space-time in China originated from the Book of Changes, which established "No plain is not followed by a slope; no advance is not followed by return" as the fundamental law governing the operation of all things in the universe. The Yin Yang Eight Trigrams diagram in the Book of Changes originates from the

observation and setting of the 24 solar terms in nature by ancient people (Figure 1), emphasizing the cyclic and changing laws of yin and yang energies. Yuanjie Lin 2023) Buildings standing in the universe also follow this law without exception. The use of wood in ancient architecture, based on the characteristics of wood decay, can be consistent with the laws of the circulation of all things in the universe.



Fig 1. The 24 Solar Terms

The 24 solar terms are Start of Spring, Rain Water, Insects Awaken, Spring Equinox, Clear and Bright, Grain Rain, Start of Summer, Grain Buds, Grain in Ear, Summer Solstice, Minor Heat, Major Heat, Start of Autumn, The End of Heat, White Dew, Autumn Equinox, Cold Dew, Frost's Descent, Start of Winter, Minor Snow, Major Snow, Winter Solstice, Minor Cold, Major Cold.

1.3.Expressing the Way of Eternity through Maintenance and Reconstruction

The ancient Chinese imperial palace had a complete maintenance system. Taking the Forbidden City, which has been in existence for 600 years, as an example, it has a precise maintenance system of annual repair (regular maintenance), major repair (periodic reconstruction), and special repair (post disaster restoration). Establishing a royal timber factory to store the golden nanmu needed for the construction of the imperial palace, setting up a golden brick kiln in Suzhou to produce glazed golden bricks, and passing down the eight master craftsmen's systems of painting, tile making, and woodworking from generation to generation. The standard methods are fixed in the "Rules of Engineering Practice" to ensure the continuity of traditional construction techniques. Over the course of 600 years, the Hall of Supreme Harmony suffered from lightning strikes, wars, and burning, and underwent 4 reconstructions. (Figure 2-3) The maintenance system of folk architecture integrates patriarchal ethics and traditional craftsmanship, utilizing the winter agricultural off-season for maintenance and ensuring the reuse of old materials.



Fig 2. The Hall of Supreme Harmony

The Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City is located in the Palace Museum in Beijing. It is the largest of the three outer halls of the Forbidden City and also the largest palace in the Forbidden City. Commonly known as the "Golden Luang Hall" among the people, it is located in a prominent position along the north-south axis of the Forbidden City. Built in the 18th year of the Yongle reign of the Ming Dynasty (1420).

Picture source: The official website of the Palace Museum <https://www.dpm.org.cn/building/talk/224412.html>

2.The dilemma faced by the concept of "authenticity" in the contemporary Chinese context

The concept of "authenticity" in the field of urban heritage conservation originated from Western civilization and has a strong Western cultural color. The concept of "authenticity" has had a significant impact on the field of heritage conservation in China since its introduction, but to this day, it still faces many contradictions in the process of "sinicisation".

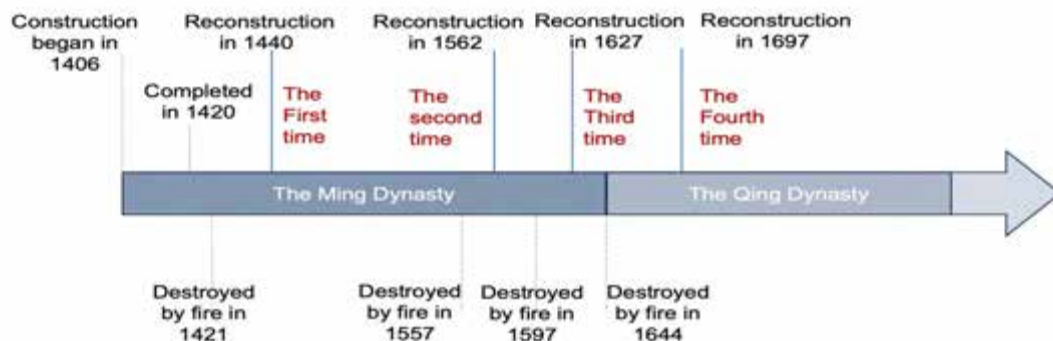


Fig 3. Over the course of more than 600 years, the Hall of Supreme Harmony has undergone four reconstructions
Diagram source: Drawn by the author of this article

2.1.The contradiction between absolutization and relativization

There are still a large number of traditional residential buildings in use in China, and these urban heritages are essentially dynamic, influenced by the passage of time and constantly changing cultural customs. However, the concept of authenticity in the field of international heritage protection often fails to adapt to changes and prioritizes preserving a fixed “absolutized” historic moment. In fact, authenticity should not be limited to a static “snapshot”, but should reflect the cultural changes that are taking place, which give meaning to urban heritage.

2.2.The contradiction between materiality and spirituality

Chinese urban heritage is often full of profound spiritual significance, which cannot be expressed solely through material attributes. An important contribution of the Nara Authenticity Document is its recognition of the importance of intangible values. However, this intangible spiritual value challenges the traditional standards used to evaluate authenticity. The spiritual value in heritage is often marginalized, excluded, or misunderstood due to considerations of authenticity, even though it is crucial for the cultural identity of the heritage. Chritina Cameron 2024)

2.3.The contradiction between authoritarianism and popularization

The origin of the concept of “authenticity” in Western civilization is not a subjective evaluation, but comes from institutional authority, law, religion, or scientific rationality. Authenticity is often invoked as a method of social control or a mark of power relations: once something is defined as authentic, it is no longer questioned. (Jones, S. ,2010) The Nara Authenticity Document broadens the evaluation criteria for authenticity, emphasizes the importance of communities in interpreting and assessing authenticity, and recognizes them as the primary guardians of cultural heritage. However, the voices of local communities are still often marginalized, and experts and governments tend to prioritize material protection over community values and the views of local residents.

3.Cases of Traditional Residential Conservation in Three Historic Cities: Pingyao, Shanghai, and Suzhou

Pingyao, Shanghai, and Suzhou are three famous historic and cultural cities in China, which still retain a large number of traditional residential buildings that are still in use. These traditional dwellings, distributed in large patches, constitute the background of the authenticity of urban heritage. Traditional Chinese wooden architecture is a reflection of the traditional concept of cyclical time, emphasizing human habitation in the “present world” and reconstruction is a common occurrence. At present, most of these traditional dwellings suffer from problems such as structural aging and long-term disrepair. Unlike historical buildings in China that have legal protection status and are maintained by the state, most traditional dwellings are protected by individuals, often facing difficulties such as funding shortages and high maintenance costs during the protection process, and to a considerable extent, there are calls for reconstruction among residents. Experts have also raised questions that these wooden buildings, which have existed for a hundred years or even longer, have lost their maintenance. “What is the significance of completely preserving the dilapidated reality of these houses for the contemporary development of the city? Since conservation is for the inheritance and development of culture (Abdul Huq, S., Puthuvayi, B. 2024), will the purpose of contemporary historical and cultural protection be reversed by being limited to such static reality?” (Bing Zhang ,2011)How to better maintain the “authenticity” of traditional dwellings, while improving the quality of life of residents and raising their awareness of actively protecting traditional dwellings, is a problem that needs to be carefully considered. Pingyao, Shanghai, and Suzhou have provided different answers based on their own history and actual situations.

3.1.Government led + Resident autonomy - Pingyao

3.1.1.Strict and orderly courtyard model

Pingyao Ancient City has a history of 2700 years. The existing Pingyao Ancient City was formed in the 14th century and is an outstanding example of the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. It fully preserves the spatial sequence of traditional Chinese ritual architecture and was recognized as a World Cultural Heritage site by UNESCO in 1997. The entire ancient city covers an area of 2.25 square kilometers and has nearly 4,000 traditional residential courtyards, of which 90% are buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, and about 20,000 households live in them.

The traditional residential buildings in Pingyao Ancient City adopt the traditional Chinese solemn and orderly quadrangle courtyard model. There are clear axis lines, symmetrical left and right, and distinct primary and

secondary in the planar layout. Large courtyards are often composed of two or three courtyards, forming a “日” and “目” shape. (Figure 4)



Fig 4. Typical Traditional Residential Courtyard in Pingyao Ancient City

There are various types of courtyard combinations in traditional residential buildings in Pingyao. The main courtyard is mostly a narrow quadrangle courtyard, while the auxiliary courtyards include chariot and horse yards or study courtyards.

Picture source: “ Practical Conservation Guidelines for Traditional Courtyard Houses and Environment in the Ancient City of Pingyao ”

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a courtyard was the private property of a household. After two rounds of “private house socialist transformation” in 1958 and 1962, by 1966, more than 10,100 houses belonging to over 1,000 households in the ancient city had become “economic rental houses”, and their property rights had changed from private property to public property. (Feng Tian, Wenzheng Shi, Junqing Wen, etc ,2016) Some courtyards have formed a mixed situation of public and private property, and residents have a low willingness to autonomous maintenance. Due to the low rent, the housing management office is unable to use the rent for house maintenance, resulting in widespread housing decay.

3.1.2.Comprehensive Conservation Policy

Since the 20th century, the tourism industry in Pingyao Ancient City has become increasingly developed, bringing about changes in courtyard functions and alienation of environmental landscapes. Traditional dwellings lack protection systems and financial support, and a large number of traditional dwellings have long lacked maintenance, resulting in poor living conditions. The traditional craftsmanship of restoration also needs to be adapted to modern protection concepts, lacking scientific and technical guidance. As early as 2010, the Global Heritage Fund (GHF) in the United States sponsored a pilot project for residential renovation in Pingyao. At that time, the concept of GHF was to use a courtyard as a model for renovation, providing reference standards and technical guidance for local residents.

The Pingyao County Government promulgated the “Implementation Measures for Financial Subsidies for the Conservation and Restoration of Traditional Residential Buildings in Pingyao Ancient City” in 2012, which was revised, improved, and implemented in 2013. The property owner shall submit an application to the county planning bureau and provide proof of property rights, original photos, restoration drawings, budget and other materials, which shall be reviewed and posted of the public notice by the government before being issued. Supervisors are composed of government deputies to the National People’s Congress and members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, as well as experts, scholars, and social figures who love the protection of ancient cities. At the same time, the “Conservation Management Guidelines for Traditional Courtyard Houses and Environment in the Ancient City of Pingyao ” and the “ Practical Conservation Guidelines for Traditional Courtyard Houses and Environment in the Ancient City of Pingyao ” were jointly initiated by UNESCO and the Pingyao County People’s Government. The Shanxi Provincial Department of Housing and Urban Rural Development and Tongji

University jointly began to develop them, providing guidance for government management departments and residents' traditional residential building restoration and protection. (Figure 5) From the completed courtyards, government subsidies can basically account for one-third of the total project cost. On February 28, 2025, the Pingyao County Administrative Approval Service Management Bureau officially approved the "Pingyao Ancient City Historical and Cultural Block Renovation Project", planning to invest over 250 million yuan to inject new vitality into the protection and development of the ancient city. The funding source is 55.9471 million yuan from the county-level finance and 200 million yuan from the central finance application.



Fig 5. "Conservation Management Guidelines for Traditional Courtyard Houses and Environment in the Ancient City of Pingyao " and " Practical Conservation Guidelines for Traditional Courtyard Houses and Environment in the Ancient City of Pingyao "

Developed by the Shanxi Provincial Department of Housing and Urban Rural Development and Tongji University (2012-2016)

3.2.Government led + market participation - Shanghai

3.2.1.Joint layout of courtyard model

Traditional residential buildings in Shanghai, also known as Shikumen Lilong, are a combination of Chinese and Western architectural forms, built by foreign real estate developers or Chinese businessmen. Shikumen Lilong originated during the Shanghai Concession period in the 1870s and was built on a large scale in the 1910-1930s. The Shikumen architecture has the traditional form of a two-story courtyard or quadrangle courtyard in the regions south of the Yangtze River, with an overall layout following the Western style of row houses. (Figure 6-7)

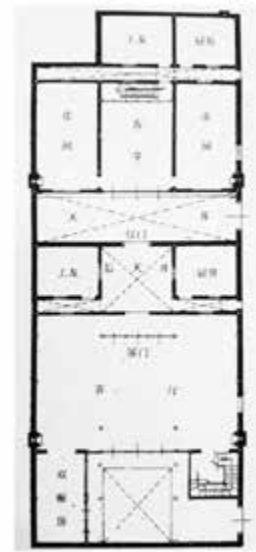


Fig 6. Shikumen Lilong Residences and the urban texture in old Shanghai.
Picture source: Collection of Shanghai History Museum (part of the original picture).

Fig 7. The plan of early Shikumen Hongdeli. Picture source: Qing Chang (2023)

Due to its construction during times of war, the land in the concessions was precious, and the opening and area of Shikumen buildings were greatly reduced compared to traditional residences. In 1949, 3 million people were squeezed into an 82.4km² urban area. At that time, there were a total of 17.115 million square meters of new and old style lilong buildings in Shanghai, accounting for 72.5% of the total residential area. (Compiled by the Shanghai Residential Construction Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1998).

There are both a small number of high-end villas and mansions in Shikumen Lilong, as well as small courtyard houses in new-style lilong. Most of these high-quality lilong have protected identities and are maintained by the government or property owners. In addition, due to the real estate development method of renting land to build houses in Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century, with a lease term of only 20-30 years, a large number of low-quality Shikumen residential buildings were also constructed. These residences, which experienced a wave of social movements from the 1950s to the 1970s, often had complex relationships between housing attributes and residency rights, crowded living conditions, inadequate living facilities, and safety hazards. They have long been referred to as “old-style lilong”. Due to the lack of identity protection or the ambiguity of identity protection, the preservation of such old houses is often in a state of controversy. By the end of 2000, there were 14.1199 million square meters of old-style lilong in the central urban area of Shanghai center, which had been reduced to 8.13 million square meters in 2017, nearly half of which was secondary old-style lilong. By the end of 2018, there were still 2.38 million square meters of secondary old-style lilong in the central urban area of Shanghai center, with more than 100,000 residents.

3.2.2.Limited Conservation Policy

Faced with the protection and development of traditional residential buildings on such a large scale in Shanghai, as well as such complex historic relics, the principle of “authenticity” in the field of international heritage protection cannot be used for general comparison, because the scarcity of heritage is no longer comparable. (Qing Chang, 2023) Some experts believe that for the Shikumen architectural complex, active protection should be taken, but there is also a degree of protection. Not everything can be protected, and needs to be protected to its original state. When determining the scale, standards, structure, and degree of protection (architectural form, economic format, social ecology), except for cultural relics protection units, the principle of comprehensive authenticity may not necessarily be followed (protection units can only reflect the authenticity at the material level), and specific issues need to be analyzed case by case. (Yong Wan, Jianxiong Ge, 2011)

Since the 1990s, with the rapid development of Shanghai's economy and the soaring of land value and real estate prices, large-scale reconstruction of the old urban areas in the centre of Shanghai has been carried out. Shikumen Lilong is located in the central area of the city, facing the dual pressure of urban functional layout adjustment and land development intensity, which is intensifying. The government led mechanism for the renovation of old urban areas, with market access and “development plot ratio rewards” as its core features, quickly took over the dominant position, and the current social and material spaces began to be completely eliminated. Under the temptation of the real benefits brought by large-scale demolition, the government and market forces directly intervened in large-scale spatial reconstruction, thus forming an urban redevelopment model characterized by “large-scale demolition and construction, separation of people and land”. (Gang Liu, 2016) (Figure 8-9)



Fig 8-9. “Xiesan Base” turned into Haihua Garden, 1992-1994

On January 25, 1992, Shanghai signed a contract for the first phase of the “Xiesan Base” in Dapugiao, the first old district renovation site to utilize foreign investment. Two years later, the site was built into a high-rise residential area called Haihua Garden. From then on, land leasing was fully implemented in various districts of Shanghai, marking the beginning of large-scale urban renewal in the city.

Picture source: [Memory of the city] “Xiesan Base”-a milestone in the history of Shanghai’s old reform, News and Publicity Center of Shanghai Municipal Commission of Housing and Urban Rural Development

In recent years, the old district renovation model of “large-scale demolition and construction” has become unsustainable, and the concept of “urban renewal” based on stock development has gained more expectations. In 2017, the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee and Government proposed to adjust the renovation method of old districts from “demolition, renovation, and retention, with demolition as the main focus” to “retention, renovation, and demolition, with preservation and conservation as the main focus”, and emphasized “allowing the city to retain memories and people to remember their homesickness”. The renovation of old buildings in Shanghai has roughly gone through three stages, from “large-scale demolition and construction” to “demolition, renovation, and retention”, and then to “retention, renovation, and demolition”, with a greater emphasis on the conservation of historical features and urban texture. Due to the high investment and low return ratio of the renovation of old buildings, the government and state-owned enterprises have become the main sources of funding, and the participation of social capital in the renovation is relatively small. Since 2019, Shanghai has gradually explored the old and new system and operation mode of “urban cooperation and government enterprise cooperation”, hoping to more effectively attract social capital participation. The new round of old area renovation projects will be implemented through the “housing expropriation” method, with monetary compensation as the main form of expropriation and physical resettlement as a supplement. For historic buildings that require conservation and preservation, renewal and functional reuse will be implemented after the completion of house expropriation, in order to achieve the goal of “people leaving the house and not demolishing it” for historic buildings. (Jingyun Xu, 2023) (Figure 10,11)



Fig 10-11. Zhangyuan before and after renovation,2018-2024

Zhangyuan is the largest and most well preserved representative of the Shikumen architectural complex in Shanghai. Before the protective expropriation of Zhangyuan, about 280 residents living here did not have independent bathrooms in their homes, and the internal space of the building was arbitrarily divided and overloaded. The aging, damage, and destruction of the building were serious, and the residents’ desire to improve their living conditions became increasingly strong. In order to improve the quality of life of residents and continue the urban context, the Zhangyuan area will be renovated using the method of “expropriation without demolition”, fully preserving the texture of the neighborhoods and alleys. After the expropriation is completed, the historic buildings will be protected, preserved, renovated, and reused according to the planning requirements.

Picture source: Taken by the author of this article on February 22, 2023

3.3. Government led + Resident autonomy + Market participation - Suzhou

3.3.1. The courtyard model of living by the water

Suzhou has a 2500-years history of city construction, and most of the existing traditional dwellings were built during the late Ming, Qing, and Republic of China periods. The ancient city of Suzhou still maintains a dual chessboard pattern of rivers and streets, and traditional residential buildings mostly reflect the layout characteristics related to rivers. Suzhou residential buildings are often center-courtyard model, with “one-entrance gate courtyard” as the basic unit of residential buildings. Large residential buildings are composed of two to multiple entrance gate courtyards. (Figure 12,13)

In the 1950s, in order to solve the housing problem of residents, public-private partnerships were implemented, and traditional houses in the ancient city of Suzhou were rented out to residents in the form of contracts, with the whole old houses being separated and inhabited. In the 1990s, the permanent population of 142,000 square kilometers living in the ancient city of Suzhou was 342,000. Crowded living, lack of supporting facilities, complex property rights, aging building structures, and damaged building appearances are all challenges to the Conservation and renewal of traditional residential buildings in Suzhou.



Fig 12-13. Typical Traditional Residences in the Ancient City of Suzhou

Traditional Suzhou houses are arranged in groups horizontally or vertically, forming a continuous group of alleyway houses. The overall layout of residential buildings is closely related to the river channel. This high-density layout allows each household to occupy the smallest amount of riverbank and alley sections, compact the land area, and achieve convenient water and land transportation.

Picture source Ancient Charm of Jiangnan - Suzhou Residential Architecture Culture Ancient Architecture in China

At present, there are about 1.95 million square meters of traditional residential buildings in the ancient city of Suzhou, with 43,000 households living in them. In traditional residential buildings, there are approximately 840,000 square meters of private houses and 19,000 households, with an average area of approximately 44.21 square meters per household; Directly managed public housing covers an area of approximately 1.11 million square meters, with around 24,000 households and an average household area of approximately 46.25 square meters per household. Both public and private houses are unable to meet the basic living needs of 60 square meters per household, and many directly managed public houses face difficulties in being fully integrated.

3.3.2. “Three Original” Conservation Policy

In the 1980s, Suzhou’s economy began to develop rapidly, and urban expansion led to the demolition of traditional dwellings and the reconstruction of modern buildings in the ancient city, resulting in the destruction of the city’s appearance. In 1982, Suzhou was listed as one of the first batch of Chinese historic and cultural cities, officially beginning the process of ancient city conservation. In order to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the layout and style of the ancient city, the 1995 Suzhou Urban Planning Regulations proposed that “the urban area of Suzhou should protect the style of the ancient city”, explicitly stating that “within the protection scope of the

ancient city, it is not allowed to construct buildings (structures) that do not conform to the style and features of the ancient city". In 2003, the "Measures for the Conservation of Historical and Cultural Cities and Towns in Suzhou City" further refined the regulations, stating that "the form, volume, height, and color of buildings within the protection scope of the ancient city should maintain the inherent characteristics of moderate volume, light shape, elegant color, and especially the white walls and black tiles of Suzhou buildings, reflecting the traditional style of Suzhou ancient city." In 2011, the Suzhou Planning Bureau formulated and issued the "Regulations on the Planning and Management of Private Housing Construction for Residents in Suzhou City," which clarified that the renovation of "dilapidated houses" in traditional residential buildings in the ancient city should maintain the "original area, original height, and original style", abbreviated as the "three original" principle.

Before 1998, the number of approvals for the renovation of traditional residential buildings was about 100 per year. After the promulgation of the "Regulations on the Planning and Management of Private Housing Construction for Residents in Suzhou City", the planning and management of private housing construction for residents has been strengthened, and the number of approvals for traditional residential reconstruction has been reduced to 20-30 per year. After 2020, the number of approvals for traditional residential construction has increased to about 50 per year, and is showing a trend of increasing year by year. On September 1, 2022, Gusu District held a special conference on the participation of social capital in the revitalization and utilization of traditional residential buildings, exploring new paths for introducing social capital to participate in the collection and revitalization of traditional residential property rights, and providing greater strength for the protection and renewal of the ancient city. Whether it is residents' independent reconstruction or the activation and utilization of social capital, the "Three Original" principle is still a rigid principle that cannot be exceeded.

The "Three Original " principle embodies the concept of combining "protection priority" with "organic renewal", by limiting the area and height, thus controlling the development intensity and avoiding excessive high-rise and commercialization of the ancient city; By preserving the texture of streets, courtyards, and architectural styles, the ancient city style has been continued; Under the premise of protection, residents are allowed to carry out modernization of the interior, thereby improving the living environment and balancing the needs of people's livelihood. (Figure 14-15)



Fig 14-15. An example of the renovation of a traditional residential building located on Shantang Street in the ancient city of Suzhou 2024
Picture source: DEKONG STUDIO

This is an independent residential renovation project. The space of the original building has been re planned and the height of the floor slabs has been adjusted. By appropriately staggered levels (ensuring the height

of the main space and reducing the height of the auxiliary space), a new attic space has been obtained. Due to the partial decay of the original roof wooden structure, the entire roof was renovated by adding insulation and waterproof layers. In order to obtain a larger span, steel structures were locally added. The staircase was designed as a hollow staircase and skylights were added, making the staircase a lighting well and solving the problem of insufficient lighting in the original house.

4.Conclusion and Discussion: How to Understand Authenticity in the Chinese Context?

How to understand the “authenticity” of a large number of traditional residential buildings that are in disrepair and lack identity conservation in the contemporary context of China? How to renovate the buildings in traditional Chinese cities, mainly consisting of brick and wood structures, in order to maintain their “authenticity”? Maintaining the materiality and authenticity of traditional architecture is certainly important, but can the continuation of traditional urban functions and sense of place also be understood as maintaining the “authenticity” of historic sites? Looking back at the three historic cities of Pingyao, Shanghai, and Suzhou, Pingyao has adopted a comprehensive protection policy due to the small scale of traditional residential buildings and the relatively intact preservation of courtyards, which are funded and maintained by the government; Due to the large scale and varying quality of traditional Shikumen Lilong in Shanghai, a limited protection strategy has been chosen to preserve some of the Lilong; The scale of traditional residential buildings in Suzhou is in the middle, and the ancient city's water and land double chessboard pattern has been well preserved for thousands of years. Therefore, the “Three Original” principle of “small-scale gradual” preservation of urban texture and allowing residents who meet regulations to rebuild independently has been adopted. Table.1

Tab.1 Comparison of the Conservation of Traditional Residences in Pingyao, Shanghai, and Suzhou

	Traditional Residences in Pingyao	Traditional Residences in Shanghai	Traditional Residences in Suzhou
Construction History	During the Ming and Qing dynasties	From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China period	From the late Ming Dynasty to the Republic of China period
Construction scale	The ancient city covers an area of 2.25 k and has nearly 4,000 traditional residential courtyards	In 1949, 3 million people were crowded within an 82.4k area of Shanghai's urban area, with a total of 17.115 million square meters of Shikumen Lilong and residential buildings. In 2017, the area decreased to approximately 8.13 million square meters	The ancient city of Suzhou covers an area of 14.2 k and has approximately 1.95 million square meters of traditional residential buildings, with 43,000 households living in it
Is it a World Heritage City	Listed in 1997	no	Suzhou Gardens as a World Cultural Heritage Site (1997, 2000)
Is it a historic and cultural city	Second batch (1986)	Second batch (1986)	First batch (1982)
Real estate prices	¥5,000-7,000 /square meter	About ¥120,000 /square meter in the central urban area	About ¥26,000 /square meter in Gusu District
Government conservation tendency	Comprehensive conservation policy	Limited conservation policy	"Three Original" conservation policy
Market participation situation	Less	More	Medium
Residents' willingness	Repair after applying for government subsidies	Looking forward to receiving the demolition compensation after the government's unified expropriation*	Prefer to rebuild or construct independently
Expert advice	Continue the "authenticity" of the World Cultural Heritage	Question the damage to "authenticity" caused by the early government's "large-scale demolition and construction" and the current "gentrification" process	Hoping that the government will introduce policies to encourage residents to carry out self-repair instead of reconstruction, so as to maintain the "authenticity" as much as possible.
Present situation	Keep almost completely	Collage-style retention	Continue the texture and style of the ancient city

Table source: Drawn by the author of this article

* If residents choose to stay, they can enjoy the potential appreciation of the house in the future after its restoration, but it also means they still have to live in the old house and continue to endure various inconveniences. However, by choosing to leave, residents can directly vacate their old houses. This not only enables them to get rid of the poor living conditions as quickly as possible, but also allows them to immediately obtain the benefits of expropriation and relocation, or by purchasing and exchanging for new houses, they can gain the potential appreciation of their properties in the future. Many people are not averse to lifelong life, but under the influence of opportunity cost, they still choose to leave. (Jing Yu, 2024)

Regardless of the principle of protection, the attitude, function, and role of the government in preserving or rebuilding traditional dwellings are highly noteworthy. In addition to considering the continuation of traditional culture and the preservation of cultural memory, the government also needs to take into account economic benefits such as tourism consumption income, economic benefits from reconstruction, and the cost of demolition and resettlement for residents. The higher the land prices in historic urban areas, the more inclined the local government is to promote the reconstruction of traditional dwellings, and the more motivated market capital is to participate; For residents, this often means that they can receive a large amount of compensation for

demolition and substantial improvement in their living conditions (except for the unfavorable factor of needing to leave the city center); Heritage conservation experts are more inclined to restore and preserve traditional dwellings, opposing the “gentrification” process of historic urban areas and calling for the preservation of the material and spiritual “authenticity” of traditional dwellings. However, reality is often complex. As the number of traditional dwellings that can be preserved has greatly decreased, the overall trend in various historic cities is to prioritize protection over reconstruction (small-scale autonomous reconstruction, or government and market forces led demolition and reconstruction). After all, these cultural memories representing a nation should not be roughly erased.

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