

## Research on the Tourism Development Path of Human-Habitat World Heritage from the Perspective of Space Production: A Case Study of Pingyao Ancient City

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### Abstract:

Human-Habitat World Heritage, as a form of living heritage, embodies dual attributes of “heritage” and “habitat.” Driven by economic restructuring and urbanisation, it is transitioning from “everyday residential use” to “tourism-driven development,” facing challenges of conservation and development. This study, based on Pingyao Ancient City, employs the triadic dialectics of spatial production alongside policy analysis, historical archives, field surveys, and oral histories to construct its transformation narrative. Findings reveal that Pingyao achieved physical space reproduction through planning and business adjustments, strengthened cultural identity via conservation policies and cultural festivals, and expressed social space through community participation and visitor interaction. This process has enhanced cultural and social values while driving sustainable development. Through Pingyao's practical paradigm, this study establishes a theoretical framework for balancing conservation and development, offering insights for managing similar heritage sites globally.

**Key words:** space production; human-habitat world heritage; living heritage; Pingyao Ancient City; tourism development

### 1 Introduction

Pingyao Ancient City, located in Shanxi Province, China, was built in the 14th century and inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997. It is a quintessential example of Human-Habitat World Heritage, possessing dual attributes of “heritage” and “habitat.” First, its heritage characteristics are significant, featuring abundant tangible and intangible heritage. It preserves a traditional urban layout, streets, and architectural remains, reflecting over five centuries of evolution in Han Chinese urban architectural styles and planning (Centre). Additionally, it embodies traditional spatial organisation principles, materials, structures, and construction techniques, as well as traditional aesthetics, folklore, religious practices, political systems, commercial culture, and production methods (Shao et al., 2016). Second, its habitat characteristics are evident; historically, it served as a living space and continues to accommodate daily life, undergoing constant development and change (Shao, Hu, and Xu, 2019). These dual attributes underscore its “Outstanding Universal Value” at the global level” (‘Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage’, 1973) and highlight its significance for stakeholders (Li and and Su, 2020), heritage communities, and cities at the local level. The interplay between traditional spaces and lifestyles illustrates the wisdom of addressing “human-place relationships” in traditional urban planning, offering unique value (Shao et al., 2016).

With the progression of urbanisation in China and economic restructuring, Pingyao Ancient City has witnessed rapid tourism development in recent decades. Commercial activities and spatial forms within the city have diversified, improving and advancing the local economy (Long, 2016). However, the form and function of the heritage site have been irreversibly affected (Rezaei, 2017). The deepening connection and escalating conflict between visitors and indigenous residents have driven Pingyao's transformation from an “everyday residential” model to a “tourism-oriented” one. Overuse and excessive demand on the heritage site have revealed issues unanticipated during its construction (Li, Wu and Cai, 2008). Heritage conservation faces dual challenges: safeguarding the authenticity and integrity of the heritage, respecting the material spatial authenticity and lifestyle of indigenous residents, while promoting tourism and modern livelihoods to drive tourism-induced spatial and economic transformation (Wang, 2012). The Protection and Revitalisation Plan for Pingyao Ancient City was approved in 2014, with the overarching goal of enhancing heritage conservation and livability while fostering sustainable social and economic development (Centre). The conservation, preservation, reconstruction, and management of Pingyao have evolved from a “material-centric” approach focused on architectural restoration and tourism to a “people-centred” model of community co-creation (Sun and Nakajima, 2023).

Current research on the governance of Pingyao Ancient City, a Human-Habitat World Heritage site, primarily focuses on analysing its intrinsic value and conservation methods, as well as its development from the

perspective of heritage tourism. Studies on intrinsic value and conservation methods encompass value assessment and characteristic evaluation (Shao, 2018), conservation management mechanisms (Miao, 2014), spatial and morphological studies (Tao, He and Jiang, 2014; Xie, 2015), comparative analyses of ancient urban planning concepts and urban expansion through conservation and planning (Li et al., 2022), and research on the protection and analysis of street facade spaces (Li and Wang, 2015). From the perspective of heritage tourism, research covers spatial-functional analyses (Liao et al., 2022), resident and community participation (Ju, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Sun and Nakajima, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Cui, Cheng and Shang, 2024), stakeholder framework studies (Li and Su, 2020), application frameworks for urban historical landscapes (Hu, 2011; Wang and Gu, 2020), tourism industry analyses (Gao et al., 2017), sustainable development assessments (Weng et al., 2019), and visitor data tracking (Li et al., 2024). In summary, there is limited focus on the spatial production and renewal mechanisms of Pingyao Ancient City. Few studies adopt a comprehensive framework to integrate and analyse the relationships among the material, social, and spiritual dimensions.

This study focuses on the spatial patterns and production processes of Pingyao Ancient City as a Human-Habitat World Cultural Heritage site, employing Lefebvre's triadic dialectical framework of spatial production for a narrative construction of its transformation pathway. Lefebvre's theory views urban space as both a product and a means of production, shaped by social and interpersonal relationships (Fuchs, 2019). It conceptualises urban space as a triad: (1) Spatial practice (perceived space); (2) Representations of space (conceived space); (3) Representational space (lived space) (Lefebvre, 1991). Through historical-sociological analysis and spatial investigation, this study aims to construct a comprehensive framework of spatial production. It analyses the interplay among material space (buildings, streets, districts), planning and policy frameworks (conservation plans, relevant policies), and everyday life and values (local culture, resident experiences). The objective is to elucidate the processes and outcomes of spatial production and heritage governance during the tourism transformation of Pingyao, thereby offering valuable theoretical and practical paradigms for the humanistic tourism development of Human-Habitat World Heritage sites. Specifically, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How have the material, social, and spiritual spaces of Pingyao Ancient City changed under heritage tourism?
2. How do stakeholders and key policies collectively influence and shape the spatial production of Pingyao Ancient City?
3. What integrated strategies can be identified to guide the tourism transformation of Human-Habitat World Cultural Heritage sites?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Human-Habitat World Heritage and Living Heritage

Human settlement refers to all types of inhabited aggregations and their environments, including rural areas, towns, cities, and regions. It encompasses five key elements: nature, society, humans, dwellings, and supporting networks. Human settlement consists of two main components: firstly, humans, including individuals and the societies they form; secondly, the tangible settlements and their surrounding environments composed of natural or artificial elements (Wu, 2014). Research on Human-Habitat heritage sites began in the late 1990s ('The spatial coupling and its influencing mechanism between rural human-habitat heritage and key rural tourism villages in China', 2025) and is interdisciplinary, covering both tangible and intangible heritage (Su, 2011; Wang, 2016; Amit Cohen and Sofer, 2017). The inheritance and development of Human-Habitat heritage sites demonstrate continuity (Poulios, 2011), with an emphasis on the functional role of "habitat" where residents, as key participants, continuously engage in shaping heritage spaces (Chapagain, 2013). Heritage sites and communities are closely interconnected, forming a form of "living heritage" (Zhang and Lu, 2025).

Academic literature on Human-Habitat World Heritage emphasises the concept of "living heritage", focusing on its sustainable development (Landorf, 2011; Weng et al., 2019). The heritage management process has shifted from a centralised, exclusionary approach to a participatory and holistic one, with "community", "residents", and "co-creation" becoming key terms in heritage governance (Li et al., 2020). A "community co-creation" governance model has been developed to address conflicts in living heritage, particularly the tensions between modern socio-economic development and the daily needs of local heritage communities (Ju, 2022; Sun and Nakajima, 2023). Additionally, conflicts among stakeholders have become a major focus in heritage tourism research, prompting the proposal of frameworks to resolve such disputes (Li and Su, 2020). Furthermore, tailored

assessment frameworks have been established to evaluate China's management practices in promoting community participation in cultural heritage (Li et al., 2020).

## 2.2 The Applicability of the Theory of Spatial Production

The theory of spatial production originated from Marxist sociology, with Henri Lefebvre as its founding figure. Lefebvre posited that "space is a product of social relations," emphasising that social space is produced through social practices. He categorised the production of space into three dimensions: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space (Lefebvre, 1991).

In recent years, the theory of spatial production has been increasingly applied to research on cultural heritage sites and industrial heritage. In the context of industrial and urban heritage renewal, scholars have employed the perspective of spatial production in analysing cases of Chinese industrial heritage and urban redevelopment. For example, Song Yongyong, Zhang Tongyu, and others investigated urban old industrial zones, analysing their renewal mechanisms and pathways within the framework of spatial production theory (Song et al.). The theory has also been introduced into the protection and governance of historic urban districts. The conservation of inhabited heritage must balance heritage value with the needs of residents' daily lives. Ma Xiaowen and Li Bin analysed the renewal process of Qingdao's Zhongshan Road Historic District within the theoretical framework of spatial production and place-making (Ma and Li, 2024). Moreover, spatial production theory has been applied to heritage spaces in tourism contexts. Wang Mingfeng and Zhou Yuan studied the production and evolution of Shanghai's Tianzifang as a creative tourism space (Wang and Zhou, 2022).

For Pingyao Ancient City, as an inhabited World Heritage Site, Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial production offers a valuable perspective. The triadic dialectics of spatial production organically integrate the physical, social, and mental dimensions. This theory facilitates an understanding of how state-led conservation plans (conceived space) interact with tourism-driven market forces (social space) and cultural attachment (lived space).

## 3 Materials and Methodology

This study examines the transformation pathway of Pingyao Ancient City, a World Cultural Heritage Site, through methods such as policy review, historical archive analysis, field surveys, and oral history collection. Using Henri Lefebvre's triadic dialectics of spatial production as a theoretical framework, it analyses the spatial production mechanisms of Pingyao Ancient City.(Figure 1)

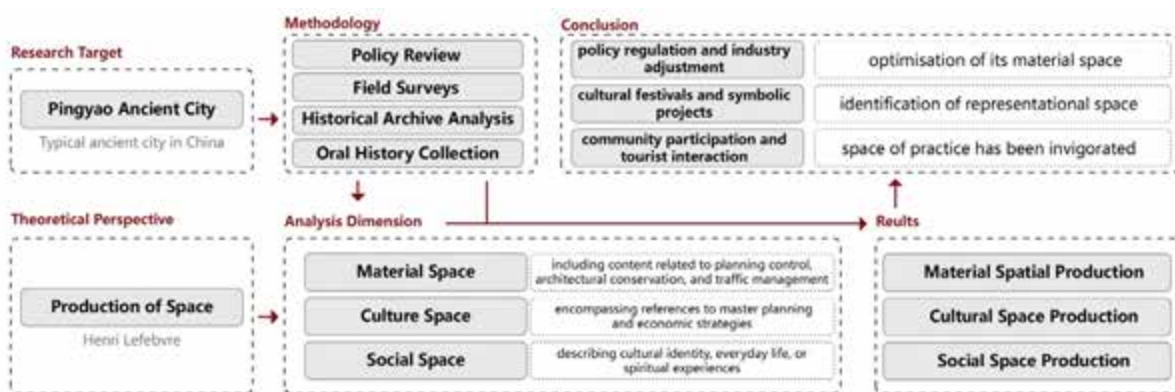


Figure 1. Research Framework

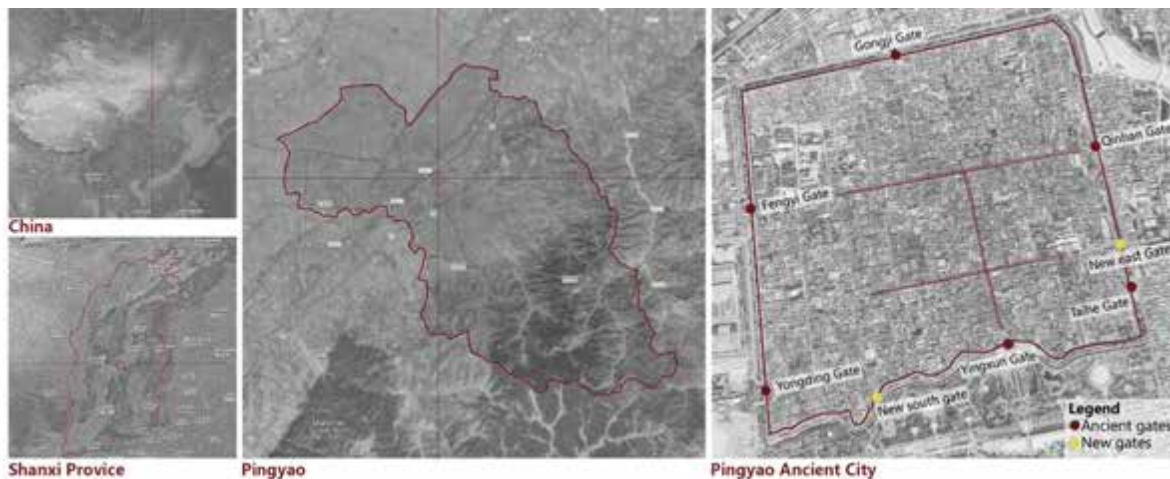
## 3.1 Study area

### 3.1.1 Pingyao Ancient City

Pingyao is located on the central plains of Shanxi Province, adjacent to the Fen River, the region's principal waterway-Figure 2-. Pingyao Ancient City lies in the northwest of Pingyao, covering an area of 2.25 km<sup>2</sup>. The protected zone encompasses "one city and two temples"—Pingyao Ancient City and the nearby Zhenguo Temple and Shuanglin Temple. Within the city, there are over 20 ancient temples and nearly 4,000 historical residential units. Built in the 14th century, Pingyao Ancient City is one of the four well-preserved ancient cities in China,

reflecting Han cultural characteristics (Su, 2018; Tang, Zheng and Ng, 2019). Its urban fabric illustrates five centuries of evolution in Chinese imperial architectural styles and urban planning, with its “piaohao” buildings, associated with banking, being a distinctive feature.

Pingyao City is shaped like a turtle poised to move but remaining still—Figure 2-. The “turtle’s” head points south and its tail north, with its four gates on the east and west symbolising the turtle’s legs. Outside the southern gate, there were originally two wells, metaphorically representing the turtle’s eyes. This configuration has led to the city being colloquially referred to as the “Turtle City,” symbolising eternal life, perpetual youth, unyielding strength, and everlasting stability (Government, 2015).



**Figure 2.** Location and the plan of Pingyao

The functional layout within the ancient city of Pingyao exemplifies the typical characteristics of a traditional county town in the Central Plains region of the Han ethnic group. On the left is the Chenghuang Temple, while the county office is on the right; the Confucian Temple is located to the left and the Martial Temple to the right. The Qingxu Taoist Temple is situated on the eastern side, and although the Jifu Buddhist Temple on the western side no longer exists, the City Tower remains centrally positioned, creating a symmetrical functional distribution. Pingyao’s street network is renowned for its “Four Main Streets, Eight Minor Streets, and Seventy-Two Winding Lanes.” Most streets and lanes are organised in straight north-south or east-west alignments, with distinct hierarchies and systematic organisation. Particularly prominent is the inverted “干” shaped primary commercial street system formed by South Street, East and West Streets, Chenghuang Temple Street, and County Office Street, whose scale far exceeds that of typical traditional county towns (Xie, 2015). Flanking the main streets are historical shop buildings dating back to the 17th to 19th centuries. The well-preserved architectural ensembles vividly illustrate the historical urban landscape and commercial cultural heritage of Pingyao Ancient City.

### 3.2 Research design

#### 3.2.1 Theoretical Framework

Henri Lefebvre’s core triadic dialectical structure of spatial production consists of: (1) Spatial Practice, which refers to the material practices in production and everyday life, such as daily activities and social reproduction processes. (2) Representations of Space, denoting the conceptualised space created by ruling classes, planners, and professionals, including urban planning, architectural design, and maps. (3) Representational Space, indicating the lived space characterised by people’s subjective experiences and symbolic meanings, encompassing cultural imagination and symbolic inscriptions. (Lefebvre, 1991). These three dimensions are dialectically interconnected: spatial practice reproduces space through social actions, representations of space shape spatial forms via planning and design, and representational space reflects people’s utilisation and emotional investment in space. Within this framework, Lefebvre asserts that every social formation exhibits this “triadic dialectical” structure (Lefebvre, 1991).

### 3.2.2 Analytical Dimensions

Using Lefebvre's triadic dialectical theory of spatial production, the surveyed texts are categorised according to the spatial dimensions they reflect, specifically: (1) material space, including content related to planning control, architectural conservation, and traffic management; (2) cultural space, encompassing references to master planning and economic strategies; and (3) social space, describing cultural identity, everyday life, or spiritual experiences. The analysis results are further integrated to form a comprehensive examination of Pingyao's spatial production process, revealing how the material, social, and spiritual dimensions interact under the influence of various stakeholders and policies to collectively shape the spatial characteristics of the heritage site.

### 3.3 Data and methods

This study employs a combination of qualitative research and case study methods, supplemented by policy and historical document analysis, on-site observations, and semi-structured interviews. To visually present the findings, the study uses tables to illustrate the research content: Table 1 lists the major policies of Pingyao Ancient City, and Table 2 marises the timeline of significant events, providing historical and policy context for the study.

Heritage tourism projects involve numerous stakeholders, and existing literature presents different models of relevant stakeholders across various cases (Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher, 2005; Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005; Cheng et al., 2012). However, there are still shared and overlapping stakeholder groups. Local residents, governments, tourists, tourism entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations, and mass media are identified as key and indispensable stakeholders in heritage tourism projects (Communicating heritage – a handbook for the tourism sector, 2011). -Figure 3-This study's oral history interviews involved five categories of key stakeholders: government officials and planners, local residents within the ancient city, tourism entrepreneurs, and visitors. The interviews were structured around the following themes: living conditions, perceptions of heritage value, views on the benefits and costs associated with tourism, and understanding of conservation policies. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin.



Figure 3-Stakeholders and Their Interrelations

## 4 Empirical Analysis of Spatial Production in Pingyao Ancient City

### 4.1 Pingyao Ancient City

Pingyao is located on the trade route between Beijing and western China, serving as a longstanding administrative and market centre (Wang and Gu, 2020). Its historical evolution encompasses three morphological periods: the pre-industrial period (before 1949), the socialist period (1949–1997), and the recent development period (post-1997). Each period represents a distinct cultural-historical phase, marked by the emergence of unique spatial configurations and forms that adapted to the socio-economic demands of their time (Conzen, 1960; Conzen and Whitehand, 2012; Wang and Gu, 2020).

Before 1949, Pingyao Ancient City experienced a period of trade prosperity, even emerging as a financial centre of China. During this time, historic buildings were subjected to repurposing, such as the conversion of the Confucian Temple into a modern school in 1904 and the use of Qingxu Taoist Temple for military purposes in 1926. Additionally, key traditional structures suffered damage during wartime (Wang and Gu, 2020).

Between 1949 and 1997, the development of Pingyao Ancient City was shaped by socialist policies, leading to the construction of industrial-related buildings such as factories and staff dormitories within the ancient city

(Wang and Gu, 2020). Additionally, modern structures like prisons, police stations, and juvenile detention centres emerged, which contrasted sharply with the traditional architecture (Su, 2018). During the late 1970s, a team from Shanghai Tongji University conducted multiple field surveys and mapping projects in Pingyao, strongly advocating for the preservation of the ancient city. They appealed to the local government to halt demolition activities, marking the beginning of Pingyao's heritage conservation efforts (Ruan and Pan, 2019). In 1986, Pingyao Ancient City was designated as a National Historical and Cultural City. By 1997, the city, including its "ancient city walls," "government offices," "markets," "residences," and "temples," was inscribed as a unified entity on the World Heritage List. Recognised as a "living specimen" for studying the development of Chinese politics, economy, culture, arts, and religion.

After 1997, the local government prioritised tourism as a key focus for the conservation and development of Pingyao Ancient City. Over years of planning and implementation, the ancient city gradually evolved into an isolated landmark within the urban area. (Li et al., 2022). The local government's objectives for urban conservation and heritage development included: first, restoring the historical features of the walled city; second, reducing population density within the city walls; and third, creating an ideal environment for tourists (Wang, 2012). By the time this study commenced in 2005, the local government had largely achieved these goals. Historical buildings within the city walls had been restored, and functional transformations had been completed to serve tourism purposes. (Wang and Gu, 2020).

#### 4.2 Dimension of Material Spatial Production

The "spatial practice" within the dimension of material spatial production constitutes its primary level, with production outcomes manifested as tangible and perceptible spatial forms. The incorporation of tourism attributes into the spatial fabric has become a key aspect of the tourism development process in Pingyao Ancient City. The intervention of tourism elements has led to significant transformations in the material spatial morphology. External driving forces, represented by the government and planning experts, have gradually replaced the endogenous impetus based on the natural development of the local community, thereby assuming a dominant role in the production of heritage tourism space (Zhang and Li, 2024). As a model of cultural heritage conservation in China, Pingyao Ancient City has realised a spatial transformation from a traditional town to a cultural tourism destination through functional relocation, business adjustment, restoration of traditional residences, and the introduction of cultural industries. The urban pattern has undergone a diachronic evolution from the "Ming and Qing layout" to a "tourism pathway", while spatial functions have experienced a topological reconfiguration from "residential and productive" to "commercial and cultural."

Functional relocation and spatial vacancy have provided the spatial foundation for the transformation of the ancient city. Prior to the World Heritage nomination, the ancient city housed approximately 45,000 residents. Following the successful inscription, the county government, originally located in the old county yamen, was the first to relocate outside the city walls. Subsequently, schools, hospitals, public security, prosecution, and judicial institutions—functions less related to the cultural context of the ancient city—were gradually moved out. The resident population within the city decreased to about 20,000 permanent inhabitants (Wang, 2012; Wang and Gu, 2020). This measure not only alleviated spatial pressure within the ancient city but also freed up space for cultural exhibitions and activities. It furthermore provided opportunities for the restoration and conservation of historic buildings occupied by institutions.

The reshaping of commercial functions and the optimisation of the landscape constitute important means for the transformation of the ancient city. The production of material space in Pingyao Ancient City is profoundly influenced by policies and planning at international, national, and local levels. The restoration and conservation of the city walls and the strict planning of traffic in historic districts have resulted in the core area becoming a pedestrian zone, with motor vehicles restricted to peripheral circulation to reduce environmental impact on the heritage site. The adjustment of commercial functions centred on South Street is a key example of spatial functional reproduction, where shops originally serving local residents were relocated, and the core street was transformed into a tourism-oriented commercial district themed around cultural antiques, calligraphy, paintings, and intangible cultural heritage (Wang, 2012). Through the restoration of courtyards, revival of traditional styles, and establishment of intangible cultural heritage exhibition centres, this area has become a spatial node of both cultural and economic value. Infrastructure within the ancient city has been repaired, and some private residences have been converted into tourist-oriented guesthouses, boutique hotels, and restaurants (Whitehand and Gu,

2007; Wang et al., 2022). In this process, traditional spaces have been redefined as venues for cultural display and consumption. However, this phenomenon is distinctly marked within the ancient city, where buildings on main streets and heritage nodes have been restored and revitalised, whereas backstreets and peripheral areas receive comparatively less attention, revealing an uneven distribution of resources during heritage conservation and spatial redefinition.

Non-profit restoration and industrial innovation have injected vitality into the production of material space. Under the guidance of policies such as the "Control Plan" and "Management Rules," the restoration of traditional residences, the rehabilitation of significant historical buildings, and the functional adjustment of industrial buildings and land have further reinforced the cultural display function of the ancient city (Government, 2015; Regulations on the Protection of the Ancient City of Pingyao in Shanxi Province). The non-profit restoration of residential buildings in Pingyao Ancient City has achieved remarkable results, with restoration funding jointly undertaken by the Pingyao County Government, the Global Heritage Fund, and property owners. Meanwhile, some industrial and warehouse lands that have been relocated were repurposed for cultural exhibition and creative industry functions, providing venues for the presentation of intangible cultural heritage and cultural research activities, such as lacquerware decoration techniques and Sha Ge opera performers.

The spatial transformation of Pingyao Ancient City demonstrates a policy-driven model of heritage conservation and tourism development. Through the combination of functional relocation, targeted restoration, and innovative cultural industries, it illustrates that heritage sites can achieve a balance between cultural preservation and economic vitalisation.

#### 4.3 Dimension of Cultural Space Production

The second dimension of spatial production is the "representation of space," that is, the production of cultural space. Its outcome is manifested in conceived and symbolised spatial forms that carry specific knowledge and ideology. Building upon the embedding of material tourism elements, the interpretation and reinterpretation of heritage values endow the physical space with spiritual and cultural connotations, which is key to emphasising the heritage attributes and their value significance (Zhang and Li, 2024), thereby promoting the incorporation of cultural connotations and the spirit of place into heritage tourism spaces. Cultural festivals, artistic activities, and symbolic architecture in Pingyao Ancient City are critical carriers of this dimension.

Cultural interpretation and policy implementation constitute the foundational controls ensuring the reliability of spatial representation. The central and local governments of China have successively issued multiple policy documents that provide clear guidance for the preservation of Pingyao Ancient City's spatial pattern, restoration of its historic appearance, and environmental improvement, with strict enforcement at the implementation level (Shao et al., 2016). For instance, in 1998, Pingyao initiated the "blue brick and grey tile" renovation project, removing incongruous colourful buildings to restore the traditional visual characteristics of the ancient city. In 2017, the local government further implemented the "illegal construction removal, disorder rectification, and quality enhancement" campaign, clearing over incompatible building materials such as coloured steel sheets and polycarbonate panels, thereby improving the overall visual impression of the ancient city. The "Management Regulations for the World Cultural Heritage Pingyao Ancient City" strictly specify the renovation styles and procedures for traditional residences (Sun and Nakajima, 2023).

Cultural festivals and narrative reconstruction have deepened the cultural expression of Pingyao's spatial environment. Pingyao Ancient City realises the reproduction of cultural space through festival activities. These include representative events such as the Pingyao Chinese New Year, Pingyao International Photography Festival, Pingyao International Film Festival, and Youjian Pingyao Performance (Again See Pingyao) (Li et al., 2022), which integrate traditional culture with contemporary art, thereby reshaping the city's cultural imagery (Sun and Nakajima, 2023). These cultural projects and festive celebrations not only enhance the attractiveness of Pingyao Ancient City but also inject new narrative dimensions into the city, strengthening public recognition of the heritage site's cultural value.

The demands of different stakeholders have shaped the cultural spatial representation of Pingyao Ancient City. Around 1994, Pingyao proposed the "Three-City Plan," aiming to establish a "Tourism City," "Film and Television City," and "Commercial City." In 1995, the local government introduced a "Private Sector Strategy," seeking to enhance

the cultural spatial value through market-based approaches by encouraging private capital to participate in the renovation of South Street, transforming it into a cultural district themed around “antique trading.” The government further reinforced the cultural value of the ancient city through symbolic naming, for instance, in 2017, roads near Pingyao Ancient City were renamed as Ruan Yisan Road and Zheng Xiaoxie Road, commemorating experts who contributed to the heritage conservation efforts. Additionally, the establishment of the “See You Again in Pingyao” theatre exemplifies the heritage management’s control over cultural space production, as well as the driving role of private capital and creators. This representational space combines traditional narratives with contemporary art to provide visitors with a unique cultural experience, while simultaneously reinforcing the heritage’s contemporary value.

The cultural spatial production of Pingyao Ancient City reflects an organic integration of policy and practice. On one hand, the government provides strong assurance for the cultural conservation of the ancient city through the implementation of policy documents and concrete measures. On the other hand, cultural festivals, symbolic architecture, and narrative activities serve as key carriers that enrich the cultural connotation of the ancient city and enhance public heritage recognition.

#### 4.4 Dimension of Social Space Production

The third layer of spatial production is the “representational space,” referring to the production of social space, whose outcome combines both reproducibility and authenticity in spatial form. As a space of practical living, experience, and engagement, its primary producers are the local residents and visiting tourists of the heritage site. During the transformation of heritage tourism, local residents often occupy a passive position due to relatively weak discourse power (Sun and Nakajima, 2023). With the dominant intervention of power holders, heritage communities typically undergo a process of resistance, adaptation, and eventual acceptance (Su, 2018). Ultimately, through participation in tourism services and heritage education, they gradually identify practical fields for intervention in spatial production, thereby personalising and normalising the power-led spatial representations and the spirit of place, resulting in a perceivable representational space with distinctive local community cultural characteristics (Zhang and Li, 2024). In Pingyao Ancient City, heritage serves both as a material carrier and a reproduction of living narratives, with community participation and tourist experience forming the core of this dimension.

Community spatial participation and social feedback enhance the vitality and cohesion of heritage communities. Residents of Pingyao Ancient City are deeply engaged in building renovation and commercial operations, achieving a win-win situation for heritage conservation and economic development through the synergistic guidance of private capital and government policies. For example, the former site of the Rishengchang Draft Bank was transformed by private capital into the “China Draft Bank Museum,” which not only fully preserves its historical and cultural characteristics but also effectively stimulates the local economy, injecting endogenous dynamism into the heritage area. Many residents have converted private residences into guesthouses, shops, or exhibition venues, actively participating in the city’s operation through commercial means. Under a “government-led + resident self-help” model, community members have completed the restoration of privately owned courtyard houses, gradually becoming key actors in heritage space management and operation (Sun and Nakajima, 2023). Furthermore, intangible cultural heritage such as Pingyao lacquerware decoration techniques is widely exhibited within the heritage zone, revitalising traditional craftsmanship and effectively addressing employment issues for some local youth (Sun and Nakajima, 2023). Heritage community residents also participate in local governance through roles such as “grid members,” contributing to the administration of the ancient city community.

Tourist experience and the reproduction of representational space. Tourists, as perceivers and participants of heritage representational space, shape their unique heritage narratives through heritage education, cultural experiences, and subjectivised evaluations (Su, 2018). Various guided tours, cultural activities, and heritage education programmes provide tourists with opportunities for an in-depth understanding of the cultural significance of Pingyao Ancient City. Modern technological means, such as digital light shows, museum development, and intangible cultural heritage transmission, reproduce the ancient city’s culture within virtual spaces, creating novel visitor experiences. The diversified interpretations of heritage by tourists enrich the cultural connotation of the heritage and simultaneously raise new spatial production demands for heritage managers and local communities, thus forming a dynamic balance between heritage conservation and tourism development.

As a World Cultural Heritage site, Pingyao Ancient City has established a dynamic and interactive social space between the community and tourists. The community achieves self-empowerment through active participation and social contribution, while tourists inject new narrative dimensions into the heritage through their experiences and reproduction.

## 5 Conclusion

This study attempts to reveal the heritage revitalisation of ancient city heritage with distinctive Chinese traditional cultural characteristics through the protection and transformation practices of Pingyao Ancient City. From Lefebvre's perspective, it analyses the dynamic interweaving and mutual shaping of material space, space of representation, and representational space within heritage sites: through policy regulation and industry adjustment, the ancient city has achieved optimisation of its material space; by leveraging cultural festivals and symbolic projects, the city has strengthened the identification of representational space; and through community participation and tourist interaction, the space of practice has been invigorated. This virtuous cycle not only injects sustainable development momentum into the heritage site but also provides a referential model of spatial production for other heritage sites (Figure 4).

From the perspective of spatial practice, political power, professionals, capital, and non-governmental organisations have been deeply involved in the remaking of Pingyao's space: government planning and financial investment have shaped tangible spaces such as the city walls, roads, and utility networks (including the continuous removal of illegal constructions and the construction of underground corridors); market forces have introduced modern tourism functions, promoting the synchronous development of pedestrian districts within the ancient city and the surrounding areas (for example, guiding private capital to renovate South Street). Social strata and various interest groups have also played a role in this process: the authorities have constructed Pingyao as a site to exhibit Jin merchants' culture and emphasised the protection of indigenous residents' rights by positioning them as the "remaining residents of the old city"; meanwhile, investors and external developers pursue tourism profits, leading to a reconstruction of commercial space content, but this has also resulted in inappropriate "false prosperity," raising concerns about the authenticity of the space.

At the level of representational space, the preservation blueprint designed by the government and experts has provided guidance for the transformation of the tangible space: the official policy's principle of "minimal intervention" and the subsidy mechanism have directed conservation and repair practices; cultural and creative projects along with promotional narratives have reconstructed the public's interpretative understanding of Pingyao's spatial significance.

At the level of spatial representation, the interaction between residents and tourists endows the ancient city's space with multiple cultural significances: it is both a historical relic and a modern living environment. The community progressively strengthens its role through active participation in management, education, and governance, while tourists, through their experiences and reinterpretation of the heritage, inject new cultural narratives and meanings into the site.

The spatial production of Pingyao Ancient City is a complex process involving multiple actors and layers: national policies and planning establish the baseline for protection and development positioning; capital investment presents challenges. Lefebvre's framework reminds us to focus on the contestation among different forces in the process of spatial production. The transformation practice of Pingyao Ancient City demonstrates that through the integration of government, capital, and community, alongside a protection-prioritised approach, these conflicts can be mitigated to some extent, providing a valuable reference for the management and planning of similar heritage sites worldwide.

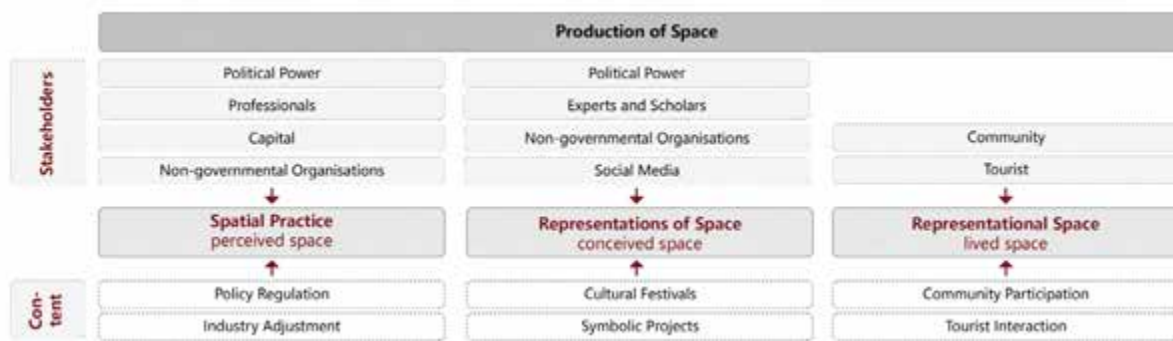


Figure 4-Framework Model

**Based on the present study, future research could be further expanded in the following directions:**

(1) The balance mechanism between heritage authenticity and commercialisation: Conduct in-depth analyses of the impact of commercialisation on the cultural value of heritage during the production of heritage space, and explore regulatory approaches through policies and management methods to maintain the authenticity and sustainability of heritage sites.

(2) Collaborative heritage conservation models involving multiple stakeholders: Investigate the modes of collaboration and power distribution among government, capital, and community in the spatial production of heritage sites, with a focus on the evolving roles and dynamic relationships of each stakeholder in heritage protection and utilisation. Further exploration should be made on the long-term mechanisms of multi-stakeholder collaboration for sustainable heritage development.

(3) Strategies to enhance visitor experience and cultural identification: From the visitor's perspective, examine the relationship between heritage spatial representation and visitor cultural identification, analysing how cultural experiences and narrative construction influence visitors' understanding and attitudes towards heritage, thereby providing new insights for the future development of heritage tourism.

(4) Comparative heritage management from a cross-cultural perspective: Through comparing the conservation and management practices of Pingyao Ancient City with other cultural heritage sites, especially under different national and cultural contexts, explore universal principles and localisation strategies for heritage site management in a global context.

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## Appendices

**Table 1 . Main Policies**

| Year | Level         | Leading Organisations                                                                                                 | Policy / Convention Title                                                                                                            |
|------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1972 | International | UNESCO                                                                                                                | Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage                                                      |
| 2013 | International | UNESCO                                                                                                                | Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention                                                       |
| 1964 | International | International Conference of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments                                          | International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter)                                   |
| 1987 | International | International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)                                                                 | Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (Washington Charter)                                                  |
| 1994 | International | International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)                                                                 | The Nara Document on Authenticity                                                                                                    |
| 2005 | International | UNESCO                                                                                                                | Hoi An Draft — Asia's Best Practice in Heritage Conservation                                                                         |
| 2004 | China         | ICOMOS China                                                                                                          | China Principles for the Conservation of Cultural Relics                                                                             |
| 2007 | China         | National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China                                                          | Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China                                                                     |
| 2008 | China         | National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China                                                          | Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People's Republic of China                                                                       |
| 2008 | China         | State Council of the People's Republic of China                                                                       | Regulations on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages                                           |
| 2024 | China         | Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, National Development and Reform Commission                           | Construction Guidelines for Protection and Enhancement Projects of Historical and Cultural Cities and Districts (Trial)              |
| 2022 | Local         | Shanxi Provincial Government Office                                                                                   | Action Plan for Strengthening Protection and Development of Pingyao Ancient City as an Internationally Renowned Tourist Destination  |
| 2018 | Local         | Shanxi Provincial People's Congress                                                                                   | Shanxi Province Pingyao Ancient City Protection Regulations                                                                          |
| 2015 | Local         | Pingyao County Government, UNESCO, China Huaxia Cultural Heritage Foundation, Global Heritage Fund, Tongji University | Guidelines for Protection, Restoration and Environmental Governance of Traditional Residences in Pingyao Ancient City                |
| 2009 | Local         | Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute                                                                   | Management Rules for World Cultural Heritage Site Pingyao Ancient City                                                               |
| 2015 | Local         | Pingyao County Government, UNESCO, China Huaxia Cultural Heritage Foundation, Global Heritage Fund, Tongji University | Practical Guidelines for Protection, Restoration and Environmental Governance of Traditional Residences in Pingyao Ancient City      |
| 1987 | Local         | Pingyao County Government, Shanxi Urban-Rural Planning and Design Institute                                           | Protection Planning for Pingyao Historic and Cultural City                                                                           |
| 1999 | Local         | Pingyao County Government, Shanxi Urban-Rural Planning and Design Institute, Tongji University                        | Overall Planning for Pingyao County Town                                                                                             |
| 2013 | Local         | Pingyao County Government, Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute                                        | Detailed Control Plan for Protection of Pingyao Ancient City                                                                         |
| 2012 | Local         | Pingyao County Government                                                                                             | Implementation Measures for Financial Subsidies for the Protection and Restoration of Traditional Residences in Pingyao Ancient City |

Table 2. Main Events

| Year       | Main Participants                                                                        | Event Description                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1963       | Dong Jianhong, Ruan Yisan (Tongji University)                                            | Conducted a survey of Pingyao                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 1976       | Pingyao County Construction Bureau                                                       | After the Reform and Opening-up, Pingyao was designated as a small to medium-sized city focusing on light textile and machinery industries                                                                    |
| 1981       | Pingyao County Government, Tongji University                                             | Surveyed and formulated the Overall Plan for Pingyao County; new urban area developed outside the old town; Pingyao was designated as a nationally protected tourist county with a complete ancient cityscape |
| 1986       | State Council of the People's Republic of China                                          | Listed as the second batch of national historical and cultural cities                                                                                                                                         |
| 1992       | Ministry of Construction, UN-Habitat                                                     | Organised training courses on ancient city protection planning                                                                                                                                                |
| 1994       | National Committee of Historical and Cultural Cities                                     | Passed a proposal to support the prompt nomination of Pingyao as a World Cultural Heritage Site                                                                                                               |
| 1997       | UNESCO                                                                                   | Officially inscribed Pingyao Ancient City along with Shuanglin Temple and Zhenguo Temple on the World Heritage List                                                                                           |
| 2006       | Global Heritage Fund, Pingyao County Government                                          | Jointly funded and completed the overall conservation plan and residential repair projects in Pingyao                                                                                                         |
| 2011       | Pingyao Jiucheng Cultural Tourism Investment Co., Ltd., Wang Chaoge Team                 | Youjian Pingyao Performance (Again See Pingyao) designated as a benchmark project; Pingyao Film Festival became a signature event                                                                             |
| 2017       | Jia KezhangdirectorPingyao International Film Festival Co., Ltd.                         | Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival                                                                                                                                             |
| Since 2019 | State Administration of Cultural Heritage, Shanxi Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage | Conducted protection and repair of heritage units; constructed public service spaces; implemented operational regulation                                                                                      |
| Since 2020 | Pingyao County Government                                                                | Implemented infrastructure improvement and renovation projects in Pingyao Ancient City                                                                                                                        |