

Bridging Culture and Community: A Study on the Community Participation Mechanism for the Revitalization of Chikan Old Street in Zhanjiang

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Abstract: Historical district revitalization in contemporary China often encounters a critical tension between state-led infrastructural efficiency and the organic preservation of community life. This study examines the revitalization of Chikan Old Street in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, as a paradigmatic case study to explore the mechanisms of community participation in heritage conservation. Adopting a qualitative case study design, this research utilizes participatory observation and semi-structured interviews to investigate the barriers to effective community engagement. Through the theoretical lens of Empowerment Theory and the ERG (Existence, Relatedness, Growth) framework, the study reveals structural disconnects in the current top-down governance model, including policy discontinuity and social fragmentation. The findings underscore the paradox of popularity, where increased visibility leads to the dilution of local identity. This study proposes a professionalized social work intervention mechanism. By establishing a multi-stakeholder collaborative platform, social workers can bridge the gap between government objectives and resident needs, employing cultural mapping and micro-regeneration tactics to restore community agency.

Keywords: Community participation; Heritage conservation; Social work intervention; Urban regeneration

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1. Introduction

The revitalization of historic districts has emerged as a cornerstone of urban policy in China, shifting from the “bulldozer” approach of the late 20th century to more nuanced strategies of organic renewal and heritage conservation ^[1]. Against the backdrop of Guangdong Province’s “High-quality Development Project for Hundreds of Counties, Thousands of Towns, and Myriads of Villages” (commonly known as the “Bai-Qian-Wan” Project), the integration of urban and rural development has prioritized the activation of cultural assets ^[2]. This policy environment provides both the impetus and the resources for transforming historic areas like Chikan Old Street in

Zhanjiang into engines of local economic growth ^[1,3]. However, the translation of macro-policy into micro-level reality is fraught with challenges, particularly in balancing the demands of tourism-driven development with the preservation of existing social fabrics.

Chikan Old Street, historically known as “Guangzhouwan” during the French leasehold period, represents a unique architectural and cultural heritage. Its streetscape, characterized by a fusion of Cantonese arcades and French colonial styles, narrates a century of trade and cultural exchange. In recent years, fueled by media exposure—most notably the hit drama “The Hidden Corner” (Bad Kids)—Chikan has catapulted from a quiet residential quarter to a nationally recognized “Internet Celebrity” (Wanghong) destination. This newfound fame has attracted substantial government investment in infrastructure, streetscape beautification, and tourism facilities ^[3-4]. Yet, this rapid physical transformation has highlighted a deepening chasm: the mismatch between the “hard” investment in stone and mortar and the “soft” deficit in community belonging and social cohesion.

The central problem addressed in this research is the paradox of successful regeneration leading to social alienation. While the streets of Chikan are cleaner and more photogenic than ever, long-term residents increasingly feel like strangers in their own homes, marginalized by rising rents, noise pollution, and a commercial landscape catering exclusively to transient visitors. This “mismatch” manifests in the tangible erosion of “Yanhuoqi”—the smoke and fire of daily life that gives a neighborhood its soul. The objective of this study, therefore, is two-fold: first, to empirically analyze the structural and social barriers that inhibit genuine community engagement in Chikan’s current revitalization model; and second, to propose a constructed mechanism of professionalized social work intervention that can empower residents and institutionalize their participation in the governance of their heritage.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Urban regeneration and heritage-led revitalization

The academic discourse on urban regeneration in China has undergone a significant paradigm shift. Early models were predominantly “Property-Led”, characterized by large-scale demolition and reconstruction driven by land finance and developer interests. This approach often resulted in the complete sanitization of historic areas, replacing organic communities with faux-heritage commercial districts—a phenomenon critics have termed “museumification” ^[5]. In response to the loss of cultural identity and social displacement, recent scholarship and policy have pivoted toward “People-Oriented” revitalization. This newer paradigm emphasizes “micro-regeneration” (Wei-Gaizao), which advocates for small-scale, incremental improvements that respect the existing urban fabric and social networks. Heritage-led revitalization is now understood not just as the preservation of buildings, but as the safeguarding of the “living heritage” embodied by the local community ^[5-6].

2.2. Community participation in social work: Applying Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation

Sherry Arnstein’s seminal framework, the “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969), provides a critical typology for evaluating the distribution of power in planning processes. The ladder delineates eight rungs across three levels: “Non-participation” (Manipulation, Therapy), where the aim is to educate or cure participants; “Tokenism” (Informing, Consultation, Placation), where stakeholders are heard but lack the power to ensure their views are heeded; and “Citizen Power” (Partnership, Delegated Power, Citizen Control), where residents possess decision-making authority ^[7]. In the context of heritage conservation, this model serves as a diagnostic tool to distinguish

between performative involvement and genuine democratic governance^[8].

Applying this lens to typical heritage revitalization practices in China reveals a prevalence of “Tokenism.” Despite the shift towards “People-Oriented” policies, engagement often stalls at the rungs of “Informing” or “Consultation.” Residents are frequently notified of development plans post-decision or surveyed without binding mechanisms to incorporate their feedback. In Chikan, the top-down nature of the “Bai-Qian-Wan” project risks reducing participation to a ceremonial exercise, where the “one-way flow of information” precludes the “Partnership” necessary for sustainable renewal. This “empty shell” participation mirrors the physical “empty shell” syndrome, where the community is present in form but absent in power.

2.3. Theoretical framework: Empowerment, ERG, and social capital

To analyze the dynamics of community participation in Chikan, this study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks that collectively explain the “why” and “how” of resident engagement.

2.3.1. Empowerment theory

Focuses on the transformation of residents from passive beneficiaries of government largesse to active decision-makers^[9]. It distinguishes between “process empowerment” (the mechanisms of participation) and “outcome empowerment” (the actual control over resources and decisions). In the context of Chikan, it provides the metric for evaluating whether participation is tokenistic or substantive.

2.3.2. ERG Theory

Alderfer’s ERG Theory (Existence, Relatedness, Growth) offers a hierarchical yet flexible understanding of human needs^[10].

Existence: Basic safety, housing security, and physical environment.

Relatedness: Social cohesion, neighborly bonds, and community identity.

Growth: Cultural pride, self-actualization through heritage stewardship.

2.3.3. Social capital

Analyzes the fabric of the community through “Bonding” capital (ties between residents) and “Bridging” capital (links between residents and external power structures like government or developers)^[11]. Resilience in heritage districts depends on strengthening bonding capital to resist displacement while cultivating bridging capital to access resources.

These theories are operationalized through Arnstein’s “Ladder of Citizen Participation.” Current practices in many Chinese heritage projects often stall at the rungs of “Informing” or “Consultation”, which Arnstein categorizes as tokenism. The goal of the proposed social work mechanism is to elevate this participation toward “Partnership” and “Delegated Power”, where the satisfaction of ERG needs creates the foundation for genuine empowerment and social capital accumulation.

Based on the theories, the conceptual framework was constructed. As shown in **Figure 1**, this conceptual framework takes the Community Participation Mechanism as its core and integrates three sets of variables while clarifying their internal pathways. The first component is Empowerment Theory, structured around Process Empowerment and Outcome Empowerment. Process empowerment emphasizes participation mechanisms and capacity building, which determine whether residents can enter the agenda-setting process and gain the skills

and organizational capacity to act collectively. Outcome empowerment focuses on resource control and decision-making power, and is reflected through inclusive deliberation and shared governance, indicating whether governance structures genuinely open up to resident influence. The second component is ERG Theory, which explains participation motives through three tiers of needs: Existence needs (safety, housing security, physical environment quality), Relatedness needs (social cohesion, neighborly bonds, community identity), and Growth needs (cultural inheritance, pride and self-actualization, heritage stewardship). The third component is Social Capital, distinguishing bonding capital—strengthening internal resident ties and mutual aid networks—from bridging capital, which connects residents to external structures and resources through government links, market and developer links, and NGO and expert connections. Under Linkages, the framework proposes that ERG satisfaction → enhanced empowerment capacity → deeper participation, enabling participation to move beyond superficial forms toward partnership and delegated power, ultimately achieving the stated goals of sustainable revitalization, preserving and enhancing “yanhuoqi” (everyday vitality), and building long-term community resilience.

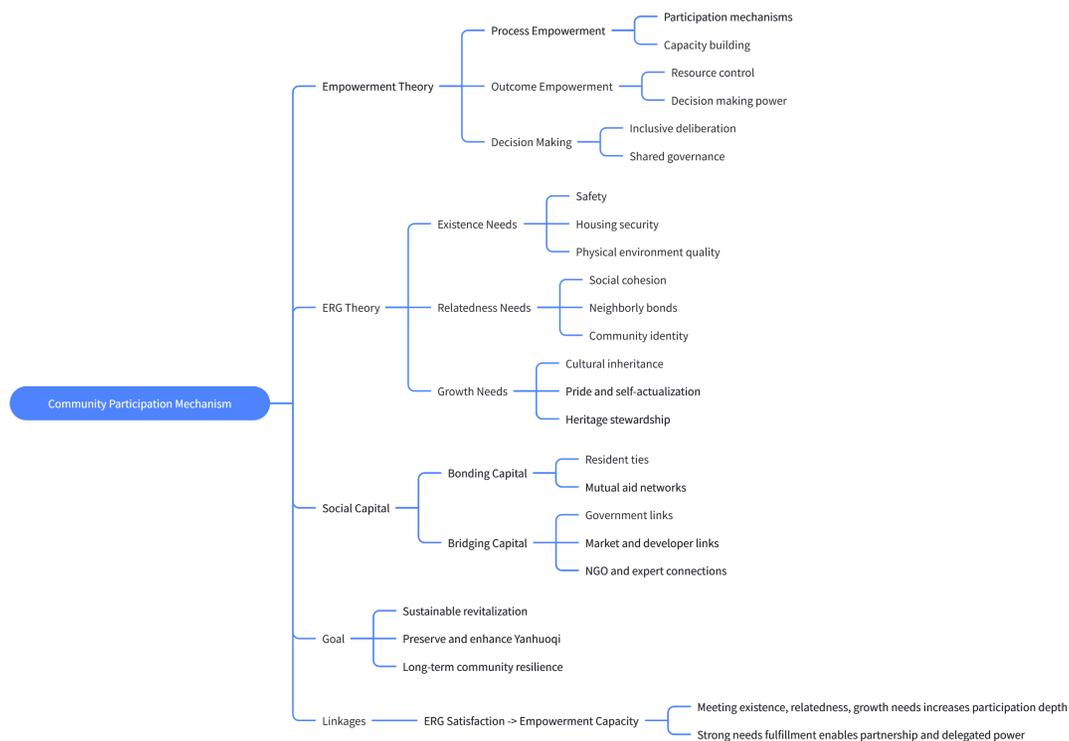


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the community participation mechanism

3. Methodology

Given the complex, context-dependent nature of urban revitalization, this research employs a qualitative case study design. This approach allows for a deep, holistic investigation of the social dynamics within Chikan Old Street, capturing the lived experiences of stakeholders that quantitative metrics might overlook.

3.1. Data collection

The primary data collection methods included field ethnography and semi-structured interviews.

Field Ethnography: The research team conducted extensive participant observation within the district, documenting the daily interactions in public spaces, the changing commercial landscape, and the physical alterations to the streetscape. Observations focused on indicators of “Yanhuoqi”—such as street markets, elderly gatherings, and traditional festivals—and how these were impacted by tourist inflows.

Semi-Structured Interviews: A diverse sample of stakeholders was recruited to ensure multi-perspectival validity. Participants included local government officials responsible for the Bai-Qian-Wan implementation, long-term residents (both property owners and tenants), business owners (both traditional artisans and new “Wanghong” entrepreneurs), and tourists. This sampling strategy allowed for the triangulation of data, cross-verifying official policy narratives against the ground-level reality experienced by residents.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic coding pipeline aligned with the “Need–Space–Satisfaction” mechanism derived from the theoretical framework. Transcripts and field notes were coded to identify recurring themes related to unmet needs (Existence), disrupted social networks (Relatedness), and opportunities for cultural expression (Growth). Rigor was maintained through member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with key informants to verify accuracy, and through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting methodological decisions^[8, 12].

4. Findings: Current state and dilemmas

The investigation into Chikan Old Street’s revitalization reveals a complex tapestry of progress and regression. While the physical environment has undeniably improved, four critical dilemmas have emerged that threaten the long-term sustainability of the district.

4.1. The top-down governance model and unintended consequences

The revitalization of Chikan has been primarily driven by a government-led, top-down model. While effective in mobilizing resources and executing large-scale infrastructure projects swiftly, this approach has often lacked the granularity to address local needs. A poignant example cited by residents is the replacement of street pavements. In an effort to enhance the “historical atmosphere”, planners installed smooth, polished stone slabs. While aesthetically pleasing to tourists, these surfaces become dangerously slippery during Zhanjiang’s frequent humid and rainy weather, severely impeding the mobility of the district’s elderly population. This “unintentional damage” exemplifies the disconnect between administrative aesthetics and the functional “Existence” needs of the residents, fostering a sense of resentment rather than gratitude^[1].

4.2. The “internet celebrity” paradox and homogenization

The branding of Chikan as a “Wanghong” destination has unleashed a wave of commercial homogenization that threatens to erase its unique character. The research identified a proliferation of “Zanhua” (traditional floral hairpin) photography shops, with over 20 such businesses opening in a short span. These establishments, catering almost exclusively to tourists seeking social media content, have displaced traditional grocers, barbershops, and breakfast stalls that served the daily needs of residents. This “Internet Celebrity Paradox” suggests that as the district becomes more “consumable” for outsiders, it becomes less “livable” for insiders. The authentic “Yanhuoqi” is being replaced by a staged authenticity, a commodified simulacrum of heritage that lacks the depth of genuine community life^[13–14].

4.3. Social fragmentation and the “empty shell” syndrome

The commercial pressure has catalyzed a process of social fragmentation. Rising property values and rents have incentivized many original owners to lease their properties to commercial operators and move to modern apartments in the suburbs. This displacement has led to an “Empty Shell” syndrome (Kongxinhua), where the physical structures of the heritage district remain, but the indigenous social networks that sustained them have evaporated. The remaining residents are often elderly or vulnerable populations who lack the resources to move, leaving them isolated in a neighborhood that no longer caters to them. The “Relatedness” needs of the community are thus severed, breaking the continuity of collective memory and reducing the district to a commercial backdrop [15].

4.4. Policy discontinuity

Finally, the research highlights the challenge of policy discontinuity. The reliance on campaign-style mobilization for projects like Bai-Qian-Wan often means that attention and funding are intense but fleeting. Political cycles and personnel changes in local administration can lead to shifting priorities, leaving long-term social infrastructure projects unsupported [1]. Without a permanent, institutionalized mechanism for community governance, the gains of revitalization remain precarious, dependent on the whims of external funding rather than endogenous community resilience.

5. Discussion: Constructing a participation mechanism

To address these dilemmas, this paper proposes a transition from the current state-managed model to a collaborative governance model led by professional social work. This mechanism is designed to bridge the chasm between top-down planning and bottom-up needs [5,12].

As shown in **Figure 2**, this collaborative governance model positions the social work station as a pivotal hub that bridges government authorization and policy resources with residents and merchants needs and participation. Social workers first use cultural mapping to translate local knowledge and place-based values into actionable planning agendas, then rely on a community governance council as a multi-stakeholder platform for sustained negotiation and shared decision-making. Finally, micro-regeneration enables resident-led actions that deliver tangible improvements in everyday life. By closing the loop from resource–need alignment to negotiation–action implementation, the model aims to achieve sustainable *yanhuoqi* (everyday vitality) and co-governance.

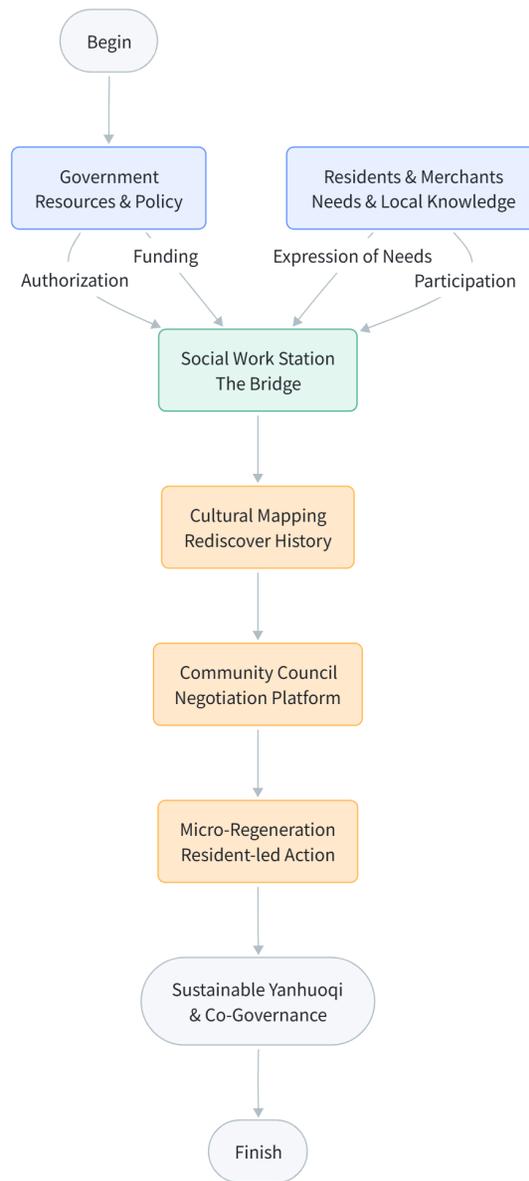


Figure 2. Collaborative governance model

5.1. Designing a multi-stakeholder platform

The core of the proposed mechanism is a multi-stakeholder platform—a Community Governance Council—that institutionalizes communication. This body would include representatives from the sub-district government, resident committees, business owners, and heritage experts. Unlike occasional public hearings, this council would have defined decision-making powers over specific aspects of neighborhood management, such as the allocation of public space usage or the regulation of commercial noise.

5.2. Social work as a “bridge”

Professional social workers play a pivotal “bridging” role within this framework, translating macro-policy into community language and articulating community needs into policy proposals.

Cultural Mapping: Social workers facilitate “cultural mapping” workshops, where residents identify sites of personal and collective significance—an old well, a gathering tree, a specific corner shop. This process validates residents’ knowledge and reintegrates their “Growth” needs for cultural pride into the planning process.

Conflict Resolution: As neutral mediators, social workers manage the inevitable conflicts between residential and commercial interests. By facilitating dialogue, they can negotiate compromises, such as designated quiet hours or shared waste management systems, that allow tourism and residential life to coexist.

5.3. Sustaining “Yanhuoqi” through micro-regeneration

The mechanism emphasizes “micro-regeneration” explicitly aimed at restoring “Yanhuoqi.” This involves creating “Community Empowerment Funds”—small grants accessible to resident groups for self-organized projects, such as planting community gardens, repairing shared stairwells, or organizing traditional festivals. These projects satisfy “Existence” and “Relatedness” needs simultaneously, rebuilding the “Bonding” social capital that makes the community resilient against displacement.

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

The revitalization of Chikan Old Street stands at a crossroads. Continuing down the path of unchecked commercialization risks turning a living heritage site into a hollow theme park. This study argues that community participation is not merely a moral add-on but a functional necessity for sustainable renewal. By empowering residents to become co-creators of their environment, the district can retain the “Yanhuoqi” that is its true competitive advantage.

6.1. Policy recommendations

Institutionalize Public Consultation: Move beyond tokenism by embedding mandatory community impact assessments and co-design workshops into the legal framework of urban planning for historic districts ^[1, 4].

Establish Community Empowerment Funds: Allocate a percentage of tourism revenue to a ring-fenced fund managed by the Community Governance Council, enabling residents to finance their own micro-improvement projects ^[16].

Integrate Social Work Stations: Mandate the establishment of professional social work stations within heritage districts to serve as the permanent operational hub for community organization and conflict mediation.

6.2. Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its single-case focus and qualitative nature. Future research should examine the applicability of this social work-led model in other “intermediary cities” across the Global South and employ longitudinal quantitative methods to measure the long-term impact of such interventions on social capital metrics.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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