Under the banner of heritage conservation: The gentrification of dilapidated low-income neighborhoods in the Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project

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Abstract. Understanding the dynamics and implications of urban redevelopment projects, particularly in the context of China's rapid urbanization, could inform sustainable and inclusive urban development strategies. This abstract provides an overview of the Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project (DPPRP). Unlike other redevelopment projects that prioritize economic benefits, the DPPRP is predominantly driven by political interests, with cultural and economic factors playing supporting roles. As part of the broader integrated conservation and redevelopment program, the DPPRP holds political significance, and its implementation demonstrates clear state involvement, led by the local government. The response from residents reflects the failure of China's attempts to promote citizen participation in local governance, suggesting challenges even for participatory authoritarianism. These developments have negative implications for Chinese citizens' pursuit of their right to the city, hindering their ability to shape urban spaces and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. The purpose of this study is to analyze the Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project (DPPRP) in China, providing insights for policymakers and urban planners to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of urban redevelopment projects.

Keywords: Cultural heritage conservation, Gentrification, Political interests, Citizen participation, Urban renewal.

1. Introduction

Urban regeneration is imperative due to the myriad challenges faced by cities worldwide, including deteriorating infrastructure, population growth, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic disparities. Through urban regeneration programs, cities aim to tackle environmental concerns, enhance livability, stimulate economic growth, and strengthen the physical and social fabric of urban areas. As a result, urban redevelopment has become a prevalent phenomenon globally, aiming to transform urban spaces, address various social, economic, and environmental issues, and improve residents' quality of life. However, it is essential to recognize that the motivations, processes, and outcomes of urban redevelopment projects vary significantly in different contexts. Therefore, comprehending these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, urban planners, and researchers alike, as it enables the promotion of sustainable and inclusive urban development practices.

With the rapid urbanization and ongoing transition in China, there has been an increased focus on urban reconstruction in recent years. The Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project (DPPRP) serves as a prominent example of these efforts, aiming to preserve cultural heritage while stimulating economic growth. However, concerns arise regarding the potential implications of such projects on local communities and their long-term sustainability. Therefore, conducting a comprehensive study on the DPPRP and its impact on the local context holds significant importance in informing and enhancing future strategies for urban redevelopment not only within China but also globally.

The rent gap hypothesis falls short in fully elucidating the process of gentrification resulting from historic restoration programs in low-income neighborhoods. Instead, Tunbridge and Ashworth's 1996 theory of heritage utilization offers a more comprehensive explanation for this phenomenon. Moreover, the DPPRP represents a distinctly Chinese governmental intervention with unique characteristics. Extensive dialogues with local residents have unveiled their aspirations for the right

to the city. Therefore, studying the DPPRP necessitates integrating multiple perspectives and developing a profound understanding of China's political and economic landscape.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the DPPRP as a case study of urban redevelopment in China, with a focus on investigating its underlying motivations and exploring its societal, economic, and cultural impacts. Through comprehensive analysis from multiple perspectives, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges associated with urban redevelopment projects in China.

A mixed-methods approach will be employed to achieve the study objectives. Firstly, an extensive analysis of existing research on urban planning, cultural heritage preservation, and redevelopment in China will be conducted. This comprehensive review will contribute to establishing a theoretical framework for analyzing the DPPRP and identifying any knowledge gaps that exist. Additionally, primary data will be collected through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Key stakeholders involved in the DPPRP project, including local residents, will be interviewed to gain valuable insights. Surveys will also be administered to gather quantitative data on the perceptions and experiences of residents affected by the project. Furthermore, field observations will document physical transformations in the urban landscape and assess the impact of this initiative on the local community's well-being.

2. Literature review

2.1. Xi’an and its “Imperial City Restoration Plan”

Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, is a prominent city along the Silk Road and is located in the northwestern region of China [1]. In comparison to the more developed eastern and southern regions of China, the western and northern areas are undergoing slower political, economic, and cultural progress. Nevertheless, with the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative, the central government has extended substantial support to Xi'an's local administration in recent years. This support has significantly contributed to the city's economic growth, leading to an increase in its population. In 2020, Xi'an emerged as a pioneering city in northwest China by achieving a GDP that exceeded one trillion renminbi (RMB) [2]. Furthermore, since 2014, Xi'an has consistently surpassed national average GDP growth rates with an annual increment of approximately 100 billion RMB [2]. Consequently, Xi'an has established itself as a pivotal economic hub in northwest China necessitating prioritization for its urban development.

Xi'an possesses a profound historical legacy spanning over six millennia [3]. As the political center of thirteen Chinese dynasties, it holds immense historical significance [1]. Among its renowned appellations is Chang'an, a name that resonates deeply with the Chinese populace and evokes the grandeur of the Tang Empire [3]. Employing past events to underscore historical and cultural commonalities among diverse ethnic groups serves as a prevalent political strategy aimed at fostering national cohesion. The Imperial City Restoration Plan (ICRP) can be perceived through this prism.

Mayor Sun Qingyun initially proposed the Integrated Conservation and Redevelopment Plan (ICRP) in the 2005 Government Work Report [4]. The ICRP has been highlighted as the primary strategy for urban revitalization in Xi'an, as stated in the white paper titled "Xi'an's Development Report on Internationalization, Marketization, Humanization, and Ecology" released by the Xi'an Municipal Government [5]. Essentially, this comprehensive redevelopment plan aims to revive Xi'an's glorious past as an ancient capital through extensive restoration and reconstruction of its heritage sites. The concept of "historical urban landscapes" is not novel within the realm of urbanization [6,7], with various international organizations emphasizing the significance of prioritizing conservation efforts for urban heritage during the process of urban development, particularly in cities boasting a rich cultural legacy, to cater to residents' social needs [6,7].

2.2. The Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project (DPPRP)

With the aim of preserving and restoring the Daming Palace Relic Area, the DPPRP plays a crucial role within the ICRP [8]. Broadly speaking, the DPPRP can be divided into two phases: firstly, focusing on demolishing the urban villages and shanty communities located on-site; secondly, dedicated to establishing a publicly accessible heritage park. Renowned as "The Most Magnificent Palace," the Daming Palace holds immense historical significance as it serves as a national symbol of the Tang Dynasty with global recognition [9,10]. Regrettably, conflicts and wars led to its disappearance a millennium ago, resulting in shanty towns and urban villages emerging prior to implementing the DPPRP [8]. Official statistics indicate that this initiative directly impacted nearly 6,000 companies, 25,000 families, 100,000 individuals along with 89 governmental institutions and enterprises [8].

In order to investigate the impacts of implementing historic preservation projects, particularly in residential areas, on local communities, this research employs the DPPRP as a case study. The study relies on published data obtained from official websites of the local government and incorporates feedback gathered through online in-depth interviews. Due to limitations, the research process was exclusively conducted online with video calls utilized for conducting comprehensive interviews with residents. The researcher interviewed five local families, including two migrant families residing within the DPPRP.

2.3. In the Daming Palace Relic Area, gentrification and historical usage

Clark's concept of "the order and simplicity of gentrification: a political challenge" [11] serves as the fundamental basis for the term 'gentrification' employed in this essay. As per this definition, gentrification denotes a process entailing a shift in the demographics of land users, wherein the incoming users exhibit higher affluence compared to their predecessors. Simultaneously, reinvestment leads to enhancements in the built environment within the area.

In the context of the DPPRP, the local government has developed new residential areas in close proximity to accommodate populations affected by the project and in need of relocation. These recently established residential zones have significantly improved living conditions, thereby enhancing the socioeconomic situations of their inhabitants. Former owners from urban villages and shanty towns were provided with housing units of equivalent size but with superior living standards within these new residential zones. Any remaining flats were made available for sale on the housing market, following a strategy similar to that employed by the Republic of Korea's Joint Redevelopment Programme (JRP) [12]. The builders successfully generated a profit and reimbursed their expenses, consequently attracting buyers of elevated socio-economic status to these residential areas. This resulted in the displacement of previous tenants from shanty towns and urban villages, indicating the colonization of the region by individuals belonging to a higher socioeconomic class.

Furthermore, in addition to the establishment of a museum and a cultural park featuring an archaeological study facility, the local authorities have introduced commercial malls and upscale shopping centres within the DPPRP area. In summary, these transformations align with an expanded interpretation of gentrification.

Prior to the implementation of the DPPRP, there existed a significant disparity between projected and actual ground rentals in the area. However, it was not primarily this rental discrepancy that drove gentrification; rather, governmental intervention played a pivotal role. While consumer choice remains noteworthy, it is not the determining factor in this particular scenario. Alternatively, Tunbridge and Ashworth's concept of "dissonance heritage" offers a more compelling rationale for gentrification within the Daming Palace Relic Area.

Heritage conservation projects serve three primary purposes: political, cultural, and economic. From a political standpoint, heritage preservation can function as a tool for the government to foster societal unity and evoke citizens' historical consciousness, which is a widely adopted approach. Considering the significance of the Daming Palace, the DPPRP itself could also be perceived as a noteworthy political achievement for the local administration.

Furthermore, heritage is regarded as a valuable cultural asset [1, 13]. From an economic perspective, historical preservation initiatives not only enhance local property values and contribute to urban revitalization but also offer benefits to tourists [14]. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that heritage conservation projects can potentially trigger gentrification, leading to the displacement and eviction of marginalized communities originally residing in the vicinity [1, 14].

These marginalized groups within the context of the Daming Palace Relic Area encompassed the tenants who had previously inhabited Xi'an's urban villages and shantytowns. Through initiatives such as the DPPRP, the local government has actively engaged in transforming the urban landscape of this region for a significant duration of time.

2.4. China and its Participatory Authoritarianism

China's post-socialist system, characterized by state control over land resources and limited citizen ownership, confers the government with a distinctive advantage in land expropriation compared to other governments [15]. Moreover, the Chinese government has consistently implemented numerous top-down programs with a paternalistic approach. In essence, policies are not formulated based on citizens' demands. However, there has been a global trend towards citizen participation in local governance in recent years, prompting the Chinese government to gradually modify its previous strategy. Although local individuals can now partake in the policy-making process, their ability to do so remains constrained, guided, and overseen by governmental authorities [16]. This unique form of citizen engagement in local government is referred to as participatory authoritarianism [16].

3. The effects of the Daming Palace Protection and Renovation Project

3.1. Impact on Migrant Families

During the implementation process of the DPPRP, over 25,000 migrant families were impacted. The author's comprehensive interviews with two of these migrant families, who were relocated from dilapidated shanty communities to government-designated residential areas for resettlement, served as the primary source material for this section. This article employs five key categories to elucidate the migrants' perspectives towards the DPPRP: resistance, recollection, passive opposition, inadvertent involvement, and active adaptation. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the migrants' attitudes underwent transformation as the program was executed.

Before the initiation of the project, both the interviewed migrant families and individuals within their social circles displayed a sense of inadvertent involvement upon being informed about the implementation of the DPPRP. They did not actively oppose the program but also did not anticipate it. When questioned about any opposition, both migrant families mentioned being aware of clear resistance to the DPPRP but were unfamiliar with specific details. At least one respondent expressed, "I was aware that it would be ineffective, so I didn't feel compelled to acquire further knowledge. “Both families also indicated that they had not been contacted prior to receiving notification from the government regarding their relocation due to the DPPRP. From the perspective of the tenants, both households expressed unawareness of any direct involvement by the government in engaging with them. As one interviewee stated, "Indeed, discussions were held with homeowners and tenants were informed by homeowners about the requirement to vacate." Notably, there are no provisions pertaining to tenant consultations or rehousing mentioned in publicly available government documents. Documents published on Xi'an municipal government's official website emphasize urging locals to "consider the overall situation and comply with requirements," sign agreements, and relocate within a specified timeframe [17].

No new residential sites were actually constructed when the shantytowns and urban villages were dismantled, thereby compelling the migrating families of the DPPRP to seek alternative housing options. The government documents fail to address any resolution for this issue. The interviewees disclosed that this predicament caused significant distress not only for themselves but also for other immigrant households within their social networks. At this juncture, the mindset of migrant families

can be best described as passive resistance, as they believed overtly resisting would be futile. Nevertheless, all participants in the interviews affirmed that their living conditions had indeed improved since relocating to their new residences. This observation is consistent with the information provided by the government. Interestingly, two interviewees also expressed a sense of nostalgia for their previous neighborhoods, highlighting that the new residential areas did not offer the same close-knit community atmosphere. Furthermore, the respondents consistently reported an increase in the prices of daily necessities in the area.

On the other hand, all interviewees expressed positive views about the Daming Palace National Heritage Park. One interviewee, a daughter from a migrant family, described taking leisurely walks in the park as an essential part of her life. In fact, every participant, throughout the in-depth interviews, stated that they were content with their current life situation. However, it remains undeniable that initially, they were resistant to the changes. "Although I am satisfied with the current situation, I still miss the sense of community we had before," expressed one respondent.

3.2. Local Residents

Remarkably, during the survey conducted in the area, none of the families reported any knowledge of resistance towards the DPPRP. In fact, every single participant held a positive view of the initiative. One participant expressed, "Preserving our heritage is a positive endeavor, and the government is providing us with a new place to enjoy our leisure time." Interviews with local residents consistently revealed that they perceived the historical preservation initiative as more beneficial than detrimental. Additionally, not a single participant indicated support for the stance of the DPPRP migrants.

4. Discussion

4.1. Advantages of DPPRP

Firstly, it is undeniable that the historical conservation endeavor has significantly contributed to the preservation of our cultural heritage, particularly evident in the Daming Palace Relic Area which benefits from protection by the DPPRP. Ongoing archaeological excavations at the Daming Palace continue to this day in 2021, showcasing the immense contribution made by the DPPRP towards regional archaeology development. Moreover, local tourism industry has directly thrived due to these efforts. Additionally, as an integral part of the ICRP, the DPPRP has played a pivotal role in shaping Xi'an's historic urban landscape with noteworthy economic and political advantages that should not be disregarded. Furthermore, official records and interviewee comments attest that removal of urban villages and shantytowns have effectively enhanced both security and quality of life within this area.

4.2. Disadvantages of DPPRP

However, in light of the positive impact on heritage preservation and the transformation of the urban landscape, it is crucial to acknowledge the overlooked group of original tenants who have become the main victims of the DPPRP. Their housing needs and voices have been disregarded in the government’s resettlement plan, with limited representation in social media and public government documents, creating a concerning silence surrounding their plight.

In addition, the conduct of government employees and the government's strategy, which is recorded in its need to "take into account the overall situation and obey the needs," have demonstrated a lack of consideration for the feelings of the DPPRP migrants. This may be attributed to the government's legal advantage in land acquisition. Additionally, the emotional needs of these migrants about their original neighborhood were not considered during the relocation process.

Moreover, during the interviews, the migrants expressed a sense of powerlessness, believing that resistance was futile and that the government merely informed them without consulting them. This suggests a lack of opportunities for citizen participation in local governance. This failure in promoting citizen participation may reflect the challenges of implementing participatory authoritarianism, even in economically developed cities like Xi'an in northwest China.

However, over the course of several years of implementation, the favorable reception of the DPPRP by local residents and migrants inadvertently reinforces the tendency of local authorities to overlook the desires of inhabitants in subsequent urban redevelopment endeavors. Consequently, this undermines the pursuit of residents' rights within the city.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly uses DPPRP as a case study of urban reconstruction in China, explores its motivations, processes and results, and analyzes its impact on the social, economic and cultural structure of the affected communities. This study contends that the DPPRP, initially framed as a cultural heritage preservation project, was influenced by various factors throughout its implementation, gradually prioritizing profitability and resulting in the transformation of the local gentrification. Unlike other projects primarily focused on economic gains, the DPPRP is primarily driven by political interests, with cultural and economic considerations serving as supplementary factors. Its inclusion within the ICRP highlights its political significance, emphasizing the leading role of the local government in its execution. The response of local residents towards the DPPRP sheds light on the limitations of citizen participation in local governance in China, revealing the challenges of fostering participatory authoritarianism in the country. This unfavorable development carries significant implications for Chinese nationals seeking to exercise their future right to the city.

Moving forward, further research can explore alternative approaches to urban redevelopment that prioritize inclusivity, social justice, and citizen participation. This could involve studying successful international case studies where urban redevelopment projects have effectively balanced economic development with social and cultural preservation. Additionally, investigating the potential role of grassroots movements and civil society organizations in influencing urban redevelopment policies and practices can provide insights into enhancing citizen engagement and empowerment.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of the complexities associated with urban redevelopment projects in China. By critically examining the DPPRP, this study highlights the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches that genuinely consider the interests and rights of all stakeholders, including marginalized communities and original tenants. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering an environment that enables citizens to actively participate in shaping the future development of their cities, ultimately promoting sustainable and inclusive urban development in China and beyond.

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