Historical Preservation in Rust-Belt China: The Life and Death of Jihong Bridge in Harbin

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Citation: Ren X, 2020, Historical Preservation in Rust-Belt China: The Life and Death of Jihong Bridge in Harbin. Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism, 2(2): 916. http://dx.doi.org/10.36922/jcau.v2i2.916

ABSTRACT

This article examines how China’s rust-belt cities deploy historical preservation for urban revitalization. Drawing upon fieldwork interviews and online debates, it investigates the preservation battle over Jihong Bridge in Harbin in northeast China. Built by Russian settlers in the early 20th century, Jihong Bridge symbolizes the birth of Harbin as a railway city, but a century later, it stood in the way of the local government’s ambitious plan for building high-speed rail. The municipal government elevated the bridge, significantly modifying its structure to allow high-speed trains to pass underneath. The renovation was heavily criticized by local preservationists, who invoked the government’s own preservation regulations to try to save the bridge. The study highlights the dilemma faced by local governments of rust-belt cities, as they are caught between the desire to deploy historical architecture for city branding and competing priorities of infrastructure investment.

Keywords: rust-belt cities, Harbin, historical preservation, public participation

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1. INTRODUCTION
In the shadow of China’s glittering super-star cities, there is another urban China—rust-belt cities struggling with sluggish growth. Cities in northeast China represent such slow-growth urban regions. As the country’s major industrial base in the socialist era, the northeastern cities heavily relied on large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for their survival. When the state stopped giving subsidies to SOEs in the 1990s, these cities experienced factory shutdowns, and their economy has not recovered since \(^{1,2}\). The northeastern cities also have been suffering from a brain-drain, as many of their best and brightest young people leave for first-tier cities to find better opportunities. Despite their sluggish growth, however, the local governments in the region are dreaming big, eager to reinvent their cities as regional centers for trade, logistics, and tourism. One frequently used strategy is culture-led revitalization, such as preserving historical architecture to draw tourists. This essay examines such efforts of culture-led revitalization in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province in northeast China. With a case study on the preservation of a historical bridge, the essay spotlights the gap between the municipal government’s grand plan to preserve Harbin’s European architectural heritage and its dismal record of preservation.

Historical preservation in Harbin should be understood in the larger context of the improved regulatory frameworks for heritage protection in China. China has substantially strengthened the legal protection of historical architecture and heritage sites in the last two decades. At both the national and local levels, governments have enacted new preservation regulations and expanded the listings of heritage sites. Once included in an official listing, historical buildings are guaranteed protection from demolition, and local authorities have to abide by the preservation regulations when they engage in property development that would require modification of heritage buildings. The strengthened legal protection of heritage marks a major departure from the 1990s, when many historical buildings vanished during the urban renewal.

This study probes into the preservation of Jihong Bridge (霁虹桥; meaning “rainbow bridge”) in Harbin to highlight the dilemmas between preservation and development faced by rust-belt cities. Built by the Russians during the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway in the early 20th century, Jihong Bridge was designated as a national heritage site in 2013 by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. The designation means that the bridge cannot be demolished and that its preservation must be carried out according to the national heritage preservation law \(^{3}\). However, the Harbin municipal government renovated the bridge in 2018, significantly modifying its structure to allow high-speed trains to pass underneath as the city strived to reinvent itself as a hub in the national high-speed rail network. The renovation was heavily criticized by local preservationists. The controversy over the bridge’s preservation shows the quandary faced by the municipal government, as it tries to balance the competing priorities of promoting tourism via preservation and building new infrastructure to boost development.

This study draws upon multiple sources, such as fieldwork interviews, online discussions, media reports, and urban masterplans. The author conducted interviews in January 2020 with city officials, preservation activists, local academics, and residents, asking their views on Jihong Bridge and the preservation practices in Harbin in general. The author also analyzed online debates over Jihong Bridge’s renovation from Harbin Stories (Dahua Harbin), a popular blog created in 2009 by residents interested in Harbin’s architectural history. The blog has over 300 members in its WeChat group, and Jihong Bridge is one of the most debated topics on the blog. A Chinese keyword search using the term Jihong Bridge (霁虹桥) yielded 91 essays published between 2009 and 2019 on the blog. These essays offer rich materials with which to examine how
residents reacted to the municipal government’s decision to renovate the bridge. In addition, the author also consulted Harbin’s urban masterplans from the 1950s to the present to trace its past and present as a railway city.

2. DEMOLITION, PRESERVATION, AND THE HERITAGE TURN

Urban redevelopment in China in the last three decades can be roughly divided into two phases. The first phase, from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, was marked by a demolition-centered approach with little regard for historical preservation. The second phase, from the mid-2000s to the present, has seen improved preservation of heritage sites, largely because local governments have discovered the value of historical buildings in promoting tourism and cultural industries. The shift from demolition to preservation can be understood in relation to China’s “heritage turn,” a collective effort by national and local governments to use heritage to promote the country’s soft power and boost economic development [4].

Beijing in the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics exemplifies the demolition-centered approach to redevelopment. Traditional courtyard houses (siheyuan) were demolished at an alarming pace, to make space for higher-density commercial projects [5-7]. Of the historical buildings that survived, many met the fate of “symbolic preservation,” a term referring to the practice of replacing authentic historical buildings with new constructions that mimic the old [8,9]. The dismal record of preservation can be attributed to economic factors, such as the strong demand for housing and office space in the central city [10], and also to governance structures, such as the power imbalance between municipal authorities in charge of land development and those responsible for preservation—with the latter being much weaker. To varying degrees, demolition-centered redevelopment was taking place in many Chinese cities from the 1990s to the mid-2000s.

In the mid-2000s, some local governments began to realize the commercial value of historical buildings for promoting tourism and revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods [11]. A turning point can be found in the Xintiandi project in Shanghai completed in 2001, the first commercially successful preservation project in China [12,13]. Located in the former Luwan district at the heart of Shanghai, the Xintiandi area before redevelopment was a cluster of dilapidated shikumen houses—traditional lane houses (lilong) dating back to the early 20th century that combines both Chinese and Western architectural features. A Hongkong-based developer partnered with the former Luwan district government to redevelop the area. After relocating all residents, the developer renovated a few blocks of shikumen houses and turned the area into pedestrian-only shopping streets with high-end stores. The shopping streets at Xintiandi became so successful that the area has since become a top tourist destination. The developer demolished the rest of the shikumen houses and built luxury apartment towers. Real estate prices spiked, and Xintiandi today is one of the priciest neighborhoods in Shanghai. The Xintiandi model of preservation-led redevelopment has since been copied all over the country [10,14,15]. Preservation-led redevelopment like that in Xintiandi has often led to gentrification and displacement of residents, either by eviction or by higher rents and living costs [16,17].

The shift from demolition to preservation can be understood in the context of “heritage fever” in China [18]. Since the turn of the 20th century, China has witnessed a heritage turn [19,20], as national and local governments use cultural heritage to serve various economic and political goals [20,21]. At the national level, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage is the main gatekeeper for approving and designating heritage sites. It is responsible for overseeing the protection of more than 500,000 immovable heritage sites. By selectively including certain historical buildings, sites, and intangible forms of heritage, the State Administration of Cultural
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Heritage uses heritage protection to serve a wide range of economic and political ends, such as promoting nationalistic education, creating a Han-dominated narrative of Chinese civilization, and promoting tourism and cultural industries. At the local level, from Shanghai to Wuhan, and from Tianjin to Beijing, city authorities compete with one another to deploy historical architecture for city branding. The current efforts of culture-led revitalization in rust-belt cities such as Harbin should be understood in this larger context of China’s heritage turn.

3. HARBIN: PAST AND PRESENT OF A RAILWAY CITY

Much of the historical architecture in Harbin can be traced back to the founding years of the city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Harbin was built as a railway city during construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway by Russia at the end of the 19th century. Russia built the Chinese Eastern Railway in order to extend its territorial control in Manchuria (i.e., northeast China), and it administered the railway’s operation from Harbin. The Railway Company built residential villas for its managers, and also churches, schools, and other cultural institutions to serve the growing Russian community. The city of Harbin was jointly governed by Russians and Chinese until 1917. Russian authorities controlled the railway land and the commercial waterfront along the Songhua River, while Chinese authorities controlled the Daowai district where most Chinese residents lived. The city was transferred to Chinese rule in 1917, and Chinese authorities began to promote Harbin as a Chinese city through architecture and city planning—for instance, by constructing more Chinese-style buildings and changing street names and store signs from Russian to Chinese. In 1932, Japan invaded Manchuria and Harbin was transferred to Japanese rule until the end of World War II. Throughout the chaotic years of the early 20th century, Harbin thrived as a cosmopolitan city with a large foreign population of Russians, Japanese, Koreans and Eastern Europeans.

Foreigners fled the country in the socialist years, and Harbin became a Chinese city and a center of industrial production. The city’s first masterplan (1950–1952) dictated the transition of Harbin’s function from a “consumer city” to a “production city” (Harbin Urban Planning Bureau, 2006). The central government relocated factories from other provinces to Harbin, turning the city into a major industrial hub. The “motor district” (dongli qu) was developed in the 1950s, home to a cluster of major factories employing tens of thousands of workers. During the socialist years, the city spent little funding on preservation, and many historical buildings and monuments from the early 20th century were destroyed. St. Nicholas Cathedral, a magnificent Russian orthodox church built in 1910 at the city center, was torn down in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution began.

After the market reform began, Harbin experienced sluggish growth in the 1980s and 1990s, as the center of manufacturing in China moved to the south. The central government stopped subsidizing local factories, causing many factories to shut down as they could no longer compete with those in the south. The city also experienced a mass exodus, as young people left for top-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou to find better opportunities. Harbin continued to grow in these two decades, but at a much slower pace compared to coastal cities. The urban masterplans capped the city population at between 2 and 3 million, and its jurisdiction at about 250 sqkm—much smaller in size and territory compared to many other provincial capitals. The municipal government paid scant attention to historical preservation in these early decades of the market reform, as it was embroiled in the contentious issues of factory closures and layoffs. Many historical buildings from the early 20th century deteriorated due to a lack of maintenance and funding.
In the early 2000s, the State Council launched new initiatives to help revitalize the industrial cities in the northeast. One such initiative was to allow cities to annex surrounding counties to expand their jurisdiction, so that local governments could lease out more land to gain revenue. The Harbin city government, like other cities in the region, was eager to seize the opportunity to expand outward. This ambition can be discerned in the city’s recent masterplans. In the 2011–2020 masterplan, the city enclosed a territory of 53,000 sqkm, an almost 200-fold increase compared to the previous masterplan. The 2011–2020 masterplan indicated three spatial development strategies: “leaping to the north,” by building a new town on the north bank of the Songhua River; “exploring the south,” by building a high-tech manufacturing zone; and “revitalizing the center,” by redeveloping inner-city neighborhoods. In the new masterplan of 2016–2030, the city projects a population of 12.5 million and an urbanization rate of 75% by 2030. The new masterplan also emphasizes historical preservation by underscoring Harbin’s status as a “historical and cultural city” with European characteristics. Urban masterplans are powerful instruments for cities to steer growth in the post-reform era. In Harbin’s new masterplan, the city has embarked on a trajectory of expansion while underscoring the need to preserve its architectural heritage in order to promote tourism and cultural industries.

4. HISTORICAL PRESERVATION: BETWEEN PLANS AND PRACTICES

The Harbin municipal government is eager to use its European architectural heritage to promote the city as a cosmopolitan place. It has expanded the lists of historical buildings, passed new preservation regulations, and drafted ambitious masterplans to promote itself as a center for culture and tourism. However, in practice, the city is falling short of preserving its architectural heritage, for lack of funding and also due to the exclusion of the public from decision-making over major preservation projects.

On paper at least, the city has grand plans to deploy its architectural heritage from the early 20th century for city-branding. These plans are prominently on display at the Harbin Urban Planning Exhibition Hall. With lavish maps, scaled models, and multimedia installations, the exhibition hall showcases the achievements of urban development in the city on its four floors of display space. The entire first floor is devoted to historical preservation. One section displays a replica of train tracks that guide visitors to trace the history of the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Another section marks the major milestones of historical preservation legislation. According to the description, Harbin was designated as a historical and cultural city by the State Council in 1994. In 1996, the municipal government passed its first historical preservation regulation, identifying nine historical areas, 19 cultural heritage protection units, and 173 historical buildings. The list of cultural heritage units and historical buildings was gradually expanded over the following two decades, and by 2012, the city had included three districts, 18 historical green sites, 22 neighborhoods, and 415 buildings on the preservation list.

Figure 1. Harbin Urban Planning Exhibition Hall. Source: Photo by the author, July 5, 2017
In addition, the municipal government has sorted its heritage sites into two categories and specified the regulations that apply to each category. The first is historical architecture (lishi jianzhu) including 475 historical buildings. Their preservation must follow municipal regulations, which classify the buildings into three groups—Classes I, II and III, with Class I receiving the most protection. For example, the façade, construction materials, colors, structure, layout, and interior decoration of Class I buildings should be kept to the original, while the structure, layout, and interior decoration of Class III buildings can be altered.

The second category is cultural heritage protection units (wenwu baohu danwei). Some historical buildings in Harbin have been reclassified as cultural heritage, and with the status upgrade, they gain better protection. Cultural heritage is further classified into different ranks, including national, provincial, and municipal-level heritage. These administrative ranks signal the level of the government responsible for supervision and also the strictness of preservation requirements. National-level cultural heritage enjoys the highest status, and any proposal to preserve, repair, or modify the sites in this category must be approved by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Once designated as national cultural heritage, historical buildings cannot be demolished, and their restoration must follow the principle of xiu jiu ru jiu—ensuring authenticity as much as possible. Jihong Bridge is one of the 14 sites in Harbin that are designated as national cultural heritage.

In spite of the expanded listing and better classification, in practice, many historical buildings and heritage sites have not been carefully preserved. Some historical neighborhoods have been partly demolished by the municipal government, such as the Lao Daowai neighborhood, the earliest Chinese settlement in the city, which had a large cluster of “Chinese-Baroque” style row houses from the early 20th century. The municipal government relocated all residents, demolished a large area of row houses, and renovated the remaining ones as shopfronts. But the district has failed to draw tourists, and many shopfronts stay vacant. Other historical neighborhoods have been abandoned for more than a decade after relocation of residents, as few developers are interested, and the municipal government has neither sufficient funding nor ideas to redevelop these places. The Garden Street, a historical neighborhood of villas built by the Chinese Eastern Railway Company, is one such example. After more than a decade of abandonment, the city finally approved a plan in 2021 to integrate the neighborhood into the campus of the Harbin Institute of Technology. Even on the Central Street, Harbin’s top tourist attraction and a better protected area, many buildings only received an exterior facelift, and the interior did not get much repair or conservation. In 2019, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage issued a warning that it might revoke Harbin’s “historical and cultural city” status, because of the city’s poor record of preservation. The controversy over Jihong Bridge, as examined next, reflects the glaring gap between the municipal government’s official plans for preservation and its dismal practice in reality.

5. HIGH-SPEED TRAINS OR THE OLD BRIDGE? THE PRESERVATION BATTLE OVER JIHONG BRIDGE

Jihong Bridge is one of the most recognizable landmarks in Harbin. It was built by the Russians in 1916 during the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and has served as a major transportation route in the city for over a century. While recognizing its symbolic value, the local government attempted several times to demolish or relocate the bridge, because it stood in the way of the city’s ambitious plan of widening roads and building high-speed rail. The municipal government claimed that the bridge was too low to allow high-speed rail lines to run below it into the central train station. Local residents and activists mobilized and challenged every major proposal from the government. Drawing upon online
discussions and fieldwork interviews, this section traces the decade-long preservation battle over Jihong Bridge (2008-2018), by examining three interrelated questions: How did residents articulate the meaning of the bridge? How did they mobilize to try to save the bridge? And how did they commemorate the bridge after the city elevated it to allow high-speed rail tracks to pass underneath? These questions point to the social process of preservation, concerning issues over whose heritage is preserved, how it is preserved, and by whom.

Jihong bridge presents an uneasy case for preservation, because of its complicated history entangled with Russian colonial expansion in Manchuria. It was built by Russian engineers working for the Chinese Eastern Railway Company, to transport raw materials from the resource-rich northeastern region to aid railway construction. Essentially, it was a piece of strategic infrastructure built by the Russians to expand their control over northeast China. However, the colonial expansion and exploitation was rarely mentioned by local preservationists in their commentaries on “Harbin Stories”—an active blog created for debating preservation issues in the city. Most writers on the blog presented the bridge as valuable historical architecture and highlighted its high-quality construction and elegant European design. They recounted the major historical events marking the completion of the bridge, such as the inauguration ceremony on November 28, 1916, when Liu Zhe—the then-president of Harbin Institute of Technology—named it Jihong Bridge (“rainbow bridge”), quoting from the 9th-century poet Du Mu. Bloggers posted historical photos of the bridge from different periods, such as the early 20th century, the socialist years, and the 1980s–1990s. For them, it was less important that the bridge was built by foreign colonizers; what mattered more was that the bridge is a major piece of the city’s history, witnessing Harbin’s development and changes throughout the 20th century. Regardless of its foreign origin, it is a piece of local heritage that residents feel deeply attached to.

Residents advocated for the preservation of the bridge by invoking national and municipal preservation regulations. In 1997, the bridge was designated as Class I historical architecture by the Harbin municipal government. In 2008, it was designated as a municipal-level cultural heritage site. However, a year later, the municipal government suggested the idea of demolishing the bridge and building a replica elsewhere, as it wanted to expand the Harbin train station and the bridge was in the way. The announcement sparked strong opposition from residents and the government withdrew its demolition plan. Zeng Yizhi, a journalist with Heilongjiang Daily (a provincial newspaper), wrote a series of essays critiquing the government’s decision. Citing preservation regulations, she urged the municipal government to follow the law and preserve the bridge. She wrote,

Jihong Bridge was designated as Class I architecture by the municipal government, and we must follow the Historical and Cultural City, Town, Village Preservation Regulation as well as the Harbin Historical Architecture and Neighborhood Preservation Regulation, to preserve its historical ambience. Nobody can damage the authenticity and integrity of this historical and cultural heritage.

In 2013, Jihong Bridge was selected as a national cultural heritage site, as part of a larger cluster of architecture associated with the Chinese Eastern Railway. For national-level cultural heritage sites, preservation must follow the national cultural heritage protection law rather than the less strict local regulations. Jihong Bridge was also designated as “immovable heritage,” meaning that it should be preserved on the same site. This reclassification meant that the municipal government’s original plan to dismantle the bridge would be illegal. The status change gave preservationists hope that Jihong Bridge could be saved.

The frenzy of high-speed rail construction in China in the mid-2010s
brought the demolition plan back to the table. The high-speed rail line that would affect the bridge—the Harbin-Qiqihaer line—was finished in 2015. When the first bullet train roared into the central station under Jihong Bridge, a commenter posted a picture of the bridge on Harbin Stories, as evidence that the bridge was high enough to allow high-speed trains to pass, contrary to the government’s claim. But the municipal government had grand plans for the central train station: there were four train tracks under the bridge, and it wanted to build eight tracks so that high-speed trains could arrive and depart more frequently. In 2016, the municipal government announced a different plan of elevating and widening the bridge instead of demolishing it, taking into account the new status of the bridge as national cultural heritage.

This new announcement sparked opposition from the professional community of architects and planners. The Faculty of Architecture at the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT)—one of the highest-ranking universities in the country—published an open letter in May 2016, criticizing the municipal government’s plan. In the letter, they highlighted the national cultural heritage status of the bridge and urged the municipal government to preserve the bridge in accordance with the national cultural heritage law. They also challenged the argument put forward by the city authority that the bridge was structurally unsafe. The HIT faculty argued that this assessment was baseless, and that even if it was true, the bridge could be repaired. Their harshest critique was directed toward the decision to have high-speed trains enter the city center, because in 2012 Harbin had already completed a modern rail station on the western outskirts to handle most high-speed rail traffic. The HIT Faculty argued that having high-speed rail enter the old central station was not necessary and would cause significant congestion. Last, resonating with the arguments of local residents, the HIT Architecture Faculty argued that the bridge carried historical memory of Harbin as a railway city and should be preserved by all means.

The opposition by local academics and activists did not change the course of the city’s plan to elevate the bridge. The city submitted its proposal to the State Administration for Cultural Heritage. The proposed plan for renovating the bridge did not adhere to the stringent requirements of the national cultural heritage law. But the State Administration allowed the city to bend the requirements, and approved the city’s proposal on October 28, 2016. According to the proposal, the old bridge would be kept at the same location but on a higher and longer span to allow high-speed trains to pass below. Construction started in March 2018 and was completed in October of the same year.

Figure 2. Jihong Bridge after renovation. From the pedestrian level, the renovated bridge looks the same as the original. But it sits on a new base, as the original supporting base under the bridge was demolished to allow high-speed rail traffic. Source: Photo by the author, January 23, 2020
The preservationists were disappointed to see that the municipal government did not follow the national cultural heritage preservation regulations. Harbin Stories was flooded with comments on the modification of the bridge. They lamented the loss of the old bridge and their own lack of opportunity to participate in the decision-making. Two bloggers wrote,

No matter how wide, smooth, and beautiful the new bridge is, no matter that some of the original designs are added back, the old bridge in my heart is gone forever. We couldn’t decide the fate of the bridge. We couldn’t get transparent, accurate, and scientific assessments, nor could we participate in decision-making and voice our opinions.

When historical architecture is completely demolished and rebuilt, it is not authentic. The elevated bridge is a new bridge, even though some original elements are kept. How was the bridge “preserved”? The four spire-shaped towers, iron railings, and some decorative items were cut off and added to the new bridge. Jihong Bridge has died. It is in another world, together with St. Nicholas church and the old Harbin train station.

The author visited the city of Harbin’s Preservation Office in January 2020 and interviewed Mr. Sun, who helped draft many of the city’s preservation regulations. He eloquently explained how the city had been systematically updating the preservation regulations. But when the author asked about actual practices of preservation, he commented, “If high-speed trains had to enter the old station, then the bridge would have to go, no matter if it is a national cultural heritage site or not.”

6. CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the practices of preservation in Harbin with a case study of Jihong Bridge. The local authority is keenly aware of the value of its European architecture for promoting tourism and cultural industries. The municipal government has expanded its listing of historical architecture and cultural heritage sites since the 1990s, and it has also drafted new laws and regulations to better protect historical architecture. However, as the case study of Jihong Bridge shows, the grand plans for preservation are not followed by action. The city has prioritized other initiatives over preservation, such as developing high-speed rail, and it attempted to demolish Jihong Bridge or relocate it elsewhere. When these plans became illegal—as Jihong Bridge gained the status of national cultural heritage in 2013—the municipal government “renovated” the bridge by significantly modifying its structure to allow high-speed trains to pass under it. The developments over the bridge’s preservation spotlight the priorities of the local government—infrastructure investment has more urgency, and historical preservation is an afterthought.

The essay has also examined how local residents mobilized to save Jihong Bridge. One striking pattern has been their frequent use of the government’s own policies and regulations to contest the city’s proposal to demolish the bridge. This resembles “rightful resistance,” a concept that captures the practice of using laws and official policies to protect citizens’ guaranteed rights. Local activists and residents in Harbin cited the city’s preservation regulations and national cultural heritage laws to urge the local government to preserve historical architecture. Responding to residents’ opposition, the municipal government eventually chose to elevate Jihong Bridge, instead of demolishing or relocating it.

The preservation battles in Harbin spotlight the uneasy course of deploying historical architecture for urban revitalization in China’s rust-belt cities. These cities face more challenges, compared to their affluent peers in the south, where municipal governments allocate more funding to preservation and the private sector is better mobilized too. Large-scale preservation-based redevelopment projects have all failed
in Harbin, because the municipal government cannot finance these projects alone, and few private investors are interested in forming public-private partnerships. Grand plans for building a “historical and cultural city,” such as those exhibited in Harbin’s Urban Planning Hall, are doomed to fail without including local residents and incorporating their ideas for preservation. Cities such as Harbin have made some progress in the last two decades in strengthening legal frameworks for preservation. The next step should be establishing institutional channels to solicit public input and incorporate local residents’ vision of heritage preservation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
The author wants to thank Ran Mei, graduate student at Harvard Graduate School of Design, for her assistance in formatting the manuscript.

FUNDING
The research was supported with a grant from the Humanities without Walls program under the theme of Global Midwest (2016-2020).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None.

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