Protection Status of a World Cultural Heritage Site Under Tourism Development: Case Study of Shuhe Ancient Town

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Abstract: In 2019, China joined Italy as the two countries with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Among the Chinese heritage sites, the inhabited ancient towns, called Living Heritage, are the most difficult to protect in the eyes of many scholars. Only two Chinese ancient towns are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the Old Town of Lijiang in Yunnan province, the most important settlement of the Naxi people. This indicates Lijiang’s significance in the protection of China’s cultural heritage. As one of three heritage sites within Lijiang Old Town itself, Shuhe is a pilot site for tourist development and heritage protection, led by the local government. In contrast to the Model of Dayan, the largest area and the earliest tourist development heritage site in Lijiang Old Town, Shuhe was renovated and modernised by a real estate company under the official guidance of the Lijiang government. This model was created to solve the contradiction between local development and cultural heritage protection in Shuhe. Since its renovation 17 years ago, the model of Shuhe has typical Chinese characteristics and has been a great influence on many other historical cities in China. After nearly 20 years of follow-up research, this study combs the development history of Shuhe Ancient Town, by analysing examples of architectural heritage transformation, and further reflects on the root causes of Shuhe development from the perspective of laws and regulations. The rapid development of tourism has become means for the local government and the people to lift themselves out of poverty at the cost of their historical heritage. The development of tourism has brought immediate economic benefits to the local government, developers, outside operators and local habitants in Lijiang. However, the original Naxi habitants have left their historic settlement, and the profound changes to the Naxi living environment have caused the Shuhe world heritage site to lose its original significance. In the renovation of heritage buildings, architects and craftsmen are not responsible for the modification of the historical heritage but are only tools for local governments, developers and outsider operators to gain wealth. The defects, backwardness and inability to fully implement the laws and regulations on heritage protection are the
fundamental causes of Shuhe’s problems, which reflect the huge gap between the administrators’ awareness of heritage protection and the requirements of the professional guidelines of the UNESCO for the world cultural heritage protection.

1. Introduction

China, with 55 sites, and Italy had the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2019. However, if judged by the ratio of the number of heritage sites to land size, then China is far behind Italy in terms of heritage density. Moreover, quantity does not indicate heritage protection. Amongst various kinds of heritage, inhabited ancient towns, which are called living heritage, are the most difficult to protect. Only two ancient Chinese towns, including ‘Lijiang Old Town’, are listed as world cultural heritage sites, indicating their importance and significance in the protection of cultural heritage in China.

The Lijiang Old Town was listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, including Dayan Old Town, Shuhe Ancient Town and Baisha Old Village. The impoverished town in the highlands in southwest China and the territory of Naxi minority is well preserved with its local culture, magnificent architecture and unique agricultural landscape. Since 1997, Shuhe, once a poverty-stricken area, has become the most popular tourist destination in the Lijiang region. ‘Shuhe mode’ and ‘Chinese experience 2004’ refer to Shuhe’s development experience. Shuhe is introduced to many Chinese ancient towns as a model for conservation development. However, during its 20-year development, Shuhe received complaints from many tourists about its tourism overdevelopment in the protection zone. Shuhe and Lijiang Old Town even received a ‘yellow card’ warning from UNESCO.

Through a 20-year tracking research on Shuhe, this paper reviews the tourist development process of Shuhe Ancient Town and conducts a deep analysis of and reflection on certain problems in its tourism development and residential area renovation.

2. Ancient Shuhe before tourism development: from a commercial hub of the ancient Tea Horse Road to a poor village in silence

As one of the three sites of ‘Lijiang Ancient Town’, Shuhe Ancient Town is located 6 km over the north of Dayan Old Town, both in Lijiang Basin amongst the mountains. Shuhe has an altitude of approximately 2400 m, an altitude between the Tibet and the hinterland of Yunnan Province. Most Tibetan and Han merchants prefer to stop in Shuhe as their trade transfer station because of its climate. Since the 14th century, Shuhe has become an important site for the production and trade of leather between Hans and Tibetans. Specifically in the 1940s, Shuhe became a rich village in the Tea Horse Road. In the early 1950s, mainland China began to promote the socialist transformation, abolishing its handicraft industry and engaging residents in farming, which they were not good at. Hence, living standards rapidly fell, and Shuhe became a poverty-stricken area [1].

From 1997, the tourism of Dayan Ancient City witnessed a rapid development after Lijiang was named as a World Cultural Heritage Site. However, Shuhe Ancient Town, another heritage site that is far from the urban centre, was left in poverty until 2002. The per capita income of Shuhe residents was approximately 800 yuan, still within the national poverty line (637–882 yuan) at that time. Several urban
problems were waiting to be solved, such as several decaying old buildings to be renovated, urban infrastructures to be modernised, insufficient running water and few public toilets. Nevertheless, with Shuhe’s historical and cultural resources, the ancient town was later favoured by many tourism investors, and they hoped to develop tourism in certain major areas. To avoid the management confusion that occurred during Dayan Old Town’s tourism development, the local government looked for a company with deep pockets to provide integrated development in old Shuhe, protecting its core areas and preserving its integrity and uniqueness.

3. New construction practices adjacent to the heritage site: an integrated model of tourism development

In 2003, the Lijiang government chose Dingye Company from Kunming to modernise and preserve Shuhe. With a total investment of 500 million yuan, the whole project was conducted in 2003–2004, which is the gap period with few tourists due to the SARS breakout in China.

Under the guidance of the local government, the project of Dingye strove to preserve the original architectural heritage and some farmland landscape. In Dayan Ancient Town, the government paid to conduct architectural restoration and infrastructural modernisation. By contrast, in Shuhe, the project was funded by Dingye to modernise infrastructures, renovate the ancient architecture and rebuild certain disappearing historical buildings. As a compensation for the investment of Dingye, the Lijiang government authorised the developer to build a new tourism zone near the south of ancient Shuhe. Accommodation, catering and other tourist services are placed in this zone to avoid the burden of excessive tourists in the town. The new zone covers an area of 14.9 ha, with business centres, restaurants, public spaces, banks, hotels and parking areas. The urban fabric and architectural style imitate the traditional Shuhe Ancient Town, but in concrete structure (Figure 1). However, the new zone is built close to ancient Shuhe, replacing its original farmland landscape. The buffer zone is unclearly set to identify the heritage site from the new buildings, thus reducing the historical and cultural values of Shuhe Ancient Town.

![Figure 1. ‘Tea Horse Station:’ new district in the south of Shuhe Ancient Town [2]](image-url)
The stakeholders of the Shuhe development project are local governments, developers, local residents and foreign tourists; and their liabilities are as follows:

(1) Policy guidance of local governments. Lijiang government invited experts, scholars, grassroots cadres and local residents to discuss Shuhe’s protection and development before making the final decision. After the discussion, they set the basic principles of ‘development through protection and promote protection through development’ and ‘achieve the project through the market operation.’ The construction activities in Shuhe’s protection zone were strictly controlled by a level-III traditional reservation system, which was widely applied to preserve ancient Chinese towns at that time.

(2) Investment of developers. Dingye completed the modernisation of infrastructures, renovation of damaged old buildings, construction of public toilets and public lightings and rebuilding of two temples destroyed in the history. At the same time, a new construction zone was built next to the south of ancient Shuhe for tourism activities.

(3) Local residents and tourists. The tourism development created many jobs, such as grooms, drivers and waiters. More than 300 jobs were created by Dingye alone. At the same time, the developer transformed certain traditional residences in the protection zone into homestays, stores and restaurants. From 2002 to 2006, the proportion of the agriculture workforce in Shuhe rapidly fell from 94% to 41%. The total number of tourists received reached three million in 2006, 100 times of that in 2003. The annual per capita income of local villagers was raised from 800 yuan to 15,000–40,000 yuan [3].

According to the official statement, Shuhe reached the expected targets after three to four years of development. This achievement was a win-win tourism mode for multiple parties [3].

4. Architectural transformation in the protection zone

The allocation of a specific plot for commercial construction is a reasonable compensation to a developer for its previous investment to modernise the public space of a heritage site. However, due to the proximity of the special construction zone that mimics the historic buildings of Naxi to heritage conservation areas, the farmland landscape around the ancient settlement was destroyed, making the differentiation of the actual heritage difficult.

In the protection zone of Shuhe, Dingye led the transformation of traditional residences to homestays, restaurants and souvenir shops. Dingye hoped to meet most tourists’ needs in the new area nearby. Similar to other old towns in China, ancient areas are always attractive to tourists. Therefore, the traditional dwellings in Shuhe were inevitably and increasingly transformed into guesthouses for tourists. Unable to compete with foreign merchants outside Lijiang, most original residents prefer to rent out their homes to outsiders for five years at a time [4].

Originally because of heritage protection, the local government banned the selling of traditional houses, and only allowed such houses to be rented for transformation and reconstruction using Naxi methods. According to the ‘Regulations of the Protection of the Lijiang Old Town in Yunnan Province’ issued in 2006, any modifications to the building facades in the protection area are prohibited [5].
However, this obscure expression cannot easily ensure that the residential transformation can meet the requirements of UNESCO. In reality, the local administration allowed the transformation and reconstruction using Naxi methods in the protection area. Therefore, the functional change leads to certain important architectural changes in the spatial division or architectural structure [6].

The traditional Naxi residential architecture generally includes five models: two buildings in L, three buildings in U, four buildings with five patios, two consecutive courtyards and two parallel courtyards [7]. With the surrounding buildings of 1 or 2 levels, the open yard is the most important feature (Figure 2), which is commonly used for drying grains, gardening, keeping poultries and livestock. To meet tourists’ demands, the traditional buildings are mostly transformed into homestays, restaurants, shops and entertainment establishments. Buildings and courtyards are often transformed or even rebuilt to increase room quantities, strengthen structures, enlarge room sizes and build restrooms to satisfy tourists. Comparing the satellite maps in different years, significant changes can be easily observed in the protection zone of ancient Shuhe (Figure 3). The traditional courtyard of Naxi is generally enclosed by individual rectangular buildings with suspended double-slope roofs. Rare L- or T-shaped individual buildings also exist, intersected by two rectangular buildings. To increase interior space, the original architectural features are often changed; for example, building depth is increased, the architectural combination is further disordered and courtyards are filled with new buildings (Figure 4).

![Figures](image)

**Figure 2.** Basic types of the courtyard of Naxi, adjusted based on reference [7]
Figure 3. Important modifications in Shuhe’s protection zone, adjusted based on reference [2]

Figure 4. Diverse transformation and reconstruction in Shuhe’s protection zone; photo adjusted based on reference [8]

Notes: Several historical buildings in Shuhe are transformed or replaced by new construction to satisfy diverse tourist activities. The red line shows the new construction after the destruction of historical residences. The Cyan line indicates that the courtyards of traditional residences are covered with glass or tile roofs.

Moreover, many traditional facades of Naxi buildings were improperly modified after the tourism development. The windows on the ground floor or in the side walls are traditionally open to courtyards, rarely open to streets. The main wall material is stone or masonry for the lower walls, whereas the upper walls are built with grey bricks, adobe bricks and rammed earth with or without white paint. Street-front shops are relatively open, with wooden doors and window frames (Figure 5). After the transformation or reconstruction by outlander tenants, only the wooden structure and traditional brick wall of the
‘traditional style’ were preserved, and the windows at the front, side or façade were built at will to meet the requirements of the operator.

The architectural transformation in the protection area of the World Heritage Site should follow the corresponding international rules to avoid damages. Following such rules is a considerable challenge even for good architects because superb professional skills are required. Admittedly, these architectural transformation practices are innovations to integrate modern functions and traditional architecture in non-protection areas. Unfortunately, these transformation practices destroy the heritage of Naxi in the protection area due to its arbitrary renovation, violating the principle of authenticity in heritage protection and discarding the architectural tradition of Naxi. The World Heritage Site is replaced by some clumsy pastiches of ‘traditional Lijiang style.’

Figure 5. Courtyards in Shuhe Ancient Town were transformed into tourist shops; Picture above: adjusted based on reference [7], Photo below: from reference [9]

5. Protection regulations of Lijiang Ancient Town

The architectural heritage and the cultural value of Shuhe Ancient Town are reduced through different transformation types. Exploring the root causes of problems concerning the tourism development in Shuhe Ancient Town from the perspective of regulations is necessary. In 1994, Yunnan Province promulgated the ‘Regulations on the Protection and Administration of Lijiang Historical and Cultural Cities.’ According to these regulations, only Dayan, instead of Shuhe, was protected [5]. But nine years later, the protection strategy of Shuhe Ancient Town was influenced by the protection concept of Dayan
at that time. The quantity of authentic architectural heritage decreases from the interior first-class to the exterior third-class protection zone. Moreover, the protection requirements of the third-class protection zone are less rigorous than those of the first-class one, thus blurring the boundary of the heritage conservation area and causing confusion between the authentic architectural heritage and its imitation. The architectural vocabulary of transformation in the conservation area became chaotic, therefore the architectural heritage and even the cultural value of Shuhe Ancient Town are both fading away.

The ‘Regulations on the Protection of the Lijiang Ancient City in Yunnan Province’ were promulgated in March 2006. The protected objects include Dayan Ancient City, Shuhe Ancient Town and Baisha Village. However, the promulgation meant that the protection of Shuhe Ancient Town was devoid of a legal basis during the first three years of tourism development which initiated in 2003. Article 9 of the Regulations stipulates that ‘Indigenous residents are encouraged to live in Lijiang Ancient City and granted subsidies by the city protection and management institution in accordance with relevant regulations.’ Through a field interview, the author finds that the indigenous residents in Lijiang Ancient City only receive a monthly subsidy of 10 yuan, which is merely equivalent to a one-day food expense for one local person. Therefore, retaining indigenous residents is evidently unappealing [9].

Article 10 of the Regulations stipulates that ‘Lijiang Ancient City is protected by different zones, such as protection, buffer and environmental coordination zones. The demolishment of historical buildings in the protection zone is prohibited. The architectural appearance must remain unchanged during house and facility renovations and functional adjustments. In the buffer zone, construction with no direct relationship with the ancient city in function and in nature shall be prohibited. In addition, the improvement or new construction of building features should be consistent with that of the adjacent parts in properties, masses, heights, colours and forms. In the environment coordination zone, construction inconsistent with the environment of the ancient city is prohibited.’ This regulation is essentially the same as Regulations 1994, which requires heritage protection in the three zones with a gradual reduction of protection requirements from the interior (first-class protection zone) to the exterior (third-class protection zone). Disappointingly, the practices in Shuhe’s protection area totally go against the regulations. Several old buildings are replaced by new ones (Figure 3).

In terms of penalties, Article 29, Paragraph 1 states that unauthorised renovation and reconstruction for traditional dwellings in different protection areas will be imposed a fine ranging from 500 to 20,000 yuan. Compared with the renovation or reconstruction cost from several hundred thousand to several million, the amount of fine stipulated in this regulation is not a huge deal. Foreign merchants prefer to pay the fine, and then transform the traditional buildings of Shuhe according to their own wishes[5].

Problems in the heritage protection of Shuhe during the tourism development already emerged and even became prevalent in Dayan Ancient Town before 2003 [6]. However, these problems were not taken seriously during the tourism development of Shuhe. In the official regulations, no specific provisions restrict foreign merchants from conducting construction and transformation, except for the vague statement requiring coordination between construction and transformation with the ancient city.
6. Conclusion

As a World Cultural Heritage Site, Shuhe Ancient Town showcases the Naxi culture with over 800 years of history, the unique Naxi Ancient Town, the surrounding farmland landscape, the magnificent traditional buildings of Naxi and the indigenous inhabitants for generations. The rapid tourism development helps local governments and people to lift themselves from poverty. Unfortunately, such tourism development affects the local cultural heritage.

Tourism development has brought various economic benefits to the local governments, developers and merchants from outside Lijiang. However, the loss of indigenous residents and the ever-changing unique living environment of Naxi deprive the world heritage of its original significance. Amidst the architectural transformation, architects and craftsmen cannot be blamed for the deterioration of the World Heritage Site of Lijiang. Instead, the defects and backwardness in protection regulations are the underlying causes, which further reflect the considerable deficiencies of policymakers’ practice and awareness in heritage protection compared with the requirements of World Cultural Heritage.

In 2017, 20 years after the inclusion of Lijiang Ancient City in the World Cultural Heritage List, the local administration of Lijiang held a hearing on the re-enactment of the ‘Regulations on the Protection of Lijiang Ancient City in Yunnan Province (draft).’ The late move indicates a possibility of progress. The timely reassessment of the damage to the architectural heritage in the protection area of Shuhe, the timely discussion of remedial measures and the establishment of strict penalties to the destruction of the heritage are correct steps towards the heritage protection. From the administration to the residents, the increasing awareness of heritage protection in the entire society and the emphasis on the long-term value of heritage ought to be the foundation to establish a protective barrier for heritage.

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