The Diverse Practices of Preserving the Living Cultural Heritages:
A Case Study of Tongli Water Town, South-east China

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Abstract
Tongli water town, located in south east China, was certified as a national historical and cultural town. In the past 15 years, the conservation and development of Tongli was ongoing. This paper uses various construction projects as the units of analysis, and catalogues them by different objectives, spatial and timing characters and operation mechanisms of these projects. Finally, this paper sums up the experience and problems of such projects, and analyzes their roles in simulating the vitality of town, protecting the historic landscape and keeping the diversity of life.

1. Introduction
Tongli, located in south-east China, was certified as a national historical and cultural town, one of the 181 listed towns in China. Since 1998, the town government started the overall conservation of the water town. During the past 15 years, there have been more than 300 launched projects aiming at preservation and developments, which could be divided into eight categories. In such diverse practices, the cultural heritages of Tongli became one of the driving force for sustainability through the way of integrating the forces of local residents, government, experts and market.
In the global context of protecting cultural heritages, Tongli constantly adjusted and localized its strategies through diverse practices. As the prevalence of historic towns
conservation all over China, the most two important things are the localization of the living cultural heritages’ value and the flexible strategies of developing through protecting.

This paper focuses on the typological analysis of the construction projects in the past 15 years, to understand the dynamics of Tongli by time axis and to analyze the goals and objectives of government and planners by spatial axis. The paper also attends to the correlations between time-space and the actors’ behaviors in different projects.

2. The types and objectives of the projects
All the government-led projects in Tongli can be catalogued into eight types, including preservation of architecture heritages, renovation of settings and landscapes, construction of cultural facilities, improvement of public environment, construction of hotels and inns, repairing of public housing, construction of tourism facilities as well as pilot projects. However, given the objectives of these eight types project could be re-assorted into three categories, which are conservation of historical/cultural heritages, improvement of living environment and development of tourism (shown in Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image-url) The types and objectives of the projects
3. The timing of the projects

Different types of projects were carried out in different time periods, the following is the implementation sequence of the eight types which are previously mentioned: first came the preservation of architecture heritages, then the renovation of landscape and construction of public environment followed, next was the construction of cultural facilities, and then the construction of large-scale of tourism facilities was started since 2008. The reconstruction of inns which used to be residential houses and the repairing of public houses were launched throughout the whole process, while the pilot projects cannot be sorted for their uniqueness. According to adjustments of governmental strategies, the past 15 years can be divided into four stages.

Stage I: Year 1999 – 2002

During this stage, the local government was mainly engaged in the development with state-owned assets. In addition, market capital was attracted by preferential leasing policy, which improving the cultural charm of Tongli. Meanwhile, with the increasing of tourists, a few local young man saw the economic opportunities, and then changed their old houses into inns, which became the family-style accommodation of the old town.

Stage II: Year 2003 – 2006

The government took five main measures during this stage: (1) investing the land-leasing rent in improving public environment to benefit both residents and tourists; (2) maintaining historic buildings, protecting heritages and increasing tourist sites; (3) cooperating with the university and establishing public place for culture promotion; (4) using subsidy fund to show the livable method of rehabilitating traditional houses; (5) making policy to encourage local residents to benefit from tourism industry and estate properties.

Stage III: Year 2007 – 2009

With the replacement of major, the spatial strategies of Tongli government changed. The New leader emphasized on periphery of the old town, including settlement area for low-income households, road construction and real estate development. Within old town area, the government invested in tourism facilities, meanwhile, the market force also fastened on tourist accommodation. At the same time, the local residents began to rehabilitate their houses for the increasing income.

Stage IV: since 2010

There are five main characters of this stage : (1) the inflow of migrant workers and non-local house buyers with the development of tourism; (2) the improvement of Tourism service standards and the urbanization of business activities; (3) the increasing willingness of natives
to rehabilitate their houses; (4) the preferential policies to support local market elite; (5) the policy orientation to lead new development.

4. The spatial analysis of the projects

The spatial distribution of the government-led projects was scattered. The site selections were usually based on two criteria: one is the locations of state-owned idle land or vacant houses, the other is the radiantly economic influence on the surrounding regions. Such kind of projects were composed of the maintenance and reuse of the historic buildings as tourist attractions, the renovation of the main tourism route and public space, the construction of cultural facilities and distinctive inns. After the completion of such projects, the government-led travel service soon improved the environment for tourism and extended the range of touring, which brought the following three effects.

(1) In the original range of tours and excursions, the rent of houses along the tourism route surged for the improvement of the environment. While the spontaneous replacement of business activities truly diversified the tourism services and improved the service qualities. Meanwhile, the increasing of housing rent also brought more benefits to the house proprietors.

![The distribution of the construction projects in Tongli](image)

**Figure 2** The distribution of the construction projects in Tongli
(2) With the expansion of the touring range, more residents gained benefits and more various traveling activities appeared. The initiative of community participation in tourism was sufficiently motivated, e.g. the rapid development of private residential inns and the numerous increase of the repaired/renovated houses. At the same time, more and more residents changed their residential houses into commercial use illegally.

(3) Due to environmental improvement and increasing tourists, the market attractiveness of Tongli was enhanced. More and more foreign investors and local elites (including those still living in Tongli and those having already left) generally invested in the construction of tourism or cultural facilities by consultation with local government or dealing with residents. Inspired by the government-led “spatial acupuncture” projects, the local residents, local elites and foreign enterprises invested in new projects which located within the influence scope of the formers. Therefore, such practices gradually formed a ring-net structure of spatial development and diverse functions of business structure.

5. The operation mechanism of the projects

There were various implementation approaches of the construction projects in Tongli, including individual investment, private enterprise investment, government investment, joint investment and NGO investment. Given the quantity and capital amount of different mechanisms, the government-led project is the dominant pattern. The number of the government-led projects accounted for 25% of total number of the projects, while the amount of governmental capital accounted for more than 50% of the total; the number of joint projects accounted for 29% and their investment accounted for 32%; although the number of resident investment projects account for the most as 35%, but the capital only accounted for 6%; only one NGO-led project showed the supportive role of social force. (see table 1)

(1) The government-led project

Since town government is the grass-roots unit of Chinese administrative system, the township government still follows the rule of “bosses”, that makes the development planning of Tongli totally decided by the individual will of the local officials. Since the decentralization reform, the grass-roots government gained more power of decision-making and less interventions from the upper-level government. Therefore, with the familiarities of relevant laws and regulations, the township government usually promotes their projects without procedural and regulatory obstacles. As long as fully funded, the leadership’s decision could be quickly carried out, instead of long time pre-coordination and market research. Such character is
called in Chinese “短 平 快” (short, adaptable and fast).

Secondly, as an administrative organization, the role of township government in the development projects is coordinator and manager, with its governmental functions of social/

Table 1  The project number and capital amount percentage of different operation-patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operation pattern</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
<th>Types of the projects</th>
<th>Capital (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government investment</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>preservation of architecture heritages, renovation of settings and landscapes, construction of cultural facilities, improvement of public environment, repairing of public housing, construction of tourism facilities</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint investment</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>preservation of architecture heritages, construction of hotels</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private enterprise</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Construction of tourism/cultural facilities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident investment</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Construction of private clubs and inns, repairing and renovation of houses</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3  The government-led project of preserving architecture heritages and renovating landscape and setting, which observed the principle of heritage conservation, keep the original historic landscape in maximum.
political/economic considerations. Therefore, from the long-term perspective of development, the local government pays much attention on integrated targets to maximize the overall interest. All the concerns should be put into the selection and timing of the government-led projects.

However, since most government-led projects aim at public interest instead of economic profits, such kind of projects are usually lack of the planning of post-management and usage. In many cases, the government carried out the projects only for the so-called achievements, “DOING” is much more important than “HOW TO DO” or “HOW TO USE”.

(2) The joint investment projects

With the improvement of the entire environment, private enterprises and individuals began to cooperate with town government to be involved in Tongli’s conservation and development. As a result, besides the government-led projects, there have been the joint investment ones, which mostly are profitable projects such as tourist attractions and inns.

The costly planning of conservation and renovation brought the severe financial pressure to local government. While the public goods as streets, public environment, public facilities are lack of investment attractiveness, the government can only rely on the profitable projects to raise social capitals. As long as allowed by policies, the joint cooperation has turned to be the main form of the construction projects in Tongli, which indicates the transition from government-led to market-led. The role of local government changed from manager to assistant.

Such practices of cooperation integrated the strengths of both public and private sectors to public services, and made all the stakeholders share both the risks and revenues. This mechanism coordinates different stakeholders with common interests, making the goals of the projects more diversity and market-oriented. What’s more, the forms of cooperation is flexible, including franchising, joint ventures, equity transfer of state-owned enterprises or government subsidies for private investors, etc.

The joint form also provides opportunities to local residents to be involved in Tongli’s development planning, by changing their houses into commercial use, e.g. inns or restaurants. Driven by business interests, most residents voluntarily invested in repairing and renovating their private houses. They remained the spatial characteristics of traditional houses, including a number of well-preserved historic buildings and provincial level architecture heritages. Most participants appreciate such projects which highly increase their incomes and improve the town’s reputation.
(3) The private enterprise/individual investment projects

In Tongli, there are few projects operated by private enterprises independently, which were mainly blocked by the complicated operation procedures. Especially for the non-local investors, it seems to be more difficult for their lack of social network. In addition, the conflicts between the investors and the residents near the construction sites made the enterprises more intend to cooperate with the government.

Meanwhile, the residents’ investments were mainly used for the renovation and functional replacement of their own houses as inns or other tourist shops. Of course, there are other cases, such as some local residents rented others’ houses for business activities, or some residents rented out their houses to non-local investors. Overall, influenced by the government-led projects and the joint-invested ones, the willingness of community participation in the development of Tongli has grown quickly. At the same time, more and more non-local investors have been involved in the tourism market of Tongli.

(4) The project funded by NGO

The project of No. 168 Yuxingqiao Street is a low-cost housing improvement project with purpose, funded by UNESCO and operated by Tongji University. First of all, the user of the selected house should be certain low-income family; secondly, the location of the project
should in the core area of the old town; finally, the house should be the historical building with traditional form. In the process of construction, Tongji University gave technical support for the project, which then became a pilot project of preserving traditional houses with economic and high-tech considerations. Such practice is creative and experimental, that provided some experience for the solution of historical house rehabilitation.
6. The experience and problems

In the past 15 years, driven by the town government, Tongli has experienced a diversified path of development, which is formed by the government’s flexible strategies of adjusting policies positively during the dynamic process. The multi-stakeholder cooperation has brought Tongli the motives of sustainability and the adaptability to the market. At the same time, such joint mechanism also balances different interests, especially the interests of local residents. In the principle of multi-stakeholders, the old town adopted a continuing gradual development strategy, which increased the income and asset value of natives gradually and continuously. Meanwhile, the survival capacities of the participants have been enhanced obviously. However, in the context of urbanization and globalization, the development of Tongli is facing new challenges.

(1) The tourism of traditional community

During the 15 years, all the updated and increasing facilities are for tourists not for local residents. Many service facilities for local residents were resettled to the peripheral new zone, and then the vacated space or buildings were constructed and renovated for tourism use instead, involving both government-led projects and resident investment projects.

(2) The urbanization of traditional community:

When meeting spatial conflicts between new comers and local residents, government tend to be more inclined to new comers and local elites. The engagement of new comers separated the integrating friendly community into Mosaics, turning to more complicated community.

(3) The Individualization of heritage community:

The inhabited heritage site is the stably physical space with long history and legal protection, including the remained social structure, which limits the environment and condition of human activities. However, with the stratification of traditional communities, the common interests and aspirations of the community have been individualized. How this kind of limitation can turn to the institution of preservation and the common action of development?