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# **The Right to Envision the City? The Emerging Vision Conflicts in Redeveloping Historic Nanjing, China**

**Hao Chen, Lili Wang and Paul Waley**

## **Abstract**

This article presents a new trend in urban politics in China, that is, the intertwined conflicts of three competing visions—entrepreneurial redevelopment, historic conservation, and community conservation—in the redevelopment of historic areas. Through an in-depth case study of the struggles around the redevelopment of historic Nanjing, we outline three key points. First, historic conservation has emerged as a strong urban vision competing against entrepreneurial redevelopment in historic districts, since the early 2000s. Second, local residents have tactically employed the discourse of historic conservation to negotiate their own visions of community conservation, yet these have largely failed since the major concern of the elite vision of historic conservation is the preservation of material structures rather than communities living in them. Third, and in conclusion, this article calls for a more inclusive vision of historic community conservation and more attention to the “visioning” right of ordinary residents in Chinese urban politics.

## **Keywords**

vision conflicts, historic conservation, urban redevelopment, the right to the city, Nanjing

## **Introduction**

The scale and intensity of the redevelopment of Laochengnan [old Chengnan] in this round is unprecedented. We expect a totally new Chengnan will be in view in two to three years. Then the new Chengnan will become a center for high-end residential developments. (Cao Lubao, Deputy District Leader, Qinhuai District, June 28, 2006)

The precious historic area along the Qinhuai River provides a rich tapestry of history, literature, folk culture, and architecture. It is thus the cultural heritage of all of Nanjing and all the Chinese people rather than a mere piece of “land” that can be sold arbitrarily by the district government for real estate

development. (Excerpt from the first petition drafted and signed by 16 nationally renowned scholars and experts on August 11, 2006)

We, the current residents of Laochengnan, must be rehoused in situ so that the culture of the old city can be maintained, and the historical landscape and local folkways of Nanjing won't be broken as a result of our displacement ... (Excerpt from the petition signed by 148 households in Laochengnan on September 19, 2009)

The three quotes above indicate deep cleavages in the visions regarding the future of Laochengnan (old city south, literally translated), an area in the inner city of Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province in eastern China. In 2006, the district government administering Laochengnan planned to redevelop the area into a new expanse of luxurious estates. Meanwhile, a group of scholar-activists argued that Laochengnan was a heritage site belonging to all citizens, not only in the city and but in the entire nation. They waged a widespread fight against district government plans and proposed a radically different, gradualist approach to the conservation of Laochengnan. At the same time, a proportion of local residents refused to leave their homes. They shared ideas of historic conservation proposed by the scholar-activists, but also had a vision of their own—to stay in Laochengnan where they were born and grew up, and where many of their families had lived for generations.

Overt urban conflicts such as these have not been common in the past few decades under China's pro-growth authoritarian regime (Lai 2010). Since the start of reform and opening up in the early 1980s, the central aim of Chinese urban policy has been developing the economy and shaking off a sense of backwardness (Zhang 2006). Alternative visions related to historic conservation and community conservation that potentially challenge the hegemony of "development" are rarely voiced and heard (Wu 2015).

Since the 1990s, while the resistance of residents to urban redevelopment might have fostered an alternative urban vision to the growth-oriented redevelopment approach, the existing literature has generally conceived these grassroots resistances as struggles around "welfare redistribution" (Qian and He 2012). To elaborate, resisting residents are often depicted as mere interest-seekers, whose ultimate goal is to obtain a more

preferable, in some cases more lucrative, compensation package, rather than to call off the redevelopment project based on a fundamentally different urban vision (Qian and He 2012; Shin 2013; He and Wu 2005). This distribution-oriented political strategy, argued by Qian and He (2012), does not challenge established unequal power structures and change the political marginality of displaced residents. Inspired by Qian and He (2012), we want to highlight that the existing literature, while having successfully documented the struggles of displaced residents for better compensation, has mostly ignored those cases where residents not only struggle for material benefits but also for an urban vision that rejects the one put forward by the entrepreneurial growth coalition—a regeneration without displacement, or in other words, community conservation. As such, the literature has generally bypassed the crucial question of why and how residents’ rights to shape the future of their own homes and communities—to “the right to envision”—has been deprived or repressed by the state-led growth coalition. We argue, however, that an adequate understanding of how such “alternative visioning” of community conservation plays out on the ground is crucial to a fostering of “the right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996 [1968]) and a more inclusive model of redevelopment in China.

The tension between growth-oriented urban development and community conservation, however, has been complicated by the rise of another urban vision: that of historic conservation. Since the 2000s, the radical clearance of historic neighborhoods in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xi’an, Nanjing, and Suzhou triggered intense and sustained attack from local and national cultural and political elites (Yao and Han 2016). Historic conservation as an alternative urban vision has gained increasing momentum and popularity in Chinese society. Zhang (2008; 2013), for example, unravels how the demolition of historical neighborhoods such as *hutong* in Beijing aroused extensive criticism, and how the intense struggles and negotiations between redevelopment and conservation interests led to the transformation of historic neighborhoods like Nanluoguxiang and Guozijian into so-called “historic and cultural conservation districts” to accommodate middle-class consumers and tourists (also see Shin 2010; Martínez 2016). Ren (2008), for example, engaging with the theories of urban entrepreneurialism and heritage commodification, suggest that the re-exploitation of aesthetic and cultural values in historic environments has become a crucial development strategy for cities like Shanghai to boost and restructure their local economy and reposition themselves in the global cultural economy (see also Su 2011). Accordingly, Ren (2008) anticipates a stronger tendency of *bao* (conservation) in urban

redevelopment in Shanghai, marked by a departure from the old approach based on *chai* (demolition).

The transformation from *chai* to *bao* has not been a smooth process, however. Except for a small number of historic buildings or quarters with special cultural and historical meanings (Zhang 2008; 2013), most historic areas continue to face the threat of clearance. Shao (2012) presents a vivid story of how residents in a historic Shanghai community failed to prevent their neighborhood from demolition, even though their resistance was organized around the potent discourse of historic conservation; their opposition was suppressed by the local government, ironically, with the help of a group of local experts in historic conservation. Similarly, the commercial redevelopment of the historical Enning Road neighborhood in Guangzhou aroused cross-class opposition (Zhang and Li 2016), which indicates a possibility for grassroots participation in the plan-making of urban redevelopment in China through cross-class alliances.

The above studies, while revealing a new trend in urban politics in China—the increasing challenge of historic conservation to the dominant entrepreneurial approach of urban redevelopment—have nonetheless failed to answer two important questions. Firstly, how do conflicts between three competing visions—entrepreneurial redevelopment, historic conservation, and social conservation—unfold in the everyday politics of Chinese cities? Secondly, what is the scope for historic conservation to aid in resisting displacement and helping marginalized urban inhabitants realize their “right to the city,” not merely to claim material benefits but more importantly the right to “envision,” that is, to imagine future possibilities for their neighborhoods that go beyond the entrepreneurial redevelopment plans led by the state-led growth coalition?

This paper addresses these questions by providing a thorough analysis of the vision conflicts embodied in the redevelopment and conservation of Laochengnan in Nanjing, explicating the details of who holds what visions, how alternative visions are voiced and realized, and importantly, how the three distinctive urban visions confront and interact with each other in everyday struggles and how urban marginality is sustained and even aggravated as a consequence.

This article also presents an attempt to refine and expand the ongoing debate of “the right to the city” in the Chinese context. The evocative notion is often associated with

the work of Henri Lefebvre (1996 [1968]), who imagined it as a new framework to instigate urban revolution towards a more just urban society. The ambiguity of the original conception of Lefebvre has, however, increasingly been challenged: What rights? For whom? (Purcell 2003; Attoh 2011). Purcell (2003) proposes that “the right to the city” entails two sets of rights, the right to appropriate urban space and the right to participate in decision-making; the latter, in the words of Harvey (2003: 939), means “a right to change it after our heart's desire.” In the actual practice of urban governance and politics, “the right to the city” should be conceptualized in the local setting, addressing local needs, challenges, and opportunities (Görgens and van Donk 2011). In the context of China’s rapidly changing cities, scholars tend to conceptualize the “rights” in terms of property rights, rights to inhabit (Hsing 2010), or “subsistence or economic security” (Shin 2013). This approach needs to be redressed, however. Qian and He (2012), for example, argue that “the concept of the right to the city needs to be captured as a combination of the distribution of things (social welfare) and the mobilization of process (structural change),” so as to understand the unequal power structure in Chinese cities that produces marginalized groups and how the latter can conceive counter-actions. Inspired by Purcell (2003), Harvey (2003) and Qian and He (2012), we aim to reveal how the unfettered right to “envision” the city is crucial to promoting social justice yet remains severely lacking in the process of urban redevelopment in China.

This article employs multiple methods to develop in-depth and solid empirical research. The first author used to be a member of the planning team of the 2010 Master Plan of Nanjing (working time from 2008 to 2012). This experience enabled him to closely observe the debates and conflicts that arose during the formulation of the historic conservation plan, which was an integral component of the Master Plan.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the authors conducted 46 semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders involved in the redevelopment of Laochengnan from 2009 to 2018, including three cultural elites that led the activism against the entrepreneurial plan, six government officials, eight architects and planners participating in the planning and design of Laochengnan, four scholars in the field of historic conservation and planning yet not directly involved in the Laochengnan case, two journalists, two senior managers of involved development companies, and 21 local residents. Through the eight years, the authors have collected a rich repertoire of materials for analysis, including legal papers, government policies and internal documents, city plans, and media and academic reports, dating from the 1980s onwards.

Through the empirical research we find that, firstly, the vision of historic conservation in China has emerged as a strong competitor to the entrepreneurial vision of redevelopment in historic quarters since the late 1990s and early 2000s, while the vision of community conservation remains marginal on the political landscape. Secondly, grassroots citizens have tactically employed the discourse of historic conservation to negotiate their own visions. However, since the central concern of the historic conservationists is to preserve the built environment of historical quarters rather than the people living in them, the promotion of historic conservation has thus far shown limited potential to foster the rights of residents to participate in the collective “visioning” in the redevelopment process.

In the following section, we firstly trace the evolution of three urban visions—entrepreneurial redevelopment, historic conservation, and community conservation—to illustrate how these visions emerge in specific historical contexts and how they interact with each other over time both in the West and in contemporary China. The goal is to situate the Laochengnan case in a much broader historical-geographical map. Then, we turn to the case study of Laochengnan, explicating the complex geometry between the three visions, and above all, the sustained marginality of grassroots residents. The article concludes with a summary of the major findings and a further discussion of possible measures to improve genuine public participation and residents’ right to vision in the Chinese context.

## **Entrepreneurial redevelopment, historic conservation, and community conservation**

### *Three visions in the West*

Since the nineteenth century, modern historic conservation movements have proposed that the sustainable use of historical heritage should preserve original heritage sites so that future generations can learn who they are and where they are from. However, up until the 1970s, this vision was held only by a small fraction of elite preservationists and stayed largely in the realm of discourse (Birch and Roby 1984). The dominant practice in the 1960s and 1970s was radical urban renewal led by local governments and modernist planners (Teaford 2000).

In the 1980s, as the dominating model of urban governance shifted from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in Western cities (Hall and Hubbard 1996), efforts started to

emerge to reconcile the visions of historic conservation and urban renewal (Birch and Roby 1984; Webster and Kinahan 2014). “Regeneration through conservation” was proposed as a new concept to replace the previous approach based on aggressive demolition (Pendlebury 2002). In the new approach, the historic neighborhoods were deemed no longer an illness to be cured but rather cultural capital to be exploited since they could be fruitfully reused/repackaged as “stage-sets” for post-industrial economies such as tourism, creative industries, and luxury properties (Urry 1995, p. 21). Historic conservation, therefore, from an entrepreneurialist perspective, was no longer the enemy of urban redevelopment but rather a new instrument for it (Webster and Kinahan 2014; Pendlebury 2002). In addition to economic gains, the repackaged historic spectacle could also be employed as a cultural and discursive tool to detoxify entrepreneurial redevelopment and pacify social resistance to displacement during redevelopment (Ghertner 2015).

In the 1960s and 1970s, another urban vision that rose to prominence subsequent to mounting critiques of the radical post-war urban redevelopment movement (Jacobs 1961; Power 1993) was “community conservation” (Carmon 1999; Miller 2004). This urban vision calls for the preservation of the community character, affordability, and diversity of inner-city neighborhoods (Miller 2004; Herzfeld 2015). It promotes the rehabilitation of neighborhoods by improving existing physical environments and social services rather than radical gentrification and social displacement. This vision of community conservation speaks directly to the concept of “the right to the city,” echoing the ideas of Lefebvre (1996 [1968]) that the users of urban space should be able to determine their future free from manipulation engendered by capital accumulation.

Though many efforts have been made to reconcile the three visions, the divergences between them are great and persistent. Firstly, it should be noted that, while the entrepreneurial vision of “regeneration through conservation” attempted to reconcile urban growth with historic conservation through cultural tourism or the commodification of other heritage uses, its primary and ultimate goal remained economic growth and capital accumulation (Pendlebury 2002), which often generates a rather “profitable” form of history that deviates from the “authentic” history that historic conservationists cherish so much.



Secondly, since entrepreneurial redevelopment almost invariably induces large-scale displacement and undermines the property and residential right of local residents, the conflict between entrepreneurial redevelopment and community conservation seems inevitable and irreconcilable. Despite that, Western planners and policy makers have proposed a plethora of social-spatial mixing policies to alleviate social segregation and foster social diversity (Rose et al. 2013). This effort, however, “confers on the middle classes the role of providing a social framework for the poor” (Rose et al. 2013, p. 445), and the increase of middle-class households in previously poor neighborhoods reduces the political power of poor households and causes resultant cultural and political displacements (Hyra 2015).

Thirdly, conflicts between the vision of historic conservation and that of community conservation can be clearly identified. As many commentators observe (Zukin 1987; Herzfeld 2015; Smith 2006), heritage designation and management are increasingly controlled by powerful elite groups, who make protection and restoration of historic built forms their pivotal ideology. The vision of historic conservation, therefore, often plays an important role in facilitating the removal of local residents, since the latter’s requests for community conservation are often incongruous with “the spirit of authenticity” of historic conservation (Zukin 1987, p. 129). As argued by Brenner et al. (2011) and Zhang (2018), to unfetter the right of people to the city from the profit-seeking logic of capitalism and elitist narratives of national identity construction, scholars and policy makers need to shift attention from space to people, or in other words, a care and needs-based approach to urban redevelopment and historic conservation.

Western urban planning since the 1960s has been exploring ways to promote pluralistic and participatory planning (Davidoff 1965; Healey 1997), and “visioning” has become a catchword to crystalize participatory, collaborative, and consensus-driven planning processes (Shiple and Newkirk 1999). Some scholars, however, argue that these participatory planning procedures are at best therapeutic and more rhetorical than effective (Chandler 2000; Uyesugi and Shiple 2005). McCann, for example, observes that the final planning vision produced through the procedural or majoritarian democratic process was “largely parallel to standard economic development models” (McCann 2001, p. 207). In sum, the conflicts between competing urban visions on the redevelopment of historical neighborhoods remain intractable issues for policy-making in Western democracies.

### *The evolution of three visions in China*

The approach to urban redevelopment in reform era China has undertaken a major shift in the early 2000s. Before that, the major task of urban redevelopment was to alleviate severe housing shortage in Chinese inner cities as a result of extensive state-led industrialization and what Szelenyi called “under urbanization” during the socialist time (Szelenyi 1996). Urban redevelopment in this period, because of its welfarist nature, providing public housing for residents, was a social consensus and scarcely challenged (Leaf 1995). Almost all cities in China formulated their housing-oriented redevelopment programs in the 1980s and 1990s, backed by public funds from both government and work units (*danwei*) (Leaf 1995).<sup>2</sup>

[INSERT: Table 1. The evolution of three urban visions in China and major historical events]

In 1998, public allocation of housing was discontinued in China, and housing was fully commodified. The establishment of a full-fledged real estate market has fundamentally changed the approach to urban redevelopment in China; urban redevelopment has transformed from welfare-oriented to profit-oriented, and become more and more closely intertwined with property development and local revenue-seeking (He and Wu 2005; Wu 2016; Zhang 2013). Pushed by real estate fever, Chinese cities have taken on massive redevelopment programs and cleared legions of historic neighborhoods (Shin 2010; Zhang 2006).

As indicated in the Introduction, until very recently, urban (re)development in China has been carried out to a drum beat of “growth.” Through the 1980s to the late 1990s, historic conservation as a policy agenda remained ill-defined and largely rhetorical. Even though it has been written into various national laws and policies since the 1980s (for example, the first Cultural Relics Protection Law [CRPL], enacted in 1982, and the first list of National Historic Cultural Famous Cities [NHCFCs], promulgated in the same year), in practice historic conservation was a rather marginal narrative upheld by only a small group of elite architects, archaeologists, and historians; conservation policies were applicable only for a small number of very prominent heritage sites, and a large number of “mediocre” historic neighborhoods were demolished and replaced

with multi-story residential buildings for work-unit employees, and less frequently with hotels and buildings designed for other uses.

Since the 2000s, the vision of historic conservation in China has been reinforced by two forces. Firstly, the central government has become a major proponent of historic conservation, for a series of practical reasons. For one, this is because the Chinese state has turned to cultural nationalism as a major source of political legitimacy since the 1990s (Guo 2004) and found historic conservation an indispensable strategy for cultural nationalism (Madsen 2014; Ai 2012). As Madsen (2014, p. 58) sharply observes, the CCP-led Chinese state “is now representing itself as the carrier and the defender of 5000 years of national cultural heritage.” For another, China’s increasing interest in historic conservation is also associated with its growing ambition to remake its national image and exert cultural influence or “soft power” on the world stage (Broudehoux 2007). Secondly, the other major force to advance the vision of historic conservation in China is represented by cultural figures including scholars, experts, and public intellectuals. Anxious about the massive demolition of traditional neighborhoods and the homogenization of the urban landscape across the country, Chinese cultural elites have taken various measures to push forward historic conservation (Yao and Han 2016). In practice, the above two forces corroborate each other and lead to the expansion of the conservationist discourse and ultimately the legislation of historic conservation.

In 2002, the CRPL was revised and stipulated that cities should delineate Historic Cultural Conservation Areas (HCCA) as a new managerial unit of historic conservation. Moreover, to better conserve their historic heritage, a sort of conservation charter was drawn up in major Chinese cities based on the principles of “integrity” and “authenticity” explicitly borrowed from European sources (Martínez 2016). In 2008 these principles were enshrined in the Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historic and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages (hereafter the 2008 Regulation). Along with this change, the so-called “regeneration through conservation” developed in the West was introduced to Chinese cities, producing iconic projects such as Xintiandi and Red Town in Shanghai and Nanluoguxiang in Beijing, even though this kind of compromise is often criticized by historic conservationists as inauthentic and profiteering (Martínez 2016; Arkaraprasertkul and Williams 2015). While such an entrepreneurial turn is well recognized, it is important to note the variegated geographies of redevelopment practices in Chinese cities. Not all cities and towns have adopted the new approach, and wholesale demolition and redevelopment are not fading away but still very much alive

in many Chinese cities (Zhang 2006) and even in cities that had adopted the new approach, Shanghai among them (Shao 2012).

In contrast to the increasing interaction between the visions of entrepreneurial redevelopment and historic conservation, the vision of community conservation remains largely invisible and marginalized on the political radar of urban China. Although protecting social patterns in the HCCA has been proposed by several Chinese scholars since the early 2000s (Ruan and Sun 2001), no national legislation ever specified that community patterns should be conserved and residents' right of staying-put respected. On the contrary, two important national laws implemented in 2001 and 2007 respectively (Table 1), reinforced the legal position that the (local) state can legally expropriate the private property of residents if it is in the public interests. The term "public interest," however, is rather vague and often abused in China; urban redevelopment, no matter what approach it adopts, is invariably portrayed as an initiative for the public good. The hegemonic position of urban redevelopment is so powerful that ordinary residents can hardly change the status quo. Even though some residents might make claim to a vision of "staying put," they tend to be stigmatized as "nail households," asking for exorbitant compensation and disregarding the public good (Shin 2013).

The vision conflict is a dimension of urbanization in China that has been more or less overlooked in the earlier studies concerning on urban redevelopment and historic conservation, and the policy practices. Moreover, a study of the Chinese case can "speak back" to and help refine predominantly western-centric theorizations of stakeholder visions and politics entailed in urban redevelopment and historic conservation. Compared with Western countries, the power relations between the three urban visions in China is highly uneven (Table 1). The entrepreneurial redevelopment vision is the most powerful, the historic conservation vision is growing stronger since the 2000s and posing a threat to the former, while the vision of community conservation remains weak. Besides, unlike in some other parts of the world, urban planning in China is not conceived and practiced as an open and participatory institution or platform for the collective "visioning" of citizens. While local authorities have taken some measures to encourage public participation since the 2000s, the involvement of ordinary citizens is minimal; their involvement is largely limited to being notified of the exhibition of finished plans (Wu 2015; Wu and Zhang 2007). Given these differences, it is of interest to unravel how the politics of conflicting visions play out in China and how new understandings of the "value" of historic districts and the various "rights" associated

with involved stakeholders will be developed and integrated into the academic and policy narratives so that both cultural elites and ordinary citizens can realize their power in shaping more diverse, interesting, and vibrant neighborhoods and nurturing social justice in terms of mitigating violent displacement.

### **Laochengnan in Nanjing**

Nanjing is located in the eastern part of China and is one of the most developed cities in the country (Figure 1). Having served as the national capital on various occasions between 229 CE and 1949 (the most recent being as capital of the Republic of China), Nanjing is also known as one of the most famous historical cities in China. In recognition of its historic and cultural artefacts, Nanjing was designated as one of the first 24 NHCFCs in 1982. Over the past three decades, the city has undergone a remarkable transformation, and massive urban redevelopment inflicted great damage on its historic landscape in the inner city. A government report indicates that from 1991 to 2003, 90% of Ming and Qing-dynasty style architectural buildings in the inner city were demolished (NPB 2003a). The majority of the remaining Ming and Qing historic buildings are located in a number of traditional neighborhoods in the southern part of the inner city called Laochengnan (Figure 1).

Laochengnan covers an area of 6.9 square kilometers and can be divided into two parts. The northern part belongs to Baixia District and is centered on the Nanbuting and Fuzimiao neighborhoods. The southern part belongs to Qinhuai District and is home to several historic neighborhoods, including Menxi, Mendong and Yanliaofang (Figure 1). In the authorized 2002 Conservation Plan of Nanjing, almost all remaining traditional neighborhoods in Laochengnan were designated as HCCAs, which, according to the newly amended CRPL effective since 2002, should be strictly protected. These historic neighborhoods, however, faced continuous pressure of demolition and redevelopment, especially when an entrepreneurial redevelopment plan came out in 2006. The plan triggered intense vision conflicts between urban redevelopment, historic conservation, and community conservation in the following ten years. Generally, the conflict between the vision of historic conservation and urban redevelopment occupied the frontline and the focus of political struggle, while the vision of community conservation exerted a marginal impact on the contested politics of Laochengnan.

[INSERT: Figure 1. The location and layout of Laochengnan in Nanjing.]

### **The conflict between redevelopment and historic conservation visions**

*Remaking the New Chengnan: the vision for entrepreneurial redevelopment of the local state-led growth coalition*

The local governments initiated two rounds of redevelopment plans in Laochengnan, in 2006 and 2009, respectively. Below we will elaborate on the historical contexts under which local governments made such decisions and their strategies in each round.

**Round I:** In the early 2000s, the municipal government of Nanjing had already formulated a grand spatial restructuring plan to “depopulate and revitalize the old city and develop new towns” (NPB 2001). An essential task, as summarized by the first half of the slogan, was to move residents and manufacturing industries out of the highly congested inner city. The goal was to redevelop the inner city into a high-end residential, cultural and post-industrial center. In 2006, the Nanjing Government decided to redevelop Laochengnan as part of the grand plan. The two district governments administering Laochengnan, Baixia, and Qinhuai, enthusiastically embraced the municipal plan and worked out even grander plans. While land leasing has become a major source of revenue for local governments in China (Hsing 2010), urban districts in the inner city like Baixia and Qinhuai lack sufficient new land to lease and thus are eager to promote local growth and increase revenue by creating marketable land. The leader of Qinhuai District, for example, made a clear statement of their rationality: “Where is the hope for Qinhuai District? The answer lies in the redevelopment of the inner city and ... property-led redevelopment is the theme of economic development in inner cities, as has already been testified in many developed areas” (Wang 2006).

At the beginning of 2006, the Qinhuai District government announced a massive redevelopment plan entitled “Building New Chengnan,” with a total investment of four billion  *yuan* within five years from 2006 to 2011. According to the plan, the district government was to demolish several old neighborhoods in 2006, including Mendong, Chuanbanxiang, and Yanliaofang, and the total demolished floor area would total 340,000 square meters (Interview with local official, May 2010). The final goal of the plan was to redevelop all the remaining traditional neighborhoods in Laochengnan within five years. The Mendong area, which was close to the southern gate of the ancient city wall, was to be redeveloped into a collection of pseudo-ancient streets

named Nanmen Laojie (southern gate old street) with tourism and entertainment functions. Other areas, though having historic and cultural value, would be demolished and rebuilt into luxurious low-rise townhouses in Ming and Qing vernacular styles. Baixia District also announced its plan: it would redevelop the Nanbuting area close to the city center into high-end residential, commercial, office, entertainment, and hotel space.

How could these traditional neighborhoods, already classified as HCCAs, be re-zoned for redevelopment? As in other countries, this was achieved firstly through place stigmatization (Wacquant et al. 2014), which functions, among other things, to devalue the existing building stock and leads to value re-creation through destruction and reinvestment (Weber 2002). Taking the Nanbuting neighborhood as an example, the local authorities, with the help of local planning experts, classified this traditional neighborhood as a “problematic” area in a detailed plan made in 2003 (NPB 2003b). Many vernacular houses were categorized as dilapidated and dangerous and in need of urgent work, preferably demolition and redevelopment. Moreover, the socio-economic pattern in the old neighborhoods was deemed “troublesome” and “obsolete.” The document reported that the social fabric in Nanbuting was composed mostly of those who were old, unemployed, or on low incomes, and such a social and economic composition was a “mismatch with the favorable location (of Nanbuting) near the city center” (NPB 2003b). It thus suggested that active measures be taken to revive the area and better exploit its locational potential. This technocratic narrative provided important legitimacy for the entrepreneurial redevelopment initiative.

At the beginning of 2006, the two district governments started the process of demolition and relocation, and some historic structures were torn down. However, in August 2006, cultural elites who opposed the plan successfully approached and pressed the central government to intervene and put a stop to the demolitions. The ambitious redevelopment proposal of the local governments was forcefully postponed.

**Round II:** In 2009, the municipal government of Nanjing re-initiated the redevelopment of Laochengnan, this time with greater incentives. Firstly, after the subprime mortgage crisis spread worldwide and hit the Chinese economy hard, the central government launched a massive economic stimulus plan; the redevelopment of old and dilapidated housing (*weijiufang gaizao*) was deemed an essential strategy to expand domestic demand and sustain growth. Local governments in Nanjing saw this

top-down initiative as a great opportunity to resume the redevelopment of Laochengnan. Soon, in early 2009, Nanjing Municipal Government brought all remaining historic neighborhoods into the program of redevelopment of old and dilapidated housing.

However, the plan had to be carefully calibrated, especially given that the first plan had failed only two years prior. The need to be prudent was heightened even more as the 2008 Regulation had come into effect one year previously. The new 2008 Regulation stipulated that historic conservation must obey the two principles of “integrity” and “authenticity,” which put a legal bridle on audacious local governments. Given this complex context, how did the local government rationalize a new round of entrepreneurial redevelopment in Laochengnan?

In addition to deliberate geographical defamation, local governments and planning experts tried to circumvent the 2008 Regulation through a “creative” reinterpretation of the “integrity” and “authenticity” principles, in a way that supported the entrepreneurial logic. Some local experts, for example, argued that it was impossible for Nanjing to closely follow these two principles to preserve Laochengnan in a similar way to Lijiang (Su 2011) and Pingyao (Wang 2012), two well-known historic cities and world heritage sites, since Nanjing was such a large city with such vigorous development momentum. “Unable” to implement integral and authentic conservation, the city government proposed a “teeth replacement model” of redevelopment as an alternative. The gist of this model was that, while the conservation plan should maintain its overall spatial landscape and fabric in the historic area, dilapidated buildings, i.e., the “bad teeth,” should be pulled out and replaced with new ones. The goal was to find a compromise between entrepreneurial redevelopment and historic conservation. While drafting the implementation plan, however, local authorities manipulated the definition of “bad teeth” and planned much more demolition and dislocation than should have been allowed, partly because the retrofitting of old buildings was much costlier than “clearance/new build,” and partly because they wanted to obtain a less fragmented land layout that was more conducive to large-scale construction and thus higher land values.

The second round of redevelopment, however, was once again halted as a result of protests from angry cultural elites, who had approached the Central Government and secured a shutoff of the plan. How should the alternative vision of the cultural elites be characterized and understood? How could they succeed twice in halting the



redevelopment initiatives of local governments in Nanjing? We will elaborate on the two rounds of elite resistance below.

*Rehabilitating Laochengnan: the vision of historic conservation of cultural elites*

In contrast with the two rounds of entrepreneurial visioning of Laochengnan, a group of cultural elites, including famous historians, archaeologists, writers, artists, and sociologists, held a radically different vision for Laochengnan. Cherishing the historic, cultural, and artistic value of Laochengnan and enraged by the severe detriment engendered by the entrepreneurial redevelopment program, these cultural elites organized two rounds of influential activism to “defend” Laochengnan in 2006 and 2009 respectively, though targeting different “crimes” in each round.

**Round I:** In the first round of resistance, the target of the attack was largely the “defamation” of Laochengnan and the massive destruction the local government planned. Shortly after the government plan was made official and some historic buildings demolished, cultural elite-led resistance began. A key figure in this was Yao Yuan, a Nanjing-born PhD student of politics at Peking University, indignant at what he saw as the depreciation of the historic and cultural value of Laochengnan, started to rally other people of like mind to form a campaign against the government plan.

On 11 August 2006, 16 nationally prestigious scholars and intellectuals sent a petition to the central government. They presented a very different vision of the value and the future of Laochengnan. Firstly, Laochengnan was hailed as the cultural root of Nanjing. The petitioners emphasized that Laochengnan was the only remaining area of Ming- and Qing-dynasty landscape in the inner city of Nanjing. Secondly, they highlighted the cultural and political significance of Laochengnan to the entire nation. Since Nanjing was the national capital of the Republic of China from 1927 to 1949, they suggested that Nanjing should be a city that appealed to the collective memory of the Nationalist elites who fled to Taiwan in 1949. The preservation of Laochengnan, they argued, could play an important role in reuniting Taiwan to the mainland. From this vantage point, they denounced the redevelopment plan of the local growth coalition as murder of the city’s soul as well as China’s precious cultural and political legacy (Chen et al. 2006).

While acknowledging that Laochengnan had been declining and facing socio-economic challenges, the cultural elites argued that the entrepreneurial clearance and rebuilding approach was a complete destruction of the historic landscape of Laochengnan. Instead, they proposed to employ a gradualist rehabilitation approach, which was characterized as “successive small repairs, the restoration of historic structures little by little, and the gradual revival of traditional communities” (Chen et al. 2006). They insisted that effective conservation and rehabilitation was the only means to realize the sustainable development of Laochengnan, and this would not only generate long-term benefits for all citizens but also contribute to local economic growth. Their stance was well expressed in the petition (Chen et al. 2006):

Rehabilitation is much less costly than demolition and reconstruction. It will not only revive the city’s humanist tradition and elevate the ambience of this ancient capital but also promote tourism, service industries, and even improve the overall environment for attracting investment. These benefits will be shared by the entire public.

**Round II:** Responding to the second round of state-led attempts to redevelop Laochengnan, cultural elites, many of whom participated in the first round of resistance, organized new opposition campaigns. Again, a petition letter, signed by 29 famous scholars, was passed to the central government on 29 April 2009. This time, the attack of cultural elites was along two lines. First and foremost, they argued that the new redevelopment plan was an opportunistic attempt by local governments to tap into the central government’s post-crisis stimulation package. In practice, they claimed, the new plan was yet another scheme to raze historic Laochengnan and was not fundamentally different from the first plan of 2006.

Secondly, the activists spurned the manipulation of the “authenticity” and “integrity” principles of government-commissioned planners and criticized the so-called “teeth replacement model” of redevelopment. In the new petition letter, they revealed the destructive effects of the approach in practice:

They [the local redevelopment coalitions] claim to respect the principles [of integrity and authenticity] through the teeth replacement technique. However, the actual situation is that almost none of the traditional vernacular structures are kept and conserved except for a few designated provincial- and municipal-level Cultural Heritage Protection Sites.

To realize the effective conservation and sustainable use of Laochengnan, they insisted that local authorities should closely follow the “integrity” and “authenticity” principles. Again, they requested that a more gradualist rehabilitation approach be taken to minimize the harm to the historic landscape of Laochengnan.

### *Jumping scale and media activism*

In both rounds of struggles between the state-led growth coalition and cultural elites, the latter managed to overturn the proposals of the former. How did this happen? Normally, public participation in the plan-making process should be the main channel to coordinate different visions and build consensus. However, in the case of Laochengnan, the principal decision makers were local authorities, a handful of planners and architects the government commissioned, and the developers involved in the project. Scholars and experts in non-planning fields such as history, literature, and art who had alternative visions were excluded from the core circle of decision- and plan-making. Therefore, cultural elites who opposed the plans had to seek other channels to promote their visions for Laochengnan. In both rounds of campaigns, they successfully adopted scale-jumping strategies, i.e., they went above the arena of local politics and to outflank the local growth coalition by winning the support of higher-level authorities.

In the first round of activism in 2006, Yao Yuan sent an appeal letter to roughly three hundred people with social and political impact, including members of the Nanjing People’s Congress (NPC) and People’s Political Consultative Conference (PPCC), as well as some locally and nationally famous professionals and scholars. The result was unexpected. He heard from none of the local government officials but received endorsements from 16 highly regarded national experts and scholars, including Wu Liangyong, an academician of the China Science Academy (CSA) expert in architecture, Hou Renzhi, an academician of CSA in historical geography, and Xie Chensheng, the honorary chair of the China Cultural Relics Academy. They then wrote a formal petition letter to the then Ministry of Construction (MoC, now the Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development, MOHURD) and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), the two central authorities responsible for overseeing the local conservation of NHCFCs and CHPSs respectively, and ultimately, through Xie Chensheng, to the then premier, Wen Jiabao.

Xie is a prestigious expert in cultural heritage protection in China and has considerable experience working in the state system of heritage conservation. He had written many times on similar issues to the central leaders, including the then Chinese president, Hu Jintao, and Premier Wen and had had significant impact on the top leaders (Li 2017). His personal access to the top leadership was crucial to the success of the cultural elites' scaling-up strategies. The arguments and appeals of the petition letter were carefully geared to the political concerns and narratives of the central government. After reading the letter, Premier Wen instructed Jiangsu Provincial Government to stop the demolition and redevelopment of Laochengnan and fully support the central government's agenda of strengthening historic conservation (Interview with a cultural activist, December 2016). It should be noted that, even though China has undergone profound decentralization, it remains a hierarchical authoritarian regime, and by commanding the promotion and deposition of local officials, the central government is able to exert strong control over local governments (Chien 2010). Therefore, faced with direct pressure from the national leader and upper-level authorities, the municipal and district authorities in Nanjing halted the redevelopment projects.

In early 2009, the local governments' plan to redevelop Laochengnan again triggered politics of scale-jumping by local cultural elites. This time, the majority of participants were not national scholars or experts but 29 local members of the cultural elite, including professors, writers, retired technocrats, artists, journalists, and TV hosts. They adopted similar scale-jumping tactics as in the first-round resistance, and soon successfully thwarted the local governments' new redevelopment plan with the support of Wen Jiabao.

What was different in the second round of activism from the first round was that it employed the media as an important platform for the expression of historic conservation visions. In the existing literature, local media are often viewed as an important aid to the growth machine by facilitating public acceptance of the urban growth agenda (Wu 2018). Nonetheless, as Ward (2009) rightly noted, the role of mass media in urban politics is not one-dimensional but rather complex. In China, the public media must serve two masters, the market and the party-state (Zhao 2008). Beyond its entrepreneurial pursuits, the media in China is required by central and provincial authorities to perform important political functions, including the communication and promulgation of government regulations and policies and the surveillance and guidance of social opinion. More importantly, since the mid-1990s, the media have increasingly been used as a watchdog to monitor the practices of lower-level officials. In the

Laochengnan case, we find that the media provided an important space for confrontation between entrepreneurial and conservation visions around the future of Laochengnan, not least when the endorsement by the central government of the scholar-activists was publicized nationwide (Figure 2).

[INSERT: Figure 2. Monthly quantity of media coverage of Laochengnan in 2009]

These news outlets worked as the mouthpiece of cultural elites and scholar-activists. Some scholar-activists actively used mass media to elucidate and spread their vision of how to crystallize the authenticity and integrity principles in the preservation of Laochengnan. For example, Xue Bing, a writer and the vice president of the Writer's Association of Nanjing and a co-signatory of the 2009 petition letter, specified in *China Culture Daily* why the "integrity" principle should not be compromised in the preservation of Laochengnan:

Through many years of demolition, the remaining historic landscape in Laochengnan is less than 100 hectares...much smaller than Lijiang and Pingyao... [If Lijiang and Pingyao can be integrally conserved] ..., then the integral conservation of Laochengnan should be non-negotiable. (Liang 2009)

Stressing the "authenticity" principle of historic conservation, Liang Baiquan, the former curator of Nanjing Museum and signatory to the second petition in 2009, clarified his understanding of how to practice "authenticity" in the conservation of Laochengnan in a widely-read local newspaper, the *Modern Express*. Liang expressed the belief that the gist of the "authenticity" principle lay in the rejection of any entrepreneurial or commercial maneuvers in the preservation of historic neighborhoods. He wrote:

Nanjing should have sufficient financial capacity to conserve a historic area smaller than one square kilometer.... Historic conservation is never equivalent to urban redevelopment.... Hence, they cannot carry out conservation through profit-oriented property-led redevelopment. (Hu and Sun 2009)

*Tacit compromise: preserved historic buildings but displaced communities*

The scale-jumping strategies and media activism of cultural elites put considerable pressure on local governments, which were forced to consider many of their suggestions and requests.

Firstly, the integrity principle of historic conservation was officially re-drafted to read “fully conserve all that deserves to be conserved,” including not only designated HCCAs but also all the traditional neighborhoods with historic and cultural values (NPB 2012). While 30 hectares of the 100 hectares of historic neighborhoods in Laochengnan were already destroyed in the two rounds of redevelopment campaigns, the remaining 70 hectares were officially designated as HCCAs and Historic Landscape Areas (HLAs) in the new Conservation Plan for the Historic Cultural Famous City of Nanjing in 2010 (NPB 2012). The new Conservation Plan also stipulated that clearance-based redevelopment should be strictly prohibited in both HCCAs and HLAs, and the rehabilitation approach should be adopted instead.

Secondly, the entrepreneurial approach based on public-private partnerships was replaced by a new conservation approach that emphasized the funding responsibility of local governments to preserve Laochengnan. Specifically, the municipal government worked out a cross-district financial transfer scheme, drawing land leasing revenues from two suburban new towns (i.e., Hexi New Town and Southern New Town) to support the rehabilitation of Laochengnan and to repress the inner desire of the district governments to seek profit from the market during the rehabilitation of Laochengnan.

While the central concern of most cultural activists was the integral and authentic preservation of historic structures in Laochengnan, a few of them also clearly suggested local communities be preserved simultaneously. Yao and Xue both put significant emphasis on community-based rehabilitation of Laochengnan (Yao 2009).

These claims, however, vanished in face of the strong narrative of the local government that the extent of the existing population of Laochengnan would make effective conservation of historic buildings impossible; displacement was inevitable. For this, an official in the Committee of Municipal and Rural Development stated that,

No city would act like this. If we do not move residents out, the rehabilitation of historic structures on such a large scale is impossible. (Lü 2009)

Another rationale put forward by the local government was egalitarianism and manageability. The local government insisted it would displace all the households in the redevelopment of Nanbuting, for example, because, citing an official in the government of Baixia District,

Resident dislocation is a unified policy. How can we apply different policies for different residents? [If we do this], how can we conduct urban redevelopment in non-historic neighborhoods? (Lü 2009)

The fear felt by the government on account of the apparent complexity and difficulty of such community-based rehabilitation approaches was palpable. In 2013, the local government resumed the displacement of the remaining 1100 households in the Nanbuting neighborhood on the premise of protecting and renovating all the historic buildings left (Interview with local official, August 2016). In October 2018, fewer than 90 households remained, and the local government declared it would relocate all of them before 2019 (Interview with local resident, November 2018). In the face of these government actions, local cultural elites have for the most part stayed silent, to some extent because they have already accomplished their major objective—to preserve the material structure of historic buildings in Laochengnan. Although some elite activists had proposed that a certain number of local residents should be allowed to stay put, their efforts were not sustained but succumbed to the stronger discourse of historic conservation, which was traditionally understood in terms of preserving the material space rather than the respecting the preferences of local people (Smith 2006; Zhang 2018).

### **The marginalized and split visions of community conservation of grassroots residents**

As indicated earlier, the vision of community conservation remains marginal in the power geometry of Chinese cities. Such a vision is not taken seriously by the government, and residents are often fragmented into groups of different interests which further weakens their political power in the negotiation with the government and entrepreneurial development forces (Qian and He 2012). While residents did not feature in the first round of activism against the redevelopment of Laochengnan, partly because the government's plan was quickly shut down by the activism of cultural elites, they organized active resistance when local governments resumed the redevelopment of Laochengnan in 2009. These residents can be divided into two major groups: tenants and private owners.

The first group comprises tenants of both public and private housing. Since renters of private housing were very few in Laochengnan and had little say in the political strife, we will focus on public housing tenants. The tenants of public housing can be further divided into two groups in terms of their divergent attitudes towards the government's redevelopment plan. The first group did not have a strong attachment to Laochengnan. Even though they paid very low rent to the government, their housing condition was poor, usually no more than 20 square meters for a household of two or three persons, with no private toilet and bathroom. Thus, housing demolition presented an opportunity for these renters to improve their housing condition. Moreover, the government's relocation plan was almost the only chance for many such low-income households to become homeowners. Hence, most public housing tenants welcomed the entrepreneurial redevelopment and deemed the cultural elites' vision of historic conservation trouble-making. The group's major concern, therefore, was more about the compensation package than rejecting the redevelopment project, a familiar story well seen in the literature (Qian and He 2012; Shin 2013; He and Wu 2005).

Like the first group, the second group, made up of public housing tenants, did not care about the survival of the houses they inhabited. However, unlike the first group, they did not want to move out of Laochengnan, for multiple reasons. Firstly, comprised of mainly elders whose housing condition was better and whose grown-up children were relatively well-off, their need for larger and better housing was not so pressing. Secondly, they enjoyed the convenience of the location of Laochengnan near the city center. Thirdly, and more importantly, they had a strong affection toward the neighborhood. Their primary concern, therefore, was the location of the resettlement housing. The best option for them was on-site resettlement.

Unlike public housing tenants, private housing owners who inherited their private property rights from older generations strongly opposed the government's plan. The size of the owner group was much smaller than the renter group. In Nanbuting area, there were no more than 200 households of private housing compared with about 4000 renter households. Private owners tended to oppose demolition and relocation; they appreciated the value of their historic houses and the preferential location of their neighborhood. Their primary vision was to renovate the house with their own funds. For example, Ma Bangbao, who inherited his house of roughly 172 square meters from his grandfather, stated:



I know the value of old houses. One house in the nearby neighborhood is now worth more than twenty million yuan. So, I just need a small amount of money to repair and renovate my house. Then, its market value may exceed ten million. (Interview, October 2017)

Ma also said that economic gain was not the primary reason why he opposed the government's redevelopment plan. For him, the most important reason was that he was born here, grew up here, and had a great attachment to this place. He knew almost every corner of Laochengnan, although it had changed greatly in the past few decades. More importantly, the house did not belong to him alone but to tens of family members – they all shared the property rights to the house, and he was just a representative of the family. He said keeping the house would be the best way to avoid family disputes and resultant divisions. Ma told us he had struggled to hold onto his house for nearly ten years since 2009 (Interview, December 2018). Ma Bangbao is not a unique case in Nanbuting but represents tens of households who refuse for similar reasons to be displaced.

As illustrated above, some of the public tenants and private owners had a vision very different from the entrepreneurial redevelopment vision. Nevertheless, like the cultural elites, they had also been excluded from the plan-making process. Therefore, they had to explore various non-institutional tactics to express and defend their visions. The first tactic can be termed “articulation” of the vision and discourse of historic conservation (Mertha 2009). When Premier Wen for a second time ordered the cessation of demolition work in Laochengnan for historic conservation reasons, they perceived this as a great opportunity to organize their own resistance. They soon reframed their argument from defending private ownership and residential rights to defending their own vision of historic conservation, and highlighted why defending their ancestral houses and on-site resettlement were crucial to the vision of historic conservation. For example, Ma and several grassroots activists stated,

I totally agree that Laochengnan should be preserved. Laochengnan is a window and a name card to display the history and culture of Nanjing. However, it would no longer be Laochengnan if we all were displaced.... Old buildings are not Laochengnan; the inhabitants here are. (Interview, October 2017)

Secondly, similar to cultural elites, local residents also adopted tactics of petitioning and scale-jumping to voice their visions. 148 households, consisting of roughly one

third public housing tenants and two thirds private owners, wrote a petition signed with blood to upper-level authorities, including the central, provincial, and municipal committees of the CCP, the State Council, SACH, and the provincial and municipal governments. In the letter, they fully advocated the vision of historic conservation while also presenting their own vision of Laochengnan. The excerpt from the petition at the beginning of this article illustrates their strategy. Besides, local grassroots leaders actively cooperated with local and non-local news outlets in an attempt to spread their voices via public media. However, the strategies that once worked for cultural elites failed ordinary residents. The residents never received any response from the central and provincial authorities. In addition, their voices in the media became fragmented; media editors processed and selected them to illustrate either the great historic value of the buildings or the rampancy and cruelty of housing demolition. Such media accounts tended in particular to convey the necessity of historic conservation and therefore reinforced the elitist vision of historic conservation (Bai 2017) rather than the residents' own visions for their houses and neighborhoods.

## **Conclusion**

The study of the case of “redeveloping vs. defending Laochengnan” adds new insights to earlier studies of historic conservation politics observed in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Zhang 2013; Martínez 2016; Ren 2008; Zhang and Li 2016) in four ways.

Firstly, it illustrates the complex politics of urban redevelopment in China embodied in the conflicts between three competing visions—entrepreneurial redevelopment, historic conservation, and community conservation. These visions are advocated by three social forces, the local government-led growth coalition, conservationist cultural and political elites, and residents living in the historic neighborhoods, respectively. Through a solid analysis of the discourses and actions of the three social forces, the research shows how each group employs various tactics and strategies, including place stigmatization vs. counter-stigmatization, scale-jumping, media activism, and narrative articulation to defend their visions. We argue that the differences of tactics employed by different players reveal the uneven power relations, epitomized by the sustained marginality of ordinary residents and their community conservation vision.

Secondly, the research illustrates the growing power of historic conservation in Chinese cities. Similar to other authoritarian developmentalist societies (Yuen 2006; Tan and

Waley 2006), historic conservation has risen recently in China as an important alternative to the dominant vision of entrepreneurial redevelopment. This research unravels the underlying forces behind the emergence of the vision of historic conservation, including the CCP's turn to cultural nationalism for legitimacy and the reactions of cultural elites to the radical clearance of historic landscapes since the late 1990s. As such, cultural elites and high-level political elites play increasingly crucial roles in the promotion of alternative conservationist visions. In the case of Laochengnan, cultural elites insisted upon the rigorous preservation of historic buildings and landscape through gradualist rehabilitation. Their voices and concerns gained positive feedback from central authorities and were widely spread through public media, posing a strong challenge to the implementation of government-led entrepreneurial redevelopment, and ultimately transforming property-led redevelopment practices into a conservation-led rehabilitation approach largely with public financing.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the geographical boundaries of the successful historic conservation campaign against the dominant vision of entrepreneurial redevelopment in China. The success of cultural elites in the Laochengnan case is not quite common in China. It is contingent on a plethora of endogenous and exogenous conditions.

The first is that, the high profile of Nanjing in China's history and national political agenda (e.g. to unite Taiwan), together with the fact that historic conservation has become a "nationalist" project, is an important reason for the central authorities to intervene in the Laochengnan case. In addition, Nanjing hosts dozens of universities and colleges and has a large group of cultural elites that are easily mobilizable and capable to jump scale and resort to media activism. Therefore, not all historic neighborhoods in China are so well-positioned to call off state-led entrepreneurial redevelopment (Yao and Han 2016). This said, we notice similar stories of scholar-led activism against entrepreneurial redevelopment emerging in other major Chinese cities with rich historic and cultural heritage, like Guangzhou, Beijing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou (Verdini 2015; Yao and Han 2016; Zhang and Li 2016). Therefore, the complex, uneven power dynamics and conflicts between the three competing visions observed in the Laochengnan case are illustrative of urban redevelopment and historic conservation politics elsewhere in China and indeed beyond.

Thirdly, this paper finds that the vision of community conservation is poorly expressed and implemented in China. While the vision of "community-based conservation" is not entirely absent among social actors in China, elite activists and local residents who call

for the vision often fail to defend it, as seen in the case of Laochengnan. One reason is that the vision of community conservation is traditionally outside the vision of historic conservation (Smith 2006). For many historic conservationists, community conservation is only a secondary concern, important yet far less important than the survival of decaying historic structures. In the Laochengnan case, when the local governments insisted on displacing local residents as a pre-condition for carrying out better historic conservation, cultural elites yielded to the government's logic and stopped pushing "a secondary concern."

A more crucial reason for the weakness of the community conservation vision is that, local residents have been deprived of the right to envision in China. Without strong legislative support, residents may have the right to negotiate a little better compensation but no right to claim a different vision beyond the powerful vision of redevelopment or heritagization. The case of Laochengnan reveals that the attack of historic conservationists on the governments' urban redevelopment plan does not help the marginal residents' struggle for their own visions.

Fourthly, the case study of Laochengnan also illustrates that due to the lack of routinized participation mechanisms, urban vision conflicts in China take on quite different forms from the West. Players who hold or can access political power can express their visions through both institutional and non-institutional channels, while those who sit at the bottom of the power hierarchy are deprived of the right to envision. As a result, compromises between visions are difficult to attain— if indeed they are even possible.

The Laochengnan case shows that historic conservation is not the savior of residents of historic neighborhoods. Inspired by the thesis of socio-spatial dialectic (Soja 1980), we propose a more inclusive and comprehensive vision of "historic community conservation" – conserving not only material historic legacies but also the existing social-cultural patterns of historic quarters. Therefore, following Brenner et al. (2011) and Zhang (2018), we call for a shift in policy focus and scholarly attention from space to people, by writing the sustainability of social living pattern and residential right of local residents into legislation on historic conservation. This will provide greater capacity for cultural activists and residents to fight for a more inclusive vision of historic conservation.

To sum up, the vision conflicts between the government-led growth coalition and cultural elites are *de facto* conflicts between two groups of elites, and they do not promise an urban politics that will lead to what Lefebvre (1996[1968]) and Harvey (2003) term “the right to the city.” Shin (2013) argues that the existing literature focuses solely on property rights-based activism and distinguishes between the rights and power of rural migrant workers and permanent urban residents (the latter are prioritized), which discourages a more vibrant opposition politics based on possible class alliances. We agree with Shin that this narrow view of the “distributional right to the city” is inadequate and further argue that compared with the dispossession of housing rights and monetary benefits (Shin 2013; Hsing 2010), the dispossession of residents’ visioning rights is equally destructive and dangerous, if not worse. Therefore, we call for more attention to the envisioning right of citizens, especially marginal groups, to shape their own homes and futures, and appeal against political actions that stand to deprive them of such a visioning right.

## Notes

1. In China, a master plan is comprised of tens of special plans. The first author was on the planning team of one of the special plans studying the “regional strategic plan for Nanjing.” The special plan on historic conservation was formulated by another team. However, during the planning process, the author had many formal and informal opportunities to communicate with officials, consultant experts, and planners who were involved in the special historic conservation plan, and learned much about the debates and conflicts during the planning process from the government side.
2. A work unit, or *danwei*, is a social-economic-political unit of China’s socialist planned economy. It is at once an employer and a welfare-provider. People who work for a work unit do not only work together, they also live together, in the residential compound of the work-unit, and enjoy the various public goods provided by the work unit.

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Hao Chen is associate research professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Nanjing University. His research focuses on the transformation of Chinese cities, including the regeneration of historic and traditional neighborhoods in inner cities, new town development, and the socio-spatial restructuring of Chinese cities.

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Paul Waley is senior research fellow in East Asian Geography at the University of Leeds. His research grows out of a strong focus on specific geographical settings in East Asia. Tokyo has provided the context for much of his research, but more recently he has been involved in research projects in Nanjing, Shanghai and Kunming.



Figure 1. The location and layout of Laochengnan in Nanjing

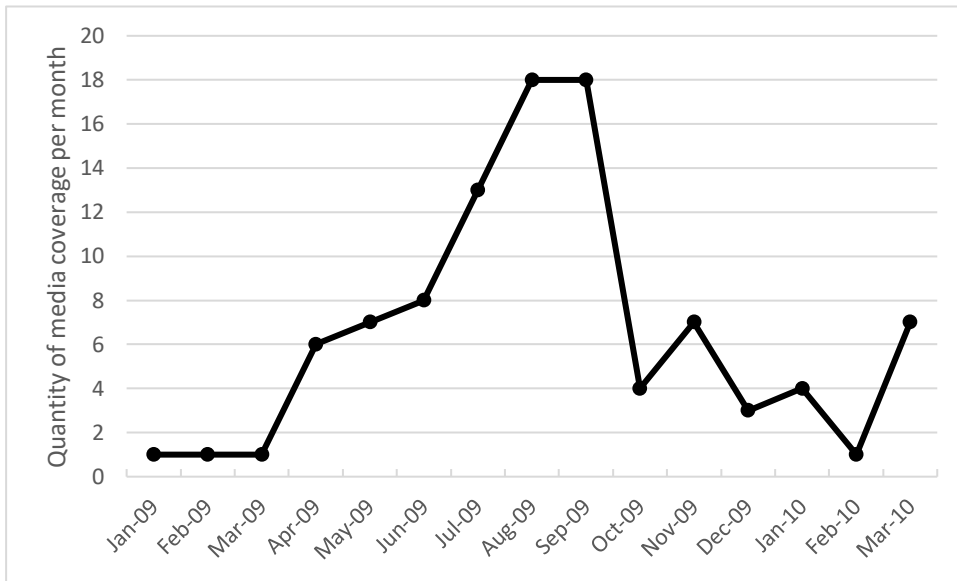


Figure 2. Monthly Quantity of Media Coverage of Laochengnan in 2009

Table 1. The evolution of three urban visions in China and major historical events

	<b>Urban redevelopment</b>	<b>Historic conservation</b>	<b>Community conservation</b>
The 1980s and early 1990s	Clearance-and-rebuild: reconstruction of old and dilapidated housing ( <i>weigai</i> ) or the clearance of shanty housing ( <i>penghu qingli</i> ).	Incipient legislation of historical conservation (e.g. the <i>Cultural Relics Protection Law</i> (CRPL) in 1982, the promulgation of national historic cultural famous cities in 1982, 1986, and 1994) with weak effect in practice.	Socialist community conservation: off-site or on-site resettlement largely based on work-units.
The middle and late 1990s	Still clearance-and-rebuild: - privatization of public housing; - tax-sharing system and land commodification paved way for the rise of land-based finance later.	Still weak practice	The disintegration of the previous socialist social-spatial fabric built around work-units, and transition to monetarized compensation and off-site resettlement.
The 2000s	Rampant real estate-led redevelopment and gentrification, in a few cases engaging symbolic historical conservation.	The corroboration of legislation and political rhetoric of historic conservation: - Revision of CRPL in 2002; - The introduction and legalization of the principles of integrity and authenticity in historic conservation.	The dominance of monetarized compensation and off-site resettlement are institutionally ensured through the implementation of the <i>Regulation of Housing Demolition on State-owned Lands</i> (RHDSL), the <i>Property Right Act</i> (PRA), and a series of local ordinances (Shih 2010).