

Exploring Pathways and a Model of Ancient-City “Self-Renewal” from a Socio-Spatial Perspective: A Case Study of Mizhi Ancient City

TIAN Darui; WAN Yuhang

Abstract

Living heritage represented by ancient cities has long occupied the forefront of international heritage-conservation research. Such cities are complex territories in which historical environments remain intertwined with contemporary urban life. Current Chinese conservation practice often privileges spatial ontology and cultural-tourism reproduction, while paying insufficient attention to human-land relations and residents' rights within a mutually constitutive socio-spatial system. Sustainable conservation therefore requires greater attention to self-organized practice. Drawing on socio-spatial theory, this paper introduces the concept of ancient-city “self-renewal.” Using the place-based revival of Mizhi Ancient City in Shaanxi Province, it identifies a pathway structured around demand as catalyst, functional embeddedness, reciprocal spatial construction, and regional collaboration. It further proposes a locally grounded “functional community” model that differs from the prevailing cultural-tourism development paradigm. The study offers theoretical and practical implications for achieving a mutually beneficial relationship between the reproduction of historic space and the development of individual households in small and medium-sized ancient cities.

Keywords: social space; self-renewal; ancient-city regeneration; regeneration model; Mizhi Ancient City

How can development be pursued through conservation? This remains one of the most influential and contested questions in the protection of Chinese ancient cities. Living spatial heritage is not only a major component of the national heritage system but also a carrier of cultural continuity. Recent national policy emphasizes the social-use value of historic and cultural heritage and its integration with urban and rural development.[1]

International and Chinese scholarship increasingly recognizes that conserving ancient cities also means sustaining local social relations, everyday customs, livelihoods, and residents' rights.[2-6] Yet the current cultural-tourism boom often binds historic places to symbolic consumption. Original functions are removed, residents displaced, and commercial capital introduced, producing homogenized landmarks, reconstructed streets and courtyards, weakened historic patterns, loss of original communities, inadequate everyday services, and declining place-based vitality. The material fabric becomes “disembedded” from contemporary social needs.

At the same time, population turnover creates possibilities for renewal. The departure of original residents and arrival of new groups generate new forms of self-organization. Physical environments are incrementally altered to support new production and living practices. Rather than treating tourism development or static preservation as the only options, research must ask how modern collective development needs and individual household needs can be accommodated without undermining the historic spatial base.

1 Socio-Spatial Relations in Ancient-City Regeneration

1.1 Key Issues in Conservation and Regeneration

Ancient cities are inhabited heritage and cannot be protected as isolated monuments. With the integration of self-organization theory and urban-heritage studies, attention has shifted from a purely spatial paradigm toward the inevitability of spatial change within social systems and the strategies through which that change may be governed.[8] A human-centered approach should link planning, sociology, and heritage conservation, protect material heritage while stabilizing non-material social functions, and sustain both heritage values and residents' rights.[9]

The Valletta Principles reaffirm that local residents and social structures are central to conservation, while acknowledging that change is ubiquitous and unavoidable.[10] Structural change in the social environment may create new regeneration pathways. If managed as an opportunity, renewal can retain original residents and living heritage while also welcoming new residents and users on equitable terms. Its success depends on whether conservation-based regeneration produces sustainable improvements in daily life and future development.

The challenge is therefore not simply whether an ancient city should change, but how its symbolic historic role and functional service role can be adaptively reset. Former functions may no longer meet contemporary needs, while modern communities generate new demands. A socio-spatial perspective helps reveal the internal logic through which changing human-land relations reshape historic space.

1.2 Intellectual Origins of Socio-Spatial Theory

Socio-spatial theory originated in Western sociology's attempts to systematize the concept of space. Through continuing engagement with philosophy, politics, economics, and geography, it broke down disciplinary boundaries and developed into an important framework for understanding human-land systems.[11-13]

Early work interpreted urban and rural transformation through power, class, and social structure.[14] Simmel and the Chicago School later emphasized social interaction in specific temporal and spatial settings and the reciprocal effects of physical and social space.[15-16] The postwar “spatial turn,” advanced by Lefebvre, Foucault, Goffman, Giddens, Harvey, and others, placed space at the center of social theory.[17] Spatial production, power relations, and self-organizing order became empirical sources for explaining social mechanisms. Contemporary work often stresses justice and spatial equity,[18] but the larger proposition remains that social practice continuously produces and reproduces space.

Historic space is thus not static. It is a production space formed by a particular social structure and a dynamic medium through which historical information is repeatedly transmitted. Ancient-city evolution is an organized spatial mechanism grounded in the logic of each period. Socio-spatial theory therefore provides a way to understand how inherited space can develop relationships of continuity, openness, and mutual benefit within modern society.

1.3 Research Progress from a Socio-Spatial Perspective

Heritage conservation has expanded from individual monuments, districts, and areas toward social protection and the role of social systems in sustaining physical remains. Research shows that non-spatial changes, including capital flows[21] and institutions,[19] can gradually alter spatial representation and structure. Planning scholarship has examined social change,[7] historical evolution,[22] development demand,[23] and spatial succession,[24] and has developed strategies, pathways, mechanisms, and guidelines for adaptive regeneration.[3,20,25-26]

Function is the key link between history and modernity and between society and space. Axes, settlement forms, and courtyard fabrics express historically specific modes of production, while their continuing transformation confirms that physical environments adapt to changing social structures. Existing research, however, has not fully explained how community action can trigger self-organization,[28] how social relations, functional capacity, and the circulation of production factors interact, or what regeneration model emerges through that interaction.

This study therefore focuses on Mizhi Ancient City, a prefectural-level historic city in northern Shaanxi, and examines a self-renewal pathway in which social and spatial systems develop together.

2 A Theoretical Framework for Ancient-City Self-Renewal

Ancient cities are contemporary urban spaces with productive, residential, and ecological functions. Their regeneration is not merely the repair of external form. It also involves functional translation, capital accumulation, spatial reproduction, new social relations, and interaction with inherited environments. In cities where original and incoming populations coexist, regeneration must interpret both visible historic form and the changing demands embedded in less visible social structures.

2.1 Concept of Ancient-City Self-Renewal

Urban regeneration is normally understood as an externally organized process, yet beneath formal intervention lie diverse self-organized socio-spatial changes.[29-30] As an open complex system, an ancient city is shaped by bottom-up actors who repair courtyards, adapt blocks, introduce modern functions, and improve the inclusiveness of historic environments. When accumulated individual changes reach a threshold, a “phase transition” may occur,[31] producing stronger belonging, wider participation, collective practice, renewed vitality, and a new endogenous structure.

Ancient-city self-renewal is defined here as a process in which self-organization within the social system improves the physical city, social groups, and regional relationships. The concept moves beyond internal spatial repair to examine social structure and community behavior, the relationship between functions and livelihoods, and the connection between the ancient city and external complex systems.

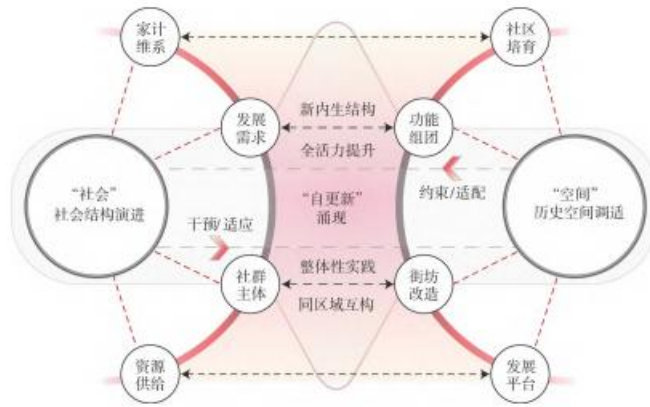


Figure 1. Theoretical meaning and origins of ancient-city self-renewal.

2.2 Pathway of Self-Renewal

The proposed pathway consists of four interrelated stages: demand catalysis, functional embeddedness, reciprocal spatial construction, and regional collaboration.

2.2.1 Demand as Catalyst

Historic districts often remain locked within a relatively closed internal environment of spatial structure, social relations, everyday routines, and governance arrangements. Population circulation between old and new groups breaks this internal cycle. Livelihood-oriented demand for resources becomes the primary endogenous force of self-renewal. Demand grows from scattered individual needs into a denser collective impetus through long-term interaction, gradually shifting the principal actor from top-down administration to local residents. The catalytic process is continuous, incremental, and dynamic, and it improves the living environment by satisfying real needs.

2.2.2 Functional Embeddedness and Activation

Functions and resources maintain the stability and sustainability of a spatial system. In self-renewal, function is the central hinge of socio-spatial relations. Traditional public resources often serve only a limited local or tourist population. When modern functions become embedded, their influence changes spatial arrangements and boundaries of use, connects the ancient city to external groups, expands its service radius, and improves spatial provision, everyday quality, and economic resilience.

2.2.3 Reciprocal Spatial Construction and Projection

The ancient city contains a dynamic “core space-supporting space” system. Core spaces are those most intensively used and prioritized by contemporary residents; supporting spaces connect and sustain them. Their roles may reverse over time. An ancestral hall, temple, academy, or shop that no longer accommodates modern demand may become supporting space, while a formerly secondary courtyard may become a new functional core. Together they form a new spatial system and a relatively stable environment in which government, market, and social forces are balanced. Their evolution spatially projects changing community needs.

2.2.4 Regional Collaboration and Service

An ancient city is part of a broader urban-rural system. Social relationships, capital, industrial activity, and population flows across the region influence internal spatial succession. Self-renewal becomes sustainable when the city assumes a modern, replaceable service role and enters wider urban-rural networks as a functional unit. Demand triggers renewal; functional embeddedness drives expansion; reciprocal spatial construction creates a scaled spatial effect; and regional collaboration establishes durable external linkages.

3 The Self-Renewal of Mizhi Ancient City

3.1 Case Overview

3.1.1 Historical Value and Spatial Characteristics

Mizhi County, historically known as Yinzhou, lies in the hilly-gully region of the Loess Plateau in Yulin, Shaanxi. It is a major carrier of northern Shaanxi's agrarian and folk culture. Mizhi Ancient City originated in the early Northern Song dynasty and expanded through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. A new city was constructed south of the Yin River in the early Republican period, ultimately producing three coexisting urban layers: Song-Yuan, Ming-Qing, and Republican.

Four main streets form the principal framework, with thirteen lanes distributed on both sides. A fractal hierarchy of primary, secondary, and tertiary streets integrates naturally grown courtyard units,[34] creating a clustered pattern of interlocking streets, alleys, and courtyards and a landscape structure described as “four mountains and three waters surrounding two cities.” Mizhi contains a wide range of yaodong cave-dwelling types and retains a strong living character. It became a provincial cultural relic protection unit in 2008 and, together with its Republican-era city, a provincial historic and cultural city in 2023.



Figure 2. Location, spatial structure, and distribution of historic remains in Mizhi Ancient City.

3.1.2 Development and Evolution

Modern development shifted westward, which protected the overall ancient-city pattern but also left the old city in passive decline. Cave courtyards collapsed, former residences deteriorated, public space was privatized, and walls and gates were removed. Population loss accelerated poverty, aging, and hollowing-out. In 2015, the subdistrict included 1,039 low-income households with 1,860 residents, and disadvantaged groups once accounted for 39.26% of the population.

Local government undertook emergency conservation, infrastructure projects, and tourism plans, but multiple constraints prevented large-scale commercial redevelopment. The city consequently retained much of its original fabric and way of life. After phases of hollowing-out and attempted commercialization, county-level population concentration and economic growth brought a transition toward modern functions and local services. By 2020, the mobile population in the ancient-city area had reached 6,244 people in 2,190 households, while low-income households had fallen to 501. Buildings were increasingly reused, cultural markers reconstructed, historic character continued, younger groups moved in, neighborhood relations improved, and cultural activities revived.

3.2 Empirical Pathway

3.2.1 Incoming Communities as Principal Actors

As established residents left, households from towns and villages across the county moved into the ancient city and altered its social structure. Many were “new-generation rural families” seeking stable residence, better living conditions, household unity, and upward mobility.[36] Together with remaining local residents, they became initiators of renewal.

Unlike property-owning locals who sometimes rebuilt extensively, incoming households generally entered through medium- or long-term rental. Cost-benefit considerations encouraged small-scale repair rather than comprehensive transformation. Typical interventions included repairing leakage and partial collapse, paving courtyards, repainting walls, replacing doors and windows, adding shade, and introducing small-scale planting. By May 2024, 55.37% of buildings had been improved spontaneously by residents, far exceeding the share renewed solely by government or through joint programs.

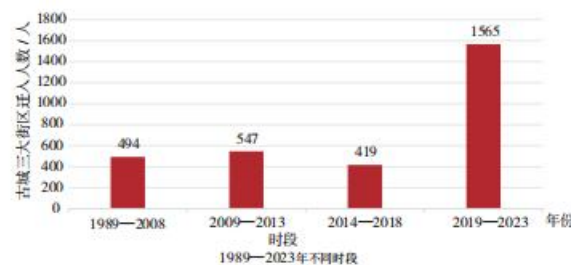


Figure 3. Population moving into the three historic districts of Mizhi Ancient City, 1989-2023.

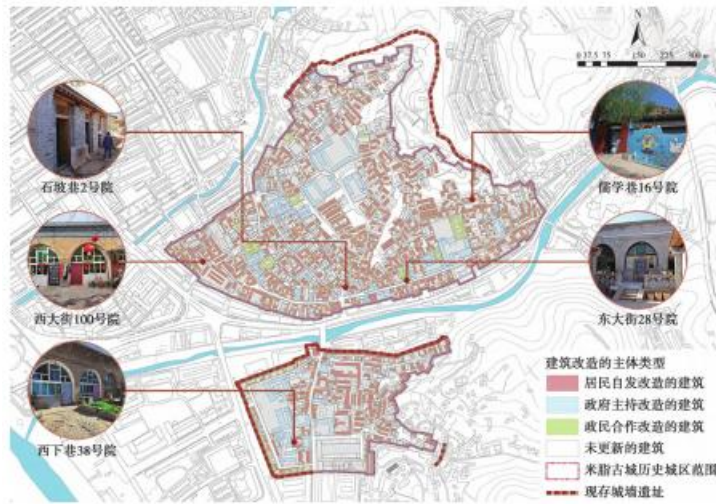


Figure 4. Main types of building renovation, 2014-2024.

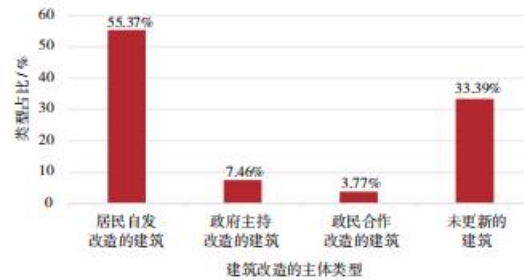


Figure 5. Proportion of renovation undertaken by different actors, 2014-2024.

3.2.2 Educational Functions as an Embedded Resource

The collective capacity to renew emerged partly because historic educational traditions and spaces were translated into a contemporary educational advantage. Mizhi Ancient City is now the county's major concentration of educational resources. In 2023, its school district enrolled 9,314 students, 38.79% of all students in the county, and maintained high teaching quality. It contains a complete system from kindergarten through senior high school.

As hundreds of rural schools were consolidated or closed, schools in the ancient city expanded. Educational resources attracted families from throughout the county, producing “education-migrant households” that lived in the ancient city while maintaining work and agricultural links elsewhere. Younger families improved the demographic structure and generated dense settlement, tidal school traffic, and intensive social interaction. Education was complemented by administrative, cultural, commercial, and residential functions, substantially increasing spatial use.

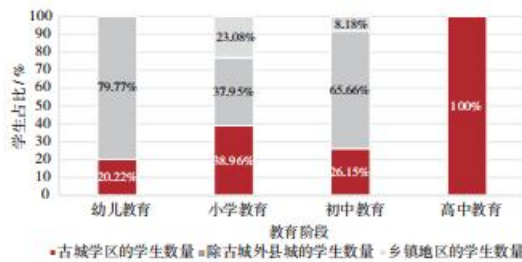


Figure 6. Distribution of students in the ancient-city school district, the county town, and rural townships in 2023.



Figure 7. Tidal school-related traffic during specific periods.

3.2.3 Household Livelihood Strategies and a Community-Oriented Spatial Structure

Incoming households gradually formed an intergenerational arrangement summarized as “study in the ancient city, work in the county town, and farm in the township.” Residence became the key spatial anchor that allowed livelihood and domestic responsibilities to be combined.[39] The ancient city functioned as the tightest spatial intersection for family cooperation and was gradually constituted as “home.”[40]

Long-term demand and a maturing housing market strengthened community-oriented development. Residential land accounts for approximately 65.86% of the ancient city. Large and medium historic courtyards often contain multiple households or even one household per cave unit. Commercial, educational, cultural, and administrative functions have been reallocated in response, and a new functional center has formed where the historic and modern city overlap.

Education, administration, and commerce now act as core spaces. Cultural venues, religious sites, and vacant courtyards are adapted to support them, while residential space forms the supporting tissue. Through reciprocal interaction, this core-supporting system creates a new community structure and enables living conservation.



Figure 8. Market and social spaces adjoining the ancient city.

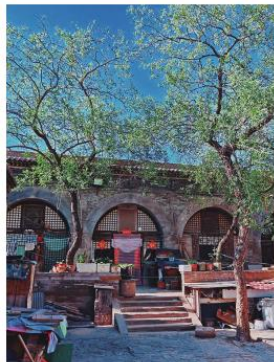


Figure 9. Multi-household courtyard conditions.

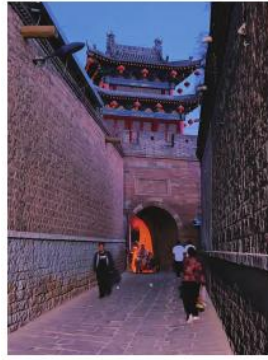


Figure 10. Human-scale streets and alleys.



Figure 11. Proportions of major land-use categories in 2024.

3.2.4 Regional Division of Functions

Mizhi Ancient City also serves broader urban-rural development. Through the circulation of elements among the ancient city, county town, and county territory, it has shifted from a historic “central role” to a contemporary “receiving role.” It absorbs incoming families, provides education and services, and functions as a platform for urbanization and social mobility. Open population absorption and concentrated functional radiation have created an adaptive mechanism through which the ancient city responds to modern urban change.

3.3 Endogenous Drivers and Critical Reflection

Mizhi's historical functional advantages were transformed into resource and service advantages. Resources attracted incoming groups, who became the principal actors of renewal and established new relations of mutual need as traditional territorial relations weakened. The city responded to modern demand through “functional renewal-spatial continuity,” developed a complete core-supporting system, and served as a space of county-level urbanization for families combining work, farming, and children's education.

Its endogenous mechanism is a mutually beneficial exchange between spatial resources and development rights. For residents, household advancement is more immediate than abstract conservation. Mizhi revived because it offered an affordable platform for social-network reproduction and upward mobility. “Not restricting” and “being able to provide” were crucial conditions. Rather than extracting exclusive heritage privileges, communities made adaptive changes and turned the ancient city into a spatial medium with specific service capacity.

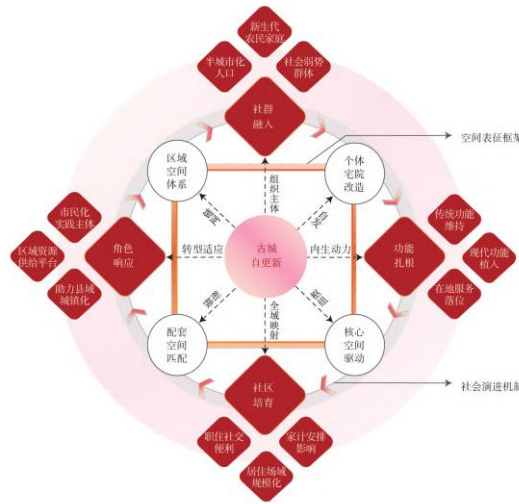


Figure 12. Internal relationships within Mizhi's self-renewal mechanism.

Rooting and de-rooting coexist. Many incoming households participate in renewal, benefit from local functions, and later move to the modern county town, another city, or back to rural areas once their urbanization or mobility goals change. Mizhi's incomplete infrastructure may discourage permanent settlement. The ancient city provides a relatively equitable, low-cost entry point but may also function as a transitional space for upward mobility. The same aspiration that draws households in may eventually lead them out; it is also the fundamental force behind population concentration and self-renewal.

4 A Model of Ancient-City Self-Renewal

4.1 A Place-Based “Function + Community” Model

The model begins with the living and reproductive needs of both established and incoming residents. Historic space is adaptively reused while specific functional advantages attract new communities and stimulate self-organized improvement. Community-oriented businesses and modern services are introduced at an appropriate scale, aligning local development demand with heritage objectives.

Even where traditional social structures have weakened, development orientations shifted, and functional needs changed, an ancient city can use existing resources and selective functional and population replacement to break a closed system. Residential and neighborhood spaces continue to provide support. Through “open absorption + place-based cultivation,” the city can renew community activities, encourage participation, restore everyday atmosphere, and become a home in both material and emotional terms.

4.2 An Ancient City-County Town-County Territory Connectivity System

Self-renewal is not confined to the historic core. The ancient city should connect to wider urban-rural networks. It can become an intermediate field where public resources inside and outside the walls take root and different regional groups meet. Mizhi functions as a convergence point for county-level urbanization and as a “spatio-temporal ladder” for social mobility.

This perspective places historic space within modern functional systems and regional development. It responds to simultaneous community loss and newcomer settlement through role replacement and functional transition, seeking a win-win relationship between the reproduction of historic space and the development of households. The model is resident-centered, bridges divisions between ancient city and region, individual and collective, and micro and macro scales, and differs fundamentally from a singular tourism paradigm.

5 Conclusion

China's heritage practice is entering a stage in which broad conservation awareness must be translated into sustainable use and living inheritance. Authentic spatial heritage and local historic depth constitute the value of ancient cities, but revival also depends on people. The genuine meaning of regeneration lies in residents' ability to live and work securely.

This paper uses socio-spatial relations, functional succession, adaptive change, and development motivation to theorize and examine ancient-city self-renewal. Bottom-up activation alone cannot protect every historic remain; many elements exceed the capacity of communities. Planning safeguards and collaboration between public organization and civic action remain essential. Mizhi's local government is now developing a

multi-actor platform to guide participation. Whether the model is a regional exception or has broader applicability requires further comparative research.

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