

The Assessment and Formation Mechanism of Heritage Communities from the Perspective of Actors

ZHOU Jiayi, YANG Chen

Abstract

Heritage community has emerged as a pivotal concept in the conservation and transmission of inhabited heritage. However, critical questions remain regarding the assessment of heritage communities, the mechanisms underlying their formation, and the roles various actors play in this process. This paper employs actor-network theory and examines the Embankment Building in Hongkou District, Shanghai, as a case study. The research is structured in two stages. First, an evaluation framework for heritage communities is developed to assess their developmental stages. Second, social network analysis is utilized to uncover the complex relationships among different actors within the community. Key events in the formation process are identified to facilitate a detailed analysis of the roles and action logics of these actors. Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of heritage communities in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage in contemporary urban and rural China.

Keywords: heritage community; actors; heritagization; heritage community assessment; social network analysis

In recent years, the number of cultural heritage sites in China has steadily increased, heritage conservation concepts have gained wider currency, and the urban renewal paradigm has shifted from "demolition–renovation–preservation" to "preservation–renovation–demolition". Nevertheless, tensions persist between top-down heritage conservation models and the actual needs of local residents [1]. On the one hand, large-scale displacement of original residents under the banner of conservation remains commonplace; on the other, although the number of officially listed heritage sites grows annually, both pre-listing value assessments and post-listing conservation management lack meaningful resident participation. Heritage conservation divorced from local life often fails to earn residents' understanding and support — a problem especially acute for inhabited heritage sites rich in living heritage [2]. In reality, heritage conservation is not solely a governmental responsibility but concerns every resident within the heritage site [3–4].

The heritage community — understood as both a bearer of local culture and a place of everyday life for residents — has become a focal point in international heritage conservation theory and practice. In 2005, the Council of Europe's *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*¹ formally introduced the concept of "heritage community." In 2007, the World Heritage Committee added a fifth "C" (community) to its 1990s "4C" strategy, underscoring the vital role of communities in heritage conservation and sustainable development. In 2011, UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL)* encouraged local communities to participate in heritage conservation and advocated for pluralistic heritage values. In 2014, the *Nara+20* document emphasized that professionals should be integrated into "community affairs that can affect cultural heritage" [5]. How to conceptualize heritage communities, assess their developmental maturity, and analyze the roles of different participating actors in the conservation and transmission of cultural heritage remains a key challenge in current research. Drawing on the perspective of actor theory, this paper takes the Embankment Building, an Outstanding Historic Building in Hongkou District, Shanghai, as a case study. It constructs evaluation criteria to determine the developmental stage of the building's heritage community, employs social network analysis to examine the formation mechanisms of the heritage community in depth — with particular attention to the modes of participation and outcomes of different types of actors across key events — and concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of heritage communities for cultural heritage conservation and transmission in China.

1 Concepts and Analytical Framework

1.1 Heritage Communities and Heritagization

A heritage community should not be simplistically understood as "a community that happens to contain heritage," but rather as an organic integration of "heritage site" and "community." The *Faro Convention* defines a heritage community as "a community that consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to protect and transmit to future generations" (Article 2b) [6]. Members of a heritage community are not limited to local residents; they also include external organizations — such as research institutions and civic associations — that share a cultural identification with the heritage site or participate in its conservation [7]. Because cultural heritage carries a "public interest" dimension, every community member possesses "the right to participate, to assist, or to add to the value of heritage and to benefit from it" [8–9]. This is what the *Faro Convention* terms the "right to cultural heritage." This does not, of course, negate private ownership or the legitimate interests of other stakeholders; rather, it calls upon a broader range of actors to engage in community heritage conservation, with the scope and depth of participation determined through practice. This paper defines a heritage community as: *a community formed within a given spatial area that embodies distinctive heritage resources and is sustained by strong cultural bonds.*

A heritage community emerges through a complex process of "heritagization" [7]. Heritagization is a social process involving multiple actors [10]: it originates in experts' recognition and valuation of heritage, undergoes deliberation and selection by a broader public (especially residents of the heritage site), and ultimately attains widespread societal recognition and legal protection as public heritage [11]. According to domestic and international literature [12–13], heritagization generally proceeds through six stages: heritage awareness (*conscience*), heritage selection (*selection*), heritage justification (*justification*), heritage conservation (*conservation*), heritage exposition (*exposition*), and heritage valorization (*valorization*).

1.2 Actor Theory

The concept of the "actor" originates in Parsons' [14] sociology of social action, which holds that a basic unit of action consists of the actor, the goal of action, the situation of action, and the normative orientation of action. Actors are both shaped by their surrounding environment and create new social relationships through interaction, thereby reshaping the social environment in which they are embedded. In a heritage community, heritagization is fundamentally a dynamic process of cultural production [11]; it encompasses not only the official recognition of physical remnants through "listing," but also the complex web of social, cultural, and economic relationships formed among stakeholders around heritage conservation during the process of "becoming heritage" [15]. Stakeholders in a heritage community can generally be classified into four categories of actors: local community, government departments, enterprise organizations, and promoters/facilitators [16–17]. Their participation and interaction are crucial to the identification, assessment, conservation, utilization, development, and management of heritage. This paper defines an actor as: *a subject embedded in a set of social relationships who is capable of actively pursuing interests, making action choices, and engaging in power bargaining within a given sphere of action*.

1.3 Analytical Framework

From the perspective of actor theory, this paper constructs a multi-dimensional analytical framework to assess heritage communities and explore their formation mechanisms (Fig. 1). The study comprises two parts: first, establishing evaluation criteria to measure the developmental stage of a heritage community; second, applying social network analysis to reveal the complex relationships among different actors within the heritage community, and selecting key events in the formation process to conduct an in-depth analysis of the roles and action logics of each actor type.

(1) Heritage Community Assessment

Existing approaches to assessing heritage communities broadly include: community-perspective evaluations of cultural heritage value, social impact assessments of cultural heritage [18–19], assessments of community participation in conservation [20–21], and assessments based on community vitality and heritage sustainability [22]. These studies tend to focus on the relationship between community and heritage, lacking a comprehensive assessment specifically targeting the developmental stage of heritage communities. In fact, the *Faro Convention*, alongside the concept of heritage community, established an evaluation indicator system encompassing four categories of actors and three dimensions, to determine the formation stage of heritage communities [17] and guide future conservation actions [16]. This evaluation system has been applied in cultural heritage conservation practices in European cities such as Rome, Venice, and Marseille [23]. This paper constructs an actor-theory-based heritage community evaluation indicator system (Table 1), covering three progressively advancing dimensions: first, sufficient actor participation is required within the heritage community (A. Level of actor participation); second, these actors must cooperate sufficiently to make heritage actions more inclusive and integrated (B. Level of cooperation among different actors); and finally, all actors should be committed to promoting the development of the heritage community, achieving sustainable economic and social development of heritage (C. Degree of promoting heritage community development).

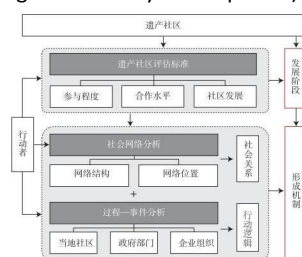


Fig.1 The analytical framework of heritage communities

Fig. 1 The analytical framework of heritage communities

(2) Social Network Analysis

Social network methods can reveal the internal dynamics of community change by analyzing shifts in social relationships among different groups across stages [24]. They are widely applied in community renewal, heritage conservation, and stakeholder research — for instance, analyzing the relationship between public service facility distribution and resident behavior [25], or residents' willingness and capacity to participate in public affairs [26]. Understanding the social relationships behind actors helps explain their behavioral motivations [27], and social network analysis is the principal method for quantitatively parsing the relationships and network structures among different types of actors. Network structure reveals the overall relational characteristics of actors, while an actor's position within the network structure determines the role they play.

(3) Action Logics of Actors

Actors engage in social action within specific situations. To understand the behavior and influence of different actors in a heritage community, it is necessary to introduce the concept of "action context" (*context*) [14] — the social, cultural, and economic circumstances facing actors, as well as the resources and capacities they possess [28]. Different action contexts shape actors' strategies and action logics, while actors' behavior may in turn alter the context [28]. The concept of action context is commonly employed to understand social governance issues — for example, exploring possibilities for collaborative community governance through the action contexts and logics of participating actors [28], or formulating action strategies for special situations from the perspective of mobilizing actors [29], and revealing the action strategies of local government intervention [30]. These studies provide empirical support for understanding actors' action logics across different contexts. This paper examines representative events in the conservation and renewal of the Embankment Building to explore in depth the action logics of actors in different contexts, thereby elucidating the formation mechanisms of the heritage community.

Table 1 Evaluation criteria for heritage communities [16]

Dimension	Indicator	Local community	Government departments	Enterprise organizations	Promoters
A. Level of actor participation					
B. Level of cooperation among different actors	1. Degree of consensus on heritage concepts				
	2. Willingness to cooperate with other actors				
	3. Level of participation in heritage conservation actions				
	4. Willingness and ability to mobilize resources				
C. Degree of promoting heritage community development	1. Formation of diverse discourse on people and place				
	2. Formation of sustainable socio-economic models				
	3. Respect for the rights and identity diversity of different actors				
	4. Achieving				

	joint participation of all actors and improving social inclusion				
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2 Assessment of the Heritage Community

The Embankment Building is located in Hongkou District, Shanghai, bordered by Suzhou Creek to the south, Tiantong Road to the north, Jiangxi North Road to the east, and Henan North Road to the west. It covers a site area of approximately 7,000 m² and a gross floor area of 54,000 m², with 672 current households. Constructed in 1932 and designed by Palmer & Turner Architects, the building originally served mixed commercial-residential use and was once hailed as "the finest apartment building in the Far East." Its floor plan follows an "S"-shaped layout, with well-appointed amenities and excellent views. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the building was taken over and renovated by the government and allocated to intellectuals and cadres. In the 1970s, three additional floors were added. In 1994, it was designated as an Outstanding Historic Building of Shanghai.

This study's fieldwork commenced with the building's renovation project in 2020, focusing on the principal events and the attitudes and actions of participating groups across different stages of the building's heritagization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 52 respondents ², and questionnaire surveys were used to collect relational data among different types of actors. Additionally, participant observation was conducted on the activity programming and operation of public spaces following the building's renovation.

Across the series of events in the Embankment Building's heritagization process (Fig. 2), various actors participated in conservation actions through different channels and gradually forged a consensus — evolving from mere "listing as an Outstanding Historic Building" to forming a "heritage community" with dense social network ties. The heritagization stages proposed in theory — heritage awareness, selection, justification, conservation, and exposition — were all present to varying degrees, with multiple groups participating at each stage. These included government entities (municipal, district, subdistrict offices, and residents' committees), local community residents (property owners, public housing tenants, private tenants, etc.), enterprise organizations (such as district-level state-owned enterprises, design firms, and social organizations), as well as a large number of external experts and scholars — thus validating the concentric structure of heritage communities advocated by the *Faro Convention*. Drawing on community placemaking research [31] and stakeholder studies [32], and in light of the Embankment Building's actual conditions, the principal actors in the heritage community were classified into 4 major categories and 20 subcategories (Table 2). Based on fieldwork findings, the developmental status of the Embankment Building's heritage community was scored ³ to observe the participation of different actors [16].

(1) Dimension One: Level of Actor Participation

The level of actor participation in the Embankment Building's heritage community approached "good" (3.75 points). Among the actors: government departments exhibited the highest level of participation, reaching "excellent" (5 points); enterprise organizations were rated "good" (4 points); and both the local community and promoters achieved a "moderate" level (3 points).

Table 2 Classification of actors in the Embankment Building heritage community

Category	Subcategory	Code
Government departments	Municipal government	S1
	District government	S2
	Subdistrict office	S3
	Residents' committee	S4
Local community	Property owners	S5
	Public housing tenants	S6
	Private tenants	S7
	Owners' committee	S8
	Volunteer teams	S9
	Ground-floor shop owners	S10
Enterprise organizations	District-level state-owned enterprises	S11
	Property management companies	S12
	Design firms	S14
	Construction companies	S15

	Social organizations	S16
	Film & TV production teams	—
	Real estate agencies	S17, S18
Promoters	University scholars	S19
	Historic Preservation Center	S20
	Media	—

(2) Dimension Two: Level of Cooperation Among Different Actors

The level of cooperation among different actors reached a "moderate" level (3.58 points). Both government departments and enterprise organizations demonstrated strong willingness to cooperate (5 points), but scored low (2 points) on fostering consensus on heritage discourse among multiple actors. Enterprise organizations exhibited higher overall participation, while government departments held an advantage in resource mobilization. Although the local community's overall cooperation level was relatively low (2.75 points), it outperformed the other two actor categories in fostering multi-actor heritage consensus (3 points).

(3) Dimension Three: Degree of Promoting Heritage Community Development

The Embankment Building scored relatively low (2.3 points) in promoting heritage community development, falling below the moderate level, with particular room for improvement in achieving the joint participation of all actors. Enterprise organizations performed at a moderate level (3 points), scoring higher than other actors in all three sub-indicators: diverse heritage discourse systems (3 points), sustainable economic models (3 points), and respect for diversity (4 points). Both the local community and government departments received an overall score of 2 points, with government departments scoring relatively higher in respecting rights and diversity (3 points). Overall, the Embankment Building's heritage community received a total score of 3.13, reaching a moderate level. This indicates that, from an actor perspective, a heritage community has initially formed at the Embankment Building, though it remains at an early stage. Among the three dimensions, actor participation and cooperation levels are relatively better, while shortcomings persist in promoting the overall development of the heritage community. Compared with the other two actor categories, the local community's participation level is relatively low. See Fig. 3.



Fig.2 The heritagization process and key events of the Embankment Building

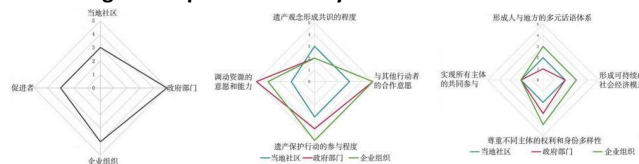


Fig.3 The assessment of the Embankment Building heritage community

3 Formation Mechanisms of the Heritage Community

While quantitative assessment indicators help determine the level of participation of different actors in a heritage community, they are insufficient to explain how the complex relationships among actors influence the community's formation. Therefore, actor theory and social network analysis are further employed to dissect the formation mechanisms of the heritage community in depth.

3.1 Action Contexts

Existing research demonstrates that different action contexts shape actors' strategies and modes of action. Three representative action contexts were selected for analysis: the conservation and renovation project, the operation of the Riverside Living Room (河滨会客厅), and film and television production. The social network characteristics and action logics of actors in each context are examined below.

First, the conservation and renovation project. The 2020 renovation was the largest-scale refurbishment in the Embankment Building's history. During the project, the official objective of "unifying the façade aesthetic of

historic buildings along Suzhou Creek" came into conflict with residents' actual living needs. Residents spontaneously organized a volunteer team to gather grievances within the building, learn about heritage, and engage in dialogue with the government through multiple channels ⁴, thereby gradually developing the local community's heritage discourse.

Second, the operation of the Riverside Living Room. Following the renovation, the former residents' committee office space on the second floor was converted into the "Riverside Living Room," open to the public and operated by a community placemaking organization. Because the Living Room is located within the building, many residents expressed concern that large numbers of external visitors and resident social organizations would infringe upon owners' private spaces. While the establishment of the Living Room attracted external forces, it also drew residents' attention to heritage discourse rights, becoming a catalyst for community cohesion.

Third, film and television production. Owing to its distinctive historic architectural character, the Embankment Building has become a popular filming location. Following the release of several well-known productions from 2010 onward, the building's owners' committee gradually recognized the positive impact of film shoots on the building's visibility and economic value. Although filming revenue was used to subsidize the building's conservation and renovation, not all residents supported this approach. This context reflects the local community's stance on balancing everyday life with cultural dissemination.

3.2 Social Network Characteristics in Different Contexts

Based on the relational data obtained through fieldwork, relational network matrices for each actor type were constructed for the three contexts. Using UCINET 6.0 and Gephi, the network structure and network positions of actors within the heritage community were analyzed.

3.2.1 Network Structure (Density, Average Path Length, Reciprocity Index)

Network density assesses the closeness of relationships among actors, reflecting the strength of ties within the Embankment Building's heritage community. Average path length measures the degree of interconnectedness among actors, indicating the efficiency of information dissemination within the community. The reciprocity index indicates the mutuality of relationships among actors [24, 33]. Calculations yielded the following results: for the renovation project, the Riverside Living Room, and film/TV production respectively, network density was 0.64, 0.67, and 0.65; average path length was 1.37, 1.27, and 1.38; and the reciprocity index was 0.69, 0.64, and 0.63. See Table 3.

Table 3 Comparison of network structure indices for heritage communities in three contexts

Context	Density	Average path length	Reciprocity index
Renovation project	0.64	1.37	0.69
Riverside Living Room	0.67	1.27	0.64
Film & TV production	0.65	1.38	0.63

The data indicate that the Embankment Building has formed a relatively dense and stable heritage community (network density exceeding 0.5 in all three contexts). In the renovation project, the network reciprocity index was relatively high, indicating that cooperation between the community and government during renovation significantly enhanced mutual reciprocity. In the Riverside Living Room context, the network was more evenly distributed with stronger information flow, benefiting from the active role of social organizations in its operation. In the film/TV production context, the longer average path length and lower reciprocity index suggest that relying solely on the owners' committee to facilitate information exchange and mutual assistance during the heritage exposition stage remains insufficient.

3.2.2 Network Position (Degree Centrality, Betweenness Centrality)

When an actor occupies a central position in the social network, they can more easily establish connections with most members, thereby more effectively advancing collective action [34]. Degree centrality reflects an actor's importance and prestige within the network, serving to identify the most influential actors in the heritage community. Betweenness centrality captures an actor's capacity for resource control and competitive advantage. At the Embankment Building, actors with high betweenness centrality functioned as bridging ties (weak ties) ⁵, serving as key intermediaries in driving the formation of the heritage community.

Analysis of degree centrality indicators revealed: ① In the renovation project, the owners' committee and the residents' committee were the most central actors. The property management company — one of the "three pillars" (三驾马车) of community governance — remained chronically absent. ② In the Living Room operation, the residents' committee (as direct manager) and property owners (as core stakeholders) were the most important actors. ③ Film and television production highlighted the resources and influence of the owners' committee. See Fig. 4.

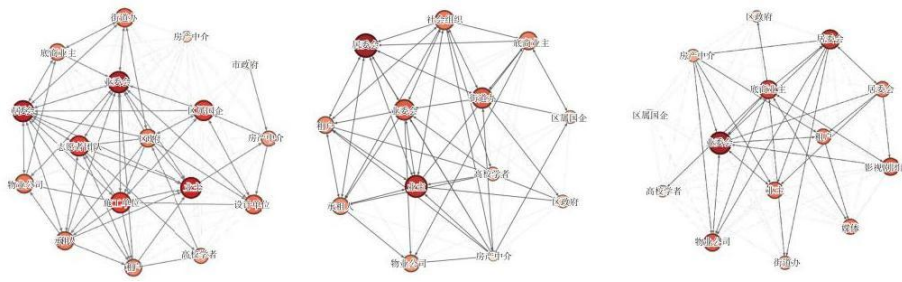
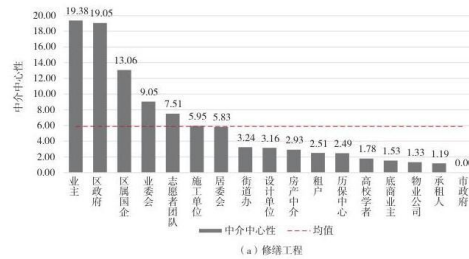


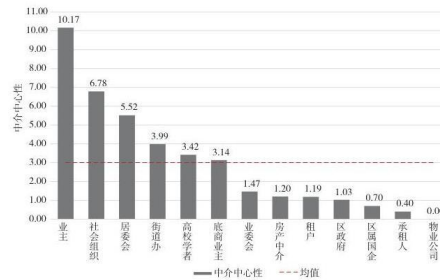
Fig.4 Degree centrality networks of actors in three contexts

Analysis of betweenness centrality indicators revealed: ① In the renovation project, property owners and the district government played the most important bridging roles, connecting all actors and facilitating information exchange among the community, government, and enterprises. ② In the Riverside Living Room, property owners and social organizations had the highest betweenness centrality. Property owners not only functioned within the community but also linked external actors, expanding the resource network. Social organizations attempted to connect more actors through activities, though this did not necessarily promote the formation of the heritage community⁷. ③ In film and television production, the bridging role of the owners' committee was most prominent, further underscoring its significant influence in the heritage community's formation process. See Fig. 5.



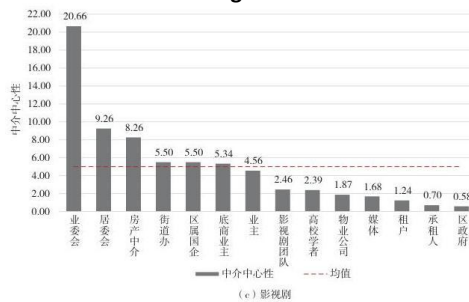
(a) 修缮工程

Fig.5 Ranking of actor's betweenness centrality in three contexts



(b) 会客厅

Fig.5b



(c) 影视剧

Fig.5c

Fig. 5 Ranking of actors' betweenness centrality in three contexts

A comprehensive comparison of degree centrality and betweenness centrality across the three contexts yields the following conclusions: ① Within the local community, property owners (the owners' committee) are the core actors of the heritage community, playing a pivotal role in its formation and development, whereas public housing tenants and private tenants exhibit lower levels of participation. ② Although the importance of different government departments varies across contexts, the residents' committee consistently remains a core actor. ③ Enterprise organizations participate in varying ways across contexts but are invariably indispensable forces in the heritage community.

3.3 Action Logics of Actors

3.3.1 Local Community

Existing research [33] demonstrates that interpersonal bonds and trust among community members contribute to building a sense of belonging and identity, and facilitate multi-stakeholder participation. Residents of the Embankment Building first engage in heritage conservation out of interpersonal goodwill among neighbors. To "maintain neighborhood relationships," residents periodically participate in community public affairs (Property owner, LC-YZ-16). The owners' committee likewise leveraged long-standing interpersonal relationships with old neighbors to gradually earn community trust and, subsequently, to represent property owners in decision-making during conservation actions. Through discussions about building conservation, residents further strengthened emotional bonds, enhancing the density of the acquaintance network within the heritage community. The owners' committee and property owners then expanded the heritage community network through trust relationships. For example, during the renovation project, residents used WeChat groups to identify community "talents" (such as architects, lawyers, and film industry professionals), further enhancing the community's discourse power and sphere of action.

3.3.2 Government Departments

Chinese government agencies typically blend formal authority (e.g., laws and regulations) with informal authority (e.g., personal connections, *mianzi* or "face") when managing social affairs. This is especially prevalent at the grassroots level (e.g., residents' committees), where informal authority is more commonly employed to reduce administrative costs and ensure task completion [30]. In the renovation project and the Riverside Living Room, both formal and informal authority were exercised jointly, whereas in the film/TV production context, informal authority predominated.

Formal authority. The renovation of the Embankment Building and the establishment of the Living Room were both completed under the direct guidance of competent government departments. This relied on the heritage listing and conservation system, through which top-down, systematic transmission of authority rapidly advanced project implementation.

Informal authority. To smoothly carry out directives from higher-level authorities, the residents' committee needed to maintain sound relationships with the owners' committee and resident representatives. Simultaneously, out of considerations for community stability, the residents' committee had to exercise moderate control over spontaneous actions by residents and social organizations. The exercise of such informal authority — woven throughout the fabric of everyday community management — both promotes and, to some extent, constrains the development of the heritage community.

3.3.3 Enterprise Organizations

The incorporation of enterprise organizations into community governance through government-purchased services has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary Chinese urban governance. Research [35] indicates that enterprise organizations operate according to three action logics: performance orientation (fulfilling government assessment targets), service orientation (meeting public needs through professional expertise), and profit orientation (pursuing economic returns). In the Embankment Building, the district-level state-owned enterprise in the renovation project exhibited a primarily performance-oriented logic; the community placemaking organization in the Riverside Living Room embodied a service orientation; and the property management company in the film/TV production context demonstrated a profit-oriented logic. District-level state-owned enterprises and property management companies participated in the Embankment Building's conservation primarily based on performance assessment. As important public cultural resources of Shanghai, Outstanding Historic Buildings are entrusted to directly managed state-owned enterprises, which bear a "safety-net" responsibility — a function determined by the nature of these enterprises. For the district-level SOE responsible for the renovation, it was "a job that had to be done even if grudgingly"; completing the task on time was the primary objective. The project itself was non-profitable and even required government funding to break even, so conservation work relied more on "corporate responsibility" than genuine initiative, inevitably dampening enthusiasm (District Housing Bureau official, PI-A-1).

The social organization's actions reflected a market-based service orientation. The subdistrict office commissioned a community placemaking organization to operate the Living Room through a purchased-service arrangement. For the organization, however, fulfilling contracted activities was only a secondary goal; the more important aim was to use the project as a testing ground for its community placemaking philosophy, and thus it was "reluctant to devote too much energy to this" (Community placemaking organization director, PSB-1). The property management company's actions reflected a profit-oriented logic. Unlike the district-level SOE, the property management company responsible for directly managed public housing had long been operating at a

loss: not to mention that the performance targets for collecting public housing rent and property fees were virtually unattainable, even if fully collected, the revenue would be far from sufficient to sustain normal operations (District-level SOE, PS-A-1). Consequently, the property management company — lacking alternative revenue sources — showed enthusiasm only when film/TV production generated income. This chronic absence in daily management is highly detrimental to the development of the heritage community.

Table 4 Mechanisms of actor engagement in the Embankment Building

		Heritage conservation	Heritage display	Heritage promotion
Action context		Renovation project	Riverside Living Room	Film & TV production
Social relations		The local community, government departments, and enterprise organizations compete for a central position	Government-led, mobilizing the local community and enterprise organizations to play active roles	Local community-led, uniting government departments and mobilizing enterprise organizations
Action logic	Local community	Interpersonal bonds; trust relationships		
	Government departments		Formal administrative authority; informal authority	Informal authority
	Enterprise organizations	Performance orientation	Service orientation	Profit orientation

Conclusion

This paper first established a heritage community evaluation indicator system to assess the Embankment Building's heritage community, and then applied social network analysis to examine the network relationships and action logics of key actors. The findings are as follows: In the renovation project, the local community competed for discourse power with the government and enterprises through emotional and trust networks. The government relied on formal authority to drive the renovation, while grassroots departments used informal authority to afford the community a degree of action space. Enterprises cooperated closely with the government, acting on performance orientation, resulting in a network characterized by contestation among the community, government, and enterprises. In the Riverside Living Room, the government took the lead and used informal authority to mobilize the local community; social organizations demonstrated agency under government guidance, producing a network pattern of government leadership, community cooperation, and enterprise participation. In film and television production, the local community led through emotional and relational networks, enlisted government for management support, and attracted enterprise participation through profit orientation, resulting in a network pattern of community leadership, government assistance, and enterprise participation. Although the Embankment Building's heritage community remains at an early stage, different actors — acting on their respective logics — have established rich network relationships that have, to a certain degree, promoted the formation and development of the heritage community. See Table 4.

Analyzing the identification and formation mechanisms of heritage communities from an actor perspective offers three implications for cultural heritage conservation and transmission in contemporary urban and rural China:

First, it deepens understanding of the heritage community concept. A heritage community is not merely a community that naturally forms around a heritage site and its surrounding residents; it requires close cultural ties and emotional bonds between people and heritage. Heritage conservation is not solely a government responsibility but is intimately connected to residents and other actors who share a cultural identification with the heritage or participate in its conservation.

Second, cultural heritage conservation planning should strengthen resident participation. While heritage listing is undoubtedly important, especially in inhabited heritage sites, conservation that is merely an administrative outcome divorced from local life will naturally struggle to gain resident support. It is recommended that community input be broadly solicited at every stage — resource survey, value assessment, element identification, plan formulation, and conservation implementation.

Third, through empirical research, the complex formation mechanisms of heritage communities are revealed. The relationship between heritage and community within a heritage community is a dynamic rather than static, multi-linear rather than single-linear cultural process. This mechanism can help transcend the action logic of any single actor and establish a pluralistic governance structure involving government, community, enterprises, and other promoters, thereby providing more channels for participation and resource support for heritage conservation and sustainable development.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹ *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, also known as the *Faro Convention*.

² The 52 respondents comprised 6 government staff, 10 enterprise organization members, 33 building residents, and 3 promoters. Of these, 30 respondents received in-depth interviews lasting over one hour.

³ The scoring method employed a 5-point Likert scale, with each level (1–5) accompanied by a corresponding objective description. For example, under Dimension B ("Level of cooperation among different actors"), the indicator "Willingness to cooperate with other actors" was scored as follows: 1 = no cooperation with other actors; 2 = participation in joint activities with other actors; 3 = signing consensus-based memoranda or similar documents; 4 = collaborative development of cultural heritage renewal projects; 5 = collaborative implementation of cultural heritage renewal projects.

⁴ The volunteer team organized residents to pursue three types of conservation action during the renovation: (1) communicating with the enterprise responsible for the renovation to refine the renovation plan; (2) requesting that the construction company optimize construction methods through the owners' committee and residents' committee; and (3) submitting written community opinions to competent government departments via the Petition Office (信访办).

⁵ In community governance research, bridging ties — compared with bonding ties — involve lower frequency and intensity of interaction but offer advantages in accessing information, creating new connections, and obtaining resources [26].

⁶ Larger and darker dots indicate higher degree centrality; darker line colors indicate stronger ties between nodes; arrows indicate the direction from the initiator to the recipient of a relationship. Because network sizes differ slightly across contexts, dot sizes and colors are not comparable between contexts; however, dot sizes within the same context are meaningful.

⁷ Actors occupying structural holes may monopolize information and resources, leading to the formation of cliques within the community.

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