ACCSCIENCE PUBLISHING

Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From static preservation to living heritage: Managing intangible cultural heritage in historic urban contexts

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Abstract

Urban heritage conservation has traditionally placed much emphasis on tangible architecture, and the role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in cultural continuity has been largely overlooked. This study examines the shift from preservation-centered approaches to living-heritage perspectives in historic urban environments through a comparative study of four cities: Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Gjirokastër (Albania), Malacca (Malaysia), and Pingyao (China). The inclusion of the Chinese case enhances the study's relevance to current debates on urban heritage governance. The study used a comparative mixed-method research design comprising semi-structured interviews (n = 60), policy analysis (n = 48 documents), and geographic information system-based spatial mapping. The analysis used two composite indices: the Heritage Vitality Index and the Urban Development Pressure Index, both of which were systematically constructed using well-defined indicators, normalization procedures, and verification processes to enhance analytical transparency. The results indicate that urban development pressure is not the sole predictor of heritage vitality. Instead, heritage vitality is determined by administrative structures, spatial planning, and community involvement. Cities with participatory or coordinated governance, such as Gjirokastër and Pingyao, show higher ICH vitality under moderate development pressure. By contrast, tourism-driven environments, as observed in Malacca, may intensify commercialization and cultural distortion. The study contributes to the urban heritage theory by conceptualizing ICH as a governance-mediated and spatially embedded process. It also offers feasible recommendations to policymakers, emphasizing that cultural practices must be integrated into planning systems rather than treated as secondary outcomes. Future research on the subject of living heritage in rapidly urbanizing cities must focus on longitudinal changes and larger comparative models aimed at enhancing the level of comprehension.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Living heritage; Urban governance; Historic urban landscape; Cultural sustainability; China

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Citation: Chen, G. (2026). From static preservation to living heritage: Managing intangible cultural heritage in historic urban contexts. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*. 8(4):026150023. https://doi.org/10.36922/JCAU026150023

Received: April 7, 2026

Revised: April 24, 2026

Accepted: May 7, 2026

Published online: July 7, 2026

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1. Introduction

Urban heritage conservation has long been shaped by a material-oriented approach. Traditional buildings, locations, and urban landscapes were traditionally viewed as the primary carriers of cultural value. This approach has produced valuable outcomes in

protecting the physical fabric of historic areas. But it has brought in a state of imbalance, too. Planning systems have often prioritized physical fabric over cultural life, social practices, and community knowledge. It is a long-established gap in the global heritage discourse, especially in the rapidly developing urbanizing regions (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025; Ripp *et al.*, 2025).

Over the past two decades, a conceptual change has occurred in the fact that inanimate preservation now takes the place of living heritage that is currently being defined. The notion of heritage as unchangeable and fixed is challenged by this shift, and it is shown to be dynamic and socially situated, and in a continuous process of recreation. It is no longer the buildings that are involved in the thoughts of scholars and decision-makers, but rather the interactions between people, practices, and place. The thesis of the approach of the historic urban landscape (HUL) and the respective paradigms is that heritage needs to be perceived as a part of broader urban mechanisms, such as social, economic, and cultural processes (Sun *et al.*, 2025). The idea of conservation, in this view, is not only protection, but also cultural tradition.

Within this shift, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has taken center stage. The practices of ICH include some traditional craftsmanship, oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals of the community. These facets are not objects that are fixed. They depend on the active use, social transmission, as well as the everyday use. ICH is a living heritage, as it is stated in the Convention of 2003 made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and helps to create the identity, continuity, and social cohesion (Kurin, 2003; UNESCO, 2003). Preservation cannot be done physically, as in the case of material heritage. It involves situations where the communities are able to exercise, develop, and impart knowledge through the generations.

The integration of ICH in urban planning is still not balanced, as awareness has been raised. The most common approach in most urban heritage policies remains to look at physical conservation as the foreground and intangible practices as the background, as either supplementary or ornamental. This brings about a structural tension. The social contexts around ICH are usually disturbed by urban development processes, especially those driven by tourism, commercialization, and the development of infrastructure. This leads to the possibility of commodifying, de-contextualizing, or being deprived of the association of culture with its contexts (Falk & Hagsten, 2025; Nebot-Gomez de Salazar *et al.*, 2023).

At the same time, recent studies have revealed that the relationship between urbanization and ICH is not always negative. The city can also provide new opportunities for cultural manifestation, visibility, and economic sustenance. It will rely greatly on the governing systems, the design of plans, and the rate of community involvement. The more participatory and people-oriented the cities are, the higher the chances of establishing more favorable conditions in the process of preserving the living heritage (Djabarouti, 2024; Sun & Nakajima, 2025). This turns the issue of the threat of urbanization into a matter of urban governance.

These arguments are particularly relevant to the Chinese context. China has experienced rapid urbanization, which has been one of the fastest urbanizations in contemporary history. Redevelopment of many historic cities has been done on a large scale. There is also the growth of tourism and the commodification of the heritage. In the meantime, China has developed sound institutional frameworks of heritage conservation, such as national policies in accordance with the international conventions. The HUL strategy is practiced in a number of cities. Consequently, the scenario is a complicated landscape where planning, growth, and conservation of the culture are state-driven.

This complexity is evident in cities such as Pingyao. Being a UNESCO World Heritage, Pingyao has implemented conservation policies in order to save the built heritage and traditional cultures. Nevertheless, there is always the pressure of tourism and commercialization. These conditions raise important questions regarding how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can be sustained within rapidly developing urban environments. In planning, how is cultural tradition and economic development to be reconciled? How can communities move from being passive recipients of heritage policies to active participants in heritage governance?

The literature that is available is going to be useful, although it has some gaps. First of all, the ICH research has been mostly concentrated on rural or community-based environments, and minimal has been conducted to cover the dense urban environments (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025). Second, research is prone to analyzing governance, participation, and/or spatial dynamics that are isolated, and not their interactions. Third, there are no comparative studies that combine qualitative information with systematic analysis. In particular, the relationship between ICH vitality and the urban development pressures has not been examined systematically and in a comparative manner.

The other weakness is in methodological transparency. Previous research has occasionally employed descriptive language, for which it is not clear how important concepts such as heritage vitality are to be measured. This reduces the thoroughness of the analysis, and comparison across

cases is difficult. We require methods that would bring together the qualitative richness and the methods of analysis that are reproducible and transparent.

In the article, these gaps will be bridged through the implementation of a comparative study of four historic cities, namely, Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Gjirokastër (Albania), Malacca (Malaysia), and Pingyao (China). Especially, it is significant that the case of China is mentioned. It enables the research to engage directly with the discourse of Chinese urban heritage and the process of embracing global forms in a specific governance context to be assessed.

Even in the context of increased use of the HUL approach, there are important gaps in comprehending how ICH works as a governance-mediated process within urban systems, but not as a policy principle per se. The literature so far has theoretically understood ICH as a cultural asset or a participatory outcome, yet it does not explicitly research the interrelation between governance frameworks, spatial processes, and development pressures in the formation of heritage vitality in various urban settings.

Moreover, although recent studies have focused on community involvement and spatial justice in heritage management, a paucity of comparative empirical research exists to connect the dimensions to quantifiable heritage outcomes. Specifically, the interaction between heritage vitality and urban development pressure is theorized and methodologically underexplored, and mostly utilizes descriptive or case-study designs.

The research will contribute to the literature by conceptualizing a comparative and multi-method analytical model, which incorporates qualitative understanding, spatial mapping, and composite indices to analyze the role of governance in mediating the relationship between the pressure of development and ICH vitality. In contrast to the current HUL-based research, the study conceptualizes the living heritage using objective indicators and compares across cities, providing theoretical clarity as well as methodological openness.

The methodology used in the research is a mixed-methods design that entails the use of semi-structured interviews, policy analysis, and geographic information system (GIS)-based spatial mapping. Further, it develops two composite measures: The Heritage Vitality Index (HVI) and Urban Development Pressure Index (UDPI) as a facilitating factor in comparison of the cases in an organized manner. In comparison with the previous studies, the index-construction method is explicitly described, as well as the selection of the indicators, their normalization, and weighting. This enhances analytical credibility and methodological transparency.

The three objectives guide the study: first, the research seeks to examine the fusion of ICH within the urban governance and planning systems within the historic cities. Second, analyze how urban development pressures impact the continuity of practice of the ICH as well as its vitality. Third, identify governance and spatial strategies that can help move away from dead heritage toward a living heritage.

This study addresses these objectives by contributing to both theory and practice. It advances the conceptualization of ICH as a dynamic component of urban systems and emphasizes the role of governance in shaping cultural outcomes. It also provides practical insights for policymakers and planners seeking to balance urban development with cultural sustainability.

This article argues that urban heritage conservation should not treat heritage as a fixed remnant of the past, but should instead support the dynamic, flexible, and socially relevant evolution of cultural practices under evolving urban conditions. The study is grounded in the UNESCO framework, which promotes a process-oriented and integrative concept of heritage. It also builds on current empirical research, such as Ripp et al (2025), which emphasizes the importance of governance mechanisms in striking a balance between heritage conservation and development pressures.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a comparative mixed-method research design to examine how ICH is embedded in urban governance structures and how development pressures affect its continuity across different urban contexts.

The qualitative approach was suitable because ICH is social, performative, and contextual. It cannot be reduced to numerical variables alone without losing meaning. Comparative research, however, requires a structured analytical framework. Thus, the analysis combined qualitative interpretation with well-defined composite indices to support cross-case analysis.

The research design was based on current scholarship on urban heritage, which emphasizes people- and landscape-oriented conservation approaches (Ripp *et al.*, 2025; Sun *et al.*, 2025). Such strategies acknowledge that heritage is shaped by the interaction among community governance, spatial systems, and cultural practices.

Three methods were used:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Policy and document analysis
- GIS-based spatial analysis

The methods were combined through triangulation, which allowed the findings to be cross-checked across several sources so that they did not depend on a single type of data (Guest *et al.*, 2017).

2.2. Case study selection

The study focused on four historic cities:

- Bukhara (Uzbekistan)
- Gjirokastër (Albania)
- Malacca (Malaysia)
- Pingyao (China)

The inclusion of Pingyao allows the study to engage with Chinese urban heritage discourse and increases its relevance to architecture and urbanism scholarship.

Case selection followed a purposive comparative logic, in which variation was deliberately selected to allow methodical comparison rather than statistical representation. Table 1 summarizes the criteria applied to select the case-study cities.

The selected cities are all UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which helps ensure consistency in heritage definitions and policy landscapes (UNESCO, 2003). This sampling approach augments analytical transferability, enabling the results to be applied in other historic urban settings (Djabarouti, 2024).

2.3. Data sources

2.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Sixty semi-structured interviews were conducted across the four cities. The sample was evenly distributed, with 15 interviews conducted in each city. Participants were selected based on their involvement in heritage governance, planning, or cultural practice.

Urban planners, heritage officials, cultural practitioners, and community representatives were included in the sample. This ensured that institutional and community views were taken into account.

The interviews were carried out between March and September 2025. They lasted between 45 and 75 min and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. The interviews were conducted in several languages, including English, Mandarin, and local languages, and were translated into English during transcription.

The interview guide focused on governance structures, the role of ICH in planning, community participation, and perceived development pressures (Guest *et al.*, 2017). This approach allowed consistency across cases while remaining flexible enough to explore context-specific issues.

2.3.2. Policy and document analysis

The policy analysis examined the formal coverage of ICH in planning systems. The review included 48 documents, including urban master plans, heritage regulations, tourism strategies, and UNESCO management reports.

The analysis focused on three dimensions: the level of ICH participation in planning, the form of governance systems, and the relationship between development and heritage protection.

This provided an institutional perspective that complemented the interview data and allowed comparison between policy intentions and their application in practice (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025).

2.3.3. Geographic information system-based spatial analysis

ArcGIS Pro 3.x (Esri, United States) was used to perform spatial analysis. ICH was defined as activity-based spatial units rather than physical objects. This distinction is necessary to prevent conceptual confusion between tangible and intangible heritage.

The locations of ICH were identified as sites of cultural activities, such as craft workshops, markets, performance spaces, and festival venues. These were identified using field data and records.

These locations were mapped, overlaid with urban development areas, and analyzed for spatial clustering. This made it possible to analyze the effects of urban pressures on the spatial distribution of cultural practices (Salimi *et al.*, 2025).

2.4 Analytical framework

The analytical model incorporates four dimensions:

- Governance structures
- Community participation
- Spatial integration
- Cultural vitality

This model indicates a shift from object-based conservation to a process-based understanding of heritage, in which cultural practices are influenced by institutional and spatial circumstances.

To improve analytical clarity, the framework was operationalized using two composite indices: the HVI and the UDPI. These indices were not used for statistical testing but for structured comparison.

Figure 1 shows the combined methodological framework comprising qualitative, spatial, and comparative analytical elements.

2.5. Construction and validation of indices

2.5.1. Heritage Vitality Index

The HVI is a score used to assess the vitality and sustainability of living culture, as shown in Table 2. The indicators were selected based on recurring themes in the literature, such as participation, transmission, and cultural activity.

2.5.2. Urban Development Pressure Index

The UDPI represents external pressures on heritage systems, as shown in Table 3.

2.5.3. Standardization and aggregation

All indicators were standardized using min–max normalization on a 0–10 scale. This ensured uniformity across units and situations.

The indices were aggregated using weighted aggregation. The weights were assigned based on theoretical relevance and the literature on heritage governance and urban pressures (Falk & Hagsten, 2025; Nebot-Gomez de Salazar *et al.*, 2023).

2.5.4. Validation strategy

A three-step validation strategy was used to strengthen the methodology:

- Theoretical validation: The indicators were based on the available literature on ICH and urban heritage.
- Data triangulation: Each indicator was supported by at least two data sources (interviews, policy documents, or spatial data).
- Sensitivity check: The check involved minor changes of the weights to ensure that general trends did not change significantly.

This made the indices analytically grounded rather than arbitrary and directly responded to a limitation that has characterized previous studies.

Because the sample included only four case-study cities, the Pearson correlation was used only as a descriptive check and was not interpreted inferentially.

2.5.5. Numerical checking of indices

To strengthen methodological transparency, additional quantitative checks were conducted. First, a Pearson correlation was calculated between HVI and UDPI scores for the four case-study cities. The findings suggested a moderate negative relationship (r = 0.42). Development pressure itself does not determine heritage vitality; rather, its effects are mediated by governance structures, spatial planning, and community participation.

Second, sensitivity analysis was extended by systematically changing indicator weights by 10–20% and recalculating index scores. The index structure was robust because the relative ranking of cities was not affected by any of the scenarios.

Third, to address issues of subjectivity in weighting, an equal-weight scenario was tested. The results revealed little variation (less than 5% deviation), which also indicates the consistency of the theoretical weighting scheme.

Although the small sample size precluded more sophisticated statistical modeling, these validation steps enhanced the transparency, reproducibility, and analytical credibility of the indices.

2.6. Qualitative analysis

NVivo 14 (Lumivero, United States) was used to analyze the qualitative data. A two-stage coding procedure was used. First, themes related to governance, participation, and planning were identified through deductive coding. Second, inductive coding enabled emergent themes, such as commercialization and cultural adaptation, to be identified in the data.

To assess reliability, 25 percent of the transcripts were coded independently. The inter-coder reliability was 87 percent, which is acceptable in qualitative research (Hallgren, 2012). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

2.7. Reproducibility and screening protocol

Systematic filtering of secondary sources was conducted to preserve transparency.

The inclusion criteria covered peer-reviewed studies addressing ICH, urban heritage, governance, or spatial analysis. Non-peer-reviewed materials, preprints, and strictly descriptive reports were excluded.

The screening was conducted in three phases: title screening, abstract screening, and full-text screening. Analysis was performed only on studies that met all requirements.

2.8. Ethical considerations

All the participants gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. Reflexive procedures were used to reduce potential researcher bias.

2.9. Methodological contribution

The research approach is rigorous and transparent. The combination of qualitative, spatial, and comparative methods is one of the study's strengths. The construction and testing of the composite indices are clearly described, which improves analytical quality and reproducibility.

This approach provides a repeatable model for studying living heritage in urban contexts, integrating theoretical grounding and empirical clarity to address the main limitations of previous research.

3. Results

3.1. Transition from static preservation to living heritage

The general trend across the four case-study cities is a shift from a static conservation approach to a more dynamic living-heritage approach. The degree of this transformation, however, differs across the cities. In Bukhara, conservation remains largely material-based. Historical buildings are preserved, but there is a limited attempt to integrate cultural practices into planning systems. This suggests that heritage is still regarded as an object rather than a process.

The transition is more advanced in Gjirokastër. Urban regeneration planning is shaped by cultural activities such as crafts and festivals. Community involvement is evident and frequent. This implies that living heritage is not treated merely symbolically but is actively maintained.

Malacca represents a hybrid case. Cultural elements are highly visible and, in most instances, affected by tourism demand. This demonstrates a shift driven by economic interests.

Pingyao shows a more planned transformation. Policy mechanisms and zoning are formal means of incorporating local cultural activities into planning. This demonstrates that state-coordinated systems, when combined with regulation, can facilitate living heritage. One of the most significant tendencies is that the transition to living heritage depends on governance integration rather than policy recognition alone.

3.2. Role of intangible cultural heritage in urban systems

Intangible cultural heritage is a fundamental part of urban identity and social continuity. However, its role differs across contexts.

In Gjirokastër, festivals and crafts are part of everyday life. These cultural practices serve social and economic purposes. This suggests that community ownership sustains ICH.

Pingyao has institutionalized traditional crafts through training and designated spaces. This shows that formal support can increase continuity, but it does not necessarily diminish authenticity.

Cultural activities in Malacca are highly visible and are often adapted to tourism demand, implying that ICH may be reshaped by economic forces.

In Bukhara, these practices are still present but less formalized. This means that ICH may persist informally but remain vulnerable. It also implies that ICH is shaped by social and economic organization, and that its sustainability is defined by the balance between external pressure and community ownership.

3.3. Models of governance and heritage integration

The governance system has a significant impact on ICH management, as illustrated in Table 4. The comparison between cities reveals different patterns of governance.

The centralized system in Bukhara restricts participation. This means that top-down control decreases flexibility.

The participatory model in Gjirokastër reinforces cultural continuity. This means that local participation increases the sustainability of ICH practices.

Malacca's hybrid model presents both opportunities and conflicts. This implies that mixed governance may produce unstable outcomes.

Pingyao combines state coordination and control. This implies that preservation and development can be balanced through coordination.

One of the main trends is that governance effectiveness depends not only on structure and coordination but also on participation.

3.4. Socio-economic effects of intangible cultural heritage

The socio-economic role of ICH differs across the cities.

Tourism is dominant in Malacca. Visitor demand is closely linked to cultural practices. This shows that economic gains may occur at the expense of authenticity.

Tourism is more controlled in Pingyao. Cultural industries show less over-commercialization. This means controlled development supports both the economy and culture.

Economic advantages are moderate and stable in Gjirokastër. This implies that smaller-scale tourism may support more sustainable heritage outcomes.

Table 1. Case selection criteria

Criterion	Justification
UNESCO World Heritage status	Supports comparability in terms of international recognition and heritage policy frameworks.
Presence of active intangible cultural heritage practices	Ensures that the selected cases include active cultural practices rather than only symbolic or architectural heritage.
Urban development pressure	Enables tourism, growth, and commercialization impacts to be analyzed.
Governance diversity	Facilitates institutional model comparison.

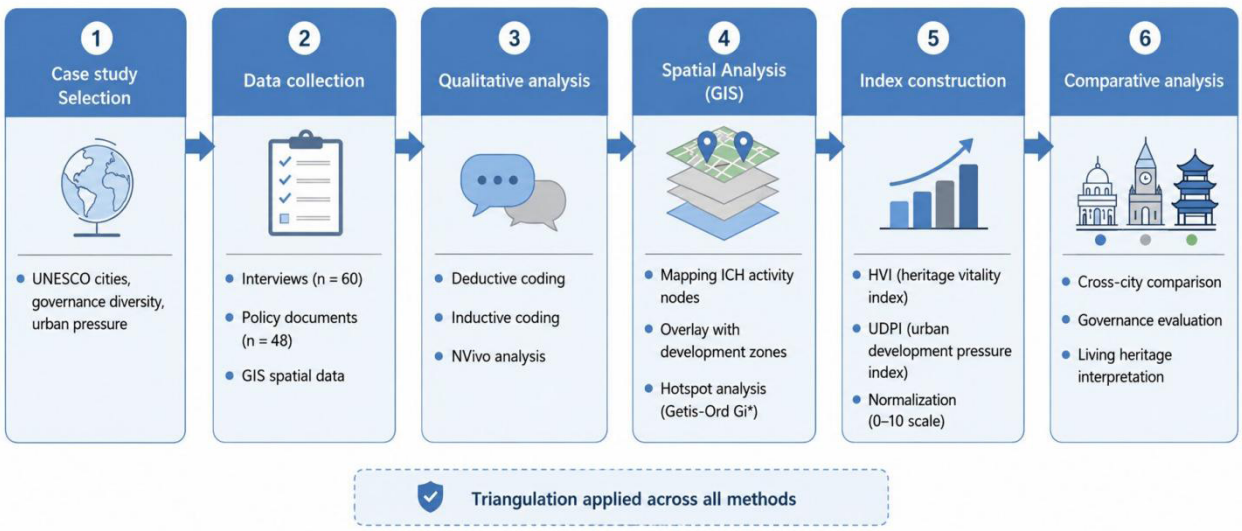


Figure 1. Integrated methodological framework for living heritage analysis. Source: Diagram by the author
Abbreviations: GIS: Geographic information system; ICH: Intangible cultural heritage

Table 2. Heritage Vitality Index indicators and weights

Indicator	Description	Weight
Active practices	Number of ongoing intangible cultural heritage activities	0.25
Community participation	Level of engagement reported in interviews	0.25
Transmission systems	Presence of formal/informal knowledge transfer	0.20
Cultural events	Frequency of festivals and performances	0.15
Youth involvement	Participation of younger generations	0.15

Table 3. Urban Development Pressure Index indicators and weights

Indicator	Description	Weight
Tourism density	Visitor concentration in heritage areas	0.30
Population growth	Urban expansion rate	0.20
Land-use change	Conversion of heritage spaces	0.25
Commercialization	Tourism-driven transformation of practices	0.25

Table 4. Governance models and intangible cultural heritage integration

City	Governance type	Community role	Policy integration	Outcome
Bukhara	Centralized	Low	Limited	Weak integration
Gjirokastër	Participatory	High	Strong	High vitality
Malacca	Hybrid	Moderate	Mixed	Commercial tension
Pingyao	Coordinated (China)	Structured	Strong	Balanced model

In Bukhara, economic integration is minimal. This shows that limited economic support may undermine long-term viability.

This shows that economic integration is not always beneficial; its effects depend on regulatory mechanisms that ensure cultural integrity.

3.5. Urban development and intangible cultural heritage spatial dynamics

The spatial analysis shows the interaction of ICH and urban development.

In Malacca, ICH clusters overlap with tourism areas. This shows that spatial concentration increases commercialization pressure.

In Bukhara, the spatial distribution of ICH is weakly integrated with planning systems.

Cultural activities in Gjirokastër are incorporated into historic areas. This implies a close association between space and practice.

In Pingyao, ICH is located within regulated areas. This implies that spatial planning supports preservation (Deshpande & Gangopadhyay, 2024).

Figure 2 shows the spatial distribution of ICH activity nodes and their overlap with the urban development and tourism areas in Pingyao.

3.6. Comparative index results

Table 5 compares the HVI and UDPI scores for the four case-study cities. The findings reveal that heritage vitality varies across cases with different levels of development pressure. This shows that increased urban pressure does not always reduce ICH vitality, indicating that governance and planning systems may mediate the relationship between development pressure and ICH vitality.

Figure 3 compares the HVI and UDPI values for the case-study cities. Differences in vitality outcomes among cities with similar pressure levels but different structural and institutional factors indicate that these factors play a significant role beyond development intensity alone.

3.7. Graphical interpretation of results

A major trend emerges when comparing HVI and UDPI across cities.

- Gjirokastër and Pingyao show high heritage vitality, even though development pressure is moderate.
- Malacca shows lower vitality under high pressure.
- Bukhara shows low vitality because of weak

integration.
- This implies that development pressure alone does not determine the results. The relationship is mediated by governance and planning (Salimi *et al.*, 2025).

Figure 4 shows the descriptive relationship between development pressure and heritage vitality in the case-study cities.

3.8. Cross-city synthesis

Table 6 summarizes the major dimensions in the case-study cities, including governance, spatial integration, and economic integration. The comparison identifies a general relationship between participatory or coordinated governance and better living-heritage outcomes, whereas fragmented or market-driven systems show weaker integration.

3.9. Key findings

Several recurring trends are discernible:

- The findings indicate that development pressure should not be viewed as an isolated determinant. Instead, the effect of development pressure depends on governance, spatial planning, and local participation.
- One of the main trends is that participatory and coordinated systems are more effective than centralized systems or entirely market-based models.
- This implies that cultural practices must be incorporated into spatial planning.
- Economic integration should be controlled to prevent cultural distortion.
- Altogether, the results indicate that urbanization does not necessarily pose a threat to living heritage. Rather, sustainability depends on the design, governance, and management of urban systems.

3.10. Comparative pattern analysis

When the results are compared in terms of governance models, spatial integration, and index results, a cross-case analytical pattern emerges. Cities with participatory or coordinated governance forms (Gjirokastër and Pingyao) show higher HVI scores even when development pressure is moderate. Conversely, market-driven or centralized systems (Malacca and Bukhara) show either cultural distortion or low vitality.

This suggests that governance quality mediates the influence of urban development pressure on ICH vitality. The results dispute linear theories that a growing pressure in cities results in cultural deterioration. Rather, the relationship is conditional and dependent on governance.

Moreover, spatial analysis indicates that integrated spatial planning of cultural activities (e.g., zoning, clustering) is associated with a higher level of vitality, whereas fragmented or tourism-driven spatial patterns are related to a lower level of sustainability.

The findings suggest a non-linear relationship between development and heritage, shaped by governance and spatial planning rather than merely descriptive comparison.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical implications

The findings show that governance is not simply an enabling condition but a structural mediator that shapes whether development pressure leads to cultural sustainability or cultural erosion. This finding extends the HUL framework. Unlike previous studies that stress the importance of participation, this study shows that participation alone cannot produce the desired impact. The absence of strong institutional coordination and/or spatial integration mechanisms may lead to ineffective participation.

The findings suggest that grassroots heritage governance requires formal planning instruments and associated legislative controls to support equitable participation and measurable outcomes. This enhances the current theoretical underpinnings by conceptualizing the governance–space–practice nexus as the main processual construct for sustaining living heritage.

This article supports the recent transformation of preservation to living heritage by illustrating that urban heritage is an active and socially incorporated system. Cultural value is not determined by physical structures alone. It is a constant creation of exchanges between communities, institutions, and space. This view is closely aligned with the UNESCO HUL concept, which focuses on integrating cultural, social, and spatial processes into urban management (Ripp *et al.*, 2025; Sun *et al.*, 2025).

The first theoretical implication has to do with the boundaries of static preservation. Traditional conservation theories state that buildings are enough to preserve the heritage value. This assumption is refuted by the findings. Cultural life may decline when the built form is preserved. A historic area may be seen as being preserved, but deprived of the activities that made it significant. This fact implies that cultural continuity and physical continuity are not equivalent (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025). The difference focuses not on the maintenance of form but on the maintenance of the function, use, and transmission.

The second implication concerns the role of ICH in urban theory. ICH is often treated as an ancillary element rather than an integral component of urban heritage. This article illustrates the fact that this separation is analytically

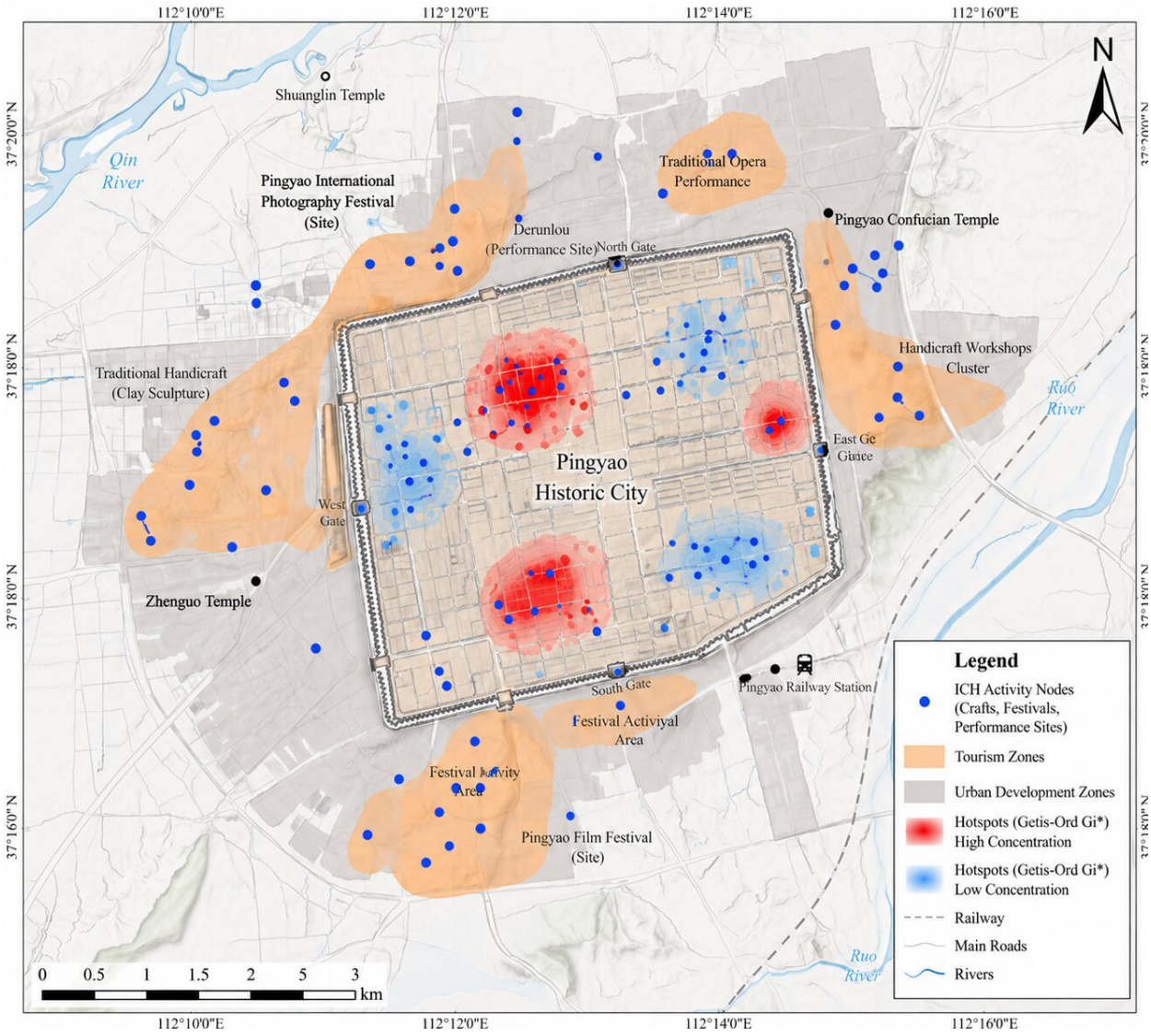


Figure 2. Spatial distribution of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) activity nodes and urban development zones in Pingyao, China. Source: Map by the author

Table 5. Heritage Vitality Index (HVI) and Urban Development Pressure Index (UDPI) scores

City	HVI (0–10)	UDPI (0–10)	Interpretation
Bukhara	4.3	3.9	Low vitality, low pressure
Gjirokastër	8.5	6.2	High vitality, moderate pressure
Malacca	5.8	9.2	Medium vitality, high pressure
Pingyao	7.9	6.8	High vitality, controlled pressure

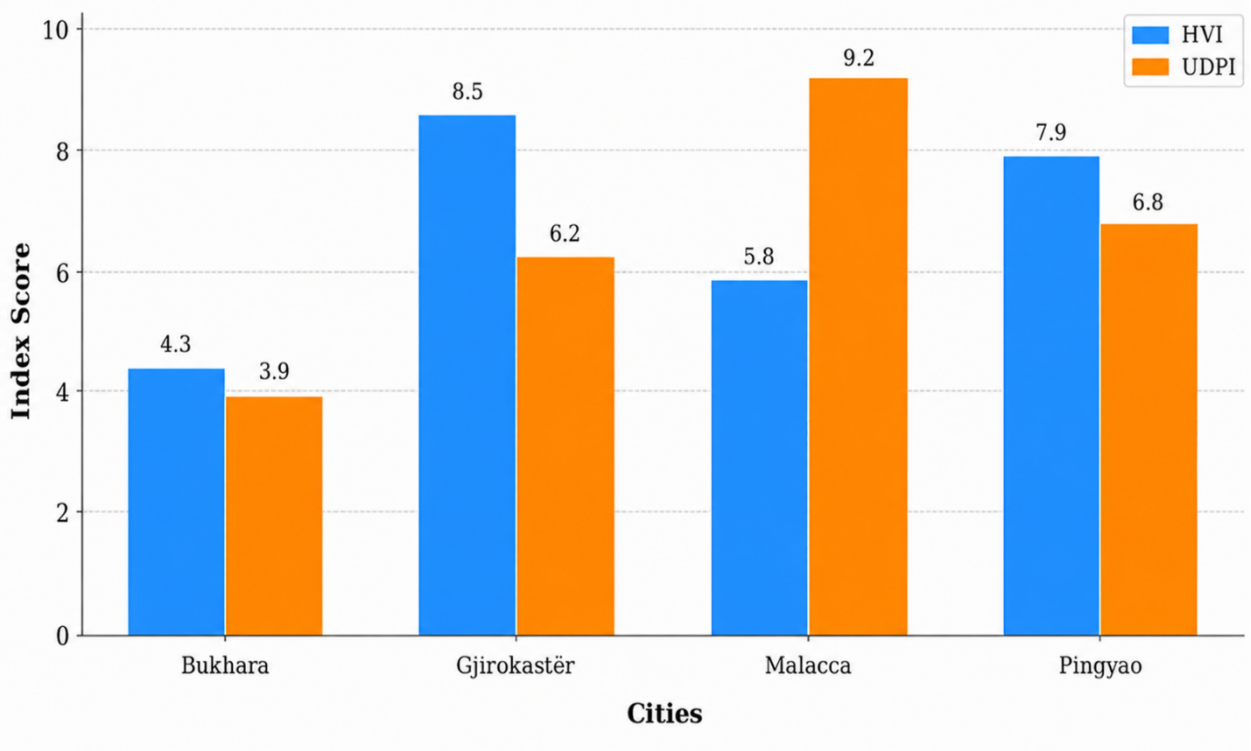


Figure 3. Comparison of Heritage Vitality Index (HVI) and Urban Development Pressure Index (UDPI) scores across the four case-study cities. Source: Graph by the author

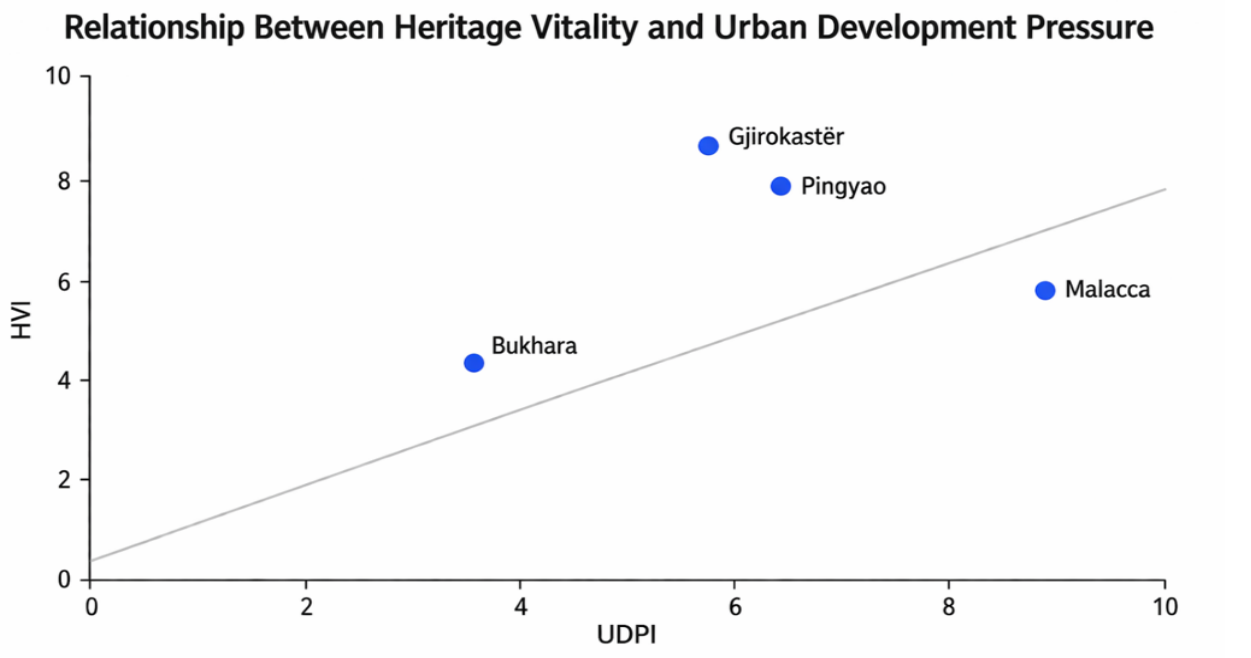


Figure 4. Descriptive relationship between the city development pressure and the heritage vitality in the case-study cities. Source: Graph by the author

weak. The cultural practices do not just exist in the urban heritage spaces. They actively create such spaces as significant spaces. To this end, ICH is to be perceived as a space and social practice. This reinforces the community and place-oriented ones, focusing on the interaction of communities, place, and governance (Ripp *et al.*, 2025; Sun *et al.*, 2025).

The third implication concerns the correlation between urbanization and heritage. The most popular belief is that heritage vitality is decreased by development pressure. The findings show a subtler meaning. It is not development pressure that determines the results. Governance systems mediate the effect of development pressure on cultural continuity. This means that urbanization is not necessarily destructive (Falk & Hagsten, 2025; Nebot-Gomez de Salazar *et al.*, 2023). When planning structures fail to safeguard the circumstances on which cultural practices are based, it becomes detrimental.

This re-evaluates the theoretical discussion. It is not a simple development and heritage dilemma. The capacity of governance systems to change without affecting cultural continuity is what it is (Djabarouti, 2024). Among the trends, the greater the integration of cities, the more they are resistant to the pressures of establishing development, and the more they may conserve the ICH.

The fourth implication is that of vitality. Heritage vitality is often equated with tourism value or visibility (Lázaro Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga, 2022). This article demonstrates that vitality is a complex phenomenon formed through practice, intergenerational transfer, involvement, and organizational encouragement. It means that being visible does not mean sustainability (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025). The success of a market is not always based on cultural continuity.

Lastly, the research has methodological value for theory-building. It is a transparent framework for analyzing living heritage that combines qualitative analysis, spatial mapping, and composite indices. The added value does not consist of quantifying culture, but rather of connecting the social, spatial, and institutional levels systematically (Guest *et al.*, 2017).

Overall, the results extend the HUL framework by showing that governance quality is central to the sustainability of living heritage, not just urban pressure.

This theoretical framework depicts the interplay between the governance systems, the urban processes, and ICH practices. Figure 5 demonstrates the combined effect of these factors on the end results of heritage vitality, cultural sustainability, and community resilience, and there are feedback loops between outcomes and governance.

4.2. Practical implications

The results provide practical implications for planners and heritage practitioners. To start with, the heritage policy should no longer focus solely on buildings or physical fabric. It is important to protect the physical fabric. The planning systems should also be able to identify the places of the cultural practices and the ways they are maintained (Graham *et al.*, 2000).

This means ICH must be integrated into general planning tools. It must be incorporated into the zoning, tourism control, urban regeneration, and the management of the public space (Sun *et al.*, 2025). Urban areas need to preserve activity areas such as craft workshops, festival paths, markets, and community gathering spaces.

Second, the article highlights the advantages of spatial mapping of cultural practices. The identification of ICH as activity nodes enables planners to determine the overlap between the cultural continuity and the development pressure. It will make sure that intangible heritage is seen in the planning systems without being materialized (Salimi *et al.*, 2025).

Third, tourism should be regulated. Although tourism can support livelihoods, unchecked commercialization may transform cultural continuity into spectacle. Among them is the fact that the systems emerging as a result of tourism change the cultural practices to fit the market requirements (Falk & Hagsten, 2025). This is potentially harmful to authenticity and sustainable existence. The finding indicates that we should distinguish between those practices that are regulated and sustainable on the one hand and determined by market forces on the other hand. Such regulation can help ensure that tourism does not undermine the cultural and social conditions required for ICH continuity.

This means that heritage-based tourism ought to be handled in a strategic manner. The policies should benefit the local cultural ecosystems, protect non-commercial practices, and ensure equitable benefits for communities (Nebot-Gomez de Salazar *et al.*, 2023).

Fourth, transmission needs to be provided through mechanisms. One of the intergenerational aspects of heritage is heritage continuity, which is a core part of heritage. This requires an investment in training, apprenticeships, and programs involving the youth (Coimbra *et al.*, 2025). Without this, the heritage policies become retrogressive as opposed to futuristic.

Lastly, heritage management has to be cross-sectoral. Cultural sustainability involves the coordination of the planning agencies, tourism agencies, and community

Table 6. Integrated comparison

Dimension	Bukhara	Gjirokastër	Malacca	Pingyao
Living heritage transition	Weak	Strong	Moderate	Strong
Governance effectiveness	Low	High	Medium	High
Economic integration	Low	Moderate	High	Balanced
Spatial integration	Weak	Strong	Tourism-driven	Regulated

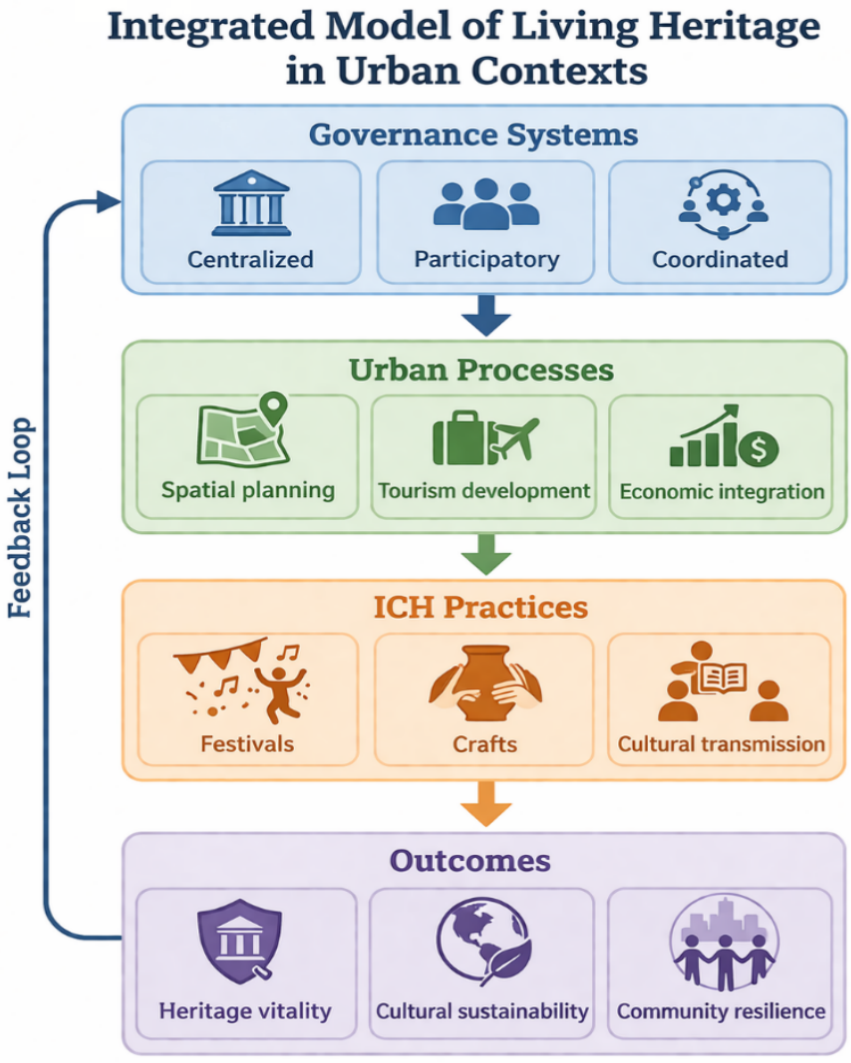


Figure 5. Integrated model of living heritage in urban context. Source: Diagram by the author

organizations. Institutional strategies do not work when singled out (Djabarouti, 2024).

4.3. Governance implications

Governance emerges as the primary explanatory factor. The findings indicate that good governance is more than the mere structure of decisions and implementation.

The first implication is that the involvement must be substantive and not symbolic. The cities that get better results come up with ongoing processes of community engagement. This means that participation is a process and not an event (Djabarouti, 2024).

The second implication is that centralized systems, though helpful in the protection of physical assets, cannot adapt to the dynamic nature of ICH. The practices that are intangible must be flexible and community-based. In order to sustain the form, the systems that are too rigid may compromise the continuation of culture (Hiền *et al.*, 2025).

The findings, however, do not mean that decentralization is necessarily good. One of the trends is the fact that the most desirable systems are participative and coordinated. The systems that are purely fragmented may not be able to sustain the pressure of development, and the systems that are purely centralized may not be able to take into account the local actors (Sun *et al.*, 2025).

This implies that hybrid types of governance are more efficient. Cultural practice is shaped by communities and receives regulatory support and resources from state institutions. This stability and flexibility are possible through this balance.

The other implication is that of scale. ICH works at a variety of levels, including local communities and city-wide systems. Governance has to therefore bridge the gap between policy structures and practice (Buckley & Graves, 2016). In the absence of this connection, implementation is poor.

Lastly, there is institutional legitimacy, which is essential. Cultural practices are more likely to remain active when governance supports communities rather than exploiting heritage primarily for branding (Falk & Hagsten, 2025). The element of trust is made a factor in the management of heritage.

4.4. Contribution to the Chinese context

Pingyao helps strengthen both the conceptual and empirical contributions of the study. It situates the analysis within the framework of urban transformation in China and aligns the study with existing research on architecture and urbanism (Sun *et al.*, 2025). Heritage governance and transmission of craft in Pingyao take place through state regulation and the forming of cultural zones with community participation in an institutionalized way. This governance model in question is not neo-patrimonial but rather a heritage governance model.

China is one of the special governance environments that has a great state capacity and speedy urbanization. This is a challenge and creates opportunities for heritage management. Pingyao illustrates the way ICH could be preserved when it is under pressure due to development through planning, spatial management, and policy support (Ripp *et al.*, 2025).

It is also important to note that simplistic assumptions are raised by the Chinese case. It proves that the state government does not necessarily limit living heritage. It can be promoted along with the organized participation and regulatory processes to promote cultural continuity (Djabarouti, 2024).

In the meantime, the outcomes increase the risks as well. The negative impact of institutional control is that it may encourage visibility at the cost of the community if it lacks balance. This means that effective governance must not be merely coordinated; it must be attentive to the local practice as well.

The Chinese case can therefore be used to make contributions to the world discourse by showing that other types of governance can also provide sustainable results. It expands comparative knowledge of the living heritage beyond Western planning paradigms (Sun *et al.*, 2025).

5. Conclusion

In this article, the problem of preserving ICH in historic urban areas under the pressure of development was examined. The findings suggest that heritage vitality is not solely dependent on the development pressure. It is shaped by governance quality, spatial integration, and community participation.

Among the conclusions is the fact that the transition from passive preservation to living heritage is uneven across cities. Some of the cities are yet to be interested in physical conservation, and some have integrated cultural practices in their planning systems. This means that policy recognition alone is not sufficient. Integration should be highly coordinated at the institutional level and put into practice.

The study also reveals that ICH plays a number of roles in urban systems. It encourages identity, social cohesiveness, and economic activity. These positions, however, can be conflicting. Tourism can earn money and change the meaning of culture. This implies that the economic integration is to be highly monitored.

The present study has a theoretical and methodological contribution. It puts forth knowledge of living heritage as a process that requires governance and gives a proper framework of comparative analysis by integrating qualitative analysis, spatial mapping, and composite-index analysis.

The Chinese example shows that coordinated planning systems can be applied to heritage management in the context of high-speed urban transformation. It shows that state-led governance can support heritage preservation if it is complemented with regulation and community participation.

From a policy perspective, the heritage planning policy must not be reduced to the preservation of buildings only. It should protect the domains of activity, promote cultural practitioners, and integrate ICH in urban decision-making.

The research was grounded on 60 interviews in four cities, which limits statistical generalizability. Nevertheless, the study embraces a comparative analytical reasoning over statistical presentation, which is more depth-based, triangulation, and identification of patterns across cases.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs, that is, dealing with the changes in the heritage systems over time. A broader comparative analysis is also required to enhance the analytical framework to find out whether it can be applied in different contexts.

Lastly, heritage should be preserved as a fixed form alone; it should be allowed to evolve within ever-changing, managed urban systems.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical review and approval were waived because the study involved non-invasive interviews focused on professional and institutional perspectives and did not collect sensitive personal data. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Consent for publication

Informed consent for publication was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Availability of data

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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