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Preservation challenges for heritage landscapes during historic-city transformation: Datong Ancient City, China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how an investment-driven programme reshaped the heritage landscape of Datong Ancient City, 2008–2024, with a follow-up in February 2025. Guided by the 2021 Call for Action marking the tenth anniversary of the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, we adapt and localise an existing challenge framework and operationalise it through directed qualitative content analysis and process tracing within a parameterised comparative matrix, in keeping with international conservation principles. We triangulate municipal regulations, contemporaneous media and archives, and structured field observation across nine municipally designated sites: Huayan and Shanhua Temples, the Mosque, Guandi and Confucian Temples, East & West Drum Tower Streets, the City Walls, the Drum Tower and the Palace of Prince Dai. Results are organised under three domains: socioeconomic, political and historical, making development-protection trade-offs visible at site scale. We identify recurrent patterns, including tenant and function homogenisation and a weak night-time economy; approval and coordination frictions and maintenance-display imbalances; and pressures on authenticity and integrity, blurred stratification and commodification. Building on these findings, we propose a policy playbook comprising tenant-retention and chain-store caps, authenticity impact statements and public participation windows, and no-net-loss authenticity covenants, and a lightweight monitoring toolkit with ex-ante risk mapping and ex-post indicators for asset condition, maintenance, tenant mix, signage and participation. The study is a historically bounded case; claims are limited to Datong's governance context and time window. The lens and tools are offered as transferable heuristics for medium-sized historic cities undertaking timetable-bound capital programmes and tourism-oriented image-making.

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1. Introduction

China's urban development has undergone more than two decades of explosive, expansionary growth ('incremental development') (Zhao et al., 2025). By the end of 2024, the urbanisation rate of permanent residents was about 67% (≈940 million) (Statistics, 2025), concentrating development pressures in historic urban cores. Meanwhile, China ranks among the world leaders in the number of UNESCO World Heritage properties (Wang et al., 2024), underscoring the importance of urban heritage in national and local governance. Internationally, UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach emphasises integrated, landscape-scale and governance-aware conservation, with recent toolkits and platforms, such as the Urban Heritage Atlas, supporting implementation (UNESCO, 2011, 2023). Urban heritage landscapes are located at the intersection of historic environments and contemporary urban development and constitute a key category of cultural heritage (Peng et al., 2025).

Within state-led, investment-driven redevelopment contexts, heritage landscapes in many historic cities face multiple challenges across material structures, social dynamics, cultural practices, legal

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frameworks and environmental considerations (Ghanbari et al., 2024). Tourism-oriented redevelopment and image-making tendencies can foster homogenisation and place pressure on authenticity and local cultural identity (Chen & Tan, 2025). At the regulatory and governance levels, further issues include legal/technical ambiguities, misalignment between conservation and development goals, complex inter-bureau coordination, and imbalances in maintenance–display resource allocation (Ghanbari et al., 2024; Phillia & Sihombing, 2023; Sonkoly, 2023). Despite growing scholarship, there remains a scarcity—particularly for small and medium-sized cities—of historically delimited case studies that triangulate policy/planning/budgetary texts with time-stamped on-site observations and make the trade-offs explicit at specific locations. Datong Ancient City has been profoundly reshaped by rapid urban development: while urban construction has improved infrastructure and environmental conditions, the cultural landscape and the preservation/interpretation of historic fabric have at times been approached with insufficient contextual understanding. This has produced replications of historical forms and business models that risk simplification (Lei, 2021). Many rebuilt structures within the ancient city have been converted into tourist-oriented uses, displacing residents; traditional houses and familiar streetscapes have been replaced by homogenised retail, raising concerns about the loss of local heritage buildings and historical cultural landscapes.

To address these challenges and gaps, the paper conducts a historically delimited single-case study of Datong Ancient City, bounded to 2008–2024 with follow-up in February 2025. We examine nine municipally designated priority heritage landscape sites—Huayan Temple, Shanhua Temple, the Mosque, Guandi Temple, the Confucian Temple, East and West Drum Tower Streets, the City Walls, the Drum Tower and the Palace of Prince Dai—combining structured field observation with documentary sources (municipal plans, regulations and contemporaneous media). We employ directed qualitative content analysis and process tracing to compare policy intentions with observable spatial/material outcomes; the evidence is synthesised and visualised in Figure 13 as a challenge framework.

We consolidate the pressures on Datong Ancient City's heritage landscapes into three top-level domains—socioeconomic, political and historical. We provide: (i) a shared agenda framework to structure discussion and define the scope and procedures of remedial actions (e.g. maintenance planning and minimum-intervention options); (ii) a risk map for ex-ante diagnosis to locate likely trade-off hotspots and focus design review and resource allocation; and (iii) a monitoring baseline for ex-post tracking using simple, repeatable indicators (e.g. asset-condition records, maintenance ledgers) to document changes over time. Scope note: this is a challenge-oriented study of the heritage landscape; we do not evaluate architectural styles or conduct a full urban-morphology analysis. As policy context (not evaluated here), in 2024 the municipality set a target for tourism and related sectors to account for >5% of city GDP by 2028, positioning heritage-led tourism as a strategic driver of growth (Bureau, 2024); our framework and monitoring baseline may inform implementation in similar governance settings.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows Section 2 reviews literature and motivates the analytical parameters. Section 3 outlines the methodology (directed qualitative content analysis; triangulated process tracing). Section 4 sketches the Datong background and the selection of nine municipally designated sites. Section 5 presents the results via a comparative matrix across the socioeconomic, political and historical domains. Section 6 discusses the findings and sets out a concise policy playbook and a lightweight monitoring toolkit. Section 7 concludes with generalisability, limitations and future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. International doctrine: from objects to urban settings

International historic-city conservation has evolved in three broad phases: the emergence of urban conservation (pre-1950s), early post-war development (1950s–1970s) and modern expansion (since the 1970s) (Xie et al., 2020). Cornerstone texts—the *Athens Charter* (1931), *Venice Charter* (1964) and *Nairobi Recommendation* (1976)—shifted attention from single monuments to urban settings and established restoration, authenticity and management principles that continue to guide practice (ICOMOS, 1931, 1964; UNESCO, 1976; Xie et al., 2020). Subsequent doctrine, notably the *Burra Charter* and the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, broadened admissible evidences of value and stressed cultural context and diversity in conservation approaches (ICOMOS, 1994; Places, 1999; Zhao et al., 2024).

2.2. HUL as perspective and toolkit

In the 2000s, the *Xi'an Declaration* clarified setting, while the *Vienna Memorandum* anticipated the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach (ICOMOS, 2005; UNESCO, 2005). The UNESCO (2011) Recommendation on the HUL formalised this turn: cities are read as historically layered interactions of cultural and natural attributes—land-use patterns, spatial organisation, visual relations, infrastructure, open spaces and intangible practices—linking conservation to change management, participation and routine monitoring (Hussein et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Tuo et al., 2024). As both perspective and toolkit, HUL has informed integrated strategies in diverse contexts and foregrounded the recognition of non-designated assets (Ginzarly et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2022).

2.3. Localisation in China: FHCC as an institutional vehicle

International principles have travelled unevenly; in China, urban preservation emerged through the encounter between imported doctrines and domestic legal and development regimes. Localisation entailed adjustments in terminology, instruments and governance, broadened what counts as 'heritage' and seeded an indigenous discourse (Li et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016; Xie et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2024).

A key institutional vehicle is the *Famous Historical and Cultural City* (FHCC), designation developed after reviewing Western European practice (Encyclopaedia, 2023), which differs from the international usage of 'historic city': FHCCs bundle historic districts, cultural relics and intangible heritage under a macro, integrated protection remit oriented to redevelopment control, yet operational precision and national standards remain uneven (Ho, 2022; Lei, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2020). The 2008–2024 state-led, investment-driven programme in Datong Ancient City operated within this national framework for historic-city conservation. It provides a timely testbed for examining how FHCC-oriented governance, approval sequences and setting/visual controls interact with authenticity, use and tourism under timetable-bound capital deployment.

2.4. China principles and the HUL call

While some scholars critique authenticity as a Western normative export (Starn, 2002; Zhu, 2015), the principle remains central in China's doctrine. The *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* (ICOMOS, 2015), define authenticity across materials, craftsmanship, design, setting and social meanings, reaffirming the primacy of national law and providing a flexible professional basis for interventions (Zhu & Maags, 2020). Marking HUL's tenth anniversary, the 2021 Call for Action urged tailored approaches for World Heritage and non-World Heritage cities, with differentiated roles for political and technical actors and targeted knowledge exchange to secure commitment at multiple levels (UNESCO, 2021). For China's FHCC cities—including Datong Ancient City—this underscores the need to localise international doctrine into workable instruments that address approval choke-points, carrying capacity in tourism corridors and craft/material continuity at site scale. This study responds to that call.

2.5. Analytical frame for this study

Guided by the above literature and the 2021 HUL Call for Action, we adapt and localise Timothy and Nyaupane (2009), framework of heritage-protection challenges in developing contexts, which documents how goal misalignment, implementation-capacity constraints, investment pressures and tourism-led theming shape decision pathways and outcomes. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) perspective emphasises layered values, governance instruments and everyday uses at the landscape scale, while charter-based debates on authenticity stress materials, workmanship, setting and social meaning. We operationalise these strands through three top-level analytical domains—socioeconomic, political and historical—and treat spatial indicators as observable carriers of these mechanisms. This design keeps the analysis problem-driven while maintaining a clear dialogue with the heritage-conservation and urban-renewal literature.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design and rationale

We adopt a qualitative single-case design to examine how state-led, investment-driven urban redevelopment has shaped the challenges faced by the heritage landscape of Datong Ancient City. A single-case design is appropriate for tracing institutional and on-site processes within a bounded governance and temporal context, allowing close coupling of material changes with the policies that authorised them. We combine two complementary methods—structured field observation and documentary analysis—to connect observable outcomes with stated policy intentions and implementation narratives.

3.2. Case context and temporal boundaries

The analysis is delimited to Datong Ancient City's redevelopment cycle from 2008 to 2024, with follow-up site checks in February 2025. This period captures the main investment and regulatory decisions affecting the city walls, temple precincts and historic streets. All inferences are bounded to this window and to its state-led, investment-driven governance regime.

3.3. Site selection within the Ancient City

Nine sites were selected ex-ante using three criteria: (i) formal appearance in municipal restoration agendas (the 2008 Standing Committee decision), (ii) national/provincial protection status and (iii) spatial prominence and experiential centrality within the Ancient City (see [Section 3](#) for details). These inclusion rules avoid ex-post selection and clarify which locations were not studied.

3.4. Data sources and collection procedures

3.4.1. Field observation

We conducted structured walk-throughs at each site and recorded observations through dated field notes and a photographic log from repeatable vantage points where feasible. No human-subject interviews were conducted.

3.4.2. Documentary corpus

We compiled municipal laws and regulations, conservation guidelines, budget reports, cadastral/plan sheets, policy announcements and contemporaneous media/archives. For auditability, each documentary source is cited inline and fully listed in the References; figure captions annotate the specific sources (issuing body, year) where applicable.

3.4.3. Scope of materials

The corpus integrates a defined set of policy and planning documents (laws/regulations, plans/guidelines, budgets, cadastral/plan sheets, policy announcements) alongside contemporaneous media/archival items. Fieldwork produced a dated photographic log covering all nine sites across repeated visits during the main redevelopment cycle (2008–2024) and the 2025 follow-up checks.

3.5. Analytical strategy

We applied directed (theory-informed) thematic content analysis seeded by prior challenge typologies and heritage-authenticity scholarship. Codes were iteratively adapted to Datong's context as site evidence accumulated and were organised under the socioeconomic, political and historical domains, with spatial indicators used as carriers of each mechanism.

We linked documentary events to on-site transformations when: (i) documentary evidence preceded the observed physical change; (ii) at least two independent sources converged (e.g. one official document plus one visual/archival record); and (iii) the temporal gap fell within a plausible implementation

window (typically ≤ 6 months, unless a policy specified otherwise). Where these criteria were only partially met, associations are reported as tentative.

3.6. Triangulation and research quality

Credibility was enhanced by triangulating (i) on-site observations (dated photos), (ii) legal/policy texts and (iii) contemporaneous media/archives, and by explicitly seeking disconfirming evidence. Dependability was supported through analytic memos and a stable code set; confirmability through an inline citation trail that enables independent verification.

Consistency checks and bias mitigation. We logged analytic decision points through memos and conducted peer debriefing with a colleague not involved in data collection. Coding ambiguities were resolved by documenting alternative interpretations and the rationale for final assignment. For Chinese-language sources, translations of key terms were double-checked by a second reader.

4. Background and case selection: Datong Ancient City

4.1. Historical geographical context

Datong **Ancient City** has over 2,300 years of urban history (Cui, 2018). Located 265 km west of Beijing at the junction of Shanxi, Hebei and Inner Mongolia (Ho, 2022), the walled core concentrates monuments and historic streets that anchor the city's narrative. Table 1 summarises shifts in Datong's historical position across dynasties—from strategic border town (Qin–Han) to capital/secondary capital (Northern Wei, Liao, Jin), to military centre (Ming) and commercial centre (Qing), and, in the People's Republic era, to an industrial hub branded as China's 'Coal Capital'.

The Yungang Grottoes (Northern Wei) are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2001). Under the Ming, Datong's defensive role intensified with the Great Wall system (UNESCO, 1987), within which the ancient city played a key role protecting the northern approach to Beijing (see Figure 1). The planning concept consolidated in the Northern Wei strongly influenced later historic cities in China (e.g. Chang'an, Luoyang) and beyond (An, 2011; Lei, 2021), as historical photographs illustrate (Figure 2).

4.2. Policy context and timeline (2008–2024)

Industrial restructuring pressures and heritage designation intersected in the reform era. Datong was among the first National Historical and Cultural Cities (State Council, 1982) and later a national tourist attraction (1991) (Chronicles, 2023); yet concerns about coal-resource depletion (Cao et al., 2005) catalysed a search for a new development model (Li et al., 2023). In January 2008 a new municipal administration prioritised heritage-led redevelopment and tourism (Kong, 2019; Zhao & Xu, 2024). In June 2008, the Standing Committee of the Datong Municipal People's Congress adopted the Decision on the Protection and Restoration of Datong Ancient City, which set legal and programmatic foundations for restoration and explicitly called for comprehensive protection, key restoration, scientific planning, phased implementation, and the demonstration of integrity and authenticity. Table 2 summarises subsequent milestones (e.g. the 2014 revision of the protection plan; 2016 renewal guidelines; the 2020 Regulations on the Protection of Datong Ancient City; the 2021–2035 plan; and 2024 notices to strengthen implementation).

Table 1. Historical overview of Datong Ancient City.

Dynasty	Period	Historical position
Qin Dynasty	221–206 BC	Served as an important border town
Han Dynasty	206–9 BC; AD 25–220	Continued as an important border town
Northern Wei Dynasty	386–534	The capital of the dynasty
Liao Dynasty	916–1125	Served as the secondary capital
Jin Dynasty	1115–1234	Continued as the secondary capital
Ming Dynasty	1368–1644	Functioned as a military centre
Qing Dynasty	1644–1911	Transitioned to a commercial centre
People's Republic of China (PRC)	1949–Today	Coal capital in China

Source: Datong Municipal Local Chronicles Research Office, (2025).

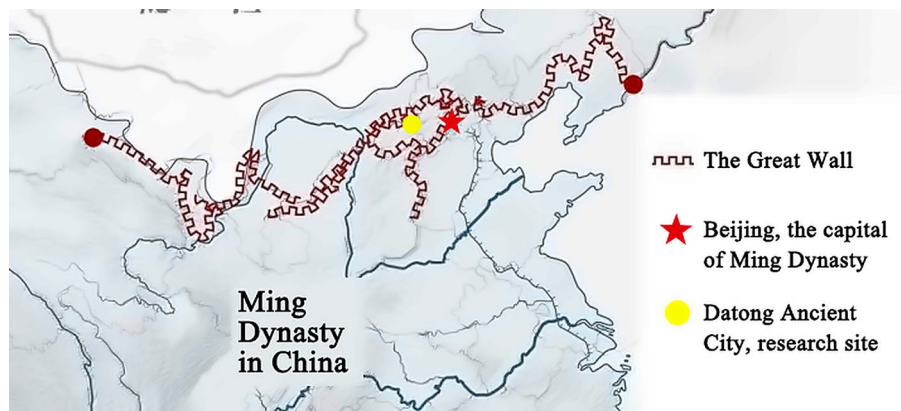


Figure 1. Geographical location map of Datong Ancient City and its defensive fortress along the Great Wall (Source: Adapted from Zhang, 2020).

4.3. Case set and inclusion rules

We define the case set *ex ante* as nine municipally designated priority sites named in the June 2008 decision (Congress, 2008): Huayan Temple; Shanhua Temple; the Mosque; Guandi Temple; the Confucian Temple; East and West Drum Tower Streets; the City Walls; the Drum Tower; and the Palace of Prince Dai. These heritage landscapes span religious ensembles, historic streets and key defensive/civic structures and are experientially central within the ancient core. This legally grounded list matches our objective to trace policy intention, implementation, observable outcomes at site scale (see Figure 3).

4.4. Concise site profiles (policy-anchored)

4.4.1. Huayan Temple (Liao–Jin foundations)

Major Buddhist ensemble; national key cultural relic (1961); explicitly listed in the 2008 municipal decision. Analytical role: authenticity of fabric and the maintenance–display balance in temple precincts (see Appendix A, Figure A-1).

4.4.2. Shanhua Temple (Tang Origins; Liao–Jin rebuilds)

One of the largest and best-preserved Liao–Jin temple complexes; national key (1961); named in the 2008 decision. Analytical role: narrative continuity and participation affordances during festivals (see Appendix A, Figure A-2)

4.4.3. The Mosque (Tang Origin; Ming–Qing repairs)

Marker of Datong’s religious diversity; protected at national/provincial level; listed in the 2008 decision. Analytical role: livelihood continuity and frontage rhythm under visitor economies (see Appendix A, Figure A-3).

4.4.4. Guandi Temple (Yuan–Ming core)

Early regional Guandi worship site; status upgrades from provincial (1996) to national key (2013). Analytical role: approval/coordination capacity and materials/workmanship compatibility (see Appendix A, Figure A-4).

4.4.5. Confucian Temple (Ming Fabric; later repairs)

Historic educational/ritual complex; listed in the 2008 decision. Analytical role: storyline integrity and ex-ante risk mapping for adjacent streets (see Appendix A, Figure A-5).



Datong Ancient City Gate



Datong Ancient City Wall



The Tower of the West Gate of Datong Ancient City



Streets and City Wall in Datong Ancient City

Figure 2. Photos of Datong Ancient City before 1949. (Source: Ato Ingashu (Issues 144–161), Ato Inga Kyokai, 1937).

Table 2. Policy and planning milestones for Datong Ancient City (2008–2024).

Year (month)	Heritage-protection efforts
2008 (1)	Comprehensive protection of the Ancient City began with the protection plan for the famous city starting to be compiled. However, it remained incomplete due to various challenges.
2008 (6)	The Standing Committee of the Datong People's Congress passed the Decision on the Protection and Restoration of Datong Ancient City.
2014	Datong adjusted its planning based on new construction conditions, compiling the <i>2014 Revision of the Datong Historical and Cultural City Protection Plan (2014–2020)</i> .
2016	The non-statutory plan <i>Guidelines for the Renewal and Construction of Datong Ancient City</i> was compiled.
2020	The 30th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 15th People's Congress of Datong adopted the Regulations on the Protection of Datong Ancient City.
2023	The Datong City Planning and Natural Resources Bureau compiled the Protection Plan for Datong Historical and Cultural City (2021–2035).
2024	Notice on further strengthening the construction and protection of ancient cities.

Source: Author collation from Datong Municipal People's Government, (2025).

4.4.6. East & West Drum Tower Streets (historic streetscapes)

Grid-based streets reworked in recent renewal phases. Analytical role: retail homogenisation, tenant turn-over and signage coherence (see [Appendix A, Figure A-6](#)).

4.4.7. City Walls (multiple phases; ming consolidation)

Defensive system central to Datong's role in the Great Wall network. Analytical role: interface continuity and utilities intrusions on inner frontages (see [Appendix A, Figure A-7](#)).

4.4.8. Drum Tower (Ming; later repairs)

Landmark civic structure; national key (2019, eighth batch). Analytical role: view corridors, night-time legibility and event-related crowd management (see [Appendix A, Figure A-8](#)).

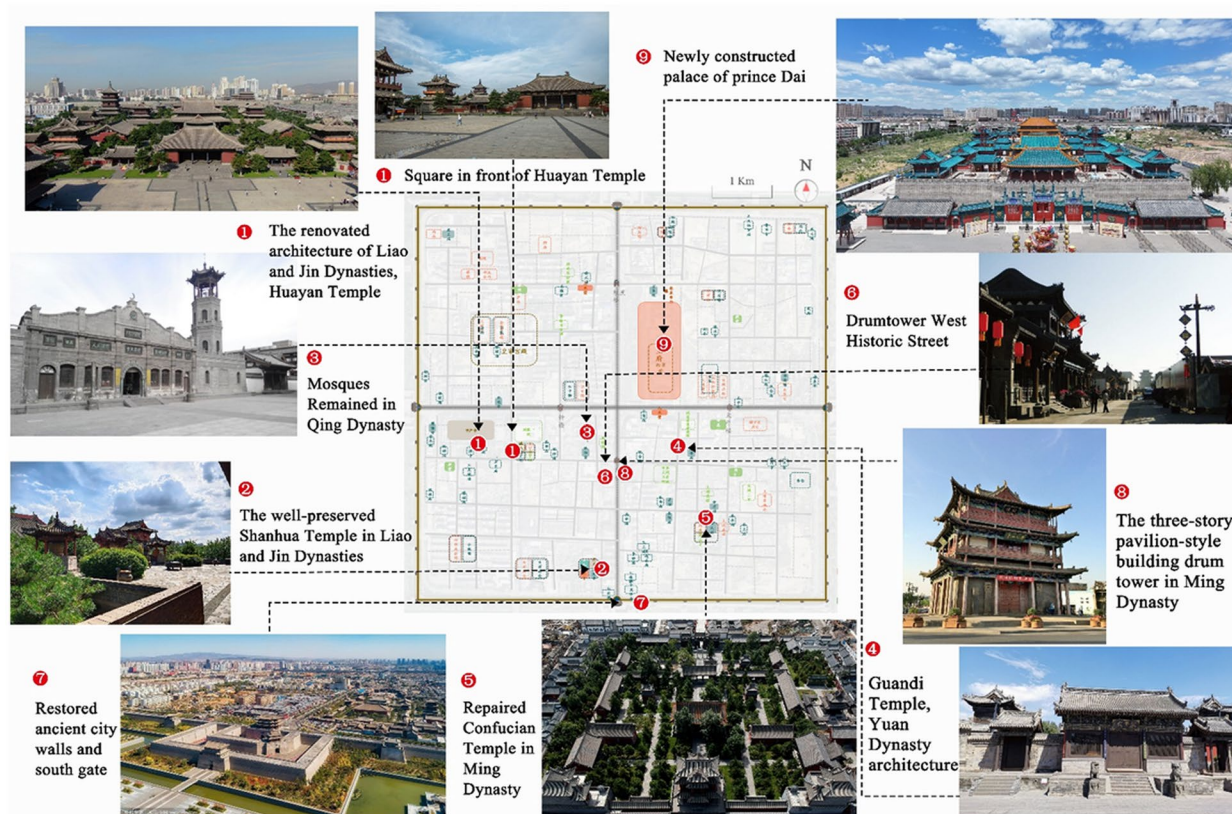


Figure 3. Map of heritage landscapes in Datong Ancient City (Source: Adapted from Datong Municipal People's Government Relics, 2022; author's photo, 2025).

4.4.9. Palace of Prince Dai (Ming origin; later destruction; partial reconstructions)

Historic royal precinct with surviving Nine-Dragon Screen (national key 2001). Analytical role: theming/replication control and interpretive framing (see Appendix A, Figure A-9).

In order to make readers better understand and better convey Datong Ancient City's rich heritage landscapes and historical standing, we provide the detailed site histories and figures in Appendix A (Site Heritage landscapes Notes). Section 4.4 retains only each site's policy anchor and its analytical role in our study. Cross references are supplied after every entry (e.g. Appendix A, Figure. A-5).

5. Results

On 14 March 2019, China's highest authorities, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, issued a notice titled *Notice on Criticism of Certain National Historic and Cultural Cities with Inadequate Protection*. The notice, issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, criticised several cities, including Datong, for insufficient preservation efforts.

'...Five Chinese historical and cultural cities, including Datong, were criticized for inadequate preservation measures. Local governments had engaged in property development within the ancient city, resulting in widespread demolition, construction, and the replacement of authentic historical structures with modern replicas. These actions have caused significant damage to the cities' historical and cultural heritage, severely diminishing their historical and cultural value.'

(The State Council Department Document No. 35, 2019)

As of 1 February 2025, on-site observations indicate that parts of Datong Ancient City remain under construction and that deterioration pressures persist at several sites (see Figure 4). Consistent with our problem-driven design, we organise the results under three domains: socioeconomic, political and historical.

5.1. Socioeconomic

5.1.1. Population decline and demographic ageing

Population is a fundamental driver of economic development (Awan, 2012). However, large-scale demolition efforts in Datong Ancient City have resulted in a significant decline in population (see Figure 5). Currently, the majority of the remaining residents are middle-aged individuals between 40 and 60 years old, contributing to a pronounced ageing issue within the city. The displacement of former residents has further undermined the city's economic vitality. A 2016 survey conducted by the Datong Urban Planning and Design Institute found that before the heritage preservation project began, the population of Datong Ancient City exceeded 100,000, with a population density of over 30,500 people per square kilometre. By October 2013, however, the population had significantly decreased, with only 22,840 households remaining. Following the demolition, approximately 59,000 residents remained, reducing the population density to 18,000 people per square kilometre (Institute, 2016).

5.1.2. Tourism model homogenisation and short-termism

The tourism development model of Datong Ancient City has become increasingly homogenised, largely driven by the proliferation of 'internet celebrity districts' and 'internet celebrity shops'. This trend has resulted in the erosion of local character in the city's tourism offerings. A prime example is a newly constructed, artificial historical-cultural street in the south-eastern part of the ancient city, completed in 2023, which fails to capture Datong's unique cultural essence (see Figure 6). While businesses prioritise short-term trends, they often overlook the rich cultural traditions that define the city. For instance, the widely promoted 'face-changing' performance—an intangible cultural heritage from Sichuan opera (Yang & Zhou, 2025)—has no connection to Datong Ancient City's local culture. Meanwhile, Datong's own intangible cultural heritage, such as paper-cutting and bronze artefacts, is frequently reproduced in low-quality replicas, lacking originality and intellectual property protection. Furthermore, cultural and creative products related to landmarks like Huayan Temple and Shanhua Temple are predominantly sourced from production centres in Yiwu, Zhejiang (Qian et al., 2024), further diminishing their local relevance.



Figure 4. Datong Ancient City still under construction (Source: Author's photo, 2025).



Figure 5. Reconstruction of Datong Ancient City: Demolition of residential buildings near the ruins and the large-scale relocation of residents.



Figure 6. An artificial historical and cultural street, completed in 2023 (Source: Xiangjie Design Agency, 2023).

5.1.3. Economic pressures and displacement

Large-scale demolitions in Datong Ancient City have caused substantial damage to residents' property, with the government's compensation efforts proving inadequate. As a result, most original residents have been forced to relocate to the outskirts of the city. This displacement, particularly among those living near key heritage sites such as Huayan Temple, Shanhua Temple, East and West Drum Tower Streets, and the Ancient City Walls, has led to a loss of geographic identity and collective memory (Hao & Zhou, 2022). The displaced residents faced two main options: first, to move into resettlement housing located on the city's outskirts, far from their original neighbourhoods; and second, to accept cash compensation based on market prices. However, the compensation offered was insufficient for many to return to the ancient city. Furthermore, the prices of newly developed real estate projects, such as the 'Platinum Blue Wulong Alley', far exceeded compensation standards, making it unaffordable for most former residents to relocate back to their original homes.

5.1.4. Resident poverty and limited heritage awareness

Due to the economic underdevelopment in Datong Ancient City, many residents prioritise immediate economic gains over the long-term value of historical heritage preservation. Relying on verbal promises

from the government regarding compensation, numerous residents sold their historical homes at low prices. This resulted in the demolition of several Ming and Qing-era buildings along East and West Drum Tower Streets (see [Figure 7](#)), with their cultural and historical significance often overlooked. Those who refused to sell their properties were forcibly relocated, an action that violated both social consent and the residents' rights. This disregard for cultural heritage in favour of economic short-termism has led to significant loss of both historical structures and the community's connection to its past.

5.1.5. Government overinvestment and fiscal stress

Between 2008 and 2009, the investment in the construction of Datong Ancient City totalled 15 billion RMB. In the following 3 years, from 2010 onward, an additional 35 billion RMB was allocated to urban development. Over a span of 5 years, Datong's total urban construction investment amounted to 50 billion RMB (Yuxiao, 2013). The most recent announcement regarding investments in Datong Ancient City was made in 2019, with an allocated budget of approximately 12.517 billion RMB. By the end of 2023, the city's government debt stood at 56.028 billion RMB, with a debt ratio of 99.2% (Finance, 2024). Despite these substantial investments, the urban development initiatives have been criticised for altering the original character of the ancient city. This transformation has led to the loss of the authenticity and integrity of historical heritage. Notably, the redevelopment of areas surrounding Huayan Temple, as well as East and West Drum Tower Streets, has resulted in the complete conversion of these spaces into modern commercial zones. Similarly, the commercial buildings surrounding the mosque have isolated it from its historical context, further compromising its cultural significance.

5.1.6. Sluggish night-time economy and low footfall

The night-time economy in Datong Ancient City remains sluggish, primarily due to the absence of effective industrial planning and strategic guidance. As a result, newly developed commercial areas experience high vacancy rates, making it difficult to attract both tourists and local consumers. This contributes to a desolate atmosphere that starkly contrasts with the historical ambiance of the ancient city. Aside from peak holiday periods, foot traffic in the commercial districts is extremely low, and many shops remain nearly deserted during the evening hours, exacerbating the issue of vacant storefronts (see [Figure 8](#)).



Figure 7. Demolition of historic buildings in Drum Tower historic streets (Source: Author's photo, 2024).



Figure 8. Visitors to the Ancient City of Datong are limited at night, the vacant rate of shops is high (Source: Author's photo, 2025).

5.1.7. Low quality of workforce and poor compensation

The quality of the workforce in Datong Ancient City is relatively low, with many workers receiving compensation that does not align with the intensity of their duties, leading to substandard service quality. Small vendors surrounding key heritage sites often pressure tourists into purchasing low-quality goods. For instance, street vendors near Huayan Temple frequently pull visitors towards their stalls to promote their products. Similarly, in the renovated shops along East-West Drum Tower Street, staff members tend to prioritise expensive items, displaying indifference towards more affordable options. Moreover, some heritage site management staff exhibit poor attitudes, responding passively to tourists and demonstrating a lack of customer service awareness.

5.2. Political

5.2.1. Corruption and project opacity

Corruption has been a long-standing political challenge in China. On 6 January 2025, national leadership underscored that combating corruption remains the most pressing issue for the Communist Party of China, as emphasised during the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (Agency, 2025). During the restoration of Datong Ancient City, Feng Lixiang (Municipal Party Secretary, 2008–2014) was investigated for serious corruption. While official notices did not explicitly link his case to the ancient-city programme, public reports indicated substantial bribe-taking related to business dealings (Inspection, 2014). Such episodes correlate with project opacity, implementation inefficiency, and resource waste, indirectly undermining heritage-preservation outcomes.

5.2.2. Legal and regulatory ambiguities

In 2009, Datong suspended works at the Yungang Grottoes due to violations of World Heritage guidelines. Similar procedural lapses occurred around Huayan Temple and Shanhua Temple, where mayoral decisions bypassed required approvals. Then-Mayor Geng Yanbo acknowledged the lapses and pledged remedies, yet no legal liability followed (Ping, 2024). In Spring Festival 2025, the municipal order to force businesses to turn on lights inside the ancient city ('breaking the door to turn on the lights') drew nationwide criticism, highlighting rule-by-person over rule-of-law tendencies and weak channels for public input (Huang Yu and People-Net 2025). After Geng's departure in 2013, the new administration halted 125 ongoing projects, leaving many unfinished and debts accrued (News, 2014). Although *Datong Ancient City Protection Regulations* were promulgated in 2020 (Bureau, 2020), enforcement remains uneven, and demolition or reconstruction is still visible in some areas.



The Real Beijing Landmark "Panjiayuan"



Cultural performances in Xi'an Ancient City



The Fake Imitation of Beijing "Panjiayuan" in Datong Ancient City



Imitative cultural performances at the Palace of Prince Dai modeled after Xi'an's ancient city



A stone tablet acknowledging the mistake is inscribed inside Huayan Temple

Figure 9. Imitation of Beijing's Panjiayuan Antique Market and Xi'an's Ancient City in Datong, alongside the stone tablet acknowledging the restoration mistakes at Huayan Temple (Source: KKNEWS, ; author's photo, 2025).

5.2.3. Unscientific protection and development

Blind demolitions and improper restoration practices have caused irreversible damage to Datong Ancient City. Ironically, the construction of replicas such as Beijing's Panjiayuan Antique Market in Datong and cultural performances at the Palace of Prince Dai modelled after Xi'an's Ancient City, the capital of the Tang Dynasty, A.D. 618–907 (Li, 2020), fail to acknowledge the unique historical and cultural characteristics of Datong.

In 2009, during the construction of Huayan Temple, the government publicly recognised its mistakes, inscribing a stone tablet with the following statement:

'The architectural complex surrounding Huayan Temple, part of the environmental rehabilitation project, is a flawed work guided by erroneous principles. First, it was initiated without approval from the National Cultural Heritage Administration, a serious violation of the law. Second, the project proceeded without expert consultation and lacked historical and archaeological evidence, thus disregarding scientific principles. Third, the building's size and density were excessive and intrusive to the national heritage sites, reflecting a flawed conceptual approach. The impact of this error was profound, and the project has been temporarily preserved as a counterexample to serve as a lesson and a warning to future generations, to prevent the perpetuation of such mistakes' (see Figure 9).

5.2.4. Lack of public participation

Collective memory is the soul of cultural heritage, with the original residents serving as its primary carriers (Cubitt, 2013; Liao & Dai, 2020). In Datong Ancient City, the predominant top-down approach to urban redevelopment has largely excluded public input from renovation projects. The absence of clear channels for public participation, along with the lack of institutions and policies for gathering public opinion, has marginalised the voices of local residents in decision-making. Instead, local governments often collaborate with real estate developers, focusing on short-term political gains, which further erodes the cultural identity and heritage of the community.

5.2.5. Modernisation conflicts and functional imbalance

Large-scale demolition/reconstruction displaced hospitals, schools and services, disrupting neighbourhood functions and social networks. Traffic planning issues (restrictions, congestion) affected both tourist experience and daily life (Police, 2024). Meanwhile, widespread imitation altered historical layering and material integrity: the City Walls relied heavily on reinforced concrete; the Guandi Temple opera stage relocation weakened traditional performance practice. In spatial carriers: City Walls (interface continuity; utilities intrusions), Guandi Temple (ritual/performance setting), Drum Tower approaches (view corridors) (see Appendix A, Figures. A-4, A-7, A-8).

5.2.6. Complex administrative management system

China's cultural heritage-protection system suffers from significant administrative challenges, particularly in terms of coordination and the division of responsibilities across various levels of government. Despite the stipulations of the Implementation Regulations of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Heritage* (Council, 1982), which mandate that all cultural relics are state-owned, the responsibility for heritage protection is largely delegated to local governments. However, local implementation requires approval at multiple hierarchical levels, leading to inefficiencies in interdepartmental coordination, unclear allocation of responsibilities and uneven distribution of resources. As a result, policy enforcement is weak, and administrative fragmentation causes delays in decision-making, ultimately reducing the efficiency of heritage preservation efforts (see Figure 10).

5.3. Historical

5.3.1. Compromised authenticity

Datong Ancient City, with its rich valuable urban landscapes, has been home to numerous heritage buildings. However, recent restoration and reconstruction efforts have seriously compromised its authenticity. A notable example is Huayan Temple, which houses two significant buildings constructed in 1038 and 1140 (Units, 2004). Between 2008 and 2010, the temple underwent extensive expansion that led to the demolition of the original building complex. This reconstruction resulted in irreversible damage to the underground relics and failed to preserve the historical integrity of the site. Additionally, the temple's murals, which are crucial to its historical identity, were redrawn by students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts under the guidance of their teachers, further detracting from the authenticity of this ancient cultural site (see Figure 11).

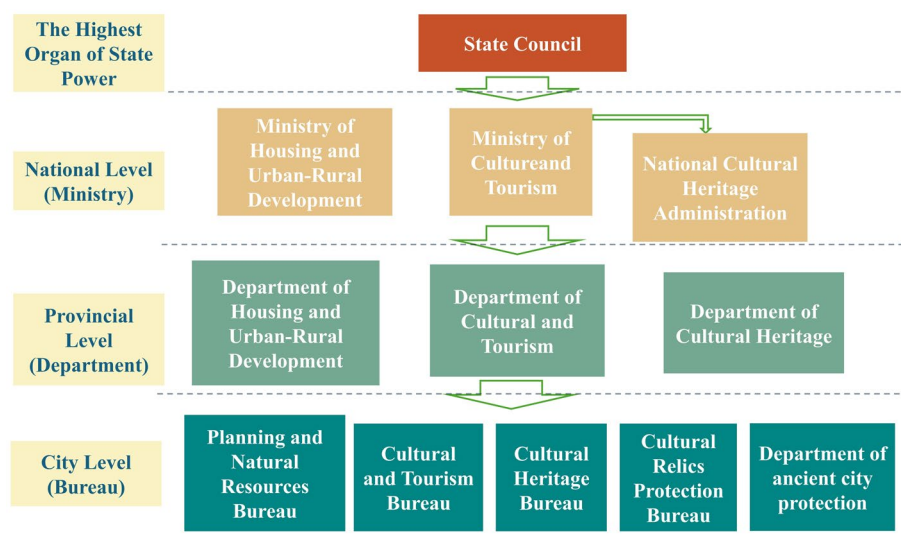


Figure 10. Hierarchical administration for cultural heritage in China (Source: Adapted from Ho, 2022).



Huayan Temple originally preserved authentic murals that had survived for over a thousand years



In 2010, they were redrawn by the Central Academy of Fine Arts



Huayan Temple before no repair (2001)



Huayan Temple under construction (2010)

Figure 11. Comparison before and after the restoration of Huayan Temple (Source: Jin, 2021; Liu, 2020; author's photo 2025).

In addition, in 2011, a controversial reconstruction project began for the long-lost residence of the Palace of Prince Dai, originally built in 1392 and destroyed in 1644. This reconstruction faced significant opposition from many Chinese scholars, who argued that it disconnected from the original historical context, effectively creating a fabricated structure and displacing numerous local residents (Chen et al., 2020; Hao & Zhou, 2022; Ho, 2022). Furthermore, the reconstruction of the Ancient City Walls using non-original materials was heavily criticised by Guo Zhan, Vice President of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), who stated that such practices significantly diminished the cultural value of the Datong Ancient City project (Cui, 2018).

5.3.2. Blurred historical stratification and loss of cultural identity

Datong Ancient City's layered past, having once been the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty, a secondary capital during the Liao and Jin Dynasties, and a prominent town in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (see Table 1). It is home to a diverse array of cultural elements, including the ancient capital culture of the Northern Wei, Liao, and Jin Dynasties; frontier culture symbolised by landmarks such as the Drum Tower, City Walls and the Palace of Prince Dai; as well as religious culture represented by Huayan Temple and Shanhua Temple (Buddhism), the Mosque (Islam), Guandi Temple (Taoism) and the Confucian Temple (Confucianism). Additionally, the East-West Drum Tower Historic Street showcases the local folk culture.

However, due to unclear cultural positioning, the identity of Datong Ancient City has become increasingly blurred. The stratification of its historical sites has been obscured, making it difficult to distinguish the various layers of history that once defined the city. Modern development has prioritised uniform real estate models, which has led to cultural alienation and the misuse of these historical sites. Despite housing numerous relics of varying historical significance, efforts to preserve the unique characteristics of

each site have been limited. Instead, religious activities, cultural tourism and leisure entertainment have been indiscriminately combined, further eroding the city's historical identity. Today, the nine major heritage sites analysed in this study primarily serve as tourist attractions, often devoid of deeper cultural or functional significance.

5.3.3. Illegal construction and transactions

Current Chinese laws lack clear sentencing standards for actions that damage cultural relics, especially when these actions are carried out by government entities. This legal ambiguity has led to widespread 'constructive destruction' at numerous historical and cultural heritage sites. Despite the existence of regulations under the Cultural Relics Protection Law, enforcement remains inadequate, allowing destructive practices to persist and resulting in repeated damage to historic sites. The restoration process of Datong Ancient City has been no exception. All nine major heritage sites in the city have experienced varying degrees of constructive destruction. During the construction phase, many historical building materials were discarded carelessly, and some residents even resorted to plundering these materials for illegal trade. To this day, markets such as the 'Panjiayuan Antique Market' within the ancient city and the 'Wei Capital Antique Mall' outside its walls continue to serve as venues where authentic relics and materials from historic buildings are recklessly bought and sold, exacerbating the ongoing damage to Datong Ancient City's cultural heritage. Ironically, because there are too many fake antiques, no one goes now (see Figure 12).

5.3.4. Misuse and commodification of historical relics

The cultural heritage of Datong Ancient City has been overexploited amid its commercial development, leading to insufficient attention being paid to the preservation of relics. Iconic sites, including the Ancient City Walls, Huayan Temple, and Shanhua Temple, have been converted into commercial tourist attractions, heavily relying on ticket revenue and visitor numbers. This commercialisation has resulted in the deterioration of these historical sites and their surrounding landscapes. The educational and cultural roles of relics such as the Palace of Prince Dai and the Confucian Temple have been largely neglected in favour of large cultural events and performances aimed at attracting tourists. This approach disregards



Figure 12. 'Panjiayuan Antique Market' in Datong Ancient City (Source: Author's photo, 2025).

the historical and cultural significance of these heritage sites, reducing them to mere commodities. Furthermore, public awareness and participation in the protection and preservation of cultural relics remain insufficient, preventing the true value of these historic assets from being effectively communicated to the public and preserved for future generations.

5.3.5. Loss of intangible cultural heritage

Datong Ancient City is not only home to invaluable tangible cultural heritage but also boasts a wealth of intangible cultural heritage elements. However, with the rapid progression of modernisation and globalisation, the preservation of traditional folk activities, handicrafts, music and dance has been severely undermined. Practices such as traditional coal carving, bronze craftsmanship, paper cutting and folk dances, once vital symbols of local culture, are increasingly losing their channels of transmission. Younger generations are progressively disconnected from these traditions, and the over-commercialisation of tourism has failed to sustain intangible cultural heritage. Traditional practices, once integral to local identity, have now lost their social significance and cultural context. The diminishing number of practitioners has further contributed to the loss of knowledge, leaving tourists with little opportunity to understand and appreciate the cultural practices that once defined the city.

6. Discussion

Datong's transformation is not a generic 'development versus protection' dilemma but a set of recurrent mechanisms concentrated at a few decision points. Three cross-cutting tensions recur: first, reconstruction that privileges visual coherence can depress Authenticity and Materials/Craft unless safeguards are in place; second, stronger Governance/Management, clearer Setting/Buffer instruments and routinised heritage-impact assessment (HIA) are associated with higher Integrity and fewer approval frictions; and third, tourism-led upgrades, while improving the public realm, risk tenant and function homogenisation along showcase streets unless carrying-capacity and benefit-sharing policies are explicit. Across cases, trade-offs cluster at a small number of choke-points—permit issuance, design freeze, procurement and view-corridor control—so the practical task is to make authenticity, and integrity impacts explicit at those moments and to record approval sequences rather than defer choices to construction. These patterns align with UNESCO/ICOMOS thinking (e.g. HUL; authenticity/integrity; setting/buffer; sustainable tourism), reflecting a shift from appearance-based protection to process-based stewardship that values craft continuity, participatory governance and change management. Methodologically, we work with a parameterised, evidence-traceable comparative matrix and structured qualitative coding, which enables cautious cross-site comparison without spurious precision. On this basis, we grounded in the three domains identified above—socioeconomic, political, historical—we propose a concise playbook for municipal practice (see [Figure 13](#)):

6.1. Socioeconomic: retention and distinctiveness

(i) Introduce a tenant-retention floor and a chain-store cap on priority streets (e.g. East & West Drum Tower Streets) to curb homogenisation; (ii) link rent support to locally embedded crafts/services and verified ICH practices; (iii) require shopfront modules to respect traditional frontage rhythm and signage coherence.

6.2. Political: governance instruments and review

(i) Require an Authenticity Impact Statement at design review for works affecting listed ensembles (e.g. Huayan, Shanhua, City Walls), including materials/workmanship compatibility and setting; (ii) align public-participation windows with decision points (permits, procurement, design freeze) and publicly post approval sequences; (iii) adopt a maintenance-before-makeover budget rule to rebalance routine care vs. spectacle projects.

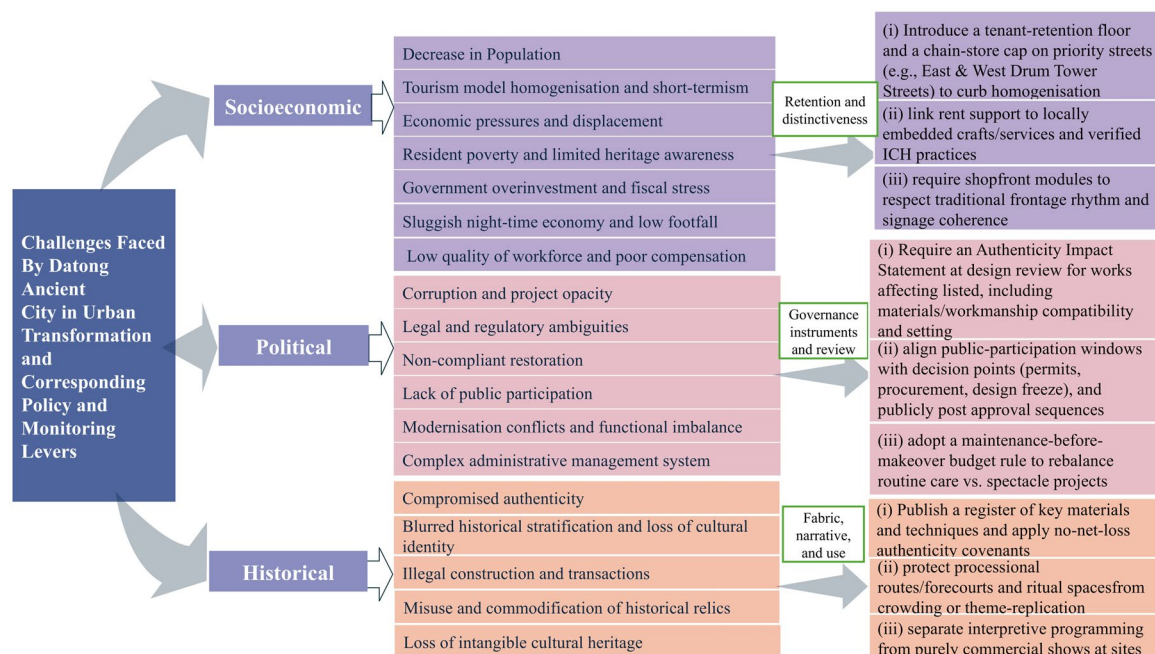


Figure 13. Framework of challenges facing the heritage landscape of Datong Ancient City in urban transformation, and corresponding policy/monitoring levers.

6.3. Historical: fabric, narrative and use

(i) Publish a register of key materials and techniques and apply no-net-loss authenticity covenants (fabric, workmanship, setting, interpretation); (ii) protect processional routes/forecourts and ritual spaces (e.g. Confucian/Guandi temple precincts) from crowding or theme-replication; (iii) separate interpretive programming from purely commercial shows at sites such as the Palace of Prince Dai.

To move from principles to operations, we propose two lightweight, repeatable tools at site scale: (i) Ex-ante risk map. Use the domain parameters to locate hotspots (e.g. frontage conversions, permit bottlenecks, material-substitution risks) prior to approvals; focus design review and mitigation where risks cluster. (ii) Ex-post monitoring baseline. Track quarterly with simple, auditable indicators: asset-condition records, maintenance ledgers, footfall counts (day/night), tenant composition, signage conformity and participation records; publish dashboards to enable public oversight.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how a state-led, investment-driven programme reshaped the heritage landscape of Datong Ancient City (2008–2024; follow-up February 2025). Guided by the 2021 HUL Call for Action, we adapted and localised an existing framework of heritage-protection challenges and operationalised it through directed qualitative content analysis and triangulated process tracing within a parameterised comparative matrix (structured qualitative coding; no numeric scoring), aligned with UNESCO/ICOMOS guidance. We organised multi-source evidence across three domains, socioeconomic, political and historical, to make development–protection trade-offs empirically visible at site scale. Across nine cases, we observed recurring patterns, including tourism-oriented investment coinciding with tenant and function homogenisation (socioeconomic); approval/coordination frictions and maintenance–display imbalances (political); and pressures on authenticity/integrity and narrative interpretation (historical). These patterns are synthesised into the challenge framework and inform a concise policy playbook and a lightweight monitoring toolkit.

7.1. Generalisability, limitations and future research

This is a historically delimited single case focused on Datong Ancient City. Our evidence draws on documentary and visual materials; no resident or small-business interviews were conducted. Uneven

temporal coverage, archival survival and publication practices may bias the record towards policy-level perspectives, and findings may be sensitive to subsequent policy changes. In line with these constraints, we avoid causal claims and bound all inferences to Datong Ancient City's transformation window and to comparable governance contexts.

Accordingly, cross-city implications are tentative. The proposed lens and tools—ex-ante risk mapping and an ex-post monitoring baseline—are transferable heuristics, not universal metrics. They are most applicable to medium-sized historic cities experiencing timetable-bound capital programmes and tourism-oriented image-making; cities with community-led, incremental restoration or different regulatory regimes will require parameter adaptation and instrument equivalence. Future research could (i) deploy the same codebook across a small comparative set (e.g. one Japanese, one European and one Chinese case) to test recurrence; (ii) incorporate oral histories and participatory mapping to capture lived experience; and (iii) add routine operational data (maintenance logs, time-use records, footfall counts) and robustness checks on the parameterised matrix to probe durability beyond Datong Ancient City.

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Authors contributions

CRedit: **Suhua Wang**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Jing Zhang**: Data curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Norliza Mohd Isa**: Data curation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Lintong Li**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Ethical considerations

All materials (images and any data excerpts) were fully de-identified and are presented only in aggregate; no information that could reasonably identify individuals—including online aliases or social-media handles—is included. Fieldwork was conducted in public settings, and no personal or otherwise identifiable information was collected. Photographs were composed to avoid capturing individuals; where any persons incidentally appeared, their faces and other identifying features were blurred/obscured prior to analysis and publication. All analysed documents were publicly available. All materials were stored securely, and procedures adhered to standard ethical guidelines for non-intrusive, document-based research. The study received ethics approval from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (Approval No.: UTMREC-2025-147).

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the first author.

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