

A Study on Placeness Evaluation of the Suzhou Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block: From the Perspective of Tourist Perceptions

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes and evaluates abstract placeness and proposes strategies to enhance the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block by integrating the perceptions of multiple subjects, namely tourists and indigenous residents, providing a reference for the development and protection of historical and cultural blocks. Based on the dimensions of placeness perception proposed by Relph, and taking the Suzhou Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block as a case study, grounded theory was used to extract elements from tourists' perception content. Combined with the characteristics of historical blocks, a structural equation model for placeness evaluation was established, comprising three dimensions: material landscape, human actions, and local meaning. Empirical research reveals that the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block exhibits an incomplete expression of local meaning caused by spatial fragmentation and redundant symbols. Therefore, in the protection and utilization of historical and cultural blocks, disharmonious elements at all spatial and social levels must be standardized to accurately convey local meaning.

KEY WORDS: placeness; tourist perceptions; Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block

Introduction

"Placeness" is the uniqueness of a place that distinguishes it from other places [1], and it is a highly condensed expression of local characteristics. With the rapid development of the cultural tourism industry, to enhance urban competitiveness, it is necessary to rely on space to present its placeness and help people form a structured understanding of that specific location [2]. Historical and cultural blocks (hereinafter referred to as historical blocks) are traditional areas that have historically served as places where individual life activities took place and still have corresponding social functions in the present day. They preserve a considerable amount of historical remnants of physical space, continue the local customs, memories, and other intangible cultural heritage, and thus present a highly

localized perceptual value [3]. As an important window for the formation and display of urban placeness, historical blocks play a vital role in the formation of a city's placeness. However, in the process of development and transformation, some inappropriate cultural tourism developments, through the continuous copying and superimposition of a large number of modern elements, have caused historical blocks to gradually lose their meaning [4]. To avoid tourists struggling to perceive the placeness of historical blocks and to promote the sustainable preservation of these blocks, it is essential to understand and analyze their current situation of placeness.

Over the past 40 years, theoretical and practical explorations related to the protection of the placeness charac-

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teristics of historical blocks have yielded fruitful results. Early scholars embedded placeness theory into the local context and proposed that historical blocks should have placeness, including uniqueness, authenticity, and historicity [5-7]. As the revitalization of historical blocks through tourism development emerged in practice, scholars have used Agnew's "location, locale and sense of place" framework to qualitatively explore the formation and cultivation of placeness and have proposed that the construction of the placeness of historical blocks should be based on the above dimensions [8-14]. In recent years, in the face of the "placelessness" phenomenon in the process of tourism development, scholars have begun to pay attention to its causes and have proposed strategies for placemaking in further development [15-17]. However, these strategies are mostly limited to the space itself and have not established a multi-dimensional model for comprehensive analysis. At the same time, they lack synchronous attention to the subject perceiving placeness.

In general, with the development of spatial practices and placeness theory in historical blocks, placeness has become a key focus in the development and protection of historical blocks. Research on the placeness of historical blocks is relatively complete, but the gap in research separating placeness and subject perception needs to be bridged. The theory of the three elements of placeness perception proposed by Relph includes both the dimensions of human perception of placeness and the dimensions of placeness presentation [18], and the connection between them can be established accordingly.

In summary, this paper attempts to extract the elements of tourist perceptions of placeness from three dimensions: "material landscape", "human actions", and "local meaning". Taking the Suzhou Pingjiang Historical Block as an example, it uses grounded theory to extract the elements of tourists' perceptions of placeness, determines the connotation of local meaning based on the characteristics of the historical block, and establishes an exploratory evaluation model. This study evaluates and analyzes the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block: It describes the level of perception, the path effect of influencing variables, and the relationship between the two; i-

dentifies the gap between the placeness content perceived by tourists and the intended local meaning, analyzes the current status and problems of placeness in the Pingjiang Historical Block, and aims to provide some reference value for the continuation and improvement of the placeness of historical blocks.

1 Research design

1.1 Overview of the case study area

Suzhou Pingjiang Historical Block, selected as the case study for this research, is located in the northeastern part of Suzhou's ancient city. Designated as one of the first Chinese Historical and Cultural Blocks jointly recognized by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the National Cultural Heritage Administration, it is the largest and best-preserved historical block within the ancient city of Suzhou [19]. The *Suzhou Historical and Cultural City Protection Plan* (2017) positioned the Pingjiang Historical Block as an experience area of "Suzhou-style life", pointing out that it should be guided to build cultural, commercial, and leisure functions and integrate surrounding resources to jointly construct a local cultural tourism window for Suzhou's historical city.

From the perspective of research content, as a residential historical block focusing on "protection", it faces the danger of stagnant vitality and has a strong need to use modern tourism development to help protect it sustainably. From the perspective of the data sample, the Pingjiang Historical Block has undergone a transformation from gentrification to commercialization and tourism in the wave of urban renewal, becoming a place for tourists from other places and international tourist groups to experience the local culture of Suzhou. Therefore, selecting it as a case study to investigate and analyze tourist perceptions of the placeness of historical blocks is highly representative and offers significant sample advantages.

1.2 Research methods

Using statistical quantitative analysis methods to construct quality models and design scales [20] and using qualitative research methods to explore the subjective perception of consumption space [21] are important means for modern scholars to measure and study placeness perception. This paper in-

tegrates research content and methods, and ultimately selects a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore and analyze tourists' placeness perceptions: Grounded theory is used to extract perceptual elements, combined with the specific local connotations of historical blocks, variables are identified, path relationships are predefined, and finally, a structural equation model is established and used for empirical testing and analysis.

Grounded theory is the main method of qualitative research. Researchers use methods such as interviews and observations to collect data, conduct a holistic exploration of the research phenomenon, generate theories from the original data, and obtain an interpretive understanding of the phenomenon [22]. Structural equation modeling is a statistical method for exploring causal relationships between phenomena and describing relationships using model diagrams. It is often used to test the relationships between multiple latent variables and manifest variables, and between latent variables [23]. Grounded theory emphasizes "discovery logic", while structural equation modeling has "verification logic". Combining these two methods to analyze tourists' placeness perceptions allows for the inte-

gration of subjective perceptions with objective mathematical models, making it scientifically applicable for exploring the placeness of historical blocks and their subjective perceptions.

2 Model construction

2.1 Data coding and scale generation

2.1.1 Coding process

From October 2021 to July 2022, the authors conducted field research in the Pingjiang Historical Block multiple times, conducted in-depth interviews with 52 tourists, and compiled 69,000 words of textual data; they also collected 262 related posts and comments on Xiaohongshu. This paper uses the format of "subject type—subject number" for coding, such as T01 represents the first tourist to be interviewed. Based on semantic analysis of the respondents and through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Table 1), textual data were screened, concepts were extracted, and categories were merged around the tourist perception cycle. Ultimately, the local element framework of the Pingjiang Historical Block was developed step by step.

Table 1 Examples of open coding

Data code	Data text	Conceptualization	Preliminary category extraction
T01	Unlike the grand scale of historic districts in Beijing, this place feels more refined, with its narrow streets.	Street scale	Street-and-lanetexture
T50	I sat in a small pavilion, looking at the plants and the river nearby. I felt that I could become part of this place.	Resting space	Leisure node
...	...	...	...
T39	People actually live here, and there is laundry hanging out to dry. This everyday atmosphere makes the place feel authentic to me.	Residents' everyday life	Authentic everyday life
T16	I bought a piece of silver jewelry designed by a local designer. Look, the small window reveals the garden landscape, and I think this is characteristic of Suzhou.	Souvenir consumption	Cultural and creative products

The three-level coding extracted two core dimensions of tourist perception: Material landscape and human actions; four categories and their corresponding 15 concepts. The comments collected from Xiaohongshu were coded to further test the theoretical saturation. No new factors were found, indicating that the above categories have covered all the local tourist-perceptible elements of the historical block.

2.1.2 Variable interpretation and scale development

(1) Material landscape

Material landscape can be understood as the compo-

sition of the external spatial environment, which is the visual starting point for tourists when they enter a place and provides a background for further perception of placeness. Semantic extraction and classification revealed that tourists perceive material landscape elements at two levels. First, the protection of historical features and relics. At this level, visitors to the Pingjiang Historical Block often mention concepts such as "Suzhou-style buildings with white walls and black tiles", "ancient bridges and wells with a long history", and "a continuous water network

pattern” as prominent features of its local character. Second, the landscape elements created to meet the needs of modern life and tourism development and to achieve sustainable local characteristics are mostly reflected in concepts such as “well-maintained roads” and “leisure spaces for people to stop and relax”.

(2) Human actions

Human actions, with the material landscape as the background and relying on the local internal functions, further enrich the subject’s placeness perception, which is the core link of perceiving placeness [24]. Human actions are extremely rich and complex, referring not only to one’s own behaviors, but also to the behavior of indigenous residents and operators who are regarded by tourists as placeness elements, namely, observation behavior driven by curiosity and consumption behavior triggered by tourism motives. Specifically, in the Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block, this includes observations of local cultural heritage preservation activities such as “Listening to Pingjiang Stories” and “Seeing the Su-style Life”; as well as the consumption and experience of cultural symbols such as “A Bowl of Suzhou-Style Mung Bean Soup” and “A Song of Pingtan”.

(3) Local meaning

When a person takes a place as a place, it is a process of giving their own system of meaning to the outside world [25]. For the subject, local meaning includes the perception of placeness and the resulting sense of place. In existing research, scholars agree that the basic characteristics of historical blocks include: Typical appearance, authenticity of remains, and historical function [26], which can be extracted as uniqueness, authenticity, and historicity. “Sense of place” refers to the psychological feelings that arise after perception, and its connotation includes a sense of satisfaction, a sense of identity, and a sense of attachment. As tourists immerse themselves in the experience, the historic block is no longer a space irrelevant to them. During interviews, tourists used concepts such as “leisure”, “pleasure”, and “nostalgia” to express their sense of place.

In summary, it is believed that tourists accumulate materials for perceiving local meaning by sensing ele-

ments of thematerial landscape and human actions, and that placeness is expressed through three dimensions: material landscape, human actions, and local meaning. This paper ultimately selected the following as latent variables: Landscape protection, spatial design, cultural inheritance, cultural consumption, placeness perception, and sense of place. It also selected 21 corresponding observed variables to jointly constitute the system of variables influencing the local tourist perception of historical blocks (Table 2).

2.2 Model Path Assumptions

Building on the extraction of local tourist perceptions of the Pingjiang Historical Block above, a conceptual model is established based on the interpretation and improvement of existing research. The model makes the following assumptions about the causal relationships among six variables: Landscape protection, spatial design, cultural inheritance, cultural consumption, placeness perception, and sense of place: H1-H4: Landscape protection, spatial design, cultural inheritance, and cultural consumption are positively correlated with placeness perception; H5-H8: Landscape protection, spatial design, cultural inheritance, and cultural consumption are positively correlated with sense of place; H9: Placeness perception is positively correlated with sense of place (Fig. 1).

3 Model validation and correction

3.1 Data collection

The questionnaire, determined based on the model, consists of two parts: Personal information and the questionnaire subject’s perception and evaluation, which includes items corresponding to 21 observed variables under 6 latent variables. The main body of the questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale, assigning scores of 5 to 1 for “agree”, “somewhat agree”, “neutral”, “somewhat disagree”, and “disagree” to collect tourists’ perception evaluations from various dimensions of placeness. This study used face-to-face interviews to collect questionnaires. The survey period was from July to September 2022. Tourists were randomly selected within the Pingjiang Historical Block for interviews. A total of 401 questionnaires were collected, and 362 valid questionnaires were obtained after screening, with an effective rate of 90.3% .

Table 2 Scale of variables influencing local tourist perceptions in historical blocks

Select dimension	Latent variable	Indicator abbreviation	Visible variables	Indicator description
Material landscape dimension	Landscape protection	SP	Traditional layout preserved	The traditional layout of adjacent river streets, parallel waterways, and land routes
			Street and alley texture continuity	Interconnected, small-scale streets and alleys
			Architectural style maintenance	Harmony between modern and historical architectural styles
			Preservation of historical elements	The remaining historical sites, such as traditional houses, ancient wells, ancient bridges, and ancient trees
	Space creation	SU	External paving facilities	Ground paving, building appearance, and materials
			Leisure node creation	Public spaces for leisure, relaxation, and social activities
			Green landscape design	Green landscape matching local characteristics
			Visitor signage facilities	Explanatory elements and readable signage indicating spatial flow
Human actions dimension	Cultural inheritance	CI	Historical stories carried	The historical evolution and regional culture that a place carries
			Intangible cultural heritage inheritance	Folk crafts and intangible cultural heritage passed down by indigenous residents
			Preservation of authentic life	Preservation of residents' original living spaces and functions
	Cultural consumption	CC	Traditional food business	Local cuisine
			Organization of experiential activities	Organizing distinctive cultural experience activities
			Sales of cultural and creative products	Local cultural and creative crafts and souvenirs
			Local brand integration	Local cultural tourism service brands
Local meaning dimension	Placeness perception	LC	Authenticity	Consistency between historical information and current local remains
			Historicity	The preservation of its profound historical significance
			Uniqueness	This place has unique characteristics that set it apart from other places.
	Sense of place	PF	Satisfaction	Whether the local area meets the subject's expectations and perceptions of the local area
			Sense of identity	Whether or not to agree that local characteristics are properly recognized
			Sense of attachment	Whether there is any intention for extended activities, such as staying or promoting in the local area

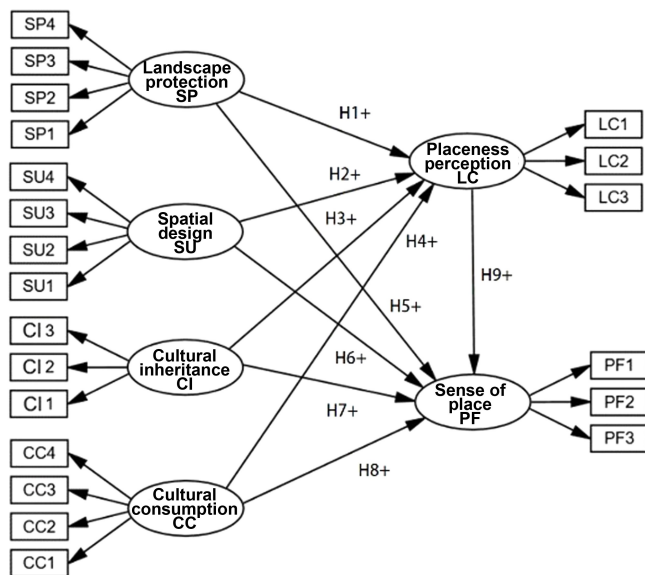


Figure 1 Preset of the local tourist perception model

3.2 Data validation

3.2.1 Reliability analysis

Reliability refers to the consistency of the results obtained, and is measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient: The total scale Alpha coefficient is 0.895, and the Alpha coefficients of each subscale are greater than 0.7. The questionnaire has good reliability.

3.2.2 Exploratory factor analysis

(1) KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity

Validity analysis can indicate the degree of effectiveness of the measurement results in reflecting the true situation. The KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity were performed on the data sample. The results showed that the KMO value was 0.862 and the sig value of Bartlett's test

of sphericity was 0.00, indicating that the variables were relatively independent and could be further analyzed.

(2) Test of explanatory power

First, the significance of each observed variable was tested using loading coefficients ($P < 0.05$), and the standardized loading coefficient value was > 0.7 , indicating that the observed variables met the dimensionality reduction requirements. As shown in Table 3, based on the four latent variables, all observed variables were significant, and the standardized coefficients met the requirements. It can be considered that the observed variables have accumulated a sufficient amount of variance explained for the corresponding latent variables.

Table 3 Test of explanatory power of observed variables

Latent variable	Observed variable	Standardized load factor (Std.)	P-value
Landscape protection SP	The traditional layout is retained in SP1	.861	
	Street and alley texture continuity SP2	.865	***
	Architectural style maintenance SP3	.918	***
	Historical elements remained SP4	.866	***
Spatial design SU	External paving facilities SU1	.840	
	Leisure node creation SU2	.855	***
	Green landscape facilities SU3	.866	***
	Visitor signage facilities SU4	.733	***
Cultural inheritance CI	Historical stories carried CI1	.831	
	Intangible cultural heritage inheritance CI2	.819	***
	Authentic life preservation CI3	.761	***
Cultural consumption CC	Traditional food business CC1	.791	
	Experiential activity organization CC2	.811	***
	Sales of cultural and creative products CC3	.838	***
	Local brand integration CC4	.799	***
Placeness perception LC	Authenticity LC1	.832	
	Historicity LC2	.860	***
	Uniqueness LC3	.867	***
Sense of place PF	Satisfaction PF1	.784	
	Sense of identity PF2	.800	***
	Sense of attachment PF3	.812	***

Secondly, we observed the path relationships between

latent variables (Table 4). The path coefficients between each latent variable were significant at the 0.05 level, and the structural path coefficients between latent variables were positive. This indicates that the variables selected in this model are highly representative and highly correlated, and the preset H1-H9 paths are all valid.

Table 4 Model path regression coefficients

Assumption	Path	Standardized load factor Std.	Critical ratio T-value	P-value	Conclusions
H1	SP→LC	0.151	2.634	**	Established
H2	SU→LC	0.207	3.471	***	Established
H3	CI→LC	0.251	3.952	***	Established
H4	CC→LC	0.186	3.124	**	Established
H5	SP→PF	0.138	2.631	**	Established
H6	SU→PF	0.140	2.539	*	Established
H7	CI→PF	0.178	2.999	**	Established
H8	CC→PF	0.194	3.503	***	Established
H9	LC→PF	0.341	5.698	***	Established

Notes: *** indicates significance at the 0.001 level, ** indicates significance at the 0.01 level, and * indicates significance at the 0.05 level.

3.3 Model correction

3.3.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

Construct validity testing is the observation and evaluation of the degree of fit between the model and the actual data[19]. This article selects 11 commonly used indicators. After calculation, GFI and RFI are not ideal, RMR and AGFI are less than ideal, and the remaining indicators are all ideal. By observing the MI index and combining it with the covariance relationship at the theoretical level, the model was modified by adding six latent variable correlations: SP—SU, SP—CI, SP—CC, SU—CI, SU—CC, and CI—CC. The modified model has an ideal fit (Table 5).

3.3.2 Revised model

All nine paths presupposed in the revised model (Fig. 2) are valid and show a significant positive correlation. The six newly added pathways demonstrate that latent variable landscape protection, spatial design, cultural inheritance, and cultural consumption all have a positive impact on each other. From the perspective of the material landscape and human actions, there is an influence between the protection of traditional features and the spatial design

driven by modern needs, as well as between the inheritance of the cultural core and specific cultural consumption behaviors. From the perspective of dimensions, it is con-

sistent with the view that the material landscape serves as a background to carry human actions, and there is a mutual influence between the two dimensions.

Table 5 Comparison of model fit indices

Goodness-of-fit index	Indicator fit range	Preset model	Conclusion	Corrected model	Conclusion
Chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2/df)	1-3	2.413	Ideal	1.782	Ideal
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.063	Ideal	0.047	Ideal
RMR	< 0.08	0.148	Not ideal	0.04	Ideal
GFI	> 0.9	0.899	Closer to the ideal	0.927	Ideal
AGFI	> 0.9	0.807	Not ideal	0.904	Ideal
RFI	> 0.9	0.894	Closer to the ideal	0.922	Ideal
CFI	> 0.9	0.944	Ideal	0.97	Ideal
IFI	> 0.9	0.945	Ideal	0.97	Ideal
NFI	> 0.9	0.909	Ideal	0.935	Ideal
PGFI	> 0.5	0.700	Ideal	0.698	Ideal
PNFI	> 0.5	0.779	Ideal	0.775	Ideal

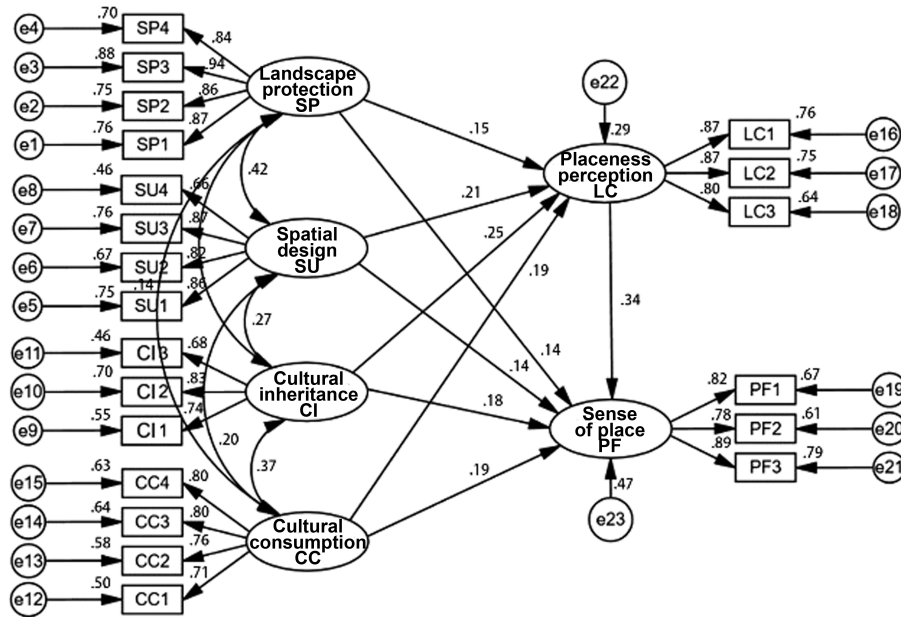


Figure 2 Modified model with standardized path coefficients

4 Empirical analysis

4.1 Description of results

4.1.1 Measurement of impact and perception

The mediation effect test was conducted on paths pointing directly to the sense of place variables to determine the total effect of each variable on sense of place, that is, the degree of influence of each variable on tourists' sense of place (Table 6). Tourists' perception levels were measured as follows: Based on the standardized factor loadings, the regression weights of each variable were

determined. The larger the weight value, the greater the impact on perception formation. The final perception index was obtained by multiplying the variable weights by the corresponding mean values of perception (Table 7).

Table 6 Path effects of the sense of place variables

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
SP→PF	0.138	0.052	0.190
SU→PF	0.140	0.071	0.211
CI→PF	0.178	0.086	0.264
CC→PF	0.194	0.063	0.257
LC→PF	0.341	—	0.341

Table 7 Variable weights and perception index

Latent variables	Observed variable	Standardized factor loading	Observed variable weight	Perception level of observed variable	Latent variable perception level
Landscape protection (SP)	SP1	0.874	0.249	3.865	3.815
	SP2	0.865	0.246	3.854	
	SP3	0.938	0.267	3.831	
	SP4	0.837	0.238	3.710	
Space design (SU)	SU1	0.865	0.267	3.757	3.584
	SU2	0.819	0.253	3.544	
	SU3	0.873	0.270	3.550	
	SU4	0.677	0.209	3.486	
Cultural inheritance (CI)	CI1	0.741	0.329	3.616	3.774
	CI2	0.834	0.370	4.033	
	CI3	0.679	0.301	3.674	
Cultural consumption (CC)	CC1	0.706	0.230	3.124	3.398
	CC2	0.762	0.248	3.804	
	CC3	0.803	0.262	3.348	
	CC4	0.796	0.260	3.318	
Placeness (LC)	LC1	0.872	0.343	3.727	3.717
	LC2	0.868	0.341	3.790	
	LC3	0.802	0.315	3.635	
Sense of place (PF)	PF1	0.816	0.329	3.552	3.740
	PF2	0.778	0.313	3.751	
	PF3	0.890	0.358	3.917	

4.1.2 Description of perception level features

An observation of the distribution of the perception index reveals (Fig. 3): There are differences in the perception levels between landscape protection and spatial design under the material landscape dimension. The perception indices of observed variables corresponding to landscape protection have the highest mean and show consistency, while the perception indices of observed variables corresponding to spatial design are slightly lower. There is a more significant polarization among the latent variables corresponding to the human actions dimension. The perception index of cultural inheritance is higher than that of cultural consumption. Among them, the perception index of “intangible cultural inheritance (CI2)” is the highest in the whole table, while the perception indices of “traditional food business (CC1)”, “quality of cultural and creative products (CC3)”, and “local brand integration (CC4)” are at the bottom of the whole table. Overall, variables related

to landscape protection and cultural inheritance exhibit high-perception characteristics, while variables related to spatial design and cultural consumption exhibit low-perception characteristics. This suggests that variables related to protection, inheritance, and development/utilization show a clear differential distribution of perception indices. Observing the differences within the dimension of local meaning reveals that tourists have a higher perception of the “historicity (LC2)” of a place, but a slightly lower perception of its “uniqueness (LC3)”. After the placeness perception, the sense of place level generates more “sense of attachment (PF3)” that can drive continuation behaviors, while the “satisfaction (PF1)” generated by meeting expectations is slightly lower.

4.1.3 Description of the relationship between the degree of impact and the perception level

First, regarding the placeness perception, there are certain differences among the tourist perception indices,

which are ranked from high to low as “historicity (LC2)”, “authenticity (LC1)”, and “uniqueness (LC3)”. To explore which elements contribute to the differences in placeness perception, linear regression analysis was used to select the observed variables that significantly affect placeness perception under the two dimensions of material landscape and human actions. The degree of influence and perception value were plotted in a four-quadrant diagram. An observation of Fig. 4 reveals: “sales of cultural and creative products (CC3)” had a

significant negative impact on tourists’ perception of authenticity; “preservation of traditional layout (SP1)” made a great positive contribution to tourists’ high perception of historicity, while “local brand integration (CC4)” had a certain lowering effect; “sales of cultural and creative products (CC3)” and “local brand integration (CC4)” greatly reduced tourists’ perception of local uniqueness, while “preservation of traditional layout (SP1)” and “street and alley texture continuity (SP2)” were the sources of tourists’ perception of uniqueness.

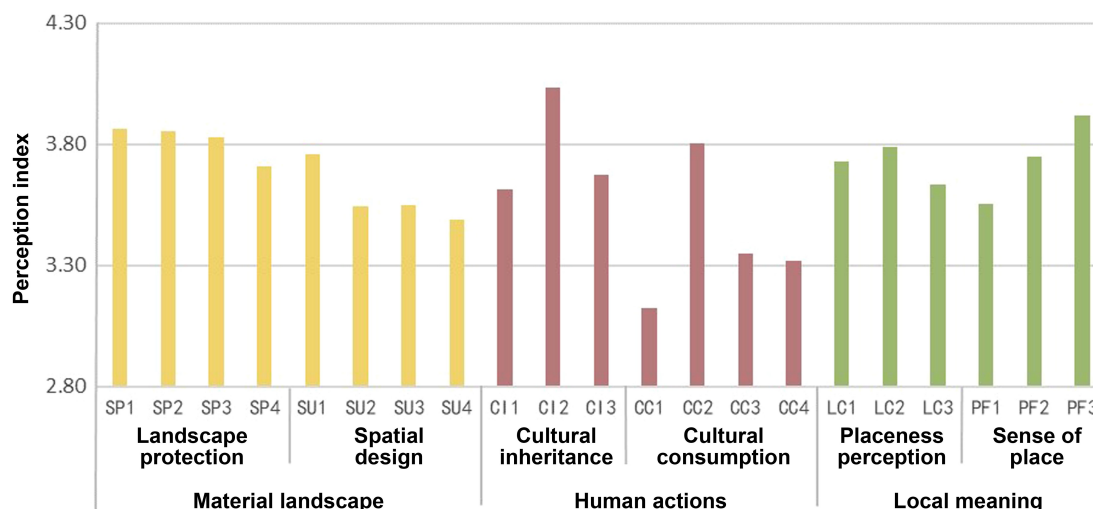


Figure 3 Perception index distribution chart

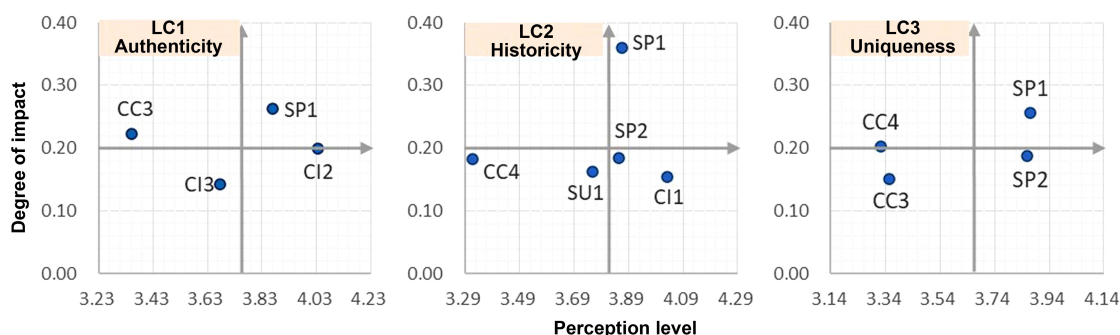


Figure 4 Path effect of local perceived variables and perception index quadrant diagram

Secondly, promoting tourists’ placeness perception is intended to create a stronger sense of place. Based on the data obtained above, a four-quadrant diagram was drawn to describe the relationship between the perception index of each observed variable and the latent variable under the two dimensions of material landscape and human actions, and the path effect value on the sense of place. The diagram (Fig. 5) shows that the latent variables of the material landscape dimension have a slightly lower influence on

the sense of place, and the variables of landscape protection and spatial design are located in the maintenance zone and the opportunity zone, respectively. The observed variables corresponding to landscape protection are concentrated in the high-impact-high-perception quadrant, while the observed variables of spatial design, “leisure node creation (SU2)” and “green landscape design (SU3)”, are located in the high-impact-low-perception quadrant and need to be improved. The latent variables of the human actions

dimension have a high degree of influence on the sense of place, while the level of perception shows a polarization. Cultural inheritance and cultural consumption are located

in the advantage zone and the repair zone, respectively. Among them, the perception index of the cultural consumption variable urgently needs to be improved.

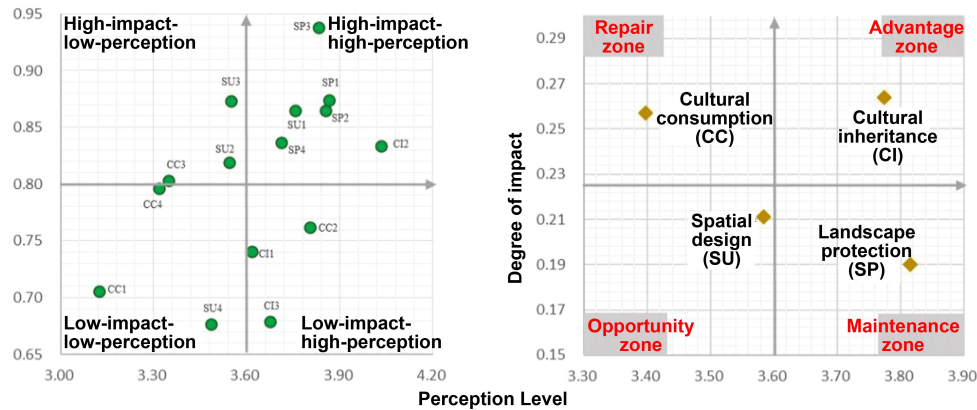


Figure 5 Local perception variable path effect and perception index four-quadrant diagram

4.2 Analysis of the current Status of placeness expression in the pingjiang historical block

The State Council's Approval of the Suzhou City Master Plan in 1986 proposed "to fully protect the ancient city's features and outstanding historical and cultural heritage... to develop tourism and expand tourism capacity". Since then, all versions of plans at the historical city and block level have regarded the protection of historical culture and features and tourism development as important missions and driving forces for the renewal and development of Suzhou's ancient city, actively preserving and expressing its placeness. Based on the above results and in comparison with the actual situation and planning content, the following analysis examines the current state of placeness expression in the Pingjiang Historical Block from three dimensions: Material landscape, human actions, and local meaning.

4.2.1 Material landscape dimension: good preservation of landscape and the fragmented presentation of space

Traditional features have always been a core theme in the preservation of historical blocks. The local government attaches great importance to the protection of the traditional features of the Pingjiang Historical Block. From building restoration to form improvement, it has introduced and implemented a number of policies and measures to continue the water town style and pattern of "streets and waterways running parallel, with white walls casting

reflections". This has laid a solid foundation for the inheritance and expression of placeness. Tourists have a high level of perception of the preservation of the historical block, which reflects its excellent preservation results. However, simply preserving the traditional appearance is not enough to achieve the sustainable protection of historical blocks. It is necessary to address the needs of modern development and inject vitality into historical blocks.

To accelerate local development and revitalization, the Pingjiang Historical Block has been adding tourism facilities since 2002, and its spatial design is oriented towards tourist destinations. The existing plan has repeatedly proposed to position the Pingjiang Historical Block as a traditional residential block with distinctive water town characteristics. At the block level, in accordance with the requirements of the higher-level planning, the goal of tourism development is to showcase the traditional cultural forms of Suzhou and the natural living customs of the indigenous residents. It is clear that a complete system of leisure tourism, slow-walking streets and alleys, and waterway tours will be arranged within the block, connecting the block into a fully functional tourist destination. It emphasizes the design and layout guidance of the environmental landscape to provide a spatial background for sightseeing, residence, and communication activities with Suzhou local life as the main content. In the actual spatial design, the tourist placeness perception conveyed by the relevant elements is not high, indicating that there is a cer-

tain gap between the placeness reality and the envisioned goals. Tourists often equate Pingjiang Road with the Pingjiang Historical Block, thus creating a spatial impression of “a straight road” or “a commercial street with a somewhat traditional style”. Specifically, the crude construction of commercial spaces has reduced the spatial expression of a block with extremely strong placeness into a single commercial street form [27]. The insufficient distribution of leisure spaces causes tourists to just walk and

look at Pingjiang Road, interrupting their continuous exploration of the inner streets and alleys (Fig. 6). The typical placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block—Suzhou-style life—is precisely the lively, everyday atmosphere interspersed in the alleys. This lack of guiding spatial design fragments the overall space of Pingjiang Historical Block, and the fragmented placeness, lacking complete information, prevents tourists from fully perceiving it, making it difficult to recognize its uniqueness.



Figure 6 Current status of block alleys, roads, and nodal spaces

4.2.2 The dimension of human actions: Excellent inheritance of culture and redundant cultivation of symbols

Pingjiang Historical Block has also invested a great deal of effort in the inheritance and protection of intangible cultural heritage, achieving remarkable results. Therefore, in the human actions dimension, tourists have a high degree of placeness perception of the cultural inheritance variable. The placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block has been well preserved. Crafts, customs, and the daily life of indigenous residents all interpret placeness; they are ongoing local stories [28]. However, for tourists as subjects, consumption behavior is the core activity in the tourism experience.

Cultural consumption undoubtedly serves as an industrial model, providing a vehicle for the inheritance and protection of intangible cultural heritage. At the level of historical and cultural cities, the plan designates “water town memories” and “Suzhou-style life” as local cultural symbols of Pingjiang. At the level of historical blocks, specific planning and action guidelines are proposed. The 2013 *Suzhou Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block Protection Plan* proposed providing performance venues for performing arts content, organizing activities for experiential content, and setting up residential-style homestays for Suzhou-style lifestyle content. Multiple industrial planning

and investment promotion activities were carried out based on the principles of “slow” characteristics and “refined” advantages. However, the current situation shows that the tourist placeness perception of the cultural consumption dimension is at the lowest value on the scale, indicating that tourists’ perception is disconnected from the planned placeness content; the symbols within the block are redundant, and its own characteristics are disjointed and indistinct.

Specifically, this manifests as centralization and de-localization. The main consumption space in the Pingjiang Historical Block is concentrated on Pingjiang Road, and the concentration of consumption activities confines tourists to Pingjiang Road. Furthermore, its formats merely copy the chain brand stores commonly found in tourist destinations; they sell fast-food fried food that destroys the local atmosphere; new leisure models derived from internet-famous bookstores and cat cafes have impacted the leisure models representing the place; and the stores are filled with a large number of souvenirs that have absolutely no connection to local characteristics (Fig. 7). Functional formats forcibly pasted with the placeness symbols of the Pingjiang Historical Block lower the overall value of the Pingjiang Historical Block’s traditional culture, constituting a kind of “creative destruction” of the block’s

rustic and subtle features and cultural atmosphere. This affects tourists' perception of their consumption behavior and weakens placeness expression. The increasingly extensive management model has caused the current consumption situation to fail to keep pace with the planning vision. The ideal of creating centuries-old local catering and accommodation shops and supporting authentic, original lo-

cal industries has failed to be realized in the consumption discourse [29]. During the cultivation of symbols, a lack of attention was paid to the connection with local culture. The implantation of symbols manifested as an irresponsible, redundant piling up, as well as symbol-pasting behaviors that blindly pursued the conversion of cultural benefits [30].



Figure 7 Consumer businesses that conflict with the placeness of the block

4.2.3 Local meaning dimension: Accurate positioning of meaning and inadequate transmission of connotations

Whether it is the material landscape as a backdrop or the human actions carried by the function of a place, they are inseparable from local meaning. Only by fully and correctly deconstructing and grasping it can it be presented in its entirety. Analysis of the measurement results of placeness perception and sense of place under the local meaning dimension shows that there is still room for improvement in the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block. In particular, the connotation of uniqueness has not been well presented, resulting in tourists' low expected satisfaction and sense of local identity.

As a residential historical block, authentic Suzhou-style life is the most unique placeness connotation of the Pingjiang Historical Block. This point has been repeatedly defined and mentioned in the planning. However, it has not been fully conveyed when the local meaning is actually implemented. There are also mismatches between planning and management, and the placeness connotation has not been taken as the criterion for the entire work process. For example, in traffic management, it is not recognized that the expression of placeness is inseparable from the interaction between indigenous residents and tourists. The scenic-spot-style development prohibits indigenous resi-

dents from riding bicycles on Pingjiang Road, which not only causes inconvenience to indigenous residents but also brings constraints to tourists' perception of placeness, exacerbating the fragmentation of streets and alleys. The placeness connotation was not deeply recognized and upheld as a core principle in the process of expression. This manifested in planning and management methods failing to fully grasp the value of placeness, making tourists confined to a scenic spot space with monotonous functions and a lacking overall environment, leading to a bias in the perception of the historical block's placeness.

5 Conclusions and discussion

5.1 Conclusions

This paper takes the Suzhou Pingjiang Historical Block as an example for empirical research. Based on tourists' placeness perception content and related studies, it constructs a structural equation model of tourists' placeness perception of historical blocks, verifies its path, evaluates and summarizes the current status and problems of placeness in the Pingjiang Historical Block, and comprehensively proposes strategies for enhancing the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block by incorporating interviews with indigenous residents. This provides an evaluation system and case reference for the enhancement of placeness in historical blocks.

The verified path relationships are as follows: The

perception of elements in the material landscape and the human actions dimension jointly influence tourists' perception of local meaning. Specifically, each variable directly affects placeness perception and sense of place, while also exerting an additional indirect effect on the sense of place through placeness perception (superposition effect). At the path coefficient level, human actions have a higher impact on local meaning than material landscape; at the perception level, the overall levels of the material landscape and human actions dimensions are relatively consistent, but there are differences within the dimensions. The placeness perception levels of latent variables related to protection and inheritance are significantly higher than those of development and utilization, and there is a significant disparity between protection and development.

The analysis of tourists' perceived content reflects that the Pingjiang Historical Block attaches great importance to the protection of placeness, but the expression effect is still insufficient. That is, the fragmented expression is caused by the uncoordinated creation of scenic areas and living spaces, and the heterogeneous dissemination of local culture is caused by placeness information being hijacked by consumption. Specifically, the material landscape dimension reveals that there is a fragmentation in representing the placeness of the space during spatial design. The scenic-spot-style tourist experience limits visitors' activities to the "street" and causes a loss of perception of the "block". The human actions dimension reveals that the Pingjiang Historical Block has redundant and unrestrained commercial symbols, making it difficult for tourists to perceive its authentic placeness symbols. The local meaning dimension shows that the overall level of placeness in the Pingjiang Historical Block still has room for improvement. There are insufficient constraints on placeness during the planning and management process, and the local meaning has not been fully implemented and grasped in the process of placeness construction.

The current state of placeness expression in historical blocks, represented by Pingjiang, poses a potential risk of further leading to insufficient development momentum and making protection unsustainable. Therefore, how to continue and develop placeness amidst the wave of renewal of

parallel protection and utilization is a crucial issue that should be deeply considered under the current concept of sustainable development of historical blocks. As perceivers of the placeness of historical blocks and media for the further dissemination of culture, tourists' perception levels can serve as a basis for evaluating the placeness of historical blocks and provide effective references for the study of the protection and utilization of historical blocks.

5.2 Discussion

Based on the survey and analysis of tourists' placeness perception content, the above text identifies the current placeness issues in the Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block. During the authors' multiple investigations and summaries of the Pingjiang Historical Block from October 2021 to September 2023, in-depth interviews were conducted with 262 indigenous residents in addition to tourists. Analysis of the sample revealed that women accounted for a higher proportion than men, and the population aged 60 and above accounted for a very large proportion, showing the characteristics of an aging population. Most of the indigenous residents have lived in the area for more than 20 years and have a relatively thorough understanding of the area. It is evident that, as an aging residential historical block, the indigenous residents are an indispensable part of its placeness enhancement and preservation. So what are the needs of the indigenous residents? What is their understanding of the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block? Continuing the research dimension logic, the following section summarizes and compares the needs of tourists and indigenous residents and discusses strategies for enhancing the placeness of the Pingjiang Historical Block.

5.2.1 Material landscape dimension: Comprehensive creation of public space

Interviews revealed that the indigenous residents strongly agree with preserving the traditional features of the Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block. "We still use this well", one resident said. "The roads are all the same as before". Despite continuous modernization and development, Pingjiang has tried its best to preserve the appearance of the "home" where people have always lived. The indigenous residents acknowledge that tourism develop-

ment has improved their living environment to some extent, but in terms of space use and creation, there are still unmet needs of the indigenous residents, mainly in terms of daily transportation and public leisure spaces. Some residents have raised issues such as “inconvenience for non-motorized travel” and “uneven distribution of public spaces, which are mostly located on Pingjiang Road”. Indigenous residents generally desire “convenient living and a safe environment”, while tourists have a need to explore placeness deeply. When tourism experiences encroach on the lives of indigenous residents, there will be some competition for space. However, the needs of the two are not completely opposed, and there are also spatial differentiations in the demand for leisure space. It is believed that the space of the block can be systematically integrated in subsequent renovation and management, the public space node system can be improved, and the needs of the indigenous residents and tourists can be taken into account in a coordinated manner.

(1) Creating a comfortable, slow-moving system

In response to traffic issues, while further connecting the main streets and secondary alleys based on key nodes such as historical sites and buildings in the Pingjiang Historical Block, the protection of historical and cultural elements and the revitalization of lost streets and alleys should be promoted simultaneously, with the aim of repairing and restoring fragmented pedestrian spaces in the block. Secondly, when designating prohibited times for passage in management, a policy of allowing passage during the off-season for tourism can be proposed. Open spaces at the entrances and exits of various communities, such as Daru Lane, can be selected to designate dedicated parking spots for non-motorized vehicles, and sufficient charging stations can be installed to guide residents to park voluntarily and reduce the disorderly parking of non-motorized vehicles in the block. It can also reduce the interference of indigenous residents' vehicles with tourists' movement, the occupation of pedestrian streets, and the squeezing of slow-moving tour space, which negatively impacts tourists' perception of the block.

(2) Interconnected layout of leisure nodes

An investigation revealed that the spatial system of

the Pingjiang Historical Block suffers from an insufficient supply and uneven distribution of open spaces. These spaces are mainly located in the Zhangjiaxiang area and Pingjiang Road, resulting in a sense of disparity between tourists and indigenous residents in different areas. Indigenous residents value the recreational spaces within the block, while tourists value the waterfront spaces along the main street. Therefore, in addition to focusing on developing the waterfront spaces, we should also refine the open spaces within the block to further tap their potential, meet the needs of residents, and attract tourists to stop, observe, and interact, thereby revitalizing the public spaces within the block. Bridgeheads, riverbanks, and wharves are tangible spaces representing the culture of Pingjiang's water towns, allowing the social networks of residents and tourists to further integrate within these spaces. First, statistics were collected on the gathering places and activity paths of various stakeholders in the three areas of Daru Lane Community, Niuja Lane Community, and Historical Block Community to determine the site selection for node development. Second, resources such as well platforms and wharves were integrated, and greening was designed in conjunction with them, supplemented by flower beds and wooden bases to enhance the aesthetics and practicality of the space, transforming scattered spaces into interconnected small-scale public spaces. In addition, the inner and outer riverbanks were combined with the wharves and paved with blue bricks and flagstones to form a continuous waterfront space, providing a place for tourists and residents to rest and socialize (Fig. 8).



Figure 8 Leisure space planning and design

5.2.2 Human actions Dimension: Separate considerations of spatial functions

The needs of the indigenous residents in this dimension are mainly focused on the functions of various spaces related to daily life. This includes their disapproval of the decline of authentic living spaces and the messy commercial formats in the block. For activity spaces, they pay more attention to spaces such as vegetable shops, toilets, and senior activity centers in the streets and alleys. The elderly population who have lived in Pingjiang for a long time also have a greater need for age-friendly facilities. Most residents tacitly agree to give up the space of Pingjiang Road for tourists to experience, but believe that it should be managed in a standardized manner so that tourists can experience the real Pingjiang. The symbolic alienation of the human actions dimension is something that both tourists and locals reject. Tourists believe that the current commercial formats' pandering to internet celebrity culture contradicts their need to experience local culture. Locals believe that there is a lack of basic commercial formats that meet their daily needs. Therefore, while enhancing the historical narrative logic of the block, it is necessary to strengthen the control over the implantation of internal commercial formats, establish a diversified commercial function system, and consider differentiated layout in the process of improving public service facilities.

(1) Differentiated provision of public facilities

For tourists, the entrance archway of the Pingjiang Historical Block should display recommended routes for visiting the area and provide paper maps for tourists' convenience; maintain environmental hygiene by evenly distributing trash cans at fixed intervals, assigning cleaning staff to monitor the cleanliness of the area in designated zones, and installing restroom signs, among other improvements. For indigenous residents, a certain number of public rest seats should be set up in the courtyard or open space in front of their houses for their daily use. Sufficient and aesthetically pleasing garbage sorting bins and designated garbage recycling stations should be provided for indigenous residents to dispose of their garbage. At the same time, fitness, health, and leisure facilities and equipment can be added to the open spaces to improve the qual-

ity of life of indigenous people. In addition, the current population composition of the Pingjiang Historical Block shows a serious aging problem. Targeted age-friendly renovations should be carried out on the space to further cater to the local resident population structure and effectively protect the rights of the elderly population in the block to use the space.

(2) Rectification of the authentic block space

The consumer spaces in the Pingjiang Historical Block, designed for tourists, are filled with businesses that are not authentic. The living spaces, intended for the indigenous residents, lack commercial facilities and are outdated and backward. This superficial and hollow space, along with the declining and closed-off atmosphere, affects tourists' perception of the block's authenticity and weakens its vitality. Firstly, for businesses targeting tourists, the integration process should be carefully managed to ensure a balance between "degree" and "rule", selecting products that truly reflect the essence of Pingjiang and eliminating categories such as trendy cat cafes and chain fast food restaurants. In terms of space, the commercial spaces catering to the indigenous residents will be comprehensively renovated and repaired (including small shops, barbershops, vegetable stalls, stores in alleys, and other spaces that meet the daily consumption needs of the indigenous residents). The specific building locations are shown in Fig. 9. The building spaces and interfaces will be repaired, and the functions of the spaces will be vacated and replaced to reduce the encroachment of building damage and business encroachment on the original life. While meeting the daily needs of residents, tourists can also better experience the authentic life of the Pingjiang Historical Block.

5.2.3 Local meaning dimension: Inheritance and dissemination of in-situ culture

Due to government initiatives and their own aspirations, the indigenous residents have been continuously migrating out, leaving only a little over 10,000 people. In recent years, a certain number of outside tenants have moved in. The indigenous residents are mainly elderly people who cannot migrate due to insufficient economic means and have a strong sense of attachment to their homeland. Having lived and worked in Pingjiang for many years,

they have established a unique in-situ culture and lifestyle, and are an important part of the local meaning of Pingjiang Historic Block, including the original residents' memories of place and local sentiments. However, tourism development and modern lifestyles are constantly weakening the sense of place among the indigenous residents, and the influx of outside tenants has also changed social networks, which has a diminishing effect on the local social and cultural heritage. Indigenous residents often express a desire to restore the community network of their block, requiring spaces for community activities and neighborly interactions. This view is more common among indigenous residents aged 40-60, who have an emotional attachment to their block from childhood and a strong sense of mission to preserve and pass on their heritage. Some residents said, "I can earn more money by converting my small courtyard into a homestay than by renting it out directly". Such actions that benefit residents will enhance their sense of identity with the block and their willingness to participate in its development. Tourists yearn to experience authentic local life, while indigenous residents desire to preserve their original way of life; their needs and goals align in the dimension of local meaning.



Figure 9 Authentic Living Space Planning

(1) Regional cultural inheritance by indigenous residents

On the one hand, indigenous residents should be encouraged to participate in the co-governance of the block, strengthening their sense of belonging and responsibility

to Pingjiang. By establishing official WeChat accounts, opening Weibo accounts, and using social media platforms such as WeChat, we can broaden the participation of indigenous residents of all ages, mobilize their enthusiasm, and discuss various matters concerning the neighborhood. Retired indigenous residents aged 60 and above are encouraged to volunteer and actively undertake tasks such as block space governance and maintenance. On the other hand, we will vigorously carry out cultural and artistic activities in the block, mainly Suzhou intangible cultural heritage Pingtan and Kunqu Opera, to provide social venues for the indigenous residents and expand the dissemination of culture. Regular cultural activities continuously awaken the indigenous residents' sense of local identity in the Pingjiang Historical Block, and their active participation in the co-construction and co-governance of the block will greatly enhance their willingness to inherit and protect the local culture. As a residential historical block, mobilizing residents to participate in protection is the core starting point for enhancing Pingjiang's placeness.

(2) Dissemination of local culture by tourists

Whether tourists' placeness perceptions are accurate not only affects the subsequent tourism vitality of the area, but also determines the specific form of the local meaning under social consensus. The arrival of the big data era has led to the viral spread of information. People no longer rely solely on word-of-mouth and stereotypes to learn about places; instead, they increasingly use online platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu to acquire information about local characteristics and cultural significance. This influences tourists' willingness and expectations to travel to these places. Therefore, in the tourism development of the Pingjiang Historical Block, on the one hand, we should focus on publicity, distribute content on multiple platforms, and create more short films that can spread Pingjiang culture and accurately convey the local characteristics of its residential historical block; on the other hand, we should strengthen management within the block, and give comprehensive consideration to tourist services and crowd diversion, optimize the tourist experience, and encourage them to engage in perceiving the placeness of Pingjiang, develop an accurate understanding, and take the initiative to promote it.

Sources of Figures and Tables

All figures and tables in this paper were prepared by the authors.

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