

“Tourism, public spaces and urban cultures”

Urban Regeneration and (over) tourism in China: Exploring Alternative Tracks in Suzhou’s Historic Centre

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Abstract: The booming development of cultural tourism in China has a significant impact on historic cities. While offering favorable opportunities for urban regeneration, tourism also poses a direct threat to the quality of life and the authenticity of urban cultures. This paper takes the historic center of Suzhou as an illustrative case to explore how alternative, spatially decentralized and time-distributed forms of tourism can contribute to the long-term and sustainable regeneration of historic cities and benefit local communities. Through conducting a design investigation of Suzhou, this research explores in particular the role of urban planning and design in aligning tourism development and urban regeneration agendas. The exploration reveals that, as opposed to exclusive and reductive city branding practice, a diversification of the tourism offer can multiply the distinctive identities of Suzhou’s historic city and contribute to its regeneration. It also advocates the potential role of urban design as an instrument of exploration and mediation in heritage-led regeneration projects in China.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism; Urban Regeneration; Urban Design; China.



Cultural tourism in Chinese cities and its impact: Suzhou as an exemplary case

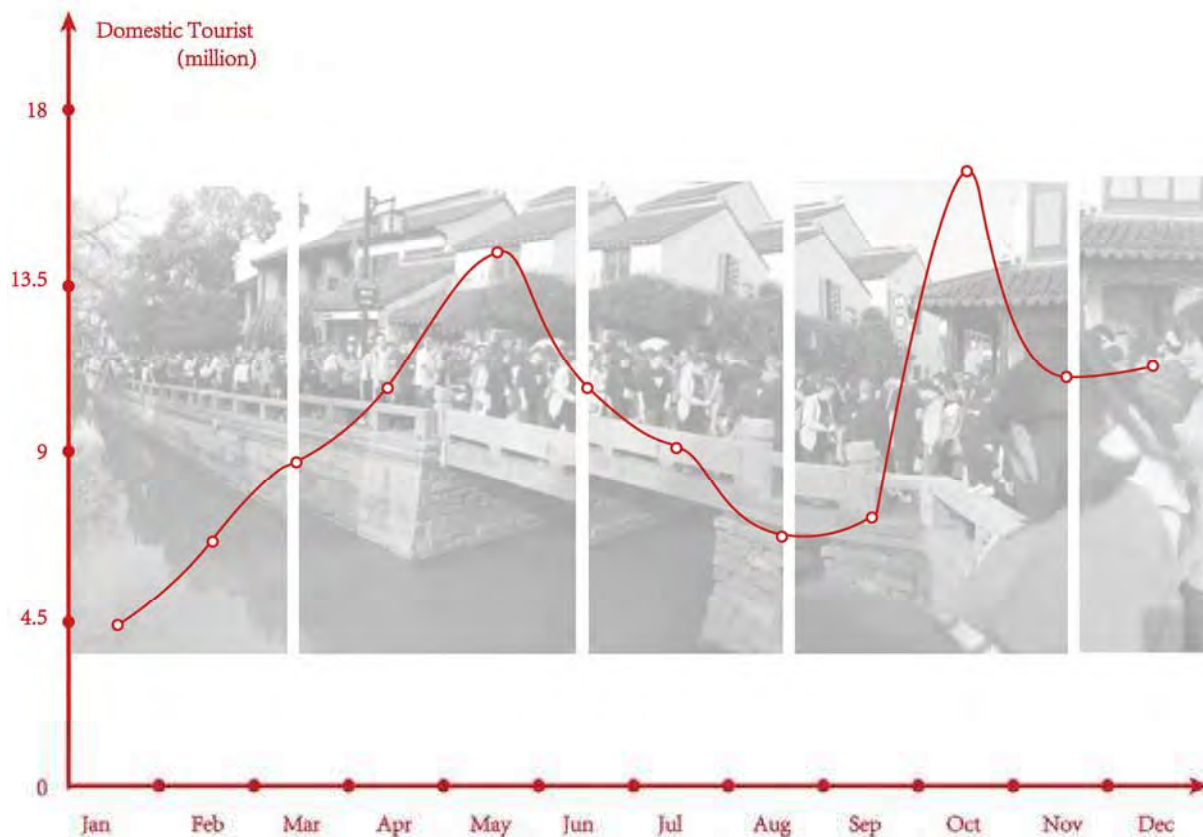


Figure 1: Accounting more than 100 million tourists every year, the influx of domestic tourists in Suzhou is mainly concentrated in two peak periods corresponding to national holidays and favorable climate conditions.

Suzhou is a megacity of 13 million people located in the heart of the Yangtze River Delta. Founded 2500 years ago, its historic center is very famous for its typical canal-streets and ancient gardens inscribed as World Heritage. Covering 15 km² and currently inhabited by 230,000 people, Suzhou old town is a main touristic destination that attracts a staggering number of visitors. Out of the more than 100 million people visiting the city area every year (STB, 2018), it is estimated that about a quarter visit the old town (Yin *et al.*, 2014). Among these, the vast majority (98%) are Chinese, coming from the local or surrounding provinces (Jiangsu, Shanghai and Zhejiang). The other 2% are foreign tourists, who still represent 1.5 million people, mainly coming from Japan, Korea and the USA.

The economic impact of tourism is equally massive. Ranked between the 10th to 20th most popular touristic destination in China according to various listings, Suzhou contributes up to 5% to the gross tourism revenue at national level, which was estimated in 2017 to 4570 billion RMB, or an 11% portion of China's total GDP.

Domestic tourism in China is in addition evolving very quickly, fueled by the emergence of the middle class and facilitated by new high-speed rail transport connections. Over the last five years (2012-2017), domestic travels in China had increased by 70%, or a 10% yearly increase. Over the same period the number of domestic tourists in Suzhou had increased by 6% every year, and generated an 11% yearly growth in revenue [Note 1].

While undeniably bringing considerable economic benefits to urban conservation and regeneration, the development of tourism in historic city centers across the world also presents serious threats. When exceeding a certain capacity, excessive growth of tourist numbers can generate negative and long-lasting impact on the livability of a place. As a global phenomenon, the adverse effects of over-tourism have been described and cautioned by the World Trade Organization (WTO, 2004). These negative effects include the abuse of natural resources and pressure on urban infrastructure and services, such as congestion and an over-proliferation of hotels, facilities or retails aiming at visitors. In addition, the promotion, marketing, branding and management of tourism can affect the diversity and authenticity of local life and culture.

In China also, the negative impact of mass-tourism on historic cities has been increasingly observed and acknowledged. In his study on Lijiang, a historic town recently listed as World Heritage, Huang (2013) describes how direct environmental nuisances such as traffic congestion and noise are accompanied by indirect and long-lasting impact on housing prices and urban services. He adds that the artificial importation of pseudo-traditional customs (such as floating river lanterns) to excite tourist interests have misrepresented the authenticity of the local culture.

Lijiang is not an isolated case. Several other researches have reported on how excessive development of tourism has affected the livability, heritage and traditional culture of local cities and forced the displacement of homegrown populations (Gang Xu, 1999; Li M. *et al.*, 2008). On the national level, it appears that most tourism strategies and management plans of Chinese cities have been applying standardized solutions for mass tourism (China Tourism, 2016). Tourism plans essentially focus on the city's major tourist attractions, with an exclusive attention to tangible elements and little consideration of the intangible aspects of the local culture (Li, 2000; Mao and Liang, 2013).

Retrospective of Chinese historic cities: from urban renewal to heritage-led regeneration

The “touristification” of Chinese historic cities is the latest stage in a succession of shifting attitudes towards ancient urban centers over the past decades. In the wake of the open-door policy of 1978, the industrial and economic development of China was accompanied with a massive wave of urbanisation. In Suzhou for instance, the built-up area was multiplied by more than 11 times between 1980 and 2010 (Wang *et al.*, 2015). In this process, most historic centers were initially neglected and suffered decay and degeneration. Overcrowded and poorly maintained, historical houses got deserted by the local middle-class population who could afford relocating in some new development areas on the urban periphery. This vicious circle aggravated the living conditions of historic city centers and worsened their attractiveness.

In reaction, from the 1980s, the question of urban renewal became a formal part of the agenda at national and local levels. Very typical in China is that local governments have played a leading role as both redevelopment advocate and project manager (Zhai, 2010). Three main successive types of urban regeneration strategies in China can be distinguished:

First, a demolition-reconstruction model, which prevailed between the 1980s and the 1990s. Also known as ‘old city renewal’ (jiucheng gaizao), this phase aimed primarily at solving urgent housing and safety issues. It replaced traditional urban fabrics with new housing types that met sanitary and fire protection standards, while sometimes ornamented with a reinterpreted expression of local historic architecture style (Yin, 2012). In this renewal process, as exemplified by the total replacement of Tianjin’s historic center, features of traditional urban fabric were forever lost.

Second, a commercial place-marketing model, which is incarnated by Xintiandi in Shanghai (1997). Based on the preservation of a few emblematic historic buildings, such projects use heritage conservation as a branding

tool to support real-estate development agendas. Economically successful in Shanghai, this regeneration model has been copied in several other places in China [Note 2]. However, these projects are also vigorously contested and accused of generating social exclusion and gentrification, while compromising the integrity and historical significance of the built heritage (Fan, 2014; Zhong and Chen 2017).

A third phase emerged in the 2000s and has focused on heritage-led regeneration – often termed ‘culture-led’ in China (Xia and Wang, 2010). According to Xie (2017), the growing influence of the notion of authenticity advocated by UNESCO explains China’s changing approaches to heritage conservation in recent years. After years of demolition and reconstruction, the new paradigm of conservation principle is now “to repair the old as to appear old” (Xiujiu Rujiu). Authenticity is not only associated to preserving essential qualities of urban form, materiality or uses and functions. It also encompasses immaterial qualities such as the arts, culture, history, lifestyle and intangible assets of a city. This combination makes historic city centers a fertile ground for cultural tourism, and culture-led regeneration as a powerful strategy to achieve economic growth (Russo and Borg, 2002).

The link between urban conservation and tourism in Suzhou



Figure 2: the comparison between Suzhou’s Tourism Plans (2011) and Conservation Plan (2013) indicates a clear correlation.

The evolution of Suzhou’s historic center over the past decades reflects the three phases described above. While its historical fabric dating from the Song dynasty (9th - 13th c.) onwards had remained largely intact until the early 20th century (Xu, 2000), the center of Suzhou has since then been subject to profound transformations. A series of turbulent events (wars in the first half of the 20th c.; the Cultural Revolution in the 1960-70s) followed by sanitation and modernization programs in the 1970s-1980s led to the demolition of courtyard houses replaced by standardized walk-up apartments.

Subsequently, the local authorities issued its first protection plan in the 1980s and initiated reconstruction programs of historic elements, such as the city wall. The successive conservation plans have gradually broadened in scale and scope – from protection listed buildings and gardens to entire streets and areas, and finally controlling development by imposing restrictions on building height and style. The latest conservation

plan introduced in 2013 defines protection zones that cover almost a third of the city center's area, and includes some heritage-themed itineraries interconnecting them.

A comparison between the urban conservation and tourism plans reveals a clear correlation. Even though produced by two separate government authorities depending of different ministries [Note 3], heritage conservation and tourism development in Suzhou's historic center are closely interrelated. The review of Suzhou's official tourism channels confirm, for the historic center, a culture-led strategy essentially based on the promotion of the historic and traditional features inherited from the Ming and Qing dynasties and depicted in some famous scroll paintings.

On the link between urban conservation and tourism, the regeneration of Ping-Jiang Road district in Suzhou is often regarded as an exemplary case of integrated urban revitalization in China (Yin, 2012; Xie, 2017). Initiated in the late 1990s, the plan not only preserved and refurbished important parts of the traditional fabric, houses and public space . It also enabled to a majority of local residents to remain living in place thanks to the provision of basic infrastructures and an advantageous housing allowance program. For several years, the renovated historic area had combined successfully a coexistence of tourists and inhabitants in a relative balance.

Two decades later, however, the regeneration project became a victim of its success. Over-promoted on postcards and featured in successful television drama, Ping-Jiang Road is almost entirely bordered with souvenir shops and is the chronic theater of tourist traffic jams. Recent interviews conducted in the area indicate how local inhabitants suffer from the excessive commercialization of their neighborhood: the reduced accessibility, the closing of the vegetable market, and the recent conversion of the local temple house into a fancy teahouse / bookshop are the signs of tourism gentrification affecting their living environment (Vannoorbeek and Attuyer, 2019).

Next to Ping-Jiang Road, a few other places designated as scenic areas tend to attract masses of tourists without positively contributing to the local life. In contrast, the rest parts of the city remain unexplored by visitors. Protected as heritage, these historic areas are subject to strict rules of conversation that limit the possibilities of radical changes, although adaptation and remodeling may be necessary to improve the living conditions.



Figure 3: contrast between overcrowded and commercialized scenic spots and decaying neighborhood.

The emergence of alternative forms of tourism

Suzhou is neither the only nor the first historic city facing the intricate challenges of tourism development, urban regeneration and livability. Lessons can be learned from numerous international cases and strategies addressing similar issues (Mason, 2015 ; Gotham 2005). One possible way to prevent the negative impact of tourism is to limit it. Perhaps inspired by Venice’s installation of gates for tourists in 2018, Suzhou since very recently (23rd April 2019) imposes a reservation system on aspirant visitors to book their visit to popular attractions one to seven days in advance (The Humble Administrator Garden, Lion Garden, and the Suzhou Museum). Another possibility is to increase the pricing of attractions as a way to increase exclusivity and filter accessibility. Although they may solve problems in the short term, these approaches also precludes the possibilities of channeling popular tourism growth as a catalyst for urban regeneration.

Another type of response is to stimulate alternative forms of tourism. The notion of alternative tourism has been developed from the 1990s as a response to mass-tourism (Pearce, 1992). As a trend, it corresponds to a general diversification of tourism interests facilitated by lower transportation costs, relaxed regulations on (international) travel, and, more recently, the development of social media and online platforms of collaborative economy (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015). Prospective tourists can now plan their own travel individually and personalize their route by tailoring it to their needs without the intermediate of travel agencies [Note 4].

Among the several forms of alternative tourism that have emerged, some are focused on achieving a positive interaction with the local cultures and people. “Experience-based tourism” (Tzortzaki, 2018), “In-Depth tourism” (Chen *et al.*, 2009) or “Slow Tourism” models generally valorize local customs, products, traditions and travel experience as part of the destination’s attractiveness (Honoré, 2004; Heitmann *et al.*, 2011; Lumsdon and McGrath, 2011) [Note 5]. Other alternative forms of tourism such as “Sustainable Tourism” (Edgell, 2016) or “Community-Based Tourism” (Blackstock, 2005) more explicitly aim at making the hosting community actively engage with and thereby benefitting from tourism development.

Interestingly, several values advocated by alternative tourism models meet the recommendations on tourism development coming from the heritage conservation and urban regeneration side. Guidelines from UN-Habitat or UNESCO’s framework for Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) also insist on enhancing indigenous and local culture, economy and products, and reiterate the pivotal role of local communities in regenerating their physical environment.

Integrating tourism and urban regeneration: defining a framework

A possible synthesis addressing both tourism development and sustainable urban regeneration is offered by a recent report of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018). This report, based on the perception of “overtourism” (Ali, 2016) by residents in several European cities, proposes eleven integrative strategies to manage and promote dispersal of tourism flows in urban areas in order to make them inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable:

- Strategy 1: Promote the dispersal of visitors within the city and beyond
- Strategy 2: Promote time-based dispersal of visitors
- Strategy 3: Stimulate new itineraries and attractions
- Strategy 4: Review and adapt regulation
- Strategy 5: Enhance visitors’ segmentation
- Strategy 6: Ensure local communities benefit from tourism

- Strategy 7: Create city experiences for both residents and visitors
- Strategy 8: Improve city infrastructure and facilities
- Strategy 9: Communicate with and engage local stakeholders
- Strategy 10: Communicate with and engage visitors
- Strategy 11: Set monitoring and response measures

While complementary, these strategies can be divided into three main types of recommendation. A series of strategies (1, 2, 3, 5) focuses on the tourism experiences in both space and time. Another series of recommendations (6, 7, 8) centers on the involvement of the hosting community in tourism development and the benefits it can generate for urban regeneration. A third group (4, 9, 10, 11) relates to monitoring, management and regulatory aspects.

Together, these recommendations are in line with the evolution from mass tourism (destination based, pre-organized, all-inclusive packages) towards alternative and diversified modes of tourism characterized by free individual travellers in search for authentic and place-based experience and in consideration of the ethical and sustainable aspects of tourism development. Even though the mass and standardized tourism model still dominates in China, the trend for alternative tourism is likely to develop in the future, give the growing influence of social media and smart tourism (Kim and Wang, 2018). The eleven strategies can therefore serve as a valid framework to explore how the management of tourism growth can be integrated with the sustainable regeneration of historic cities in China.

Design exploration: seeking alternatives in Suzhou

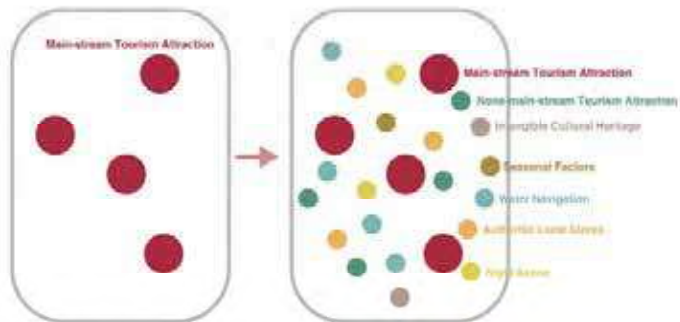
Presuming that tourism in Suzhou will continue to grow, this research proposes a design investigation addressing in particular the role of urban planning and design in aligning tourism development and urban regeneration agendas. It takes the guidelines of the World Tourism Organization on Tourism Growth (UNWTO 2018) as a framework and Suzhou's historic center as an exploration field. The study area has been limited to the historic center, where the contrast between high concentration of tourism and poor living conditions is most striking.

The design exploration employs a triple strategy: 1) to multiply and diversify the number of touristic attractions; 2) to enrich the travel experience; 3) to modulate the seasonality of tourism peak flows. These three strategies on space and time are complemented by a fourth determinant – how visitors can navigate across an expanded spectrum of available activities.

For each strategy, a detailed analysis of the current condition was conducted based on a combination of documentation, fieldwork, interviews and interpretative mapping. In the Agency of Mapping, Corner (1999) describes mapping as a performative research method that allows, through graphic operations of selection, omission, isolation, codification and associations, to uncover realities previously unseen or unimagined.

Based on the mappings' findings, specific proposals for developing alternative forms of tourism are formulated. With the express purpose to promote the values of authenticity, sustainability, and equity, the proposals also draw on international precedents and theoretical conceptualizations of the city from an experiential and perceptual perspective.

Design exploration 1: multiply and diversify the number of touristic attractions



The first strategy is to multiply and diversify the number of touristic attractions. This strategy aims at decongesting the few overcrowded spots of Suzhou's historic center, but also at dispersing peak flows in space and time (strategies 1 & 2). Besides tourist attractions, a wider palette of 'places of interests' may as well contribute to a segmentation of visitors (strategy 5) and potentially enrich city experiences for both residents and visitors (strategy 6).

In the historic center, tourists currently tend to agglomerate at a few tourist sites: the World Heritage Gardens, two historic streets, and two reconstructed city gates along the city wall [Note 6]. Labelled as "top attractions" in international, national and local rankings, these attractions are the most popular on social media (Kim & Wang 2018). Over-commercialized and often overcrowded, the immediate surroundings of these sites suffer from the influx of tourists, many of which travel in groups and may not necessarily contribute to the local economy. On the other hand, the rest extensive area of the city are left blank on the current tourist map, suggesting they are featureless and uneventful even though they are potentially of comparable interest.

We argue that alternative attractions can be defined according to various selection criteria. One possible criterion is the notion of locality and authenticity. Supported by the slow-, community-based and responsible tourism models, the focus on authenticity and locality are seen as potential vectors for supporting the local economy, strengthening cultural identity, and encouraging direct interaction between visitors and guests.

In order to identify 'places of interests' in the historic centre of Suzhou, this research draws on various non-mainstream sources, such as Suzhou-based online platforms or local certification labels attesting the quality of established businesses. As a result, several maps were created, featuring traditional shops, small opera playhouses, craftsman workshops, or local residents' favorite restaurants.

Another possible set of alternative places of interests are the sites currently vacant or underused. As a 25-century old city constantly in transformation, Suzhou invariably has some temporarily neglected spaces, such as abandoned factories, construction sites awaiting permits, or shopping malls deserted by customers. Temporarily reclaimed and refurbished, these sites can play a role in absorbing the surplus of tourists during peak periods, while serving the local community with improved city infrastructure and facilities, which is the 8th strategy proposed by UNWTO.

Many other alternative points of interest can be imagined, based on selection criteria such as natural assets or viewing points. In all cases, the definition of alternative tourist sites should remain an open and dynamic process. The mapping of these alternative places of interests reveals new spatial logics, such as thematic clusters or linear patterns that urban regeneration can align with and capitalize on. As a tool for urban regeneration, the creation of new places of interests that serve alternately visitors and locals' needs can eventually inspire and help prioritizing interventions on public space.

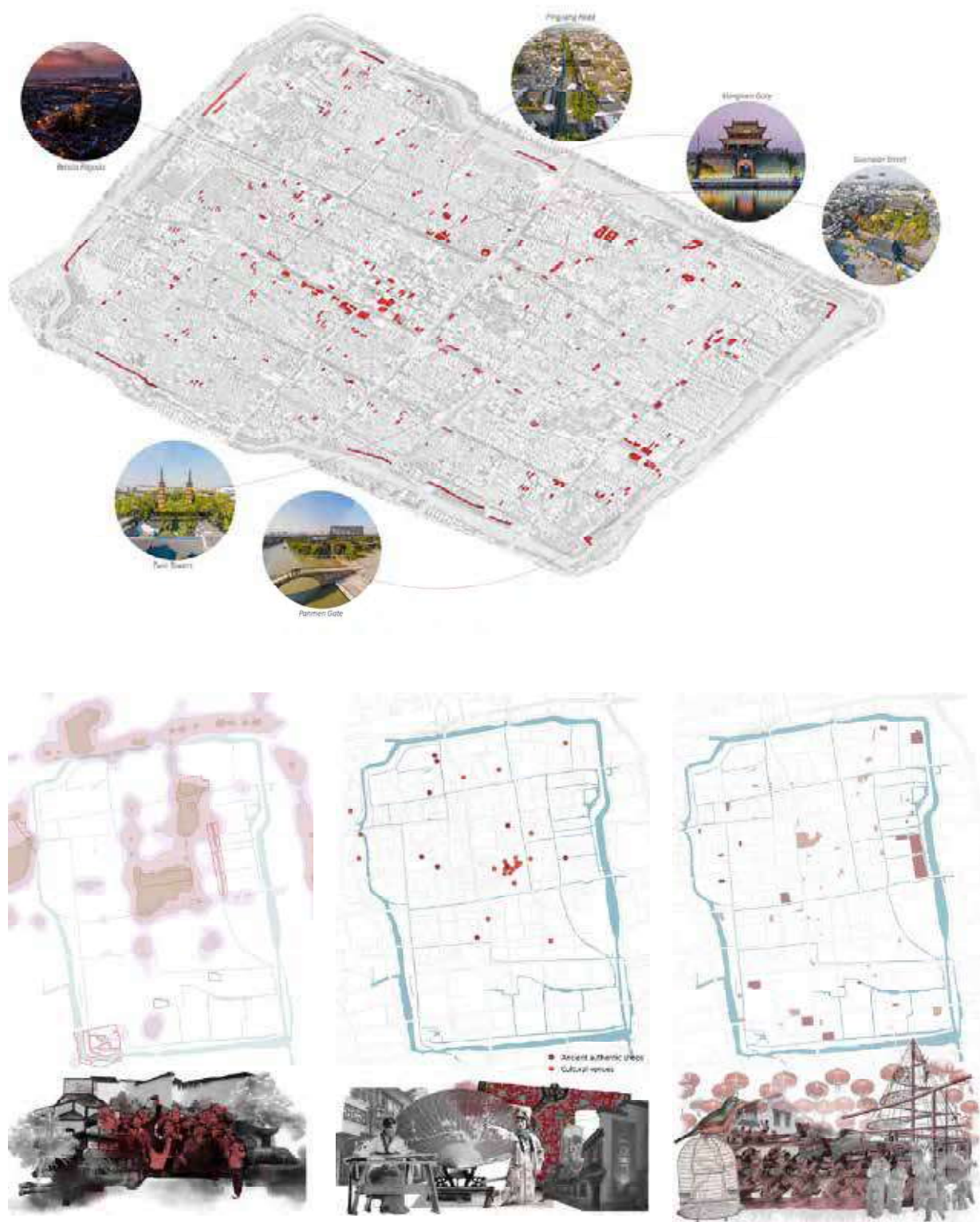
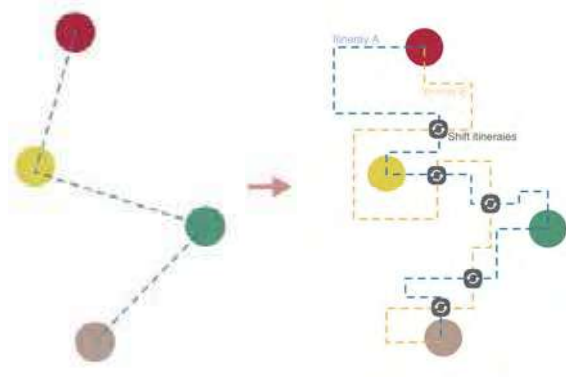


Figure 4: mapping existing and alternative attractions: a) (top) axonometric view of Suzhou with rooftops potentially offering a panoramic view on the city; (bottom, from left to right) b) mapping of the current mainstream spots (outlined with red contours) and concentration of population on a national holiday afternoon; c) typical Suzhou stores over 100 years old and traditional craft and culture places (opera, wood sculpture, embroidery, etc.); d) currently vacant or underused sites and buildings that could potentially host events.

Design exploration 2: stimulating alternative itineraries



The second strategy to address tourism growth in Suzhou is to stimulate new itineraries. Responding to UNWTO's third recommendation, this can also help disperse visitors and create city experiences for both residents and visitors (strategy 1 and 7). The notion of alternative itineraries is strongly encouraged by the models of slow tourism and experience-based tourism that emphasize on travel itself as a way to experience a place's cultural characteristics, to appreciate the everyday landscape, and to interact with its inhabitants.

Currently, flows of tourists in Suzhou are mainly concentrated in a few historic streets and the immediate surroundings of main attractions. As visitors mainly go around by metro or private tour bus, the distance from one main attraction to another is far and not easily reached on foot nor facilitated by the bike infrastructure system. Very recently, the city begins to run a tour bus system and has been adding new lines connecting the different tourist sites. However, passing through the main arterial roads only, these itineraries offer merely a very partial view to the richness of Suzhou's urban fabric.

As an alternative, this research compiles an inventory of 'streets of interests' based on their potential for travel experience. Among the various evaluation criteria, the physical features of a street are essential in determining the comfort and perceptual value of an excursion. In this regard, Suzhou is characterized by a few avenues planted with trees, and a series of canal-streets [Note 7]. This mapping also reveals partially disconnected patterns that can potentially be reconnected through urban design approaches.

Another important criterion in the selection of an itinerary is the scenic experience it provides. Theorized in Cullen's *Townscape* (1961) or Peter Bosselmann's *Images in Motion* (1998), the quality of an urban walking experience is highly dependent on the scale, spatial diversity and articulation of the different atmospheres it crosses. In this regard, the dense network of narrow alleys sneaking across Suzhou's urban blocks from the Ming and Qing period offers a very rich experience: opening sporadic views on interiors, punctuated by small bridges over canals and shaded by trees hanging over courtyards, the mesh of tortuous pathways is full of surprises that contrast with the regular and predictable rhythm of the main street pattern.

The third possible thematic categorization of the streets is related to Suzhou's local history and toponymy. In her study of the city's morphology, Xie (2017) recalls that numerous streets and bridges of Suzhou were named after famous families or people. As such, the street pattern of Suzhou not only conveys historical and social meaning but also can be seen as a 'story-scape' for the curious visitor to explore (Kaufman 2009) .

Here again, the set of criteria to choose alternative itineraries is endless and can be tailored to individual preferences. From an urban regeneration point of view, however, this investigation offers the possibility to reflect on how the designation of alternative thematic itineraries for tourists can be coordinated with investments that meet the residents' needs. The pedestrianisation of streets around schools could for instance perfectly meet the tourism mobility agenda.

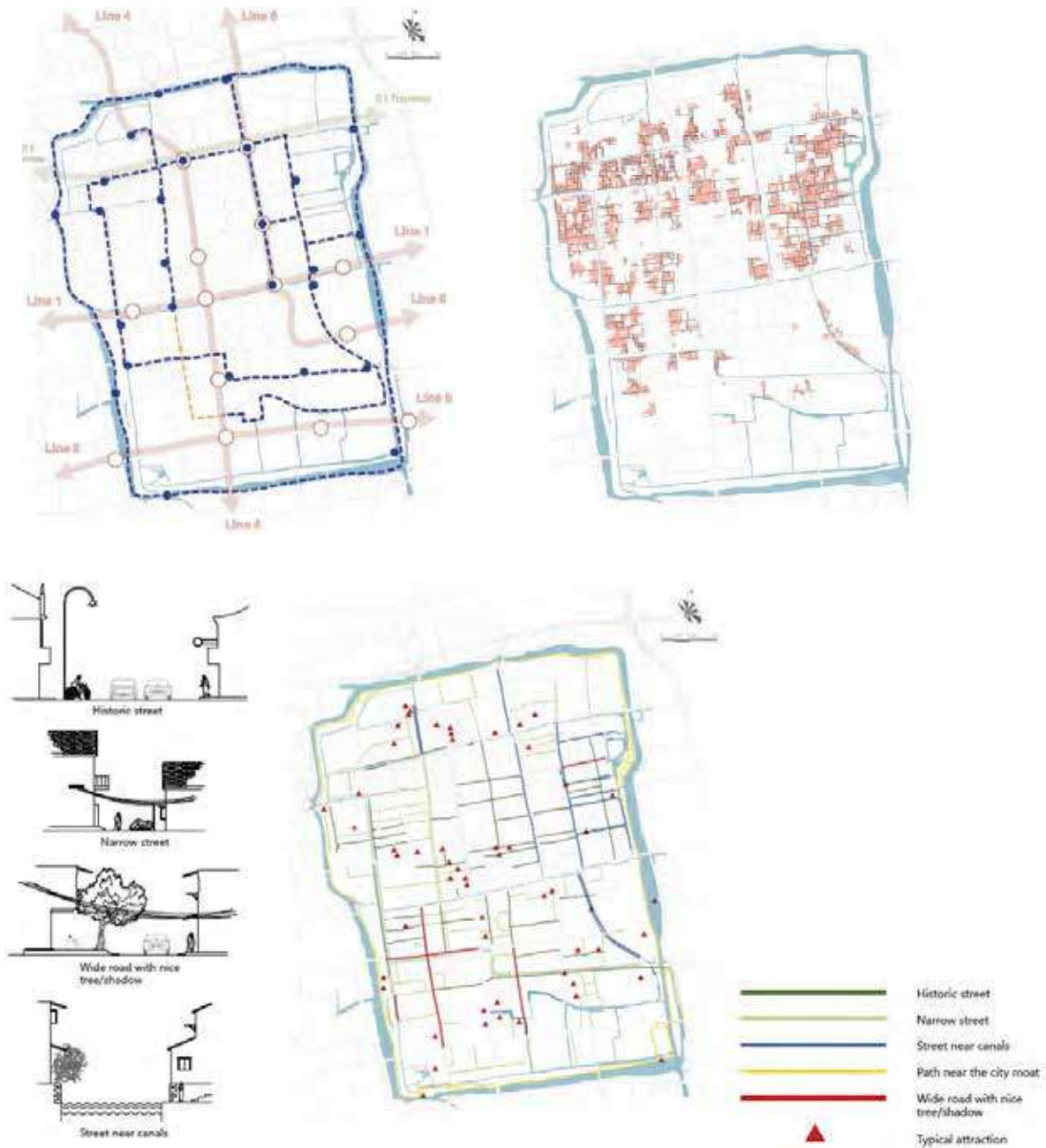


Figure 5: mapping the streets: a) (top left) mapping of the existing network of public transport and the water network with the missing links; b) (top right): narrow alleyways across the Ming and Qing urban fabric; c) (bottom) systematic mapping of the network of streets and alleys in terms of their spatial quality and historical significance.

Design exploration 3: Diversifying tourism offerings throughout the year

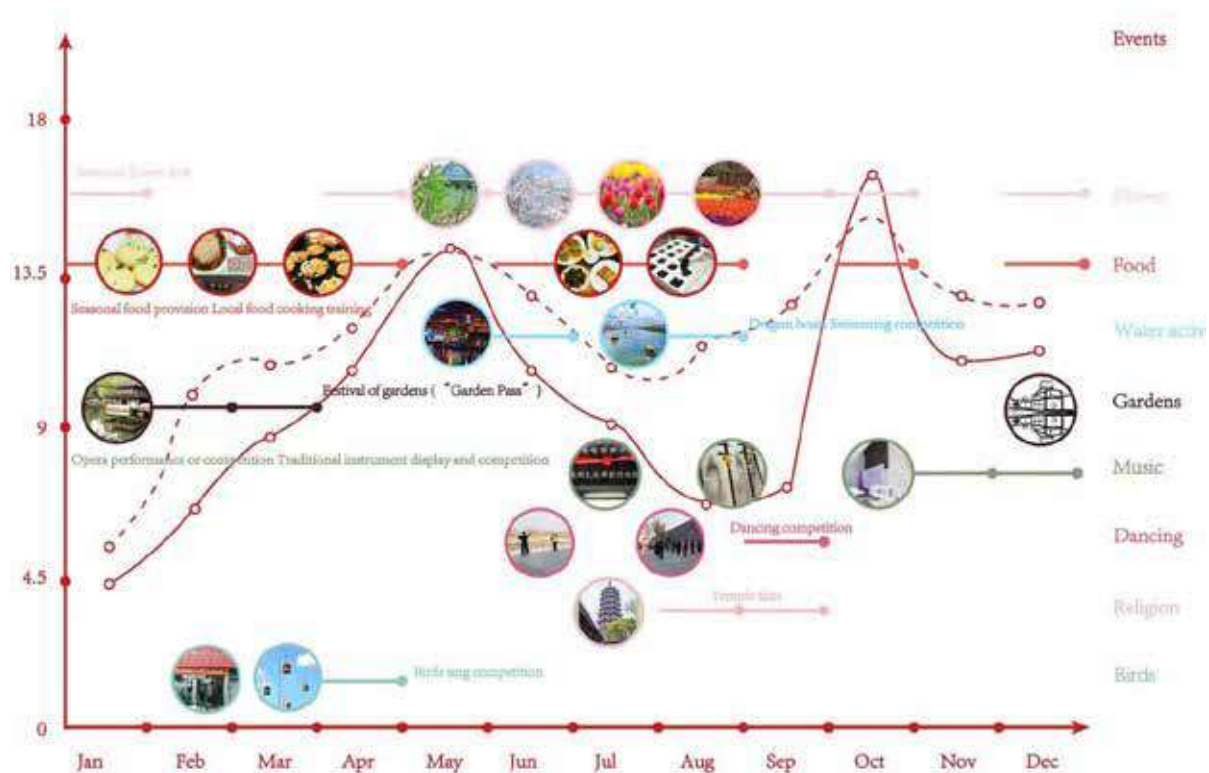


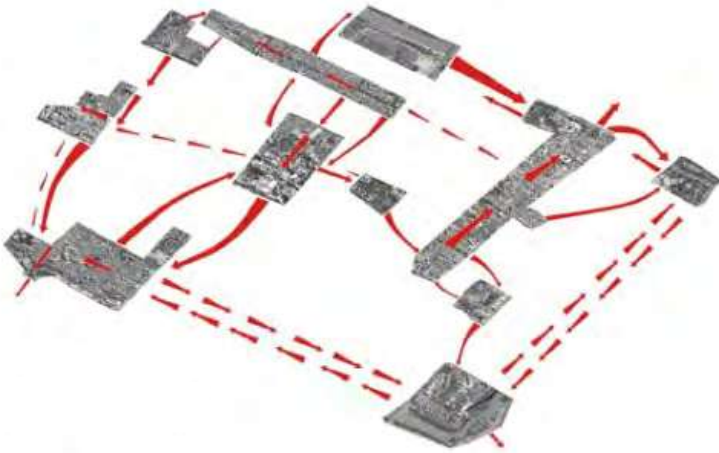
Figure 6: Chronological mapping of existing and proposed seasonal events that may contribute to a more balanced modulation of tourist influxes during the year.

The third strategy is to diversify tourism offerings into day vs. night, and weekday vs. weekend activities, featured by seasonal changes and punctuated by annual festive events. This responds to UNWTO's second recommendation to promote a time-based dispersal of visitors. Time dimension can be addressed at different scales. On a weekly and daily timeframe, tourism is logically concentrated in the week-ends and the daytime, with relatively limited activities after 8pm. On a yearly scale, the frequentation of tourists in Suzhou is relatively unbalanced, with two peak periods in May and October. This is principally explained by seasonal factors and national holidays, with no other particular linkage to Suzhou events. In contrast, the lower season is mainly in the cold winter and hot summer time, when the climatic conditions are not optimal to enjoy the mainly outdoor attractions of Suzhou.

To redistribute the influx of tourists on a yearly timeframe, several possibilities are offered. Starting from the annual calendar of flower blossoms, harvests, crops, rituals, pilgrimages, and symbolic dates, a series of alternative events can be imagined that are rooted in Suzhou's cultures, traditional houses and/or meaningful places. During the high season, decentralizing activities by using vacant sites scattered throughout the city can invite tourists to get off the beaten paths. Cordoba's Patios Festival in Spain (Cordoba, 2019) provides a good reference for Suzhou to hold a similar event prompting inhabitants to renovate their house courtyard and open it to visitors. Such initiatives, coordinated and supported by the city authorities, can contribute to develop locals' sense of pride and simultaneously foster a community-based and bottom-up dynamic of urban regeneration.

In the lower season, new events could celebrate some of the typical Suzhou customs and intangible heritage through festivals, seasonal markets or biennales. In the cold winter period, birds singing competition or gastronomic events could for instance reuse former industrial buildings, while during the hot summer times canal walks and boat rowing can help reinventing the historic link between the city and its canals.

Suzhou Drift as navigator



The systematic mapping of alternative places of interest, itineraries and events described above enriches the attractiveness of Suzhou with a wide variety of spatial and temporal opportunities. The fourth part of the design exploration of this research explores how tourists can be guided across the augmented city. Assuming that the trend towards individualized and experience-based types of travel will continue to grow, and taking advantage of new instruments associating GPS to social media, this opens up a possibility to develop an interactive navigation tool.

We develop and frame the concept of “Suzhou Drift” to support intuitive, individual and experience-based types of travel. The notion of Drift draws from the *Dérive* – proposed by the Situationist International in the 1950s-1960s – as “a mode of experimental behavior to create new situations, (...) a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances guided by intuition” (Debord, 1958).

As a navigation instrument supplemented by the additional parameters of alternative attractions and itineraries elaborated in the previous sections, “Suzhou Drift” can customize routes according to personal interests and seasonal conditions. The simulation of Suzhou Drifts can cater for the need of different types of users/travellers and recommend several possible routes to explore the city. These possible itineraries can also be imagined in sequential perspective drawings as if on a Suzhou scroll, illustrating the variety of assets that the city can offer to adventurous visitors.

Complementary to the application-based information, some light physical design interventions in the public space such as signage, street furniture or temporary public art installations can make the city more legible, walkable and enjoyable while functioning as open invitations to some of the itineraries and alternative attractions.

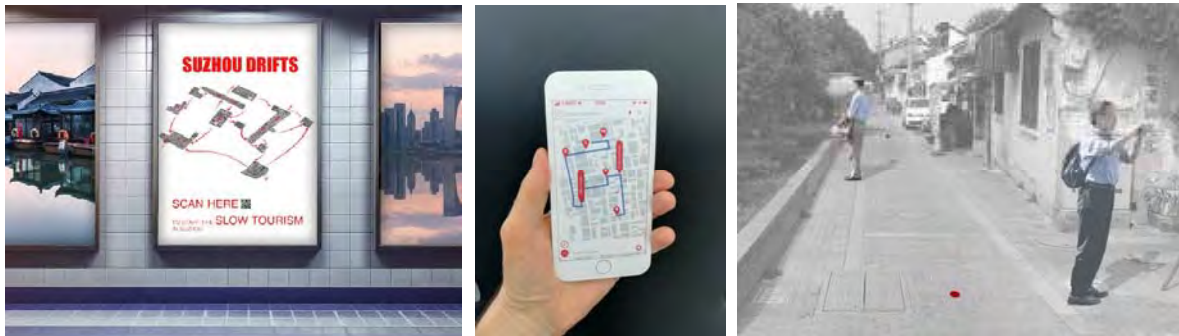


Figure 7: A simulation of 'drifts' during one day in Suzhou by three typical users profiles (a young backpacker; a family with children; a senior couple) illustrate the variety of assets that the city can offer.

Conclusion

This research has explored the implementation of a triple strategy for tourism development in Suzhou and elaborated on their possible implications in practice. Based on findings from this design exploration, three recommendations are proposed to inform the practice of tourism planning and urban regeneration in China and achieve a better integration of the both.

Firstly, the diversification of tourism is an opportunity to reveal the complexity and multiple identities of a city. The inquiry for alternative attractions and itineraries in Suzhou reveals several features that have been so far neglected. Beyond the postcard image of gardens and canals advertised in official tourism branding, Suzhou's historic center has an enormous wealth of tangible and intangible assets inherited from its long history. Tatters of the traditional urban tissue are finely intertwining within the regular blocks and punctuated by a scatter of former industrial buildings and sites. With their own scale and characteristics, these contrasted urban atmospheres coexist as different cities in the city. While the existing culture-led regeneration practice in China has tended to brand one exclusive 'legitimate' identity and orient design guidelines accordingly, we argue that the recognition of multiple urban identities – be they spatial, cultural or social – is important. Not only for the diversification and segmentation of tourism, but also to accommodate the plural needs of the local communities.

Furthermore, the potential of alternative tourism as a strategic and transformative agent of urban regeneration should be recognized and exploited. Because of its dynamic and cyclic nature, tourism has changing and renewed needs that are a priori not always compatible with the incremental and linear process of urban regeneration. Nevertheless, the design exploration of Suzhou exemplifies how the creation of events and temporal re-programming of parts of the city can serve as a transformative agent, as a testing tool to inspire, trigger or help prioritize more permanent planning choices for the regeneration of historic cities.

Finally, the methodological value of urban design as an exploratory instrument could be further expanded and enhanced. As a discipline, urban design in China has until now been confined to an executor role of masterplans and regulatory design codes. Arguably, urban design offers a large palette of tools that help grasp the complexity of the historic city and to envisage its future. The practice of urban design can associate quantitative information with a qualitative reading of the specific typological, morphological, and usages characteristics of the city. It can also develop interpretative, temporal and narrative descriptions of the city that can in turn inspire potential projects. In regeneration processes, intense cooperation and exchanges are needed between communities, tourism, spatial planning and business stakeholders. In this context, exploratory urban design can be instrumental to create a middle ground and support the development of shared visions.

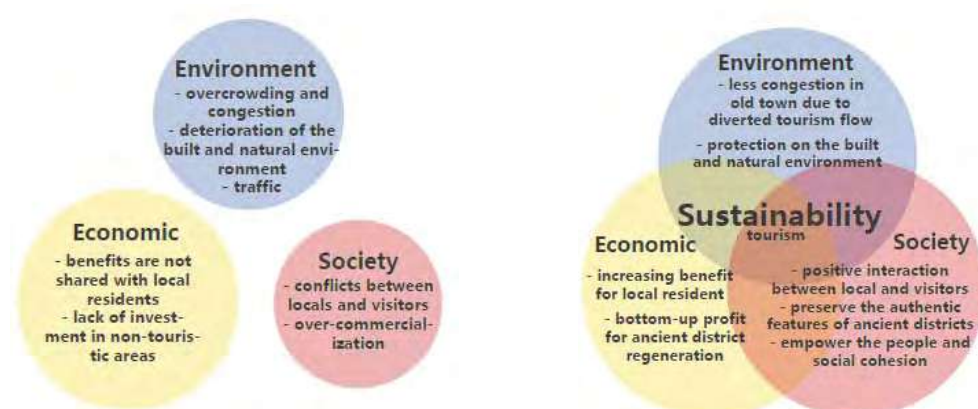


Figure 8: Comparison between the issues generated by a mass-tourism, and an ideal scenario of alternative tourism positively integrated with sustainable urban regeneration.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although potentially instrumental in China, the exploratory approach by design is nevertheless not sufficient to ensure a balance between tourism and sustainable regeneration. A key challenge remains how communities can positively take advantage of tourism development. In an ideal scenario or virtuous circle, alternative and decentralized tourism can lead to improved physical environments, empowered hosting community and greater social cohesion. In reality, however, numerous cases of touristic cities affected by an excessive Uberisation of hospitality services show that alternative and decentralized tourism models, when not regulated, can lead to serious risks of gentrification (Arias-Sans, 2015; Gant, 2015) .

From interviews conducted with officials of the Suzhou Municipal Administration of Tourism (SMAT), it appears that the current tourism development model, while encouraging decentralized and alternative tourism, relies essentially on the dynamics of the market. For further research, it is recommended to investigate how governments can assume a coordinating role to ensure a collectivization of the profits generated, and reinvestment in distribution in the form of refurbishment or training programs.

Finally, considering that the local population of the historic center of Suzhou is characterized by an overrepresentation of seniors and migrant workers, it is also recommended for further research to explore how participatory and coproduction mechanisms can be encouraged and implemented.

Acknowledgements

This research has been supported by the Suzhou Science and Technology Development Planning Project (Soft-Science Research Project, SR201821), the Summer Undergraduate Research Fund program of Xi'An Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTTLU, SURF 2018-07), and the Jiangsu Province Program of Science and Technology (BK20151244) (Dr. Christian Nolf, Principal Investigator). In addition to the authors, the research team was composed of Dr. Paco Mejias Villatoro, Dr. Eddy Fang, Poyi Sung, Yixuan Yang, Ran Bi, Yuan Xu, Qi Xue, Yuzheng Yao, and Yaxin Zheng from XJTTLU.

It has also benefitted from insightful inputs from Prof. Pierre-Alain Croset, from Mr. Wang Rudong from the Suzhou Municipal Administration of Tourism (SMAT), and from the Studio Suzhou (2018-19) coordinated by Florence Vannoorbeeck and Dr. Katia Attuyer from the Department of Urban Planning and Design at Xi'An Jiaotong Liverpool University.



Notes

Note 1: Sources of tourism data in Suzhou in 2018: Suzhou Tourism Bureau (STB). <http://www.suzhou.gov.cn/> and <http://www.sztravel.gov.cn> (Accessed: 18 Sep 2018); Sources for tourism data in China: <http://www.chyxx.com/industry/201806/650305.html> (Accessed: 18 Sep 2018) ; www.ctrip.com; <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/tourist-arrivals>, accessed on April 25, 2019

Note 2: See for instance Nanjing1912, Fuzhou Xintiandi, or Old Bund of Ningbo.

Note 3: The main public actor of tourism in Suzhou is the Suzhou Municipal Administration of Tourism (SMAT). Depending since 2018 of the Ministry of Culture, it is responsible for the definition and implementation of specific policies, strategies and plans.

Note 4: Individualized travel practices have been popularized by local peer-to-peer accommodation services such as www.couchsurfing.com or its commercial replica, www.airbnb.com. In addition, services platforms now give the possibility for tourists to authentically experience local life, to share local customs, or to benefit from insiders' recommendations or specific services. See among other www.spottedbylocals.com , www.localtravelmovement.com , www.coolcousin.com, www.getsidekix.com, www.waymarking.com, Lonely Planet's Everyday Micro-adventures or the very recent 'experience' option proposed by [Airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com/s/experiences) <https://www.airbnb.com/s/experiences>

Note 5: Slow Tourism emerged recently as one of the numerous emulations of the slow-food movement. Founded on a concept of authentic, responsible and slow travel experience, slow-tourism also claims to promote the sustainable preservation of authentic modes of living, local aesthetic and culinary traditions.

Note 6: The historic city center concentrates 24 sites designated as national heritage. Out of these, 9 gardens were listed as World Heritage by UNESCO in 1997 and 2000. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/813/>

Note 7: Known as a "double-chessboard", the grid of parallel canals and paths is very characteristic of Suzhou. From the tens of canals that were once crisscrossing the entire city, only a few canals are left today. Recently, the city initiated the reopening of some sections to restore the continuity of the network.

Source of figures

Figure 1: authors, adapted from a video of on Pingjiang Road overcrowded on April 6, 2019; data of tourism in 2018 in million visitors: <http://www.sztravel.gov.cn/news-list.aspx?page=2&catalogid=201804211508560000;>

Figure 2: left: Suzhou Tourism Plan 2011-2020 (Suzhou Tourism Bureau, 2011); Right: the Suzhou Historic City Conservation Plan_2013- 2030 (SPDRI, 2013).

Figure 3: pictures by Yiwen Wang.

Figure 4: authors, based on spatial analysis from satellite pictures and fieldwork Map a) top attractions according to social media (Kim and Wang 2018) and population concentration from baidumap live application (situation on Friday June 8, 2019, at 2.30 pm).

Figure 5: authors, based on spatial analysis from satellite pictures and fieldwork

Figure 6: Xu Yuan, Group Urban Identities, from Studio Suzhou Vannoorbeeck F. & Attuyer K. (2019).

Figure 7: authors.

Figure 8: authors.

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