

The Reuse of Modern Historical Buildings in Tianjin--The Impact of Commercial Tenants on the Protection of Concession-Era Architecture

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Abstract. The concession-era architectural structures in Tianjin stand as notable heritage assets, with a growing trend of repurposing them for commercial ventures. Business operations within these premises bring about both chances to safeguard the heritage and potential threats to it. On-site investigations conducted in Wudadao and the Italian Style Town show that most businesses keep the original exterior appearances intact while reworking the inner spaces. The restaurant retains the traditional spatial layout, the bookstore incorporates classic design features, and the hotel maintains the authenticity of the architectural structure. Some merchants put profits above conservation work and made unauthorized changes, damaging the historical integrity of these buildings. Residents mentioned that the maintenance of these buildings has improved, but they also pointed out that the number of tourists has increased. Compared with vacant properties, tourists have a higher level of participation in commercial Spaces that are actively in use. The "Regulations on the Protection of Historical Style Buildings in Tianjin" provides useful guidance when implemented correctly, although compliance with the regulations varies. These difficulties include insufficient training in preservation techniques and the need for modern facilities. The main solutions include providing financial incentives for renovation projects that meet the regulations, conducting heritage education for tenants, and simplifying the approval process, etc. These steps help support the sustainable reuse of buildings while maintaining their historical authenticity. When commercial activities are properly managed, they will become an effective way to protect architectural heritage. The results of this study provide practical ideas for adopting an active utilization strategy to protect similar heritage sites around the world.

Keywords: Heritage conservation, Commercial reuse, Tianjin concessions, Merchant behavior, urban renewal.

1. Introduction

Tianjin was an important trading port in modern Chinese history and once had nine foreign concessions. These historical buildings not only preserve the cultural memory of this city, but also serve as important tangible resources for exploring the path of China's modernization. Recently, in

the efforts of urban renewal and the development of cultural tourism, it has become increasingly common in Tianjin to reuse buildings from the concession period for commercial purposes, and business owners have played a core role in this transformation.

The core of this study is a key question: When the buildings from the Tianjin concession period were reused, how did the leasing arrangements and commercial activities of the merchants affect the success of heritage protection? On the one hand, the participation of merchants has brought obvious benefits to urban development - their businesses have driven local consumption, promoted tourism, and injected vitality into the economy of the region. On the other hand, these commercial activities may cause potential damage to historical buildings, posing risks to heritage protection. This article uses literature research and interview results to explore whether this reuse supports or poses a threat to building conservation.

2. Description of the problem

This research centers on the specific business-related actions that merchants have undertaken in recent years as they put historical buildings from Tianjin's concession zones to commercial use. Rooted in rental agreements, these practices encompass interior refurbishments, changes to building exteriors, and day-to-day upkeep carried out to serve business requirements.

Such behaviors hold significance on three fronts. For one, they exert a direct impact on the physical wholeness of the structures and the historical details they contain. Every renovation or maintenance step taken by merchants has the potential to either add to the heritage's worth or lead to the erosion of historical records. For another, merchant behavior acts as a middle layer connecting policy and the actual results of protection efforts: it is shaped by urban renewal blueprints and heritage preservation rules, yet the profit-focused nature of commercial ventures may push these actions to cross regulatory lines, thus affecting the fragile equilibrium between safeguarding and utilizing the buildings. Thirdly, a host of real-life examples have already surfaced. Some merchants have breathed new life into old structures through renovations that stick to the rules, while others have inflicted damage by breaking regulations. These instances are vital for grasping the mechanisms that underpin both the reuse process and the success of heritage protection.

3. Literature review

Scholars worldwide have generated a substantial body of research examining how historical building preservation interacts with commercial repurposing.

On the global stage, theoretical work on reusing historic structures emerged from the mid-20th-century "heritage revitalization" movement. In *A Pattern Language*, Brand's "deep repair" concept argues that historic buildings derive their "liveliness" from ongoing use rather than passive preservation, asserting that thoughtful functional adaptation is key to preventing physical deterioration. This perspective justifies merchant involvement in conservation: by infusing buildings with practical value through business activities, merchants indirectly maintain the structures themselves. Later, UNESCO's Venice Charter introduced the "authenticity" principle, clarifying reuse boundaries by stipulating that all renovations must preserve a building's historical integrity—a standard crucial for evaluating the validity of merchants' renovation work. European research on industrial heritage and ancient urban districts (such as studies of Bologna's old town) demonstrates that merchants operating within regulations can not only revitalize historic spaces but also enhance heritage's role in cultural exchange by aligning business models with architectural styles (e.g., transforming Renaissance buildings into art galleries).

Domestic research, while drawing on international frameworks, emphasizes China's unique urban contexts. In *An Introduction to the Study of Historical City Protection*, Zhang Song notes that modern concession-era buildings in China, as "distinct historical artifacts," require balancing historical authenticity with contemporary utility [1]. He highlights merchants as critical intermediaries between "protection policies" and "space utilization," whose practices directly shape preservation outcomes. Li Hequn's studies on Beijing's Nanluoguxiang and Shanghai's Shikumen renovations show that organized merchant participation can resolve funding shortages in heritage protection: commercial profits can fund repairs (like roof overhauls and structural reinforcement), creating a "preservation-utilization" cycle. Ruan Yisan's team's surveys of Jiangnan water towns confirm that when merchants align operations with buildings' historical features (e.g., converting Republican-era mansions into folk museums), they not only attract visitors but also boost public heritage awareness through immersive experiences.

Yet existing research also warns of commercialization risks. In *Research on the Protection Planning of Chinese Historical and Cultural Cities*, Wang Jinghui identifies a "utilization-over-preservation" trend in some regions driven by profit motives [2]. Merchants may illegally demolish load-bearing walls to expand space or alter facades to fit viral aesthetic trends (e.g., repainting old European-style buildings in bright hues), causing irreversible loss of historical information. A 2023 Tianjin Cultural Heritage Protection Center report reveals that 13 of 23 illegal renovation cases in Wudadao resulted directly from improper merchant actions—including replacing century-old wooden windows with floor-to-ceiling models and drilling smoke vents in brick walls [3]. These practices damage authenticity and create structural hazards. Similar incidents in Wuhan's Hankou Concession and Guangzhou's Shamian Island highlight gaps in merchant behavior oversight [4].

In summary, existing literature provides theoretical foundations and case examples for understanding how concession-era building preservation interacts with merchant activities. However, gaps remain in exploring micro-level behavioral mechanisms, differential impact analysis, and implementation pathways for regulatory standards.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining semi-structured interviews and literature analysis to explore how merchant behavior affects the protection of historical buildings in Tianjin's concession areas. The design centers on the "merchant behavior—protection effect" mechanism.

To capture perspectives from different stakeholders, the study interviewed 10 individuals from three groups:

- 2 merchant managers operating in core concession areas (Wudadao and Italian Style Town) for over 3 years, all local Tianjin residents involved in building renovations or business operations.
- 4 residents living near concession buildings, from various age groups with long-term residence or rental experience, and direct observations of building changes;
- 4 visitors from different cities, motivated by historical or tourism interests, who experienced the renovated buildings and had impressions of their preservation status.

Interviews, conducted in June–July 2025, lasted 5–10 minutes each and were held on-site in Wudadao and Italian Style Town. Interview guides included basic, core, and follow-up questions, covering links to concession buildings, perceptions of renovation and protection, and suggestions for balancing business with conservation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

5. Findings

Interview findings show that merchants have played a generally positive role. First, merchants largely comply with restrictions on building appearance, such as not altering facades or removing load-bearing walls. Some creatively turned these constraints into business advantages—for instance, restaurants preserving old stone steps and layouts to enhance a nostalgic atmosphere, or bookstores combining vintage windows with modern literature. These examples reflect Zhang Song's idea of merging historical authenticity with modern use [1]. Furthermore, merchants are becoming more aware of historical value, collecting background stories, installing signage, and incorporating heritage narratives into services. Many now see regulations as long-term safeguards—e.g., restaurant owners value traditional wall techniques and view building integrity as crucial to their business success [5].

Second, nearby residents assess merchant behavior through the lens of heritage continuity and community vibrancy. Older residents noted how renovation improved once-dilapidated buildings and preserved original features like wooden windows. Middle-aged and younger residents appreciated the convenience and atmosphere created by boutique shops. While some minor issues like noise or litter were raised, most supported a mix of residential and commercial uses, especially small-scale, low-impact operations like bookstores and tea shops—opposing large malls.

Third, tourists highlighted the role of merchants in activating heritage sites. A student interested in modern history valued accessible heritage cafes and galleries over abandonment. A teacher with family emphasized both ambiance (e.g., reliefs, stone lions) and practical function. Visitors from Shanghai and Beijing echoed a key idea: if authenticity is preserved, commercial use can transform cold monuments into relatable cultural spaces [6].

From a literature research perspective, in the field of protection of historical buildings in Tianjin's concession areas, previous studies have fully affirmed the positive significance of reasonable commercial operations for architectural protection [4-7]. Through rational commercial operations, financial support can be provided for architectural protection, thereby ensuring proper maintenance of the buildings. In successful cases of revitalization and utilization of historical buildings, part of the revenue generated from commercial operations is allocated to daily repairs and maintenance of the buildings, ensuring the safety and stability of their structures. For instance, after a certain historical building was converted into a characteristic hotel, the hotel operator used the operating income to conduct regular comprehensive inspections and repairs of the building, including roof waterproofing, wall reinforcement, and maintenance of wooden structures, ensuring that the building remains in good condition after years of use.

Meanwhile, strict adherence to relevant regulations is crucial for forming a virtuous cycle between architectural protection and utilization. Taking the "Regulations on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Buildings in Tianjin" as an example, this regulation specifies in detail the protection scope, protection measures, and renovation approval procedures for historical buildings [8]. When merchants strictly comply with regulatory requirements and maintain a sense of awe for historical buildings during renovation and operation, they can not only avoid damaging the buildings but also ensure that the buildings are better protected through reasonable utilization. For example, when a historical building in Tianjin was converted into a restaurant, the merchant strictly followed the regulations, conducted a detailed assessment of the building's appearance and structure, and skillfully replanned the internal space without damaging the original structure. This not only met the operational needs of the restaurant but also preserved the historical charm of the building, making it a model for architectural protection and utilization.

However, some literatures have pointed out that in practice, there are still some issues that cannot be ignored. Driven by interests, some merchants have engaged in illegal renovations, such as privately altering building structures or demolishing original building components, which have seriously damaged the authenticity and historical style of the buildings [2]. For example, in the Wudadao area, there was an incident where a merchant arbitrarily demolished internal load-bearing walls to expand the business area [3], posing a great threat to the structural safety of the building. Although such acts were stopped under strict supervision, the damage caused is difficult to fully recover. In addition, the excessive concentration of commercial development has led to excessive pressure on the surrounding environment of some historical buildings. Problems such as traffic congestion and noise pollution have become increasingly prominent, affecting the overall cultural atmosphere of historical buildings. Some literatures also mention that excessive decoration of buildings by some merchants has covered up the original historical traces of the buildings, which is also a point that needs attention and regulation in the process of architectural protection.

Nevertheless, both interviews and literature research have revealed some problems. During the renovation and operation process, some merchants may engage in potentially destructive behaviors due to an insufficient understanding of protection norms or the pursuit of short-term interests. Although no obvious illegal behaviors were found in this interview, the illegal renovation incidents in the Wudadao area recorded in the literature indicate that we must remain vigilant against merchants breaking the bottom line of protection in pursuit of economic interests. In addition, commercial development has also brought some impacts on the lives of surrounding residents, such as rising prices, increased noise, and garbage. Although residents generally recognize the vitality brought by architectural renovation, these negative impacts cannot be ignored, and it is necessary to balance commercial operations and residents' quality of life in future development.

To further exert the positive role of merchants in the protection of historical buildings in Tianjin's concession areas, avoid potential destructive behaviors, and achieve sustainable development of historical building protection and commercial operations, the following suggestions are put forward based on interviews and literature research:

- Relevant government departments should strengthen the publicity of regulations such as the "Regulations on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Buildings in Tianjin" [8], and regularly organize training for merchants to ensure that they have a thorough understanding of the requirements and significance of architectural protection, enhance their awareness of protection, and enable them to consciously abide by the regulations in business activities, thereby reducing illegal behaviors caused by ignorance [9].

- Establish and improve a strict supervision system, strengthen daily inspections, and use information-based means, such as establishing an inspection system to realize mobile feedback, so as to promptly detect and handle illegal renovation behaviors of merchants. Implement strict punishment measures against illegal merchants to increase their illegal costs and form effective constraints. At the same time, encourage residents and tourists to supervise and report illegal behaviors, forming a protective atmosphere with full public participation.

- The government can further optimize the subsidy policy for merchants operating in historical buildings. Provide corresponding financial subsidies or tax incentives according to the actual contributions of merchants to architectural protection, such as reasonable renovation and active dissemination of historical culture, to encourage merchants to take the initiative to participate in architectural protection. In addition, on the premise of meeting protection requirements, simplify the approval procedures for merchant renovations, improve approval efficiency, and promote the coordinated development of commercial operations and architectural protection.

- Promote cooperation and communication among multiple subjects such as merchants, residents, the government, experts, and scholars. Regularly organize forums or seminars to allow all parties to participate in discussions on the protection and utilization of historical buildings, listen to the demands of residents, absorb professional opinions from experts, promote mutual understanding between merchants and residents, and form a joint force for protection.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that under proper guidance, merchant leasing and business activities have a positive impact on the conservation of Tianjin's concession-era historical buildings. Through compliant renovations, preservation of historical features, and revitalized usage, merchants extend building life and enhance cultural communication. Only a small fraction of profit-driven behaviors pose risks, which can be mitigated through regulation [8]—demonstrating that merchants are vital allies in heritage preservation.

Policy recommendations include refined management strategies: implementing tiered subsidies and tax incentives to encourage protective behavior, organizing training to turn laws into practical guidelines, and simplifying compliance approval procedures to balance efficiency with conservation.

By bridging the gap between policy and practice, this study provides empirical insights into commercialized heritage protection, offering a reference for other cities with concession-era architecture [6,9].

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