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# Imagine the Old Town of Lijiang

## Contextualising community participation for urban heritage management in China

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# Imagine the Old Town of Lijiang: Contextualising community participation for urban heritage management in China

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ABSTRACT

The UNESCO 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) states community participation is a pivotal tool for integrating heritage practices into sustainable urban development. While community participation is significant but limited in China, various participatory methods have been developed, tested and evaluated worldwide. For example, inspired by HUL, the Ballarat Imagine in Australia has successfully used public engagement in the development of a community vision for local conservation and development. This paper aims to contextualise community participation in China, by testing and adapting a community participatory method, the (Ballarat) Imagine. Imagine was tested in the Old Town of Lijiang as an academic scoping exercise, to critically examine its viability and potential for contextualisation to the Chinese context. During the fieldwork, three workshops were organised with residents in Dayan, Shuhe and Baisha, which are the three housing clusters constituting the World Heritage property. In the workshops, residents responded to three sets of questions focussing on their feelings about local historic urban landscape as well as their ideas about future public engagement in local heritage management. This paper discusses the contextualised approach of community participation tailored to the management of the Old Town of Lijiang, and also China as a whole, seeking to find a balance between top-down and bottom-up processes. This academic exercise confirmed that the community participatory method, the Imagine, can be further adapted to the Chinese context. Further research could test it in other cities, to better face the challenges of rapid urbanisation.

## 1. Introduction

Urban heritage management in China has been criticised by international scholars, as it is considered to be an unorthodox approach, putting economic pursuits first at the cost of heritage resources and vernacular cultural identities (Verdini et al., 2017). One of the main critics focusses on its top-down approach, wherein local governments play a centralised and exclusive role in decision-making (Li et al., 2020a; Zhao et al., 2020). This is particularly true for the government-led approaches, seeking maximum efficiency in wholescale urbanisation and transformation processes, resulting in tremendous heritage demolition, community removal and exclusion as the major outcome of Chinese urban (re)development strategies (Morrison & Xian, 2016; Verdini et al., 2017). While increasing the understanding of China's situation, more holistic and integrative approaches are urgently needed, innovatively managing heritage protection and (re)use in rapid urbanisation, to adhere to global standards but also maintain its own contextualised institutional, political and socio-cultural characteristics (Verdini et al., 2017).

The UNESCO 2011 Recommendation of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) was proposed not only as a new concept but also a new approach to urban heritage management. Cities are considered herein the result of historical layering, in which natural, cultural and human attributes have accumulated over time in an ever-changing environment (Ji et al., 2020; Verdini et al., 2017). The HUL approach promotes the integration of urban conservation and development, whereas community participation is regarded as an essential tool to achieve this goal (UNESCO 2011). Heritage management is broadening the scope, from conserving built heritage in isolation to integrating heritage resources into sustainable urban development (Rey-Perez & Siguencia Ávila, 2017; Ripp & Rodwell, 2015). Within this approach, the process of prioritising actions is pivotal, which can be based on residents' interests

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and their sense of satisfaction (Ji et al., 2020). Residents and their interests could then included in the entire management process, from identification to programming and execution (Rey-Perez & Siguencia Ávila, 2017; Veldpaus, 2015).

While community participation is significant and growing, it is still limited in China (Li et al., 2020a; Zhao et al., 2020). At the same time, various participatory methods have been developed, tested and evaluated in other countries worldwide (Morrison & Xian, 2016). In America and also many European countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, community participation has been discussed and espoused in urban theories, encouraging local communities to participate in planning decision-making processes which can directly affect their daily activities (Arnstein, 1969; Lewis, 2015; van Heelsum, 2005). In China, urban heritage management, in general, is government-led, wherein residents often lack sufficient platforms and competency to be engaged (Li et al., 2020b). It is still hard for residents to fully participate in heritage projects, due to the strong local context of state-centralisation (Li et al., 2020a). Even so, effective community consultation in the pre-plan making stage has been proven to be also key to achieve excellent outcomes within Chinese practices, which is evidenced in Wenhuali, Yangzhou and Tianzifang, Shanghai (Li et al., 2020a). Otherwise, civil resistance could take place, such as in the cases of Enning Road, Guangzhou and the Drum Tower Muslim District, Xi'an (Tan & Altrock, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013). Public engagement can effectively reconcile conflicts between various stakeholders, and it is a practical solution to mitigate social tension issues in urban China (Verdini, 2015; Yung et al., 2014, 2017).

With the approval of HUL, it has become standard practice to include a wide range of stakeholders in urban heritage management, including administrators, residents, experts, business people and developers (Mackay & Johnston, 2010; Rey-Perez & Siguencia Ávila, 2017). Various participatory methods, e.g. interviews, workshops and residential meetings, have been developed for mapping heritage attributes, reaching consensus and resolving conflicts (Li et al., 2020a). Although these methods have proven themselves valid in participatory practices in contexts of democratic governance, they cannot be directly applied to China, in the contexts of state centralisation and rapid urbanisation (Li et al., 2020a; Morrison & Xian, 2016). So, there is a need to develop a contextualised process of community participation for China, rather than the usual state-led decide-announce-defend approach, where international tools are tested and adapted to national practices (Morrison & Xian, 2016).

Inspired by the HUL approach, the City of Ballarat in Australia facilitated a large conversation with the community called Ballarat Imagine, to be better informed on their interests and needs. This participatory engagement project successfully produced well-established procedures and a community vision of local conservation and development (Buckley et al., 2015). This paper aims to contextualise community participation in China, by testing and adapting the (Ballarat) Imagine method to the Chinese context. The Imagine method was tested in the Old Town of Lijiang an academic scoping exercise. Based on the critical reflections of these experiments, this research has put forward recommendations for Chinese community participation in urban heritage management.

The Old Town of Lijiang was selected as the case, due to its World Heritage status as well as its integrative developmental challenges of rapid urbanisation, including heritage commodification, over-touristification and gentrification. This situation is representative of many, if not most Chinese urban heritage properties (Opschoor & Tang, 2011; Shao, 2017; Su, 2011). Besides this, in Lijiang, the engagement of local communities in heritage management processes has been recognised in the local government's working agendas. Although it is a World Heritage property which, in the view of the Lijiang authorities, should have the most advanced management practices, a well-accepted participatory process among the public has yet to be established (Li et al., 2020b; Su, 2010, 2011). During the fieldwork, three workshops were organised with residents in Dayan, Shuhe and Baisha, which are the three housing clusters constituting the World Heritage property. In the workshops, residents responded to three sets of Imagine questions focussing on how they feel about their historic urban landscape, but also on their ideas about future public engagement in local heritage management. This paper discusses the contextualised process of community participation tailored to the management of the Old Town of Lijiang, setting out an outline to further test this method elsewhere in China.

## 2. Community participation within HUL approach and the imagine method

The HUL approach proposes a novel management approach for urban heritage, by identifying and taking into account local challenges and conditions, through community participation (Wang & Gu, 2020). This landscape approach is helpful to holistically identify urban contexts as well as increase heritage values and local communities' quality of life, linking the past to the future (Luis Loures et al., 2011). Moving beyond built environments, various other aspects including local infrastructure, crime, access, finance and labour force are also essential in the process of identifying local contexts (Luís Loures, 2015). In 2013, the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and Pacific Region (WHITRAP) initiated a programme to explore the implementation of the HUL approach in five pilot cities. These pilot cities encountered varying challenges such as increasing massive tourism, population growth and displacement and poor infrastructure, as represented in Table 1. The HUL approach promotes the development of heritage management approaches that integrate tangible and intangible attributes, broader values systems, and cope with its local natural and socio-economic contexts (WHITRAP, 2016).

These pilot cities implemented various methods of public engagement for contextual identification and decision-making, making them knowledge-based processes. As these processes were built on residents' input, their everyday living experiences, traditional practices and skills became fundamental to local heritage management (Li et al., 2020a; WHITRAP, 2016). The core principle of community participation is that residents can play a role in making local social, psychological, political and economic decisions which shape their daily lives (Li et al., 2020b; Morrison & Xian, 2016). The identification of diversified expectations of different communities can mitigate public resistance in local heritage practices, in which minority concerns and benefits also need to be sufficiently considered (Luis Loures et al., 2020). Within these pilot cities, various participatory methods were used to facilitate local community participation in decision-making, as well as, to negotiate different interests and build consensus (WHITRAP, 2016). The workshop has concluded as an effective method, both in Chinese and other international cases, especially in the areas of low public awareness and capacities in heritage protection, that it can guide residents to better contribute active discussion, feedback and joint action rather than a passive audience (Gravagnuolo & Girard, 2017; Rey-Perez & Siguencia Ávila, 2017). For example, in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, workshops were organised with residents to assess the significance of the local landscape. In Rawalpindi, Pakistan, meetings, seminars and workshops were conducted to assess local conditions and vulnerabilities (Gravagnuolo & Girard, 2017). Both Cuenca and Suzhou conducted workshops to explore residents' ideas towards local historic urban landscape and then check if their interests were well understood and included (Rey-Perez & Siguencia Ávila, 2017; Verdini et al., 2017).

Within the community participation of the two Chinese cases, local governments together with professionals played a strong role and actively led the management processes. In the Wujiang District of Suzhou, the local government commissioned university researchers to organise residential consultation workshops to approve the local developmental strategies (Verdini & Huang, 2019). Besides, the local government of Hongkou District carried out public participatory processes in the preparation, open discussion and adjustment of making

**Table 1**
Summary of HUL implementation on the five pilot cities (Adapted from WHITRAP, 2016).

| Pilot Cities | Ballarat | Shanghai (Hongkou District) | Suzhou (Wujiang District) | Cuenca (the historic centre) | Rawalpindi (the old core) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Challenges in Local Heritage Management | - Tourism blooming | - Development-orientation | - High entrepreneurial attitude | - Population displacement | - Poor infrastructure |
| | - Population growth | - Poor local facilities | - Extensive migrant workforce | - Living expense Increase | - High-density neighbourhoods |
| | - Climate change affecting farming communities | - Economic recession | - Sense of belongingness | - Losing intangible heritage | - Low public awareness of heritage |
| Participatory Processes | - Ballarat Imagine for well-established procedures of wide community conversations | - Survey the community's will- Open discussions | - Residential workshops for cultural mapping | - Sixteen citizen workshops for cultural mapping | - Meetings, seminars and workshops with residents, shopkeepers, and administrators for reaching a consensus of heritage values and attributes |
| | - Community forums for public access to information | - Public participation in the preparation and adjustment of local plans and policies | - Final development scheme presented in participatory sessions | - Prioritisation of landscape quality objectives from citizens' views | |
| Perspectives and Results | - Underpinning people-centred approaches and partnerships | - Enlarging conservation scope targeted from single heritage buildings to the whole historic area | - Improving local infrastructure | - Raising local awareness about diverse and complex heritage values | - Focussing on built heritage, traditional occupations and bazaar resilience and religious landscape. |
| | - Building a comprehensive "living" knowledge database | - Broadening heritage management framework | - Protecting rural historic landscape, including water systems and fishponds | - Agreement on joint research about the HUL approach | - Building common ground among partners |

local plans and policies (WHITRAP, 2016). Because of the sufficient discussion and inclusion of residents' interests and needs, these two cases progressed well and achieved well-accepted outcomes among the public, even though the processes were still predominantly "government-led" (Verdini et al., 2017). This reflects, within such an environment of state-centralisation, government-led community participation could also be an applicable way for urban heritage management in China, as long as residents' needs and interests are sufficiently discussed and included (Fan, 2014; Kou et al., 2018). But there are many purely top-down processes taking place in China, causing civil resistance (Fan, 2014; Tan & Altrock, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013). Therefore, the key point has become how the government-led processes can be balanced to effectively engage and include residents' interests and needs in relation to both local heritage protection and socio-economic development, as this research attempted to achieve, through workshops and conversations with the residents (Li et al., 2020b).

The departure points of these pilot cities were seeking to integrate heritage resources into broader urban development and planning contexts, as HUL is characterised by localised dynamic natural, socio-cultural and economic processes (Wang & Gu, 2020; WHITRAP, 2016). Therefore, from the identification phase, participatory tools need to be conducted, not only to identify heritage attributes and values but also local resources and social concern issues (WHITRAP, 2016). Intending to reach an agreement of local conservation and development strategies, the local authority of Ballarat conducted a project titled Ballarat Imagine to facilitate conversations between residents and government. During the project, three Imagine questions were asked with residents: 1) what do you love? 2) what would you want to retain? and 3) what would you like to change? (Buckley et al., 2015). This project was pioneering to employ a value-based process to gain a "better understanding of what different communities value most in Ballarat, what they imagine for their future and what they do not want to lose" (Buckley et al., 2015, pp.103).

The Ballarat Imagine was successfully applied to collect residents' ideas towards the historic urban landscape. And the three Imagine questions were well established to identify local contexts, moving beyond built heritage to covering the whole local environment of urban conservation and development (Buckley et al., 2015). For example, intangible attributes of the local areas were also elicited from Ballarat residents' responses, such as traditional music, arts, clean fresh air and public safety (City of Ballarat, 2013b). In China, the pre-plan making stage has not been well established yet, having failed to involve residents for local contextual identification in urban heritage management (Li et al., 2020a; Morrison & Xian, 2016). Furthermore, given the differences of local conditions in public administration and institutional systems, residents' willingness and expectation to be engaged in heritage management could be different from other countries, and this is key when discussing Chinese contextualised community participation (Li et al., 2020a). Therefore, this research employed the Imagine method as an academic scoping exercise, conducted in Lijiang, through three workshops with local residents, clustered per neighbourhood. The workshops embraced the discussions of both residents' responses to the three questions, concerning the local contextual identification and their willingness to be engaged in the future, reflecting on the Chinese contextualised approach of heritage management.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Facts about the case study of the Old Town of Lijiang

The Old Town of Lijiang, which origin can be traced back to 800 years ago to the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279), is famous for its many vernacular dwellings, cultural conventions and rituals of ethnic minority groups, as well as, natural environments including snow mountains, grasslands and waters (Shao, 2017; Su et al., 2020). It was an important centre for cultural and technological exchanges between various ethnic groups such as Naxi, Han, Bai and Tibetan people. Until today, the townscape and architectural characteristics of the Old Town have retained the residential traditions of these ethnic groups. As a World Heritage property, the core protected zone of Lijiang's old town is 145.6 ha and the buffer zone is 582.3 ha. Lijiang's traditional dwellings are characterised as "numerous two-storeyed, tile-roofed, timber-framed houses combining elements of Han and Zang architecture and decoration". It consists of three heritage housing clusters, Dayan Old Town (including Heilong Pond), Baisha and Shuhe, as shown in Fig. 1 (UNESCO 1997).

Ever since its inscription on the World Heritage List in 1997, tourism has increased enormously in Lijiang, resulting in a booming tourism industry, which is key to the growth and vitality of local economic development (Shao, 2017). In 2108, Lijiang was visited by 46.4 million tourists (Lijiang Bureau of Statistics 2019), compared to 1.7 million in 1997 (Shao, 2017). Parallel to the exponential growth of the tourism

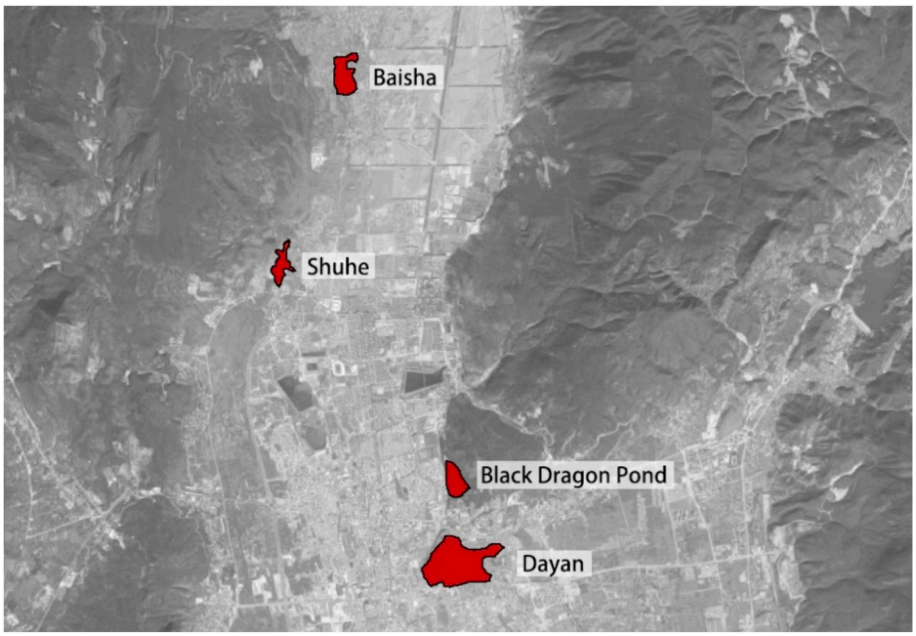


**Fig. 1.** Geographical distribution of the core protected zones of the Old Town of Lijiang in the City (Adapted from the Conservation Plan of World Heritage Site: Lijiang Old Town, 2013).

market, "tens of thousands of domestic migrants" mostly from Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, also called by the natives as new Lijiangers (xin lijiang ren), have moved to Lijiang in order to open businesses such as guesthouses, restaurants and shops, contributing to the increase of land value (Su et al., 2020). Native residents, called old Lijiangers (lao lijiang ren), have rented their houses to migrant business people and moved out from the old town. House owners became the occupation of the old Lijiangers (formerly farmers) as the rents were high enough, to become their only source of income. Most population living in the old town today is employed by the tourism sector (Shao, 2017). Paradoxically, the homes and lifestyle of the old Lijiangers are core to the cultural significance of the old town, its crafts and rituals, which are also key resources for the local tourism-based economy (Shao, 2017; Su, 2015). Therefore, the participation of the native residents' is key to achieve a better balance between urban conservation and development, and ensure the protection of Lijiang's heritage values for present and future generations (Shao, 2017).

The local government has established a specialised institution for daily administrative and protective affairs of the old town, which is called the Conservation and Management Bureau of the World Heritage Lijiang Old Town (hereafter: the Management Bureau, shijie wenhua yichan lijiang gucheng guanli baohu ju) (Su, 2010). The Management Bureau organises governmental meetings and also commits Residents' Committees (RCs, shequ juweihui) to conduct community meetings at the neighbourhood level, to facilitate participatory practices in heritage management. Earlier research revealed that these participatory platforms do not work effectively enough, as the degree of local participation is still minimal (Li et al., 2020c). Accordingly, the heritage identification phase has public residential consultation procedures yet to be established. Moreover, the participatory platforms do not include residents' interests in the phases of programming and execution. The government and local elites have then benefited more from tourism revenues. than any other stakeholders, including the native residents (Su, 2015). The local elites in Lijiang, including both natives and migrants, are either residents who have a high reputation in vernacular culture, or who run a big business for a long time. They have close relationships with the local government, appointed as representatives of ordinary residents to play a role in the governmental meetings (Li et al., 2020c). Therefore, pubic participatory procedures in Lijiang need to be advanced, further following local expectations, to better engage local residents, and not only those of the local elites, to contribute traditional knowledge and skills, so that also their needs can be included in heritage management strategies and plans.

The implementation of HUL in Ballarat included: 1) wide community conversations to collect public aspirations, visions, ideas and interests in safeguarding local heritage and promoting sustainable development, and 2) partnership-building of various stakeholders to form a bottom-up decision-making process (Buckley et al., 2015). However, the decision-making process of Chinese cultural heritage management is government-led, differing from international wide-spread bottom-up approaches (Li et al., 2020a), while there are no effective public consultation activities carried out in Lijiang (Li et al., 2020c). Therefore, as shown in Fig. 2, this research has developed the methodology endeavouring to adapt Ballarat experience to Lijiang, by "imagining" 1) residents' feelings about Lijiang's historic urban landscape and 2) residents' expectations about how their interests can be sufficiently integrated into local government-led heritage practices. The data collection and analysis processes are presented in the following sections.

The data collection was carried out during fieldwork between September and December 2019 in Lijiang, China. Three workshops were organised with 30 local residents, one per heritage housing cluster, including ten residents per workshop. Workshop participants were invited at random, as long as who had either lived or worked in the old town for over a year and knew vernacular culture well. These invited residents were with various occupations, including local public administrators, business people, teachers and workers. Their various occupations can contribute to the discussion from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups. The demographic and social characteristics of the participants are as demonstrated in Table 2.

Workshop participants discussed 1) their responses to the three Imagine questions and 2) the willingness to be engaged in local heritage management. For each Imagine question, participants can pick up to three items from nine optional items, A) heritage buildings, streets and bazaars; B) traditional conventions and rituals; C) natural parks, water systems, snow mountains and grasslands; D) community services and facilities; E) tourist services and facilities; F) community economic activities and employment; G) public transportation, pedestrian and parking spaces; H) schools and educational institutes; and I) others.

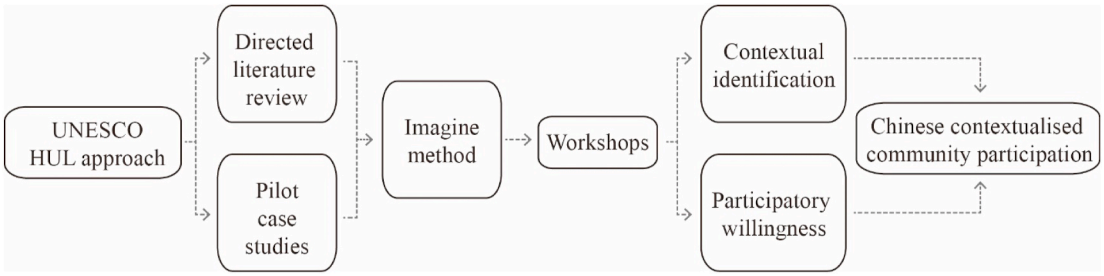


**Fig. 2.** Methodological scheme.

**Table 2**
Demographic and social characteristics of the workshop participants.

| Housing clusters | | Dayan | Shuhe | Baisha | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 70% | 40% | 40% | 50% |
| | Female | 30% | 60% | 60% | 50% |
| Age | 0–12 | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| | 13–17 | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| | 18–25 | 0% | 10% | 0% | 3.3% |
| | 26–35 | 30% | 70% | 50% | 50% |
| | 36–45 | 30% | 20% | 20% | 23.3% |
| | 46–55 | 30% | 0% | 10% | 13.3% |
| | 56–65 | 10% | 0% | 20% | 10% |
| | 66+ | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Ethnic | Naxi | 50% | 50% | 40% | 46.7% |
| | Bai | 10% | 0% | 10% | 6.7% |
| | Hani | 0% | 10% | 0% | 3.3% |
| | Lahu | 0% | 10% | 0% | 3.3% |
| | Han | 40% | 30% | 50% | 40% |
| Education | Primary school and lower | 10% | 10% | 0% | 6.7% |
| | Middle school | 10% | 10% | 30% | 16.7% |
| | High school | 30% | 30% | 30% | 30% |
| | College and university | 50% | 50% | 40% | 46.7% |
| | Master and above | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Occupation | Public administration | 20% | 0% | 30% | 16.7% |
| | Tourism business | 30% | 60% | 30% | 40% |
| | Teacher | 10% | 10% | 0% | 6.6% |
| | Worker | 0% | 10% | 0% | 3.3% |
| | House owner | 40% | 20% | 40% | 33.3% |

These items helped participants understand and scope the local historic urban landscape and, in the meantime, they can also supplement their own personal ideas through the item#I. Subsequently, residents addressed their ideas towards each optional item and the reasons why they picked up the specific items in response to each question. This was a checking process for residents to understand each optional item properly as well as for the investigator to consult with residents about their expectations effectively.

Residents' willingness to participate in local heritage management was then collected through five questions. The questions included: 1) do you think the old town conservation is important? 2) do you think the collaboration between the government, experts/professionals and residents is important? 3) have you ever participated in local heritage management? 4) are you willing to be engaged? and 5) what should the roles of the government, experts/professionals, native and migrant residents be? In the workshops, participants answered the five questions one by one, to discuss their willingness to be engaged and also how future local participatory practices could be conducted, based on current local situation and conditions.

### 3.2. Content analysis of workshop transcripts

The complex nature of this study concerned Chinese contextualised community participation, by testing the Imagine methodology and then collecting data from the residential workshops in Lijiang. The method of inductive content analysis was used to analyse the workshop transcripts, qualitatively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The workshop transcripts were processed to inductively demonstrate residents' ideas and perceptions, with numeral results of the optional items to each question integrated into the qualitative analysis process. The analysis process included counting the frequencies of optional items, open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

First, the frequencies of the optional items were counted, demonstrating the direct and manifest contents of residents' attitudes and ideas. The numeral results were separately presented for the three housing clusters and then counted in total. Second, throughout reviewing the workshop transcripts, notes and headings, as open codes, were written along with the text, reflecting all aspects of the responses. All the collected open codes were grouped and refined to several higher-order categories, providing a means of interpreting the data, by identifying the similarity and dissimilarity of open codes. And then, abstraction involved a process of judgement to provide a general description of the concerning research topics following the categories. For example, Fig. 3 demonstrates the inductive analysis process of residents' responses to the first Imagine question, "what do you love?".

Further on in the analysis process, results and findings from the Imagine workshops were brought into the discussion section. On the one hand, the Imagine as a participatory method for the identification of local contexts, its viability and effectiveness in Lijiang was revealed, compared to Ballarat Imagine. On the other hand, based on residents' attitudes and willingness of public engagement and Chinese local contexts, the process of community participation was critically discussed. Besides, the significant roles of local elites and community organisations were highlighted in such a contextualised process.

## 4. Data analysis and findings

### 4.1. Imagining historic urban landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang

The Imagine method employed the HUL approach to identify the local historic urban landscape in Lijiang (see Fig. 4). The workshops enable a discussion with residents about their feelings and ideas. In the workshops, historic buildings and streets, traditional conventions and rituals, and natural environments were most favoured and residents, then hoped, these landscape layers can be well conserved in the future. Also, local economic activities, tourism development and community facilities were recognised as significant layers of the landscape.

Tangible and intangible heritage attributes were favoured among workshop participants, concerning traditional residential buildings (n = 25) and local conventions and rituals (n = 22). These public discussions with residents developed an open knowledge-based process for local cultural mapping. Heritage could be the attributes that residents consider valuable in their traditional socio-cultural practices, not just officially authorised traditional buildings. And heritage was also recognised to be useful and significant in their daily life. They openly expressed their affections, "Of course, I love traditional courtyard dwellings and historic streets like Sifang Jie. They are the main component of our old town. Besides, we have old bridges, streams, and many ancient trees, which I also love pretty much. We need to conserve and maintain them" (A native from Dayan).

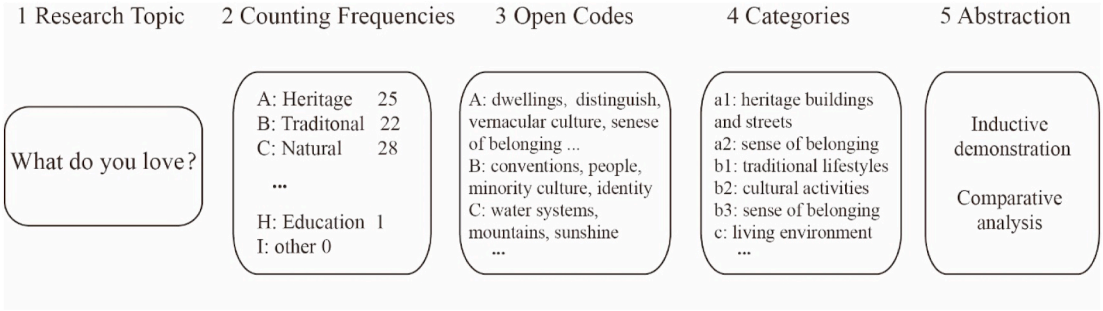


**Fig. 3.** The inductive analysis process of residents' responses to "what do you love?"

**Fig. 4.** "I love many things in our Lijiang's old town, but the things that I love most are traditional dwellings, our ethnic lifestyles and the natural environment of mountains and waters", said a native resident. The historic urban landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang, view along a stream in Dayan, consists of an ancient water-supply system, traditional timber-framed dwellings, ethic-minority-style decoration, stone pavement, followers, trees, people, etc. *@Xiaoyan He*.

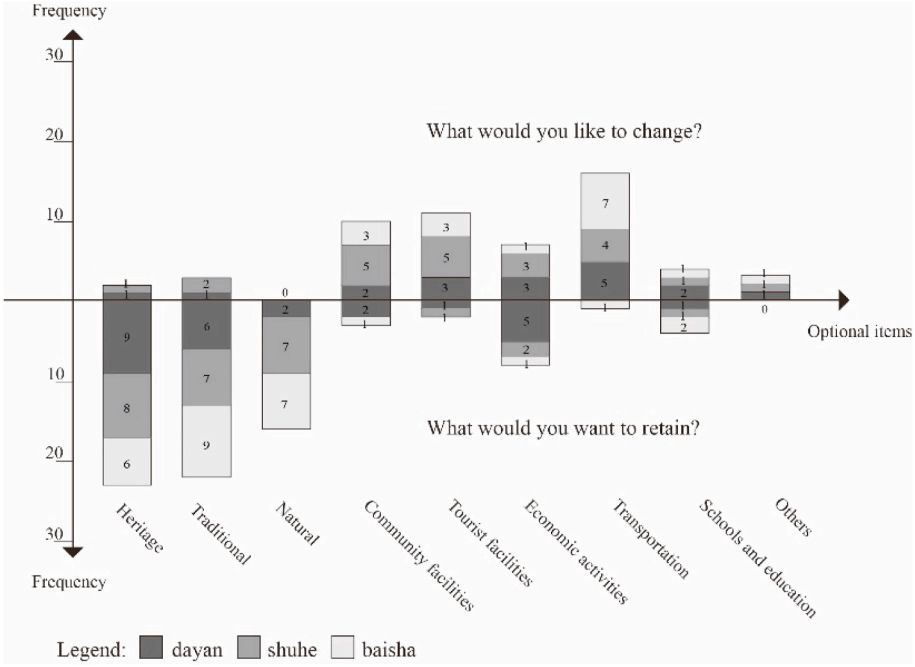


**Fig. 5.** Quantitative results of the second and third Imagine questions.

"I really love our traditional rituals and conventions as they can enhance the historical and cultural atmosphere of our old town. When joining collective activities to celebrate traditional festivals with tourists, I feel super proud of our Naxi culture" (A native from Baisha).

Furthermore, workshop participants valued and showed their love to local natural environments the most (n = 28 out of 30), including the ancient water-supply system distributed within the old town, Heilong Pond, grasslands and Yulong Snow Mountain. "Lijiang's old town essentially is a place where people live. The main reason why I decided to stay here is the beautiful and clean natural environment", as a migrant owner of a guesthouse from Shuhe stated. Besides, said a native elderly from Shuhe, "others may love our traditional dwellings most, but for me, local natural landscapes – the blue sky, white snow mountains and cool river water are the true soul of Lijiang".

Workshop participants then also addressed their worries to these landscape layers facing the challenges of rapid urbanisation, indicating their vulnerabilities and future actions to change the *status quo*. "our natural environment, especially waters and snow mountains, has degenerated because of the urban development and massive tourism over last 20 years. While protecting the old town, the natural environment should be also conserved", as a native administrative noted. "I really miss our traditional lifestyles. When I was young, I can buy home-made liquor around from my neighbours. But now, they all have left. The break of our old neighbourhood relationships is also a way of breaking down the old town", a native elderly from Dayan addressed his disappointment. This can be observed in Fig. 5, revealing how residents valued their local living environments and their willingness to retain, change and then improve it.

Interestingly, residents' attitudes to local economic activities showed a dual character. Eight workshop participants would like to retain or even further facilitate economic atmosphere within the old town. And their statements tended to focus on economic profits earned from local heritage-related businesses, saying, "most natives were farmers, only by tourism development can they increase their income", said a native. And then a guesthouse owner added, "we need to further promote tourism activities for local economic development as there is no great manufacturing industry in Lijiang". To develop the tourism-related businesses further, a native administrator addressed, "in Baisha, public toilets are not enough about both amount and condition, and we also need volunteers to improve tourists' experiences. We really need a new cultural-economic plan."

However, although the importance of tourism has been well recognised in local communities, residents also showcased their unsatisfaction to the economic development process. A Dayan native expressed his worries about the possible negative influence of massive tourism on local natural environments, "I don't think tourist cable-cars should reach the core zone of Yulong Snow Mountain directly, even if we can earn a lot of money from that. Cable-cars run extensively every day and this will definitely damage the natural environment of the mountain".

"Even though tourism is the main driving force for our Lijiang's economic development", said a Shuhe native resident, "we also need to incorporate tourism-related activities into our vernacular culture". A native businessman further explained this, "but now, many people conduct their business not related to local products, like selling Chongqing hotpots and Japanese-style guesthouses rather than silversmithing or Lijiang traditional food, only following what tourists prefer". "By developing vernacular cultural business, we can create more employment opportunities for native residents but this is not well managed", a native added. Furthermore, workshop participants in Dayan also addressed their unsatisfaction towards faking historic-style buildings (fanggu jianzhu) and traditions' disappearing, "if everything is continuously profit-oriented and tourism-centralised, we will lose our Naxi cultural identity and characteristics attached to the old town". Therefore, the dual character of residents' economic interests to feel about the local landscape is not conflicted. The local economy is significant to benefit residents' incomes, and it should not be totally profit-oriented tourism development but built on the enhancement of vernacular cultures.

Issues related to local communities' daily life were highlighted in the workshops, which always matter given Lijiang's old town is still human-inhabited, including transportation, education and neighbourhood administration. For example, the prioritised problem of transportation was the inconvenience of the existing action forbidding cars' and motorbikes' to enter the old town. Native residents stated that this was only focused on the improvement of tourists' experiences, saying, "it is not convenient for us to carry daily groceries to homes, too heavy", and "if our family members are ill, how can we take them to the city hospital without driving a car? It is not possible to call for an ambulance every time that we don't feel well". Furthermore, participants agreed that grocery markets, clinics and schools played an important role in communities' everyday life. But community facilities in neighbourhood centres, in general, were also criticized, "most facilities are only for elderly people' use, and young people are not engaged so they would possibly lose the connection with our neighbourhood".

Through the discussion about how residents feel about the historic urban landscape, their ideas were varied, either towards a specific Imagine question or a landscape layer. It is proved that people love and value not only built heritage but also other heritage that makes their identities and living environments special, such as natural systems, Naxi Dongba characters, music and traditional festivals. Furthermore, the discussion of economic activities indicates that local tourism-related should be more built on vernacular culture and community improvement, than a pure profit-oriented process. Therefore, the identification procedures, established from the test of the Imagine method in Lijiang, can effectively collect residents' interests and needs, moving beyond isolated tangible and intangible heritage to covering a broader historic urban landscape.

### 4.2. *Imagining participatory governance for the Old Town of Lijiang*

All workshop participants agreed on the importance of heritage protection, and almost all of them (26 out of 30) supported the collaboration between the local government, experts/professionals and residents in heritage management. Yet, they also concluded that "collaborative governance is not realistic". Because local political leaders (lingdaos, in Chinese) retained dominant power in decision-making and residents were not confident in their weak voice to be heard. "If we have interests deviating from the lingdaos', the government would implement their own decisions and exclude us. So, we have to trust our government and then, I don't need to be engaged". Within such a local environment, the roles of residents themselves, their representatives, the government and professionals were then discussed to find how would community participation be possible and useful.

While forecasting the future of community participation in Lijiang, workshop participants agreed that the local government was needed to initiate and lead heritage projects, but they also agreed that the local government could facilitate a much wider community consultation. They expected that local state institutions were to provide more administrative and financial support. Accordingly, the local government should request professionals to communicate with residents not only in the identification phase but also in the other two phases of programming and execution. So, the residents' interests would be much better incorporated, or as one resident put it: "we must be reflected in the final scheme". The need to empower local residents was also addressed, "both the local government and professionals need to create a better atmosphere for public heritage and provide us with participatory platforms", said a native from Baisha. Furthermore, a native from Shuhe noted that competence-building activities should be organised for both the government and residents,"Some lingdaos do not know our Naxi culture deeply, but they have the power to finalise heritage management programmes. This is not good. So, educational activities about vernacular

culture and traditional housing renovation should not be only organised for us but also for these decision-makers. Lacking professional skills, they would not be able to lead us to conduct heritage protection practices in a good manner".

With regard to residents' roles, the participation in heritage management of native and migrant residents was discussed. Native residents addressed their willingness and ability to contribute ideas to local heritage, attributes and values. Migrant residents also expressed the interest in learning vernacular culture and conducting heritage-related business in order to benefit the old town protection. Workshop participants explained this further, "Old Lijiangers need to bring back traditional Naxi culture to the old town, while new Lijiangers can learn about local culture and lifestyles and then respect them. We all have the duty to join the process of local heritage protection" (A native from Dayan).

"Native residents should play a role in meditating the interests of new Lijiangers and the government. Especially, we have neighbourhood RCs (consisting of natives) and they usually organise community meetings to inform institutional regulations. They also need to collect our suggestions and then propose to the Management Bureau" (A migrant businessman from Baisha).

"We have representatives of both new and old Lijiangers to participate in governmental meetings at the Management Bureau. In the meetings, they should not only express their own interests but also raise local concerned issues, to ensure residents' needs are truly included in final project schemes, in relation to heritage protection, living requirements and business-running" (A native businessman from Shuhe).

Through the discussion of expected local participatory governance, residents have recognised the significant and leading role of the local government in heritage practices of Lijiang's old town, especially at a strategic administration level. The local government was expected to organise public consultation with various social actors, experts and residents, which may avoid local political leaders wield exclusive power in decision-making. Furthermore, both native and migrant residents have shown the willingness to be engaged more actively, contributing ideas to protect the old town and facilitate local economy. Their representatives, including neighbourhood RCs and local elites, need to keep raising local community issues and negotiating with lingdaos when participating in governmental meetings. The process of local heritage management can be government-led, but at the same time, public interests should also be well-considered and included.

## 5. Discussion: Strengthening community participation within Chinese urban heritage management

Chinese Central Government has formulated several legislative documents to ensure community participation procedures in urban conservation and development planning processes, including the Measures for the Administration of City Purple Lines (2004) and the Town and Country Planning Act (2008) (The Central Government of PRC, 2004, 2008). However, local governments sometimes only detail and implement this legislation for meeting administrative procedure requirement, rather than conducting genuine community participation to gather public interests for heritage practices (Morrison & Xian, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013). Therefore, local governments are key in expanding participation levels in current Chinese heritage management practices, as they decide and shape how residents and their interests are included in the whole management process (Morrison & Xian, 2016; Tang, 2015).

Given the centralised administrative role of governments in China, it would be difficult to induce wider and more effective community participation within urban heritage management, solely by residents' initiatives (Fan, 2014; Morrison & Xian, 2016). Differing from bottom-up approaches, the process of community participation needs to be contextualised to fit China's contexts (Morrison & Xian, 2016). In Lijiang, as investigated in Li et al. (2020c), the local government has organised various activities including community and governmental meetings to engage residents in local heritage practices. But actually, residents are merely engaged symbolically in which local decision-makers have predominant power leading decision-making processes (Li et al., 2020c). In line with that, as the experimental process of the Imagine method in Lijiang has shown, residents have the willingness to be engaged but lack the confidence and platforms to get their voices heard and included. Additionally, residents are not keen to fully undertake local heritage management practices by themselves. Local governments, therefore, as expected to play a leading role in conducting the process and facilitating the wider community participation in urban heritage management.

In China, urban heritage practices mainly occur in three main phases: identification, programming and execution (Li et al., 2020a; Veldpaus, 2015). The identification phase, carried out in the very beginning, aims to not only recognise heritage significance (attributes and values) but also understand local broader urban contexts (Verdini et al., 2017). While the governments provide the information of local developmental administrative and strategic foci, heritage experts and professionals should be committed to working with residents on cultural mapping and public interests' collection (Fan, 2014; Verdini et al., 2017). In Lijiang, however, "community consultation" has only happened when a heritage scheme is finalised and about to be implemented, between programming and execution phases. Because of the skipping of the identification phase, residents interests have not been well included in the heritage scheme. As a result, first-hand knowledge of residents on the cultural values of the local heritage is neglected, and local community commitment to the heritage and its future developments has not been facilitated yet (Li et al., 2020c). All of this may trigger civil resistance and protests towards the future development plans, initiated by local governments, professional and business elites (Tan & Altrock, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013).

Fig. 6 presents a proposed process for Lijiang's community participation, which is built upon current local participatory platforms and the test of the Imagine method. In the whole process, the Management Bureau needs to play a role in authorising and commissioning professionals and neighbourhood RCs to organise community meetings for residential consultation. Besides, the governmental meetings are also necessary to be conducted with the representatives of residents, for raising local concerned issues and enabling feedback. In the identification phase, residential dialogue and consultation are expected in community meetings with residents (including ordinary citizens as well as cultural and business elites), heritage professionals and neighbourhood RCs. As tested in the Imagine workshops, in addition to mapping both tangible and intangible heritage, residents can also show the willingness to conserve other landscape layers which they value in everyday life, in relation to local cultural, natural, economic and social resources. Therefore, within Chinese urban heritage management, residents' interests and statements can also be collected to help professionals bring the requirements of both heritage protection and local urban development into the initial heritage scheme. Only by doing so, the role of residents can be strengthened into a role of consulting, rather than informing since the identification phase, with regard to the degree of community participation (Li et al., 2020a).

It is necessary to ensure residents' rights and include their interests throughout the next programming and execution phases within Chinese urban heritage management. Local elites and community-based organisations, as residents' representatives, need to play a role in negotiating with local governments about the initial heritage scheme (Li et al., 2020a; Tan & Altrock, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013). In China, local governments usually establish management committees, whose main responsibilities are on the discussion and adjustment of heritage schemes, when their vote is in need for urban matters (Morrison & Xian, 2016). Local elites and community-based organisations are part of the committee, and they can play a strong role in mobilising residents, collecting public interests and raising local concerns (Tan & Altrock, 2016; Zhai & Ng, 2013). Therefore, for Lijiang and also other Chinese heritage practices, after the initial scheme is discussed at the neighbourhood level, the representatives of residents then need to bring residents' feedback,

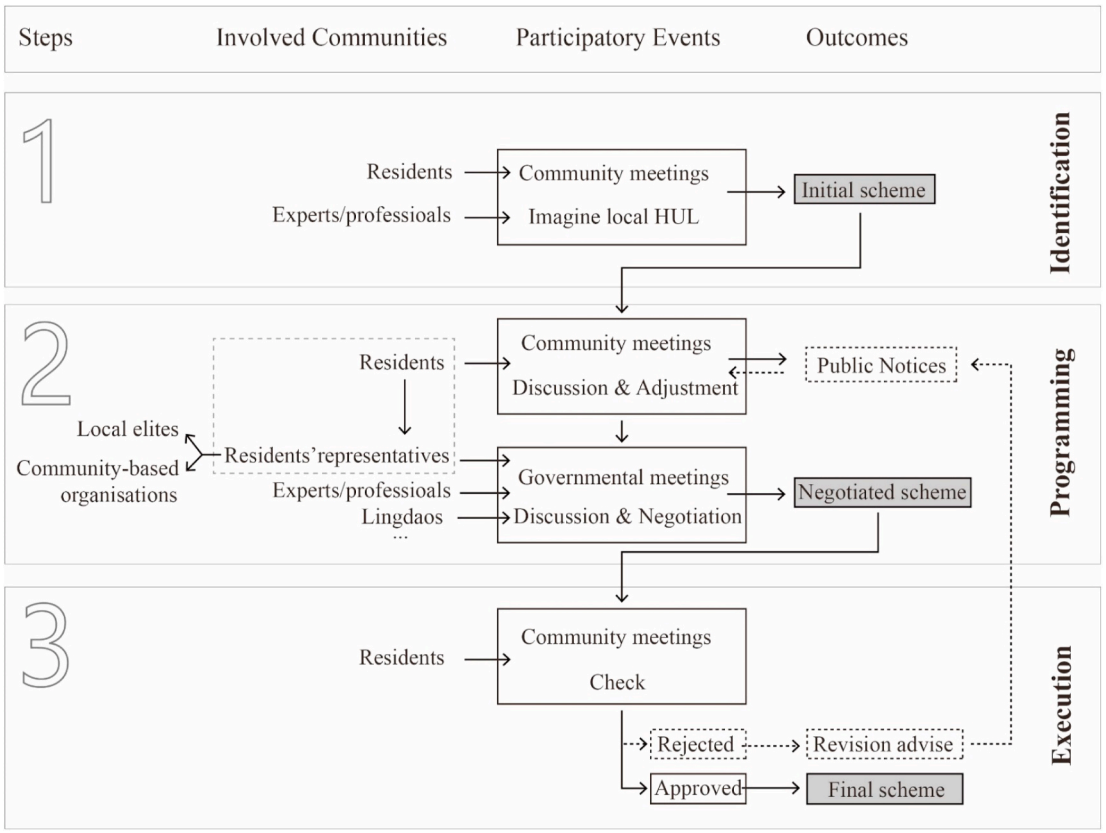


**Fig. 6.** A proposed process of Lijiang's community participation.

through the governmental meetings to negotiate with lingdaos, experts and professionals. Their effective participation can ensure residents' interests are well understood, by decision-makers and the heritage scheme addresses them. Before the scheme is finalised, ready to be implemented, residents should have the rights to check if their interests are well included in the adjusted scheme, through community meetings. And then, they can either approve or object it. If a scheme is rejected, residents' suggestions should be posted on Public Notices and then the scheme needs to be discussed in community meetings again. In doing so, the degree of Chinese community participation could increase and keep evolving, wherein residents can truly have a voice in the government-led management process, better finding a balance between conflicting interests (Li et al., 2020a).

Chinese contextualised community participation cannot be built on a purely bottom-up process (Verdini, 2015). In practice, Chinese urban heritage management is government-led, wherein local governments play an indispensable role in administrative and financial support. Even though, wide community consultation, like the procedures established from the Imagine method, is essential in the identification phase, to collect public interests and avoid civil resistance (Fan, 2014; Verdini et al., 2017). And then, the representatives of residents should have the right and willingness to keep raising local community voices and issues in the next programming and execution phases. However, sometimes, lingdaos retain the exclusive power and have a great influence on the decision-making process, following their own willingness of political promotion. And the representatives of residents then do not have the power to revise the scheme which has been approved by the lingdaos (Morrison & Xian, 2016). Therefore, there is a legal requirement to let local governments incorporate public feedback and community issues raised from open community discussions, "following the issuing of Public Notices" (Morrison & Xian, 2016, pp.211). Only by doing so, when facing the pressure from local political leaders, residents can be more confident to negotiate with local governments and better include their interests. It is a shift from that the local government is the exclusive final decision-maker to the government leads the process on behalf of both local political leaders and common residents.

## 6. Conclusion

Since the approval and implementation of the UNESCO HUL Recommendation, there have been increasing demands for more involvement of various stakeholders in the decision-making of urban heritage management (Verdini, 2015). In the meanwhile, the methodologies of bottom-up decision-making in urban conservation and development planning are being ever more implemented worldwide (Lewis, 2015; Pissourios, 2014). But still, in China, governments play a centralised and leading role while residents lack platforms, knowledge and skills in participating in the decision-making of urban heritage practices (Li et al., 2020a, 2020b). Chinese urban heritage management is more top-down, (Fan, 2014; Li et al., 2020a; Zhao et al., 2020), and international bottom-up processes of decision-making are limited and hard to expand in China (Verdini, 2015). This research has well tested the Imagine method in Lijiang as an academic scoping exercise, to critically reflect on the contextualisation of urban heritage management in China from a global perspective.

The research findings have confirmed that in Lijiang, 1) the Imagine method is effective to identify local contexts through public consultation, and 2) the expected public participation in local communities differs from the bottom-up process applied in the City of Ballarat (2013a). Through the Imagine method, the identification of Lijiang's HUL follows a holistic process, which includes (tangible and intangible) heritage attributes, community values and broader urban environments that people love and value in their daily life. Various layers of local urban landscape are well discussed and presented, contributing to a better understanding of both local heritage and living environments. In terms of the expected local community participatory process, residents

do not think they should fully be the decision-maker but want local governments to initiate, lead and fund heritage practices to provide an enabling institutional environment. Although this is a government-led process, wide community consultation and conversation are necessarily carried out since the initial identification phase, to sufficiently discuss residents' interests and benefits. Furthermore, local elites and community-based organisations, as representatives of residents, should be able to keep exchanging ideas between the local government and residents. Because they can act as intermediates, being invited to attend governmental meetings to be a heritage management committee, and having close relationships with residents, the government and political leaders.

Essentially, as inspired by the test of the Imagine method, effective and wide community consultation is key to balancing Chinese government-led methodology to be more inclusive and community-based, contributing to higher degrees of local participation and well-accepted heritage practices (Li et al., 2020c). Residents need to actively claim the power to finalise and approve a heritage scheme in the government-led process of decision-making. By doing so, residents can 1) contribute their everyday experiential knowledge of heritage value in the identification phase, 2) come up with innovative ideas and tools to bridge heritage values to local development trends in the programming phase, and 3) work together with the governments to execute and realise future heritage schemes in the final execution phase. To achieve this, a legal requirement is further needed to let local governments incorporate public feedback and interests, avoiding local political leaders to wield exclusive power in decision-making processes. Therefore, public participatory practices have been confirmed as a tool to find a balance point between top-down and bottom-up processes, namely, incorporating citizen empowerment into government-led processes, tailored to urban heritage management within Lijiang, and also, China as a whole.

This research proposed a way to implement community participation in Chinese urban heritage management by developing a contextualised approach. It is an attempt to bridge urban heritage management from theorisation, experimentation and even to a pragmatic process, bringing heritage studies to the mainstream of urban planning (Buckley et al., 2015; Rodwell, 2018). Through such a test of the Imagine method, existing heritage practices can be evaluated to examine the validation while enhancing future actions, by identifying and incorporating local historic urban landscapes of the past into present communities' daily life (Buckley et al., 2015). However, because of limited time and energy, we conducted the Imagine workshops only as an academic exercise with 30 people. And the investigation team can be made of more researchers from diversified skill background, such as urban planning, architecture, engineering, psychology, sociology, economy and ecology, to better demonstrate the complex of historic urban landscapes through the Imagine method. Therefore, future studies are highly recommended to further explore community values and participation of heritage, with larger amounts of different stakeholders, or even, implemented to practical heritage projects.

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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