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# FROM 'CITY'S REBUILDING' TO 'REVITALISATION': THE POSSIBILITY OF RENOVATING SOME OLD BUILDINGS INTO AGED CARE FACILITIES DURING OLD TOWNS' RENEWAL

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Nowadays China is faced with the problem of aging and urbanization. The demand of low and middle income elderly people are ignored, while the old towns in cities are at risk of hollowing because of human and industry migration. Take the actual conditions of China into consideration, the research might predict that renovating some old buildings into aged care facilities can ease aging pressure, stimulate old towns' transition and make it resile from aging problem and migration. Through case study in Hangzhou, we notice that aging and urbanization in China have their own historical context. The squeeze effect caused by old towns' debility and the siphonic effect result from new towns' urbanization lead old towns to aging communities. Meanwhile the process that new towns are transformed into the old ones would spread quickly over the whole city. By using interview method in Hangzhou, we find out that old people are inclined to live around their original blocks. Government can develop these old towns by preserving traditional lifestyle and attracting tourists to experience and go sightseeing. In conclusion, renovating some old buildings into aged care facilities exerts positive effect on preservation and development of old towns.

## Keywords

aging, old towns, renewal, aged care facilities, resilience

## How to Cite

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the international standard, China has become an aging society since 1999. After more than fifteen years' increase, aging population has reached 212 million since 2014, which makes the rate of population aging climb to 15.5%. What's even worse, aging population of China are predicted to reach 260 million in 2020<sup>1</sup>. The rapid growth of aging population is a crisis, exerting a negative influence on economy and society. However, it can be a turning point, too. Older people's increasing demand of being taken care of promotes retirement industry's development.

Meanwhile, with the rapid economic development of China since reform and opening up, a lot of old buildings and facilities in downtown can't meet the requirement of production and living today. To solve that problem, since 1980s, the government has started up some large-scale and all-around project of renewing old towns for many times. Such urbanization is still in progress today, along with new town construction, becoming the focus of citizens' attention and controversy.

We used to renew old towns completely by tearing down old buildings crudely and rebuilding grand ones simply like new towns. Nevertheless, it ignores old towns' context and relics, disturbing areas' population structure artificially and spreading aging problem to the surrounding.

Chinese scholars almost never link retirement industry to old towns' renewal, yet the relationship between them is close. Chen Hua puts forward an idea that the reservation and development of old towns needs to reduce constructive damage behaviour and sudden change, keeping old neighbours with their living patterns and context<sup>2</sup>. They do realize the relationship between reservation and revitalisation, yet did not focus on specific points like aged care facilities since their theme is general planning strategy. Xiangqian Wang discusses the key points of renovating an old office building into an aged care facility in ways of design and technology<sup>3</sup>. Due to professional perspectives' difference between architecture and urban planning, their research do not reach into the relationship between aged care facilities and city in urban view. Maichan Li proposes to develop retirement industry in old towns<sup>4</sup>, however, as a policy-researcher, he doesn't discuss this issue by urban planning ways.

Based on planning history of Hangzhou from 1990s to 2000s, we believe the exploration of population aging may provide a new perspective to urban renewal, which will benefit sustainable development of city and help old towns resile from aging problem and migration.

## OLD TOWNS RESULT IN AGING

The new towns and old towns in China are dramatically different in form. The former are prosperous, having bright colours, row upon row of high buildings, a relentless march of urban construction and large industrial zones, which booms city's economy. While the latter are lifeless, having grey colours, narrow roads, heavy traffic, shabby dwellings and job crisis, which makes residents' life hard. To make it worse, aging of old towns are getting serious after population migration. Old towns can't catch up with new towns because of lacking all-round and qualified talents whom new industries need desperately.

Through the case study in Gongbei district in Hangzhou, we notice that aging and urbanization in China have their own historical context.

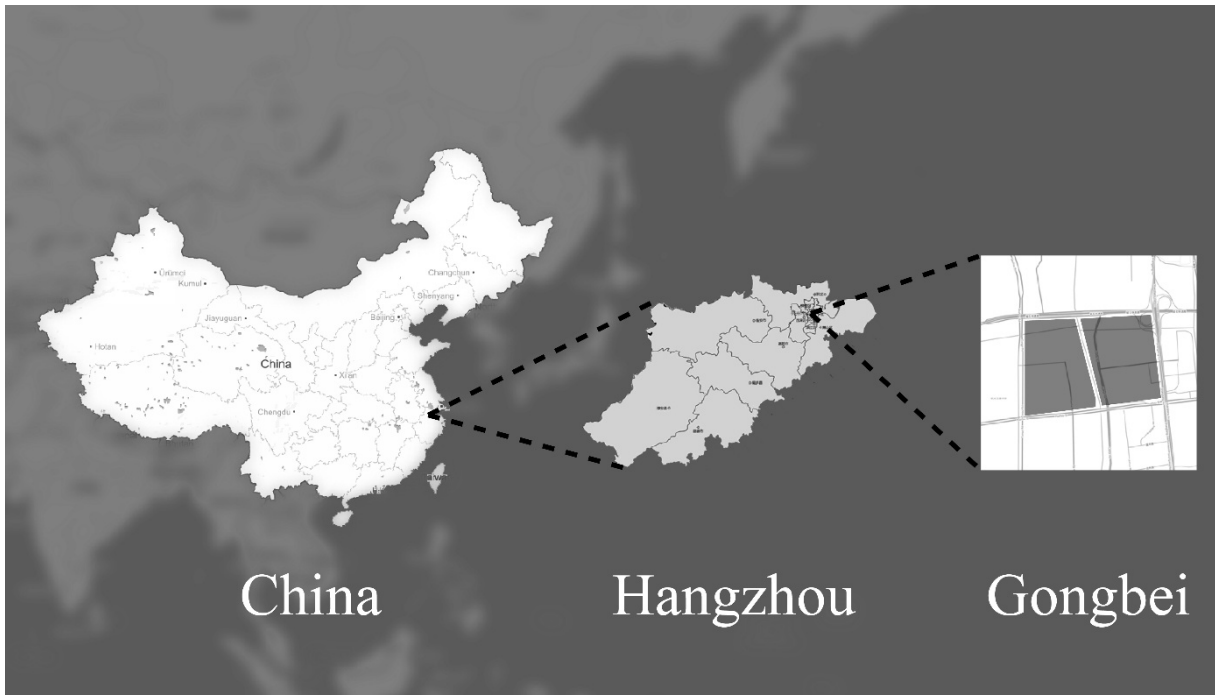


FIGURE 1 The Location of Hangzhou and Gongbei District in China. Hangzhou situated in Eastern China, near Shanghai. While Gongbei district located in the northeast of Hangzhou.

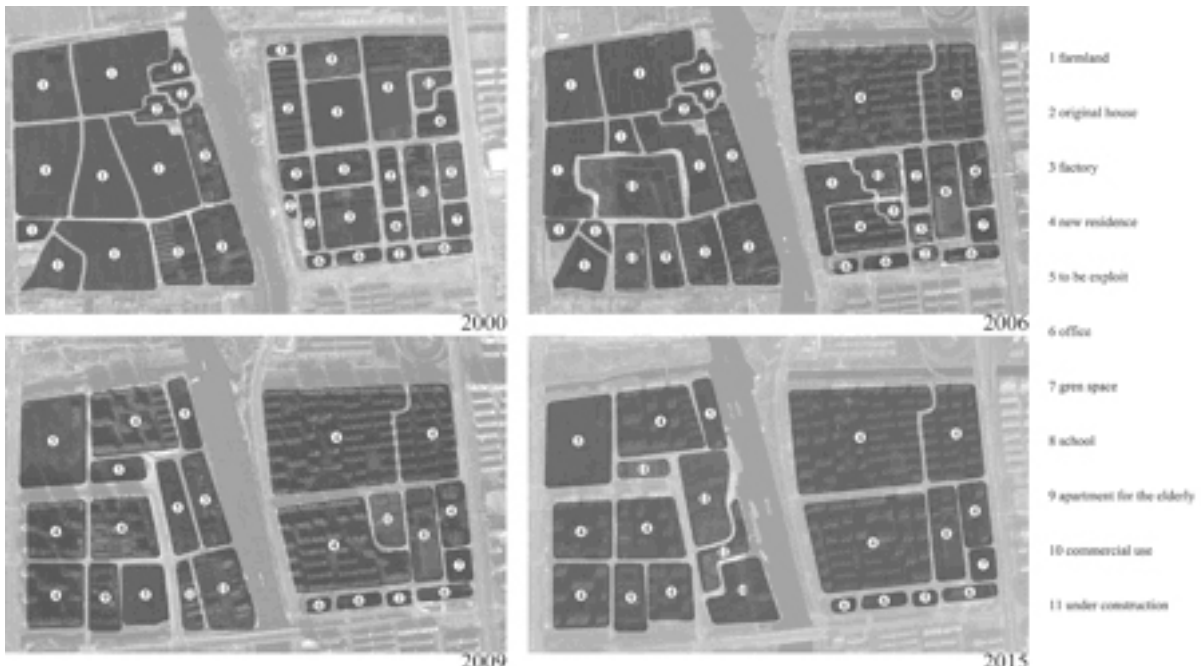


FIGURE 2 The Land Usage of Gongbei District from 2000 to 2015. Traditional industries and old residences were vanished, while new residences and commercial buildings are beginning to fill the land where old factories and residences were located.

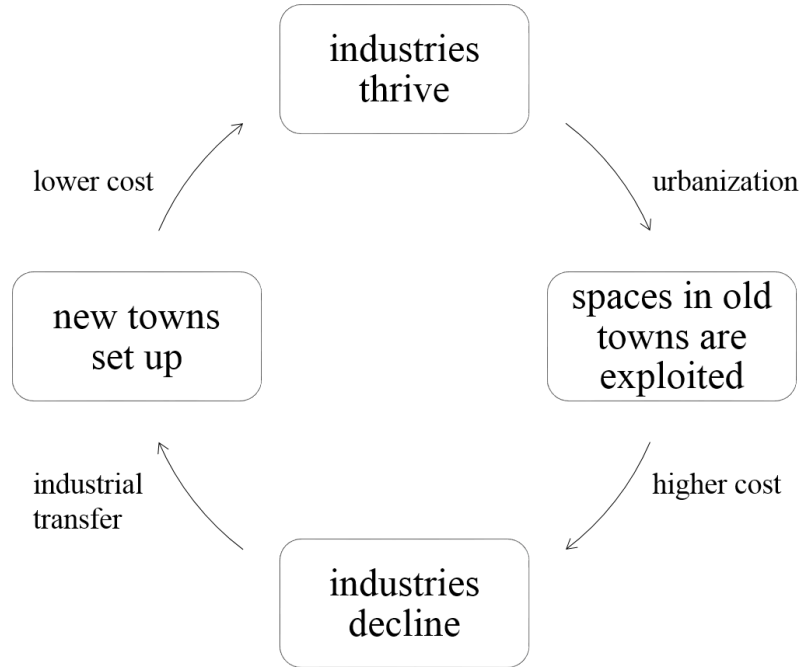


FIGURE 3 The Vicious Cycle that New Towns Got Better while Old Towns Got Worse. Resource endowment escaped from the old towns in low potential energy and moved to the new towns which had high potential energy.

Referring to the land usage of Gongbei district from 2000 to 2015, it should be clear that traditional industries and old residences were vanished, while new residences and commercial buildings are beginning to fill the land where old factories and residences were located. The old towns were the place in which traditional industries were located, such as food industry, textile industry and machinery manufactory (for instance, the Grand Canal Shipyard in Gongbei district). However, since township enterprise rose in 1980s, the traditional industries in old towns have declined because of higher cost. Meanwhile, China has started to urbanize. Because renewing old towns cost a lot, new industries preferred to settle down in new towns, that's when new towns begun to blossom. At that time, the flow of resources and factors between different areas was unfair. Traditional industries in old towns were not competitive anymore. On the contrary, new towns have assembled all sorts of resources and factors in a government-controlled industrial layout, which made potential energy difference between new towns and old towns. So resource endowment escaped from the old towns in low potential energy and moved to the new towns which had high potential energy. It seems like the situation entered a vicious cycle that new towns got better while old towns got worse.

These new towns and old towns are uncoordinated, developing separately, which bring about a wide gap between them. Along with the flow of resources, the squeeze effect caused by old towns' debility and the siphonic effect result from new towns' urbanization make old towns not capable of absorbing and bearing young and qualified talents, therefore youngsters leave old towns for better career prospects, only the disadvantaged stay. It turns out that industrial decline stimulates area's aging. Old towns are transformed into aging community with distinct boundaries in advance. All challenges and problems, for instance, depressed industry, dated buildings, backward facilities, inadequate supplies and intense social space generated by confined physical space, are intertwined, getting more difficult for government's policy-making and real estate developers' investing in old towns. At the same time, the new towns whose cost of development are lower still have comparative advantage. Due to lack of resources, it's destined that old towns are marginalized.

The unidirectional and linear flow of resources cannot establish a closed self-circulation system between new towns and old towns. New towns accumulate resources and develop rapidly in a certain period, but after the areas are built-up, it can't afford to maintain that rapid growth on account of limited space to be exploited, and then resources would flow into new virgin land. In some ways new towns are like a funnel full of resources that will run away sooner or later. The process that new towns are transformed into the old ones would spread quickly over the whole city like being infected with a virus. If we don't take action this time, city can never resile from this man-made disaster.

Such situation can partly be illustrated by John Friedmann's core-periphery four-stage model of regional development. At first, old towns and new towns are developing independently with very minimal contact between them - possibly some basic trading of goods, which is stage 1; with more physical or human resources, old towns become dominant, attracting people and investment from other regions, which is stage 2; as the conflict between old towns and new towns are deepened, new towns, which has become smaller cores, start to develop and there is an increase in flows between the core and the semi-periphery, which means the situation steps into stage 3; nevertheless, because of the model's idealization, the reality are quite the opposite when it comes to stage 4 that predicts all areas are now developed and fully dependent upon each other with flows of capital and people in both directions. Only with urban planning's interference can we fulfill that prediction.

Facing such serious crisis, lots of Chinese cities have explored appropriate method of renewing old towns in different scales and ways. Fortunately some practices have succeed, as follows.

As the results of Shenzhen's rapid urbanism, Da Fen village, famous for its oil paintings industry, can't keep pace with city's development in 1990s. In order to improve its living environment, the government decided to revitalize Da Fen village and create Da Fen Oil Painting Village as a unique culture industry brand. Today, Da Fen village has become a prominent model in urban village renovation.



FIGURE 4 Da Fen Village in 1990(above) and 2010(below). Today, the living environment has developed notably. An oil painting museum has established to revitalize the village.

At the same time, such practice also happens in the center of Shanghai, Xin Tiandi, where traditional Chinese housing Shikumen located. While the contradiction between estate development and culture reservation seems hard to reconcile, the government and estate developers reach a compromise to renovate these old housing into cultural and leisure center. It turns out to be a great success in business, however, the Shikumen's old neighbours and their lifestyle are abandoned.

Recently, the recovery of Southern Song Imperial Street in Hangzhou has aroused a wide concern in public and professional fields. Conducted by the Pritzker winner Shu Wang, the Southern Song Imperial Street find a new way, neither rebuilding totally nor preserving completely, to illustrate Chinese characteristic<sup>5</sup>. Shu Wang tries to rebuild the social network in old towns and makes some achievement, yet he ignores the infrastructure serving the aged neighbours.

As we can see from the above-mentioned facts, these models' backgrounds are so special that these methods couldn't be copied to another places. Whether the renewal of urban village in Shenzhen, or the rebirth of Xin Tiandi in Shanghai, or the recovery of Southern Song Imperial Street in Hangzhou, they all lack the concern for elderly people and don't recognize the root cause of issues. In fact, the compensation for move can't afford a comfortable resident where the elderly lives after renewal, so the relocated people have to leave their familiar environment for suburbs which has lower rent. As they suffer from dramatic transition, they also bring about hidden trouble of population aging, which may exert negative impacts on new towns, just like the spread of old towns in city. Even though some people restore old towns as the past, their plans lack basic elderly-oriented facilities and ability to incubate new industries, let alone ability to improve population structure.

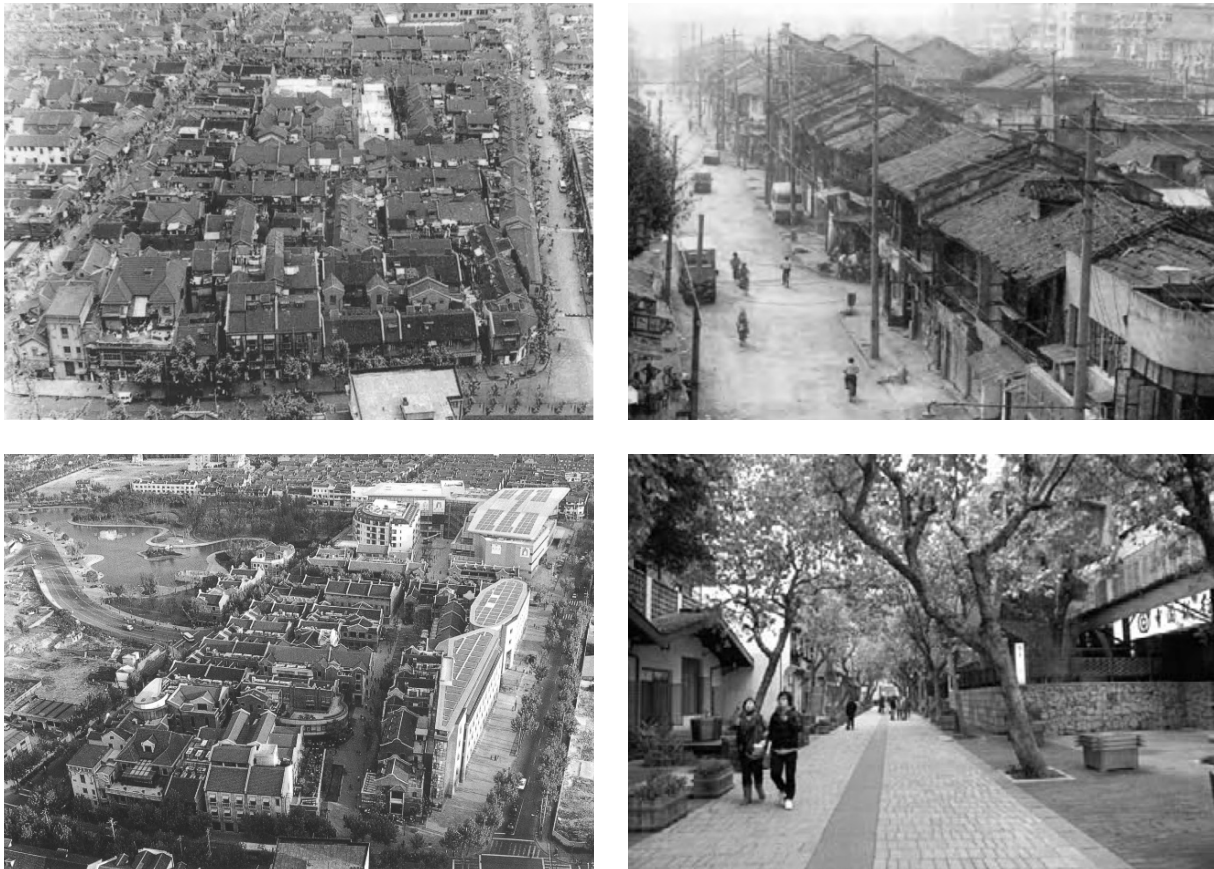


FIGURE 5 Then-and-now Photos of Xin Tiandi(left) and the Southern Song Imperial Street(right). They all achieve in business and cultural preservation, except from lacking consideration of traditional context and aged care facilities.

We should realize that industries' lacking energy and competitiveness is the root of old towns' decline. The imbalanced structure of population, dated buildings and shabby facilities are just consequences. Productivity is the motive power of city's development and human beings are city's subject<sup>6</sup>, therefore we should not only confine renewal to technical repair and reshaping physical space, but also consider both industry and people in renewal. Based on resource endowment which they have, old towns will gather various resources and find resilient strategy in the rapidly changing of urban environment if they go with the trend and choose an appropriate industry as their strategic pillar industry. In consideration of demand, macro-economic situation and old towns' status, the chance that involving retirement industry in old towns' renewal achieves success is reasonably high.

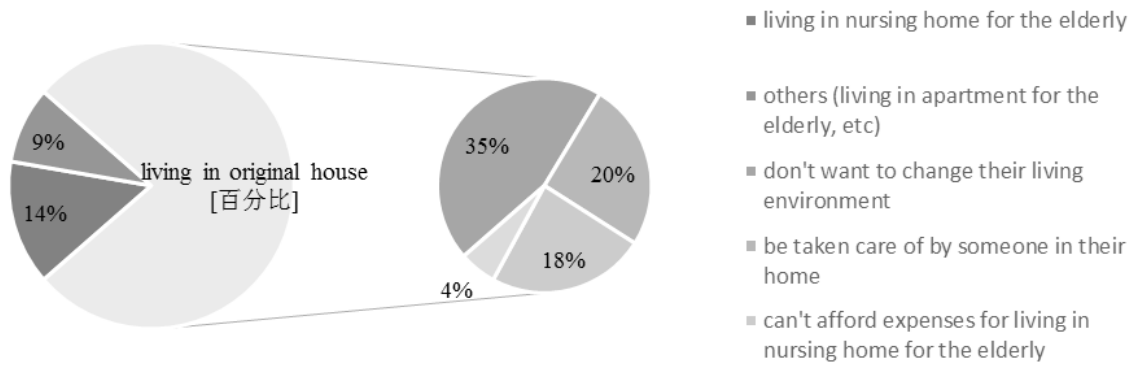


FIGURE 6 Where Do Elderly People Want to Live and Why. 77 percent of old people are inclined to live around their original blocks, mainly because they don't want to change living environment, which making them feel more familiar and comfortable.

## THE ADVANTAGES OF PROMOTING RETIREMENT INDUSTRY IN OLD TOWNS

First of all, as a country moving forward hyper-aging society, China needs a mature retirement industry desperately.

On the one hand, China is the only country whose aging population is more than 200 million in the world, which is larger than some populous nations' population, such as Brazil, Russia and Japan. It will be ranked 4th if it is taken as a country's population. Now take a look at these countries' level of economic development when they entered aging society, developed countries were faced with aging after they achieved modernization, which as described aging after wealthy, being able to establish and maintain systems of social security for elderly. However, the other side of picture is quite the opposite, because of government's policy about health insurance and birth control, China entered aging society when it still struggled in a low level of economic development. Such situation that aging over modernization is called aging before wealthy. Huge aging population and conditions that aging before wealthy make China face the serious problem of retirement.

On the other hand, in regard to methods of renewal, the usual approach is to reserve and reconstruct, then transform old towns into places for creative industry and folkloric industry, such as 798 Arts District in Beijing, Tianzifang and Xintiandi in Shanghai and Southern Song Imperial Street in Hangzhou, or tear down then build for financial, insurance and consulting industry because of location advantage. Nonetheless, the former is fit for a small scale renewal, lacking applicability for a large scale one, and the latter makes the same mistakes that spreading the 'virus' of new towns to old towns. Even if some real estate developers exploit a little land for retirement industry, they will choose upscale strategy due to high cost and profit-oriented principle, shutting the door upon ordinary elderly people<sup>7</sup>.

Under the circumstances of the strong demand for a new retirement industry's model which is suitable in China, the comparative cost advantage of old towns can fill the supply gap in middle-end and low-end retirement industry.

What's more, old towns have comfortable physical space and cosy social ecology.

To make good plans for different areas, we need to find out their advantages and choose the industry that matches. Old towns would definitely lost attraction for high-end service industry like information technology industry and communications industry because of antiquated urban landscape and scanty infrastructure relative to new towns. However, if old towns keep away from new high-end industry, their disadvantages can be transformed into advantages that new towns never have.



In order to figure out the elderly's opinion about old towns, we did 92 interviews with elderly people living in old towns of Hangzhou, including area of Southern Song Imperial Street, area of Shiwukui Alley and area of Xiaohezhi Street, finding out that 77 percent of old people are inclined to live around their original blocks, mainly because they don't want to change living environment, which making them feel more familiar and comfortable. Although the material base is behindhand, old towns have the physical space based on human scale. Roads are not wide, but suitable for walking. Houses are convenient for daily life, despite it seems a little bit small. Other buildings' size is fitting and not overwhelming, their shapes are neutral and not weird. The most important thing is that old towns reserve abundant social network and relationships. Old neighbours have collective memories, sense of identity and emotional relationships with each other. Behind declining physical environment, it's the stable community structure, lifestyle and social network for decades that hold residents together<sup>8</sup>. Once they move, nearly everyone suffers from mood fluctuation, which may do harm to their physical and mental health.

On urban planning and construction, relatively speaking, new towns are too large to live. Though it has perspective of urban design and modern infrastructure, wide roads, grand plazas, great parks and high buildings are far beyond human scale, making life inconvenient and lack living atmosphere, especially for the elderly.

With urbanization and aging increasing, city has to consider to promote retirement industry in old towns and create space to accept aging population. Old towns will come alive on condition that we keep population structure at the right level and introduce the industry that matches areas' resource endowment.

## THE STRATEGY OF PROMOTING RETIREMENT INDUSTRY IN OLD TOWNS

Only creating wealth by self-mechanism can old towns prevent from decline. So we should not only depend on others' help but also dig areas' own potential and be willing to change to prosper old towns. In a word, the development of retirement industry needs various efforts, cooperation and support of all society.

First of all, make old towns elderly-oriented.

Although old towns have comfortable space scale, it should be more elderly-oriented to meet old people's demand.

As old towns have been built up for a long time, they have complete means of transportation and cosy living space, yet lacking improvement aimed at aging population's physiological characteristics, for instance, lacking slow traffic system, public space for outdoor activities, communication space and entertainment places like teahouse, drama stage, chess room or the elderly's activity centre. Above all, the buildings in the state of disrepair not only prevent the elderly from using it, but also can be a hidden danger. Hence it's necessary to maintain or replace the aged buildings, infrastructure and equipment, making them more elderly-oriented, such as adding lift, replacing steps as ramp, adding accessibility facilities in bathroom and so on.

Secondly, take community as unit and establish a system which is based on the apartment for the elderly and supplemented by various means of caring.

The meaning of community is between the meaning of family and town. The policy of birth control makes family structure in China appears a status of 4-2-1 generally, which means almost each family has 4 grandparents, 2 parents and 1 child. That is to say, one child has to provide for two to four old people in the future. In addition, the construction of social security system is under enormous pressure. It's obvious that traditional home-based care system has been overwhelmed. Take the cost of renewal and the demand for means of caring into consideration, to develop and strengthen new retirement industry has to rely on the basic unit, community<sup>9</sup>, and establish a multiple system which is based on the apartment for the elderly and supplemented by daytime and all

time nursing home. Such system, conducted by community, supported by government and taking advantage of community, eases the burden for children, provides professional caring service for the elderly and preserves the close family ties between the aged and family, making them get used to later life preferably.

On the other side, because of poor urban planning and illegal addition, old towns' physical space are separated and torn stiffly, which is not good for residents' communication, decrease their sense of community and affect the development of retirement industry eventually<sup>10</sup>. Thus we should partly adjust the texture and structure of old towns, dredge passageway between neighbours and eliminate obstacles that separate physical space to facilitate communication. That's the way to reform messy space, reconstruct physical and social relationship in community, promote communication within areas and maintain cosy social environment. Such reform planning makes the elderly have more chance to contact with society, relieves their isolation and loneliness, making contribute to setting up an equal, diverse and energetic aging community.

At the same time, in order to serve the aged better, it's recommended to set up some supporting service facilities during planning and design, such as medical institutions, social amenities and deathbed care room.

What's more, construct a positive interactive relation between new towns and old towns.

The shape, structure and function of towns are not constant. Sticking to the existing situation and rejecting exchange only lead to decline<sup>11</sup>. Promoting retirement industry in old towns can exert a positive effect on interacting and coordinated development. The elderly bring various folkways activities and cosy atmosphere of life to old towns, which attracts youngsters living in new towns to experience and relax, promoting tourism and leisure industry in turn<sup>12</sup>. As birth and death are natural law, when the elderly living in old towns pass away and young people grow old, the aged used to be young can move to endowment facilities and spend their remaining years in comfort. Orderly population flow prevents new towns from declining brought by population aging and makes retirement industry in old towns develop sustainably. City doesn't have to blindly exploit virgin land for development, so farm land in the suburbs is protected and the trend that old towns expand immoderately is contained. As a result, urban environment improves, old towns and new towns can realize sustainable development together.

Last but not the least, seek the support of policy and public opinion. Because retirement industry is a new field in China and a social welfare in some ways, its development needs support from government and public.

On the one hand, shift the idea that renewal is equal to tear down and rebuild. Government tend to sell land to real estate developers by bidding because of old towns' location advantage, which lead to high land cost. Developers are likely to build office buildings or high-end apartments that have high plot ratio in old towns. While the vulnerable relocatees can't get a fair compensation when they negotiate with developers, they have to move to suburb that has a lower cost. The old towns, with its historical memory and living atmosphere, are torn down thoroughly in the process of urbanization. Only public advertisement can make people realize that old towns can reborn by renewing organically. On the basis of preserving living spaces and social network with which residents are familiar, old towns become good place for leisure and spending old people's remaining years in comfort, benefiting developers a lot on economy and companies' public image, giving city energy to develop.

On the other hand, government needs to reasonably guide business investment. The renewal of old towns should not yield to capital totally and become places where developers chase profit and sacrifice areas' context. However, the perfection and development of retirement industry indeed need business investment and professional service providers. Only by support and supervision of government's policy, such as tax preference, credit subsidies and laws that can restrain developers, can old towns attract investors and capital, restricting developers from destroying the context of old towns and establishing an efficient professional industrial system which meets the interests of all parties.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of social development, aging problem is more opportunity than challenge to China. Aging before wealthy indicates that most elderly people in China can't afford their own cost after retirement, which makes Chinese social welfare system and retirement industry carry a heavy burden. However, the need of high-quality service for the aged, generated by large aging population, will promote the transitional development of retirement industry. It's estimated that the next 50 years would be a golden age for retirement industry that provides a new perspective to solve the renewal of old towns when urbanization of China goes into trouble. If public, government and investors are in favour of retirement industry, it could be expected soon that building up reliable elderly security system, stimulating lifeless old towns and resiling from aging problem and migration.

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## Notes on contributor

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## Endnotes

- 1 Press conference of 4th sample survey about elderly people's living condition in urban and rural of China, last modified August 11, 2015, <http://www.cncaprc.gov.cn/contents/7/80259.html>.
- 2 Chen Hua, Zhu Wang, Haiyan Qian, Protection and Development of Living Environment of Hangzhou Old City Area, *Urban Problems* 04 (2002): 42.
- 3 Xiangqian Wang, Wei Cui, The Design Technology Key Point of Old Office Building Reconstruction for Endowment Facilities, *Shanxi Architecture* 16 (2014): 12-13.
- 4 Maichan Li, Old City Revival and Silver-haired Revolution and Retirement Industry Choice, *Urban Studies* 01 (2011): 125.
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## Image Sources

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- Figure 2: The Land Usage of Gongbei District from 2000 to 2015, based on Google Earth and post-processed by the authors.
- Figure 3: The Vicious Cycle that New Towns Got Better while Old Towns Got Worse, drew by the authors.
- Figure 4: Da Fen Village in 1990 and 2010, <https://www.douban.com/note/69181196/>.
- Figure 5: Then-and-now Photos of Xintiandi and the Southern Song Imperial Street, Xiaowei Luo, Xintiandi-One of the Mode of Urban Revitalization, *Time+Architecture* 04 (2001): 28; Shu Wang, Zhongshan Road: Renovation of a Road and a City, Hangzhou, China, *World Architecture* 05 (2012): 116.
- Figure 6: Where Do Elderly People Want to Live and Why, based on interviews conducted by the authors and drew by the authors.