

# “Xiguan Yongqingfang” at Guangzhou: Collective memory and business of nostalgia in the context of China's modern city

Yuyu Li and Supachai Singyabuth\*

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Maharakham University, Thailand.

Accepted 2 March, 2026

---

## ABSTRACT

This study takes the regeneration project of Yongqingfang in Guangzhou as its empirical focus, examining how collective memory is systematically extracted, reconstructed, and transformed into a resource for the business of nostalgia within the context of contemporary urban renewal. The research argues that the redevelopment of Yongqingfang exemplifies a mode of “memory reproduction.” Through the restoration and representation of traditional Xiguan architectural forms, the selective display of symbols drawn from local everyday life, and the construction of affective consumption settings, individual memories once embedded in routine community practices are reassembled into an integrated collective memory landscape with coherent narrative structure and market appeal. This landscape constitutes the core foundation of Yongqingfang’s nostalgia economy and stimulates the growth of economic activities characterized by cultural experience and the consumption of place-based identity. The study further demonstrates that Yongqingfang’s nostalgia economy does not operate as a passive recovery of history, but as an actively constructed emotional narrative oriented toward contemporary markets. While this process enables the commercial valorization of local memory, it simultaneously reshapes how the community perceives and articulates its own past. Drawing on field observation, interviews, and spatial textual analysis, this article reveals the generative and mutually constitutive relationship between collective memory and the business of nostalgia, highlighting the internal logic through which they coproduce and continuously reinforce one another.

**Keywords:** Yongqingfang, collective memory, business of nostalgia, urban regeneration, historic districts.

---

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: supachaisingyabuth@gmail.com.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Collective memory is not a simple recollection of past experiences by individuals, but a form of shared cognition that gradually takes shape within specific social relations and common modes of living. As Maurice Halbwachs argues, individual memory always exists within social frameworks, and the spatial environments, symbolic systems, and everyday practices of social groups determine how memory is preserved and recalled (Halbwachs, 1992). Streets, buildings, and public spaces in the city thus become crucial media of collective memory through long-term use and repeated perception, transforming abstract historical experience into a tangible

and recognizable presence that can be identified and reactivated.

In the ongoing process of urban transformation, the memories embedded in historic districts do not persist through natural continuity but are repeatedly reorganized and reinterpreted. M. Christine Boyer notes that historical images in the city are rarely faithful preservations of the past; rather, they are reassembled within contemporary contexts to form memory landscapes endowed with narrative meaning (Boyer, 1994). Once historic spaces are incorporated into practices of renewal and adaptive reuse, decisions regarding which memories are retained and how

they are represented are no longer governed primarily by the lived logic of local communities, but increasingly aligned with urban image-making and cultural utilization.

Within this shift, the affective value of memory becomes increasingly salient and is further absorbed into systems of consumption. David Lowenthal observes that modern understandings of “the past” are largely shaped by selective and embellished cultural imagination, whose significance lies not in historical accuracy but in its capacity to respond to present emotional needs (Lowenthal, 1985). Similarly, Fred Davis argues that nostalgia is not merely a personal sentiment but a cultural mechanism that reinforces identity and mitigates the disruptions of social change (Davis, 1979). When such affect is systematically embedded in spatial production and consumption practices, nostalgia gradually becomes an economic resource that can be organized and mobilized.

Nostalgic spaces typically construct a consumable sense of “pastness” through visual symbols, scenographic arrangements, and experiential design, rather than through comprehensive historical reconstruction (MacCannell, 1999). In this process, collective memory functions as a critical intermediary linking history and consumption, as both its content and modes of representation directly shape the trajectories through which the business of nostalgia is generated. In other words, the emergence of nostalgia-driven economies does not originate from history itself, but from the reproduction of collective memory.

In the regeneration of Yongqingfang in Xiguan, Guangzhou, the district, long a carrier of Xiguan’s historical culture and local everyday experience, has retained highly legible spatial memories through the restoration of traditional architectural forms such as Qilou Buildings and Xiguan grand houses. At the same time, cultural symbols closely associated with local daily life have been selectively displayed and amplified within commercial and tourism contexts, enabling individual memories once dispersed within the community to be gradually integrated into a collective memory landscape with a coherent narrative structure.

This memory landscape is not static, but is continuously reinforced through ongoing practices of consumption. Nostalgia here no longer operates as a spontaneous emotional return to the past, but as an affective form actively constructed for contemporary markets. While it has generated commercial vitality oriented toward cultural experience and place-based identity in Yongqingfang, it has also subtly reshaped how the community understands and articulates its own history, allowing memory to acquire new social meanings in the very process of being consumed.

This study is basic research utilizing qualitative methods. It aims to achieve four main objectives: (1) To study Guangzhou’s historical development from the beginning of the ‘Xiguan Yongqing community’ to the present. (2) To

study the ‘Xiguan community’ during the international economy and trade prosperity era in the dimension of ‘Collective Memory.’ (3) To study the reconstruction and development process of ‘Xiguan community’ in the past to ‘Xiguan Yongqingfang’ in Guangzhou’s modern city from 1998 to 2024. (4) To study the business of the nostalgia phenomenon of ‘Xiguan Yongqingfang’ in the Context of China’s Modern City. Through the selected research methods, the study examines how collective memory is reorganized in the process of contemporary urban regeneration and transformed into cultural resources that can be perceived, experienced, and consumed. This transformation not only serves as a core driving force behind the ongoing operation of the nostalgia economy but also actively contributes to the construction and dissemination of urban brand identity.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the regeneration of Yongqingfang in Guangzhou’s Xiguan district as a case through which to examine the transformation of collective memory into a marketable cultural resource. The object of study is not the physical site alone, but the process through which local memory is extracted, reconfigured, and operationalised within contemporary urban renewal and nostalgia-driven consumption.

The research is situated within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, drawing primarily on the sociological tradition of collective memory established by Maurice Halbwachs, which conceptualises memory as socially framed and spatially anchored. This framework is extended through engagement with heritage studies and critical urban theory, particularly scholarship examining the commodification of place identity and the construction of nostalgic landscapes. The theoretical approach thus integrates three dimensions: the social production of collective memory, the spatial articulation of the past in urban environments, and the economic mobilisation of affective attachments to history.

In alignment with this framework, the study adopts a qualitative case study design. Yongqingfang was selected as a paradigmatic instance of heritage-led regeneration in contemporary China, where local memory has been systematically repurposed to sustain a nostalgia-based urban economy. Data collection combined multiple methods to capture both the discursive construction and the material enactment of collective memory.

Repeated fieldwork was conducted in Yongqingfang and adjacent historic neighborhoods, with observational attention to spatial configurations, architectural forms, commercial arrangements, and cultural displays. These observations examined how memory is rendered perceptible and operational within the everyday spaces of a regenerated historic district.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with three key actor groups—long-term residents, commercial operators, and visitors—to document divergent narratives of the past and contrasting interpretations of ongoing spatial change. This approach enabled analysis of the selective and negotiated character of collective memory under conditions of market-oriented redevelopment. Participant observation further documented cultural events, routine performances, and consumption practices, allowing memory to be examined not only as representation but as situated activity.

Documentary analysis complemented field methods, drawing on local gazetteers, planning documents, historical photographs, academic literature, and media reports related to Yongqingfang's regeneration. By triangulating observational records, interview data, and textual sources, the study traces how collective memory is produced and circulated through spatial design, cultural narrative, and consumption practice, and how these processes together underpin the emergence of nostalgia-based economic activity within the contemporary urban context.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### From emergence to regeneration: The evolution of local life and collective memory in Xiguan Yongqingfang

Yongqingfang is located along the central section of Enning Road in Xiguan, Guangzhou, an area with a history spanning more than a century. As a historic district that integrates the past with the present, Yongqingfang stands as a representative ensemble of traditional Xiguan qilou (arcaded) architecture and embodies Guangzhou residents' urban memory of the old city. Every alleyway

and every historic residence evokes the collective memories of everyday life held by earlier generations of local inhabitants. This collective memory not only sustains the sense of identity among long-term residents but also attracts visitors from outside the city who seek to experience the cultural depth of Guangzhou's historic urban fabric. Through its transformation from a historic neighborhood into a national 4A-level tourist attraction, Yongqingfang has employed commercialization to turn nostalgia into a consumable experience, combining traditional cultural elements with contemporary lifestyles and endowing old buildings with renewed vitality. Within this process of nostalgic consumption, both tourists and local citizens reshape their understanding and imagination of the history of "Old Xiguan" in Guangzhou as they engage with traditional culture as consumers.

From a global geographical perspective, Guangzhou is situated on the southeastern edge of the Eurasian continent, within the transitional zone between the East Asian mainland and the maritime regions of Southeast Asia, at approximately 23° north latitude and 113° east longitude. The city occupies a strategic position at the core and point of origin of the Pearl River Delta, one of the world's major urban agglomerations. To the north, Guangzhou is bordered by the extensive hilly landscapes of South China, while to the south, it directly faces the South China Sea. Xiguan is located in the western part of Guangzhou and forms an integral component of the Pearl River Delta alluvial plain. With elevations ranging between 2 and 5 meters above sea level, the area is characterized by low-lying terrain. Its geomorphological formation has been largely shaped by sediment deposition from the Pearl River and the continual shifting of river channels, resulting in flat landforms and a dense network of waterways. These conditions provided a fundamental physical basis for agricultural development and the formation of settlements in the region (Situ Shangji, 1993).



**Figure 1.** This map outlines the terrain and geomorphology surrounding Guangzhou, situating Xiguan Yongqingfang within the city's river-borne landscape. Guangzhou's geographical location has influenced its role as an international maritime trading city since ancient times. Currently showing how its historical development, collective memory, and contemporary nostalgia-driven revitalisation are shaped by Guangzhou's strategic geographic setting. Source: Guangdong General Gazetteer. Accessed on June 20, 2024

The low-lying and humid environmental conditions of Xiguan did not constrain urban development but instead became a productive spatial foundation through long-term human-environment interaction. A dense network of waterways functioned simultaneously as drainage, irrigation, and transport infrastructure, supporting an efficient preindustrial circulation system and enabling the

area to develop into a hub of water-land-integrated commerce. Street alignment, building orientation, and functional distribution were structured in close relation to the canal system, producing a spatial order organized around waterways and stabilizing a mixed pattern of trade, residence, and handicraft production.



**Figure 2.** Private jetties in ancient residences provide direct access to waterways, facilitating the transport of goods by water directly into the premises. Source: [www.baijiahao.baidu.com](http://www.baijiahao.baidu.com). Accessed on January 28, 2024.

Persistent exposure to subtropical monsoon conditions characterized by high temperatures, humidity, and seasonal rainfall shaped locally adapted building forms such as arcaded streets, Xiguan mansions, and narrow, deep-plan houses. Through repeated use and long-term habitation, these architectural types became embedded in local spatial norms rather than remaining purely technical responses to climate. As a result, physical space in Xiguan functioned not as a neutral backdrop but as a medium through which everyday practices accumulated social meaning, forming a material basis for the emergence and continuity of collective memory.

As Xiguan's commercial economy became progressively embedded within global trading systems, archaeological findings and historical records indicate that Guangzhou had already developed shipbuilding and long-distance maritime trade capabilities as early as the Qin Han period, functioning for centuries as a major gateway

for external exchange (Zijin, 2004). From the Song Yuan era onward, the sustained expansion of maritime commerce further established Guangzhou as a key node along the Maritime Silk Road (Chaudhuri, 1985; Ng, 2016). Following the institutionalization of the Qing dynasty's "Single Port Trade" system, the Canton System's foreign trade activities were concentrated along the Pearl River waterfront, while the associated production, warehousing, and artisanal networks were deeply anchored in the hinterland of Xiguan (Van Dyke, 2005). The commercial spaces, guild organizations, and modes of everyday life that emerged through this process constituted the most enduring historical experience of Xiguan's local society. Through architectural forms, lineage narratives, and local customs, these experiences were continually reproduced and transmitted, gradually sedimenting into a collective memory structure centered on prosperity (Halbwachs, 1992).



**Figure 3.** This figure situates Xiguan within the early phase of trade prosperity associated with Guangzhou's opening along the Maritime Silk Road, illustrating the spatial structure and functional evolution of the Pearl River waterfront from the Qing dynasty to the Republican period. It shows how the area developed into a major economic center of the Lingnan region and subsequently emerged as a key spatial carrier for the reconstruction of collective memory and the contemporary nostalgia-driven urban economy. Source:www.sohu.com. Accessed on August 28, 2024

This trade-based structure of memory experienced a pronounced rupture in the twentieth century. Warfare and regime change fundamentally altered the existing social and spatial order of Xiguan. During the War of Resistance, aerial bombardment and the stagnation of commerce led to the rapid collapse of the area's port-related functions, triggering large-scale population outmigration and the simultaneous disintegration of neighborhood space and social networks (Guangzhou Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1996). Following the establishment of the new regime, a further institutional reorganization of urban space through property fragmentation, work unit-based management, and functional readjustment progressively weakened social structures centered on lineage, commercial firms, and neighborhood ties (Lu, 2006). This phase should not be understood merely as decline, but rather as a process of profound mnemonic trauma: earlier experiences of commercial prosperity were compressed within official narratives of progress, while memories at the individual and family levels retreated into private not

recollection and oral transmission, remaining obscured yet entirely erased (Connerton, 1989).

After the Reform and Opening-up period, Xiguan did not regain its place as a core of urban development. As Guangzhou's functional center shifted eastward, capital and policy resources were increasingly concentrated in newly developed districts, relegating the old city to a relatively peripheral spatial position (Harvey, 2012). Population outflow, accelerating demographic aging, and building deterioration converged to produce structural decline in areas such as Yongqingfang. The central issue at this stage extended beyond physical dilapidation to the parallel erosion of historical narratives and everyday memory. Traditional cultural practices gradually lost their public spatial support, while historic districts were reduced in planning documents and media discourse to "obsolete" and "inefficient" urban problem areas. As a result, their cultural significance was continually diminished, and local memory entered a prolonged state of suppression (Zukin, 2010; Merrifield, 2013).



**Figure 4.** Renovation of old buildings in Yongqingfang has transformed it into an integrated space combining cultural experiences, community life, and commercial vitality (left side). Thence, this building has become an important part of Yongqingfang (on the right). Source: Photograph by the author. Accessed on October 21, 2023

In recent years, renewal strategies, such as "restoring the old as old" and microregeneration, have preserved street

scales and architectural forms while introducing functions such as cultural exhibitions, tourism consumption, and

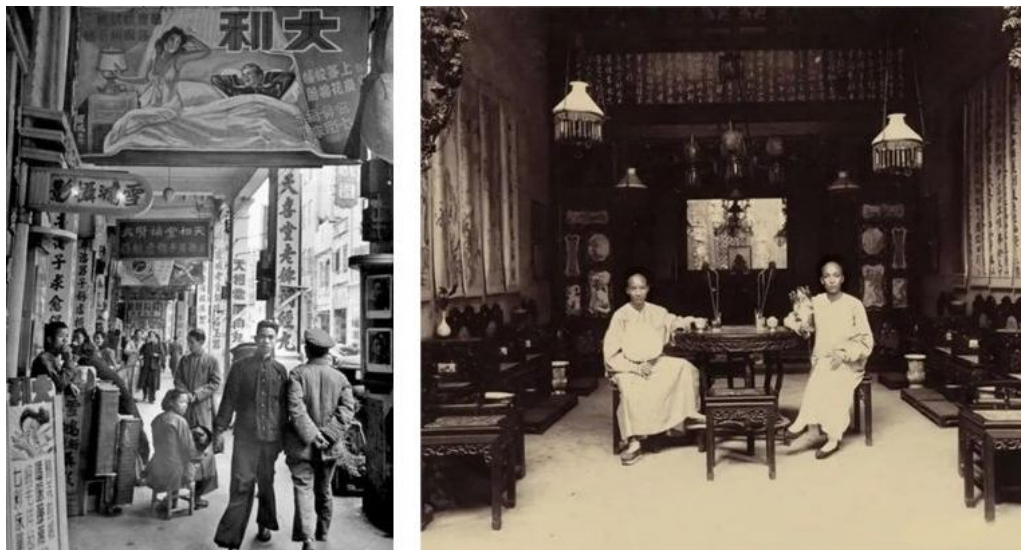
creative industries. Through this process, spaces once embedded in everyday life have been re-encoded as public-oriented cultural venues. Rather than fully reconstructing historical conditions, these interventions selectively extract and recombine elements of vernacular life, traditional crafts, and Lingnan architectural imagery, transforming them into cultural resources that can be viewed, experienced, and consumed. In this way, Yongqingfang has undergone a functional shift from a living community to a cultural landmark, while local memory has shifted from practice-based experience to curated and disseminated forms of public narrative (Boyer, 1994; Ashworth et al., 2007).

### Urban change and the formation of collective memory in Xiguan under international trade regimes

The spatial form of Yongqingfang in Xiguan took shape during the Qing dynasty, a period when Guangzhou was highly dependent on foreign trade. The emergence of Xiguan grand houses and Qilou Buildings was closely tied

to the Canton System and the Pearl River transportation network. Residential space, commercial activity, and the circulation of goods were compressed into a single neighborhood structure, enabling domestic spaces to simultaneously serve reception, business operations, and storage. Such spatial arrangements, oriented toward efficiency and accessibility, were not exceptional at the time but represented a common choice within Guangzhou's mercantile society, consistent with the Lingnan urban tradition that emphasized practicality and openness (Changxin, 2011; Yuan, 2020).

Over time, these spaces ceased to function solely as utilitarian settings and gradually became carriers of memory associated with prosperity and urban identity. The scale of the grand houses, the continuous street interface formed by Qilou Buildings, and the dense concentration of commercial activity along the streets together shaped Xiguan's distinctive urban image. Through repeated use, these spatial forms became stabilized, and even after their commercial functions had weakened, they continued to evoke historical imaginaries of Guangzhou as a port city.



**Figure 5.** The physical of Xiguan grand houses and Qilou Buildings in Guangzhou constitute important spatial carriers of collective memory. Source: [www.gznf.net](http://www.gznf.net). Accessed on October 12, 2023.

Craft traditions such as Guangcai porcelain, Guangxiu embroidery, ivory carving, and Canton clocks collectively reflect Guangzhou's role as an artisanal hub within global trade networks. Developed under the Canton System, these crafts not only met local ritual and consumption demands but also entered European, American, and Southeast Asian markets on a sustained basis, forming a

highly outward-oriented mode of production. Workshops were often embedded within streets and residential interiors, closely interweaving production activities with everyday life and constituting a vital component of the lived landscape of Xiguan neighborhoods (Clunas, 1997; Van Dyke, 2005).



**Figure 6.** Artisanal remains from the period of prosperity in Guangzhou's Xiguan, including Guangcai porcelain, Guangxiu embroidery, and ivory carving. Source: [www.epailive.com](http://www.epailive.com). Accessed on October 12, 2023.

With shifts in trade regimes and the replacement of handicraft production by industrialization, these techniques gradually fell out of everyday use, yet they did not disappear from the city's memory. Related objects, patterns, and narratives of craftsmanship were preserved and reintroduced into new cultural discourses in symbolic form. Crafts that originally belonged to systems of labor and production came to serve as vehicles for narrating "past prosperity" and have been repeatedly mobilized within processes of urban regeneration and cultural consumption.

Beyond material spaces and artisanal remains, collective memory in Xiguan is also deeply embedded in everyday urban life. Teahouses, the liminal spaces beneath Qilou Buildings, and street markets have long functioned as sites of social interaction, exchange, and the circulation of information, forming essential arenas of public life in the city. These spaces do not rely on monumental form, but sustain their significance through repeatedly enacted daily practices, allowing memory to accumulate organically through use (Gehl, 2011).



**Figure 7.** Facade of a time-honoured Guangzhou teahouse. Traditional teahouses in the city's historic district serve not merely as dining spaces, but as vital social hubs and repositories of collective memory. Source: [www.epailive.com](http://www.epailive.com). Accessed on October 12, 2023

With adjustments to urban structure and changes in everyday lifestyles, these forms of street-level life gradually diminished, and the associated memories retreated from public space into the realm of individual experience. In the contemporary phase of urban renewal, such memories have been reintroduced into the urban landscape in a different mode, transformed into cultural scenes designed for viewing and experience. Although vernacular urban life no longer continues in its original form, its affective qualities and imagery continue to circulate through new patterns of spatial use.

### From Xiguan community to Yongqingfang (1998–2024): Urban renewal and the reconfiguration of local memory

The collective memory of Yongqingfang does not derive from a single historical event, but is anchored in tangible

elements of the district that can be repeatedly perceived. The alignment of Enning Road, the continuous façades of Qilou Buildings, and the massing and scale of Xiguan grand houses together constitute the most immediate sense of history encountered upon entering Yongqingfang. These spatial elements have not been fully restored to an original state; rather, new modes of use have been embedded within their existing structures, allowing the past to persist in the present in fragmented form. This spatial mode of carrying history closely corresponds to the way in which collective memory is generated through attachment to specific places (Halbwachs, 1992; Boyer, 1994).



**Figure 8.** The arcade corridor vividly illustrates “residents resting and socializing” and “shops extending displays outdoors,” demonstrating the dual nature of the qilou Buildings as a space of public interaction and a composite social environment. Source: Photograph by the author on August 20, 2023

The regeneration of Yongqingfang in Xiguan has shifted from large-scale demolition and reconstruction to a micro-regeneration strategy. Xiguan grand houses have been structurally preserved as complete entities, while their interior spaces have been adapted into former residences of notable figures and venues for exhibitions and cultural activities, gradually transforming what were once enclosed private dwellings into spaces of public use. Qilou Buildings

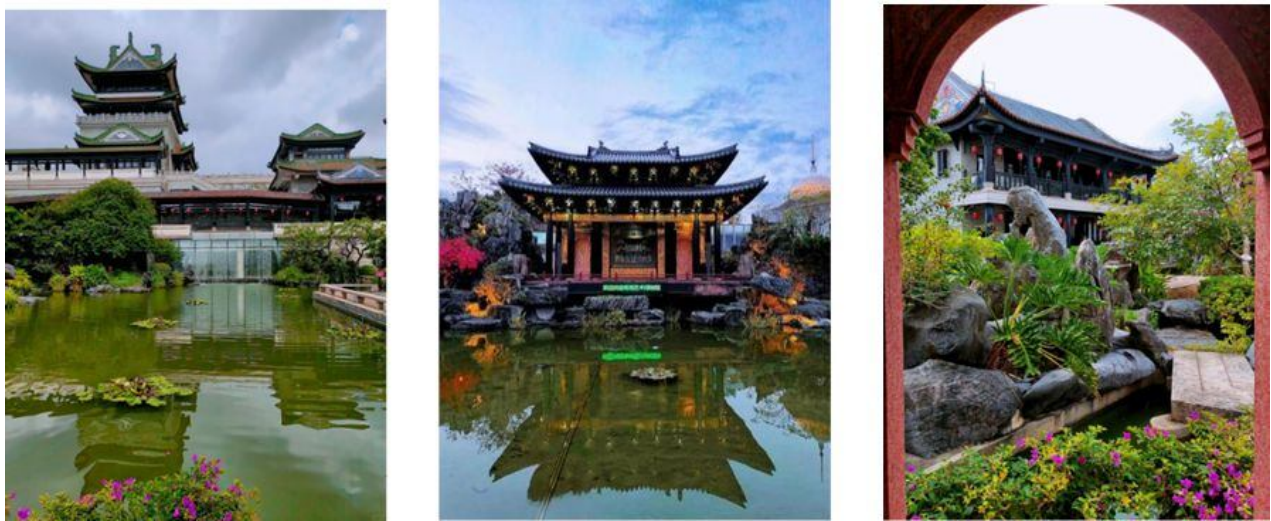
continue to perform their fundamental role as the street interface, maintaining historical characteristics at both visual and functional levels, while restored arcades are converted into commercial units to accommodate new retail and tourism demands. This approach is consistent with contemporary principles of “incremental regeneration” in historic districts (Ashworth et al., 2007; Pendlebury, 2013).



**Figure 9.** Xiguan Mansion, Guangzhou. Through scene reconstructions and object displays, it vividly recreates the lifestyle and customs of Xiguan residents during the late Qing and early Republican periods. Source: Photograph by the author on April 28, 2025.

At the same time, drawing on the spatial characteristics of traditional Lingnan architecture, the Cantonese Opera Museum was reconstructed and established as a key venue for presenting Cantonese opera culture. In its massing, courtyard configuration, and façade articulation, the building continues the traditional Lingnan architectural idiom, ensuring that Cantonese opera is no longer

encountered solely through performance or textual representation, but is instead situated within a space marked by a clear sense of place. The establishment of the museum provides this form of intangible cultural heritage with a stable spatial anchor, transforming Cantonese opera into a cultural node within the district that can be entered, inhabited, and repeatedly perceived.



**Figure 10.** The Cantonese Opera Art Museum stage and Bahe Pavilion, They are not isolated exhibits but are integrated harmoniously into the fabric of the neighborhood, replacing the dilapidated buildings that once stood there. Source: Photograph by the author on October 21, 2023.

Teahouses, Cantonese opera performances, and experiences of intangible cultural heritage crafts have been reintroduced into the Yongqingfang district. By watching performances, engaging in craft activities, and lingering and consuming in the neighborhood, visitors transform elements that once belonged to the community's internal life into cultural content oriented toward the public. In this process, memory is first extracted from everyday life and then reinserted into the operation of the district in experiential form, laying the groundwork for the gradual formation of a spatial model centered on nostalgic experience in Yongqingfang and providing concrete support for the subsequent development of the business of nostalgia (Boym, 2001; Graham et al., 2000).

### From urban renewal to nostalgia consumption: The commercial transformation of Yongqingfang

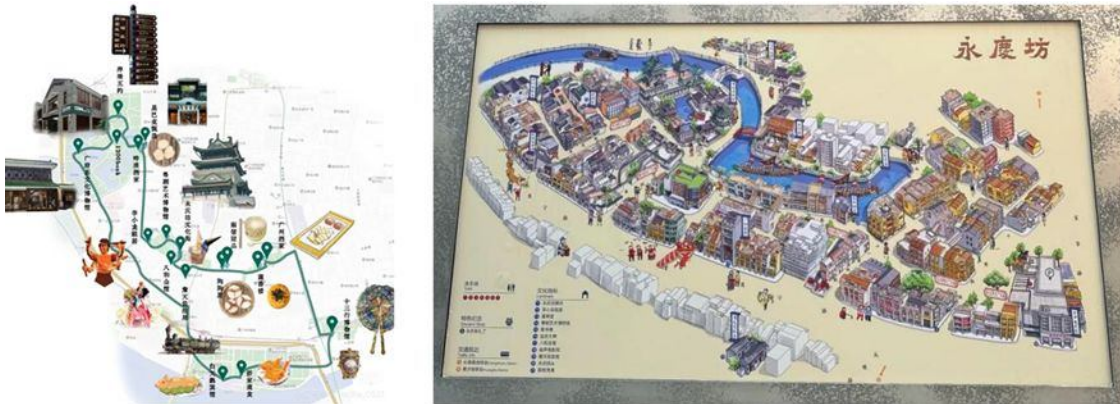
In Yongqingfang, collective memory does not enter the market as historical facts, but is first transformed into a stable affective experience. The scale of Enning Road, the shaded continuity of Qilou Buildings, and the grey brickwork and courtyards of Xiguan grand houses do not require visitors to understand their historical background, yet they readily evoke associations with the “old city” and “old Guangzhou.” Such spatial experiences do not depend on accumulated knowledge, but operate at the level of intuitive perception, allowing collective memory to detach from its original community context and become an emotional resource that can be shared by all who enter the district (Halbwachs, 1992; Boyer, 1994).



**Figure 11.** The continuous arcades along Enning Road clearly reveal the traditional “shop below, residence above” commercial residential layout. Source: Photograph by the author on October 21, 2024.

Yongqingfang's nostalgia-driven economy does not rely on entrance fees; instead, it operates by treating the entire district as an open consumption field. Pedestrian circulation is organized around key nodes such as the Bruce Lee Ancestral Residence, the Cantonese Opera Art Museum, central plazas, and flagship shops, allowing visitors to naturally pass through points of consumption as they move through the area. While the exterior

appearance of historic buildings remains relatively stable, their interior spaces are allocated to bookstores, cafés, cultural and creative brands, and themed dining venues, producing a clear functional division. This arrangement does not seek to recreate historical everyday life, but rather positions nostalgia as a contextual backdrop that encourages lingering and consumption (Ashworth et al., 2007; Zukin, 2010).



**Figure 12.** The Yongqingfang tourist route map enables visitors to experience more efficient and convenient travel, offering a deeper travel experience. Source: Photograph by the author. Accessed on October 21, 2024.

Beyond spatial design, commodities and events play a key role in converting affect into consumption. Motifs derived from Manchu windows and architectural details of Xiguan buildings are simplified into visual symbols and repeatedly applied to cultural and creative products, making them easy to carry and circulate. Intangible cultural heritage practices such as Guangcai porcelain and Guangxiu embroidery are presented primarily through short-term

demonstrations and experiential activities, allowing visitors to complete a sense of “participation” within a limited timeframe. Here, nostalgia is no longer merely a feeling, but is decomposed into measurable units of dwelling time, experiential programs, and purchasing behavior, becoming a crucial resource for the continuous operation of the district (Smith, 2006; Boym, 2001).



**Figure 13.** Yongqingfang Cultural and Creative Products-Xiguanfu Refrigerator Stickers and Bookmarks. Source: Photograph by the author. Accessed on October 21, 2024.

Alongside increasing commercial activity, the spatial character of Yongqingfang has undergone a marked transformation. A district that once primarily served residents' everyday lives has gradually shifted toward a visitor-oriented experiential environment, with street-level businesses dominated by dining, cultural and creative retail, and experience-based shops, while forms of livelihood-oriented commerce have steadily declined.

Cantonese opera performances, martial arts demonstrations, and festive parades now tend to appear in the form of scheduled shows, emphasizing visual spectacle and photogenic qualities rather than everyday community practices. This transformation renders culture more visible and accessible, yet simultaneously widens the distance between cultural representation and lived life (MacCannell, 1976; Zukin, 2010).



**Figure 14.** Martial arts demonstrations in Xiguan Yongqingfang, the “Miss Xiguan” parade, and Cantonese opera festival processions. Each movement and posture by the performer transforms intangible “collective memory” and local knowledge into a dynamic spectacle, something visible and sensible. Source: Photograph by the author. Accessed on October 21, 2024.

As nostalgic consumption intensifies, Yongqingfang’s nighttime lightscape further reinforces this trend. Nocturnal tourism scenarios extend consumption time through lighting design and programmed activities, allowing the district to remain active after dark. At the same time, Cantonese opera performances and demonstrations of traditional crafts increasingly take the form of scheduled

shows, emphasizing visual appeal and media circulation. While these changes enhance the visibility of Yongqingfang, they also contribute to the gradual transformation of cultural practices once embedded in everyday life into experiential content oriented toward visitors.



**Figure 15.** Night view of the lighting around the Cantonese Opera Museum in Yongqingfang. The illumination system shapes the nocturnal atmosphere and mood, transforming the district into an immersive theatrical setting. Source: Photograph by the author on October 21, 2024.

At the same time, nostalgic narratives have become increasingly standardized. Official publicity, media coverage, and content circulated on social platforms repeatedly foreground keywords such as “Old Guangzhou”

and “Xiguan sentiment,” compressing complex historical experiences into easily transmissible images. For visitors, Yongqingfang is presented as a stable, coherent, and emotionally reassuring space of nostalgia; for some long-

term residents, however, familiar living environments are being transformed into objects of viewing and consumption. This divergence indicates that, while the nostalgia economy revitalizes urban space, it simultaneously redistributes rights to spatial use and narrative authority (Harvey, 2007; Relph, 1976).

### **Collective memory and the business of nostalgia in Xiguan Yongqingfang**

Building on the research findings presented above, this section addresses the four main objectives of this study through theoretical discussion: (1) to trace the historical evolution of the "Xiguan Yongqing community" from its formation to the present; (2) to examine the "Xiguan community" during the era of international economic prosperity through the lens of "collective memory"; (3) to analyze the reconstruction and development process of the "Xiguan community" as it transformed into "Xiguan Yongqingfang" within Guangzhou's modern city from 1998 to 2024; and (4) to investigate the business of nostalgia phenomenon of "Xiguan Yongqingfang" in the context of China's modern city.

#### ***Objective one: From community formation to regeneration—The evolution of local life and collective memory in Xiguan Yongqingfang***

The first objective traces the historical development of Xiguan Yongqingfang from its formation to the present. The research finds that collective memory in Yongqingfang did not emerge in a vacuum but gradually accumulated through interactions between geographical environment, trade systems, and social structures. Located in the alluvial plain of the Pearl River Delta, Xiguan's low-lying terrain and dense waterway network historically supported a commercial spatial order organized around water transport. Street alignments, building orientations, and functional distributions were closely connected to the canal system, producing a spatial pattern centered on waterways and establishing a foundation for the mixed development of commerce, residence, and handicraft production.

As Guangzhou's foreign trade continued to flourish, particularly under the Qing dynasty's "Single Port Trade" system, Xiguan developed into a hub for trade-related production, warehousing, and artisanal networks. The emergence of Xiguan grand houses and qilou buildings, along with dense commercial activity along the streets, collectively shaped Xiguan's distinctive urban image. Through prolonged use and habitation, these spatial forms transcended mere functional responses and gradually solidified into material carriers of collective memory centered on prosperity. The development of traditional

crafts such as Guangcai porcelain, Guangxiu embroidery, and ivory carving further intertwined production activities with daily life, forming an important component of Xiguan's lived landscape.

War and regime change in the twentieth century brought profound rupture to Xiguan's memory structure. Population outmigration, neighborhood disintegration, and social network collapse severely disrupted the previously prosperity-centered memory framework. Following Reform and Opening-up, as Guangzhou's urban functions shifted eastward, old districts, including Yongqingfang entered a period of structural decline. Traditional ways of life gradually lost public spatial support, and local memory entered a prolonged state of suppression. Only with the recent implementation of "micro-regeneration" strategies—through restoration of traditional architectural forms and functional adaptation—did Yongqingfang complete its transformation from a residential community to a cultural landmark, with local memory shifting from practice-based experience to curated and disseminated public narrative.

#### ***Objective two: Xiguan community in the era of international trade prosperity—Dimensions of collective memory***

The second objective examines the characteristics of collective memory in the Xiguan community during the era of international trade prosperity. The research identifies three dimensions through which collective memory was constructed and transmitted.

In the spatial dimension, the formation of Xiguan grand houses and qilou buildings was closely tied to Guangzhou's foreign trade and the Pearl River transportation network. Residential space, commercial activity, and goods distribution were compressed into a single neighborhood structure, allowing domestic spaces to simultaneously serve reception, business operations, and storage. This efficiency-oriented spatial arrangement, common in Guangzhou's mercantile society, reflected the Lingnan urban tradition emphasizing practicality and openness.

In the artisanal dimension, traditional crafts, including Guangcai porcelain, Guangxiu embroidery, ivory carving, and Canton clocks, collectively reflected Guangzhou's role as a handicraft center within global trade networks. These crafts not only satisfied local ritual and consumption demands but also entered European, American, and Southeast Asian markets on a sustained basis, forming an outwardly oriented production mode. Workshops embedded within streets and residential interiors closely interwove production activities with everyday life. Although these techniques gradually fell out of daily use as trade regimes shifted and industrialization advanced, related objects, patterns, and craft narratives were preserved and

reintroduced into new cultural discourses in symbolic form, repeatedly mobilized in urban regeneration and cultural consumption.

In the dimension of daily life, teahouses, the liminal spaces beneath qilou buildings, and street markets long functioned as sites of social interaction and information exchange, forming essential arenas of urban public life. These spaces sustained their significance not through monumental form but through repeatedly enacted daily practices, allowing memory to accumulate organically through use. As urban structure adjusted and lifestyles changed, these forms of street-level life gradually diminished, and associated memories retreated from public space into individual experience, awaiting reintroduction into the urban landscape through different modes in the contemporary regeneration phase.

***Objective three: From Xiguan community to Yongqingfang (1998–2024)—Urban renewal and the reconfiguration of local memory***

The third objective examines the reconstruction and development process through which the Xiguan community transformed into Yongqingfang between 1998 and 2024. The research finds that Yongqingfang's regeneration shifted from large-scale demolition and reconstruction to a micro-regeneration strategy. The alignment of Enning Road, the continuous façades of qilou buildings, and the massing and scale of Xiguan grand houses together constitute the most immediate historical perception upon entering Yongqingfang. These spatial elements have not been fully restored to an original state; rather, new modes of use have been embedded within existing structures, allowing the past to persist in fragmented form.

Xiguan grand houses have been structurally preserved as complete entities while their interior spaces have been adapted into former residences of notable figures and venues for exhibitions and cultural activities, gradually transforming enclosed private dwellings into public spaces. Qilou buildings continue to perform their basic function as street interfaces, maintaining historical characteristics at both visual and functional levels, while restored arcade spaces have been converted into commercial units to accommodate new retail and tourism demands.

Simultaneously, the Cantonese Opera Museum was reconstructed and established, providing intangible cultural heritage with a stable spatial anchor and transforming Cantonese opera into a cultural node that can be entered, inhabited, and repeatedly perceived. Teahouses, Cantonese opera performances, and intangible cultural heritage craft experiences have been reintroduced into Yongqingfang. Elements that once belonged to the community's internal life have been

transformed into public-oriented cultural content through viewing, participation, and consumption. In this process, memory is first extracted from everyday life and then reinserted into the district's operations in experiential form, laying the groundwork for the gradual formation of a spatial model centered on nostalgic experience and providing concrete support for the subsequent development of the nostalgia economy.

***Objective four: The business of nostalgia phenomenon in Yongqingfang within China's modern city context***

The fourth objective analyzes the operational mechanisms of Yongqingfang's nostalgia economy within the context of China's modern city. The research finds that Yongqingfang's nostalgia economy does not rely on entrance fees but operates by treating the entire district as an open consumption field. Pedestrian circulation is organized around key nodes such as the Bruce Lee Ancestral Residence, the Cantonese Opera Art Museum, central plazas, and flagship shops, allowing visitors to naturally pass through consumption points as they move through the area. While the exterior appearance of historic buildings remains relatively stable, interior spaces are allocated to bookstores, cafés, cultural and creative brands, and themed dining venues, producing a clear functional division. This arrangement does not seek to recreate historical everyday life but rather positions nostalgia as a contextual backdrop that encourages lingering and consumption.

Beyond spatial design, commodities and events play a key role in converting affect into consumption. Motifs derived from Manchu windows and architectural details of Xiguan buildings are simplified into visual symbols and repeatedly applied to cultural and creative products, making them easy to carry and circulate. Intangible cultural heritage practices such as Guangcai porcelain and Guangxiu embroidery are presented primarily through short-term demonstrations and experiential activities, allowing visitors to complete a sense of "participation" within a limited timeframe. Here, nostalgia is no longer merely a feeling but is decomposed into measurable units of dwelling time, experiential programs, and purchasing behavior, becoming a crucial resource for the district's continuous operation.

As nostalgic consumption intensifies, Yongqingfang's spatial character has undergone a marked transformation. A district that once primarily served residents' everyday lives has gradually shifted toward a visitor-oriented experiential environment, with street-level businesses dominated by dining, cultural and creative retail, and experience-based shops, while livelihood-oriented commerce has steadily declined. Cantonese opera performances, martial arts demonstrations, and festive

parades now tend to appear in the form of scheduled shows, emphasizing visual spectacle and photogenic qualities rather than everyday community practices. This transformation renders culture more visible and accessible while simultaneously widening the distance between cultural representation and lived life.

Nighttime lightscapes further reinforce this trend. Nocturnal tourism scenarios extend consumption time through lighting design and programmed activities, keeping the district active after dark. While these changes enhance Yongqingfang's visibility, they also contribute to the gradual transformation of cultural practices once embedded in everyday life into experiential content oriented toward visitors.

Simultaneously, nostalgic narratives have become increasingly standardized. Official publicity, media coverage, and content circulated on social platforms repeatedly foreground keywords such as "Old Guangzhou" and "Xiguan sentiment," compressing complex historical experiences into easily transmissible images. For visitors, Yongqingfang is presented as a stable, coherent, and emotionally reassuring space of nostalgia; for some long-term residents, however, familiar living environments are being transformed into objects of viewing and consumption. This divergence indicates that while the nostalgia economy revitalizes urban space, it simultaneously redistributes rights to spatial use and narrative authority.

## CONCLUSION

Yongqingfang in Xiguan District, Guangzhou, is a revitalized and repurposed area of the city's past within Guangzhou, one of China's largest and most modern cities. Yongqingfang represents a space encompassing various aspects of shared human society's memories, including a remembrance of the past and roots of the city where they once lived. This city's identity is intertwined with both local and global contexts, reflecting its past as a modern, internationally traded maritime economic hub. These memories are woven into historical documents; however, these documents and narratives of Guangzhou's past exist only in historical imagination.

Conversely, Guangzhou, in the context of modern China, recognizes that history, a part of their shared memory, is still embedded in the ruins of Yongqingfang in Xiguan District. Modern Guangzhou has agreed to revitalize and rebuild "Yongqingfang" as an integral part of the modern city, systematically utilizing it. This involves evolving from a traditional mixed-use commercial and residential community into a culturally revitalized area, grounded in its natural geography, trade systems, and social structure, through the strategy of "restoring the old to its original state." Thus, Yongqingfang has become a special zone within the modern city, preserving shared

social memories. A shared sense of pride in the city's tangible historical roots, showcased through restored and revitalized original spaces and buildings, offering tourism that immerses the sense of community and historical connection to China's vibrant present-day maritime economic network from the past.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Supachai Singyabuth, throughout the research and writing of this thesis titled "Xiguan Yongqingfang" at Guangzhou: Collective Memory and Business of Nostalgia in the Context of China's Modern City. Your profound academic insights, rigorous research attitude, and patient guidance have illuminated my research path. From the conception of the research topic, the design of the research framework, to the revision and polishing of the thesis content, you have provided me with targeted and professional suggestions, which have enabled me to overcome various difficulties in the research process and continuously improve the quality of this thesis.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to all the teachers and professors of the Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University. The professional courses and academic seminars you have taught have laid a solid theoretical foundation for my research, and your academic thoughts and research methods have inspired me a lot, broadening my academic vision and research ideas.

My gratitude also goes to the relevant institutions and individuals in Guangzhou who have provided support and assistance for my field research. Without your generous sharing of materials, on-site guidance, and in-depth communication, it would be impossible for me to complete the data collection and empirical research of this thesis on the collective memory and nostalgia business of Xiguan Yongqingfang.

To my family and friends, thank you for your unwavering support, understanding and encouragement during my postgraduate study and thesis writing. Your silent companionship and warm care have given me the motivation and courage to move forward and become the most solid backing for me to devote myself to research.

Finally, I would like to thank all the scholars whose research results have been cited and referenced in this thesis. Your academic achievements have laid an important theoretical foundation for my research and provided valuable research references for this thesis.

Due to the limited academic level, there may be deficiencies and imperfections in this thesis. I sincerely welcome all teachers and scholars to put forward valuable comments and suggestions. I will continue to study and explore in the relevant academic fields in the future, and strive to make greater progress.

## REFERENCES

- Ashworth, G. J., Graham, B., & Tunbridge, J. E. (2007). *Pluralising pasts: Heritage, identity and place in multicultural societies*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Boyer, M. C. (1994). *The city of collective memory: Its historical imagery and architectural entertainments*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Chaudhuri, K. N. (1985). *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Changxin, P. (2011). *Modernity and Locality: The Modern Transformation of Lingnan City and Architecture*. Shanghai: Tongji University Press.
- Clunas, C. (1997). *Chinese Export Art and Design*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, F. (1979). *Yearning for yesterday: A sociology of nostalgia*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Graham, B., Ashworth, G. J., & Tunbridge, J. E. (2000). *A geography of heritage: Power, culture and economy*. London, UK: Arnold.
- Guangzhou Local Chronicles Compilation Committee (1996). *Guangzhou City Chronicles*. Guangzhou Publishing House, Volume 18.
- Gehl, J. (2011). *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space* (6th English language edition). Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory* (L. A. Coser, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London, UK: Verso.
- Lowenthal, D. (1985). *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lu, D. (2006). *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949–2005*. London & New York: Routledge.
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- MacCannell, D. (1999). *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Merrifield, A. (2013). *The Politics of the Encounter: Urban Theory and Protest under Planetary Urbanization*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Ng, C. (2016). *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Pendlebury, J. (2013). *Conservation in the age of consensus*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Pendlebury, J., Wang, Y., & Law, A. (2020). Re-thinking historic urban landscapes from a Chinese perspective. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(9), 838–852. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1649525>
- Rolph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. London, UK: Pion.
- Situ, S. (1993). *Historical geography of Guangdong [in Chinese]*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Van Dyke, P. A. (2005). *The Canton trade: Life and enterprise on the China coast, 1700–1845*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Zijin, W. (2004). Trade route of "Liang-song" area in the Han Dynasties. *Journal of Henan University of Science and Technology*, 4(4).
- Zukin, S. (2010). *Naked city: The death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

---

**Citation:** Li, Y., and Singyabuth, S. (2026). "Xiguan Yongqingfang" at Guangzhou: Collective memory and business of nostalgia in the context of China's modern city. *African Educational Research Journal*, 14(1), 305-320.

---