



# Heritage conflict evolution: changing framing strategies and opportunity structures in two heritage district redevelopment projects in China

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## ABSTRACT

Heritage district (re)development usually involves conflict, especially when the local community challenges existing preservation policy arrangements, and conflicts involve the framing of competing positions in the public sphere. While framing strategy aids in understanding conflict dynamics, further theoretical exploration is necessary. This paper emphasizes the role of contextual influence and how opportunity structures can enhance framing analysis's explanatory power in tracing the evolution of heritage district redevelopment conflicts. We perceive opportunity structures as emerging properties of interactive relationships between contending actors' framing strategies (agency) and the contextual systems where they assert their claims (structure). Through an analysis of the media frames, policy documents and interviews with 50 relevant actors, we investigate two heritage conflicts in China. The results show that conflict is shaped by diverse heritage values and competing interests as well as the presence of short-lived or long-lived opportunities. Opportunities may be missed even when conditions are conducive to achieving actors' goals. Visibility, resonance, and legitimacy are three key aspects of opportunity structures that provide advantages or disadvantages to contending actors. Policymakers benefit from consonance, which refers to positive resonance, and legitimacy within opportunity structures, which substantiates their heritage redevelopment initiatives. For policy challengers seeking to influence heritage-related policy, the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy aspects within opportunity structures stand as pivotal.

## 1. Introduction

Heritage is often politicized and contested, since different actors hold conflicting views, values and interests about it (Smith and Akagawa, 2009). At the international level, heritage preservation and (re)development processes have become more participatory and effective, as various stakeholders' concerns are integrated into the policymaking process (UNESCO, 2016). In some countries, the goals and norms of local communities on heritage preservation and (re)development have been anchored in regulations (Nyseth and Sognnaes, 2013), while in others, heritage is less regarded as being managed inclusively and sustainably. Examples can be found in the failure of local regulatory frameworks to legitimize and protect many aspects of cultural heritage, the marginalization of local communities and the lack of transparency (Nyseth and Sognnaes, 2013; Yung and Sun, 2020; Mozaffari and Jones, 2019; Robertson, 2016). Under such circumstances, existing policymaking is usually challenged by local communities, civil society organizations, or other actors who hold different views on heritage significance. Policymakers are not passive recipients of this resistance. They respond to

resistance by adapting their policy positions, seeking compromises, or undertaking innovative policy interventions (Lee, 2016; Tan and Altrock, 2016). These incidents of resistance and policymaker mobilization often coincide with counter-mobilizations by broader actors.

Conflict tends to evolve through continuous negotiation, compromise, and the intention to find common ground (Barrett and Barrett, 2004; Ginzarly et al., 2019). However, theoretical work that looks closely at the dynamics of contending processes around heritage is relatively lacking (Jones et al., 2017). Zooming in on conflict evolution can offer valuable insights into the specific advantages and challenges that actors face.

Heritage studies have recognized the analysis of framing strategies as a significant explanatory factor of conflict evolution (Waterton and Watson, 2013; Wu and Hou, 2015). In contending processes, policymakers, challengers, and supporters bring their cases to the public sphere and engage in framing strategies to win support from the public (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019; Coe, 2015; Sagara, 2015). Conflict dynamics manifest when certain frames, conveying specific values and interests, endeavor to supersede others (Benford and Snow, 2000). However, since

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framing analysis focuses on the agency of actors and overlooks the role of contexts where frames are expressed, it is thus limited in explaining conflict dynamics (Ferree, 2003; McCammon, 2013). To delve into the intricate dynamics of heritage conflict, this study develops a theoretical lens integrating framing analysis and opportunity structure. Within the field of policy contention, opportunity structure has been considered a crucial mechanism influencing the strategic frames of contending actors (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; McCammon, 2013).

While some scholars have employed opportunity structures to understand heritage politics, the perspective is still spotty in the field. We perceive opportunity structures as emergent properties of interactive relationships between strategies or practices of actors and contextual systems that are means and objects of these practices (Hallgrimsdottir, 2006). Opportunity structures constitute the contextual setting in which contending actors make decisions, while concurrently, strategies and practices of actors can open up and expand them. The influence of actors on heritage policy has to do with contextually available opportunities; missed opportunities occur when conditions are favorable while actors do not or cannot act upon them to their advantage (Sawyers and Meyer, 1999; Ferree, 2003). We argue that the application of opportunity structures takes the interrelationships between contextual settings and the strategies of contending actors into account. We respond to *Message's* (2015) and *Harvey's* (2015) calls that further theoretical work is needed to fill the gaps in heritage politics literature where contextual and strategic factors have been studied separately. Furthermore, this study considers the uniqueness of restrictive political systems. Taking China as an example, redevelopment practices in the past few years have been characterized by emerging civil society and state dominance (Hsing, 2010; Zhang et al., 2019; Verdini, 2015; Zhu and Maags, 2020). It can be argued that conflicts in such regimes might result in different policy challengers' dilemmas and policymakers' discourse control mechanisms from those in democratic countries. The presence of an opportunity structure becomes exceptionally pivotal for alternative discourses aimed at shaping policies (Cai, 2010).

The current theoretical lens was applied to two heritage conflicts in China. We carried out a comparative case study of them. To trace conflict dynamics and gain insight into the actors' framing strategies and opportunity structures, we collected and analyzed data on changing contextual conditions and constructed frames. Thereafter, we first present a within-case analysis of the conflict evolution processes, before conducting a cross-case discussion to analyze the role of framing strategies and opportunity structures in shaping the conflict. The last section presents some concluding remarks.

## 2. Theoretical perspective

In this section, we will first present the relevance of framing strategies and the context to shape heritage contention in multi-actor settings. Then we illustrate opportunity structure as a bridge between structure and agency for the analysis.

### 2.1. Framing strategy

Conflicts can be described as "disputes in which contending parties hold conflicting frames" (Schön and Rein, 1994). One influential approach to understanding heritage conflict is examining the framing strategy constructed by actors. A collective action frame refers to a scheme of interpretation that motivates collective action and mobilization (Benford and Snow, 2000). There are different types of frames that deal with different dilemmas and issues, like what is worth preserving (Sharkansky, 2004), for whose interest (Mualam and Alterman, 2018) and how preservation should be carried out (Nyseth and Sognnaes, 2013). A similar approach, the storyline, which means a "condensed statement summarizing complex narratives" has been adopted in heritage studies (Hajer, 2006, p. 69). Storylines are used by policymakers and challengers to justify how heritage is perceived and managed. Both

approaches, which will be characterized here together as "framing strategies", are generally treated as verifications of the "signification agency" of actors, that is, of their ability to claim a certain identity, values or interest (Benford and Snow, 2000). They have been applied to understand the impetus of heritage conflicts and substantial literature has developed (e.g., Harrison, 2013; Hajer, 2006; Parkinson et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019; Mozaffari and Jones, 2019; Williams and Sovacool, 2019).

### 2.2. Contextual influence

Beyond framing strategies, the contexts in which framing efforts unfold shape conflict evolution (Steinberg, 1998; Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Ferree, 2003; Kriesi, 2004; Leopold et al., 2019). A previously marginalized frame can become mainstream due to shifts in contextual conditions (Lee, 2019). Political, economic, cultural, social and media conditions can create opportunities or barriers for a certain framing of a policy problem to gain prominence (McCammon, 2012). Contextual settings include broader political and economic environments, such as the rise of civil society (Verdini, 2015), industrialization and urbanization (Hsing, 2010) and cultural economy development (Nyseth and Sognnaes, 2013). It also includes cultures and beliefs, from global to local, that shape conflicting interests and values (Mozaffari, and Jones, 2019; Robertson, 2016; De Cesari and Herzfeld, 2015; Gibson and Kong, 2005). In addition, national and local institutions and the media environment affect conflict formation and (de)escalation (Harvey, 2015; Jones et al., 2019; Robertson, 2016). However, these contextual settings are often intertwined, setting the terrain for framing contests.

We investigate contextual influence by using the notion of opportunity structure. "Opportunity structure", developed by social movement scholars, is defined as a mechanism that determines which ideas are considered "sensible", "realistic", and "legitimate" within a specific polity and timeframe (Koopmans and Statham, 1999, p. 228; Ferree, 2003). Opportunity structure reflects the openness and closeness of polity to certain claims and actions (Eisinger, 1973). It powerfully channels and shapes what is relevant and possible to achieve in and through policy or social issue contention (Ferree, 2003; Koopmans, 2005). The absence of an opportunity structure can lead to certain voices not being heard, which may cause the marginalization of the group. Furthermore, lacking an opportunity structure can concentrate power in the hands of a few privileged groups, allowing them to dominate the formation of public discourse, leading to information monopolies and abuse of power. On the other hand, too many opportunity structures can lead to excessive information diffusion and overly chaotic voices, causing public discussions to lose cohesion and direction, thereby troubling the effectiveness of decision-making (Rootes, 1999). McCammon et al. (2007) state that opportunity structures can be stable—long-lived cultural assumptions, institutions or regulations always in social motion—or volatile—short-lived discourses with only temporary or weak meaning and relevance. Stable opportunity structures provide a more predictable environment for framing practices, allowing individuals or groups to plan and execute their strategies effectively. In contrast, unstable opportunity structures can create uncertainty and disrupt framing dynamics. In more stable contexts, framing strategies may have a greater chance of shaping societal norms, policies, and institutions over time. In volatile contexts, framing strategies might be more focused on less risky or short-term objectives. Opportunity structure, as a contextually selective mechanism, is associated with resources. Resources refer to the tangible and intangible assets that actors mobilize to advance their goals, including finances, manpower, supplies, expertise, organizational support, etc. (Purdy, 2012; Edwards and McCarthy, 2004). Groups or initiatives with greater assets, such as finances and media access may more easily shape which frames are deemed "sensible", "realistic", or "legitimate" (Hay, 2002). These opportunity structures may well aid resource-rich actors in furthering their strategic interests while simultaneously posing considerable challenges for those

without similar resources (Hay, 2002).

Our definition of opportunity contrasts with conceptualizations of political or discursive opportunity as objective categories that facilitate or constrain contenders' ability to pursue their political goals (e.g., Eisinger, 1973; Tarrow, 1996, 1998; Xie and Van Der Heijden, 2010). This latter conceptualization of opportunity has received considerable attention within the contentious politics literature while being criticized for its structuralist bias (Ferree, 2003; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; Message, 2015; Jones et al., 2017). It is seen as oversimplifying the complex interplay of social and political forces. Critics argue that this approach fails to adequately account for the dynamic nature of opportunities, thereby overlooking the role of agency and the influence of specific actors in shaping the course of conflicts. With a broader reconsideration in social sciences of the issue of structure and agency (Giddens, 2004; Joyce and Bennett, 2013), conflicts can be regarded as shaped by both contexts and strategies. With the context providing limited or ample opportunities for actors, and actors also being able to recognize, exploit or broaden opportunities (Hallgrimsdottir, 2006). For instance, the conceptualization of materialized opportunity structure is limited in explaining why some opportunities lose their utility—not being perceived or considered valid by the contenders (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; Koopmans and Muis, 2009; Amenta and Halfmann, 2012). Thus, opportunity structures can be seen as emergent properties of the entire contextual environment and are mutually constituted by contextual conditions and the strategies and practices of actors. Heritage conflict can be perceived as an ongoing political process where opportunity structures are generated and reproduced.

Three distinctive aspects of opportunity structure can be identified: visibility, resonance and legitimacy. Visibility refers to the extent to which certain frames are being created and diffused in the public sphere (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). The mass media tends to serve as a gatekeeper, influencing the ebbs and flows of the contending process by selecting, shaping, amplifying, or diminishing information (Koopmans and Muis, 2009). Personal networks and social media enable easier and faster information flows, circumventing media gatekeepers in the process and providing relatively unmediated access to challengers (Koopmans, 2004; Koopmans and Muis, 2009; Jones et al., 2019; Yao and Han, 2016). An opportunity must be visible if the actor's objective is to influence the public discourse.

The second aspect is resonance, which refers to the extent to which certain frames elicit reactions from actors (Snow and Benford, 1988; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). Political issue becomes dormant if it fails to provoke broader reactions. In other words, if there is no active argument, there is no substantive movement on the issue itself. Resonance comes in two forms: consonance and dissonance (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). Consonance occurs when certain frames stimulate positive reactions; it exemplifies the alignment with prevailing values and beliefs in society or a certain segment of the population. Dissonance happens when frames trigger negative reactions. Consonance across policy-makers and challengers is regarded as essential to consensus-building in conflicts (Desrosiers, 2012; Pellegrini, 2018).

The third aspect is legitimacy, which refers to the situation where certain frames are supported by other actors more than rejected (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). High resonance is usually accompanied by high legitimacy, but sometimes it is not, because "highly legitimate frames may have no resonance at all because they are uncontroversial, while highly illegitimate messages may have strong resonance" (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004, p. 205). Legitimacy relates to the perception that a frame or narrative is morally, ethically, and legally justified—when a frame is seen as legitimate, it can attract a broader base of supporters such as the public, sympathetic organizations, and potential funders (e.g., Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Andrews and Gaby, 2015; Haunss, 2007). This base can, in turn, lead to increased access to resources, such as financial contributions, manpower, and organizational support. While legitimacy rests on a broader social basis in democratic contexts (Andrews and Gaby, 2015; Haunss, 2007; Suddaby et al., 2017), in

restrictive political systems, it is often rooted in the governing authority, since that is the main decision-maker and provides both administrative and financial contributions (Mozaffari and Jones, 2019; Verdini, 2015). Visibility, resonance and legitimacy are overlapped and mutually reinforcing aspects of opportunity structures; an opportunity structure can have one or more of these aspects simultaneously (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Ferree, 2003).

The framing influence of actors on heritage policy has to do with the contextually available opportunities. Actors act within specific contextual understandings that visualize, prioritize and legitimate some forms of claims over others. However, "missed opportunities" (Sawyers and Meyer, 1999) can exist when certain contextual conditions are favorable for mobilization, but actors do not, or for some reason cannot, act upon them to their advantage. Missed opportunities occur when: i) actors are not aware of certain conditions to act upon or miss the moments to seize them (McCammon et al., 2007). This might be because heritage conflicts are highly dynamic, and the window of opportunity for certain events or developments may be brief or invisible; ii) actors might have preconceived notions or biases that influence their judgment, causing them to overlook certain chances or strike them as immaterial (Prause, 2019); iii) actors need to get through hostile political climates and preserve enduring values and identity, thus presenting a less visible public profile. Missed opportunities can lead to inaction and mobilization pause among actors, consequently influencing the continuity of conflicts (Sawyers and Meyer, 1999).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Case selection

We conducted a comparative qualitative case study. Comparing two heritage conflicts in China provided the opportunity to explore more holistic explanations within and between cases (Pettigrew, 1997; Robinson, 2022). Drawing inspiration from recent methodologies for analyzing urban phenomena comparatively, we studied two heritage conflicts with varied contexts in China: Hubei conflict in Shenzhen (2013–2021) and Chaotianmen conflict in Chongqing (2012–2020). Comparative urban research has a long tradition. Many contributions seek to control for differences. They aim to conclude with a concept or theory that is generalized and presents urban (political) phenomena in a homogenous way. Others appreciate variation (e.g., Robinson, 2011, 2022; Schmid et al., 2018). Adherents of the latter approach value urban phenomena diversity, local specificities, and the idea that urban phenomena are deeply embedded within their unique contexts. This approach seeks a more realistic and holistic understanding of urban phenomena. By not controlling variables, researchers can capture the messy, real-world dynamics of cities and their complexities (Krehl and Weck, 2020).

Shenzhen and Chongqing were chosen as the case studies for three major reasons. Firstly, we searched for cases where heritage conflicts and negotiations are long and have enough dynamics to serve our research aim of understanding conflict evolution. Our selected cases have an average duration spanning eight years, involving diverse actors at multiple scales, and undergoing numerous policy fluctuations. Secondly, data accessibility is crucial to understanding the developments, changes, and micro-events of heritage conflicts. We selected cases that had available and accessible media data to facilitate a thorough examination of the conflicts. Thirdly, comparison makes sense whenever the objects that are to be compared have something in common but are not identical. This is because shared aspects across cases provide a basis for identifying overarching trends and offering a foundation for theoretical understanding, while unique dynamics can yield nuanced and context-specific insights (Pettigrew, 1997; Robinson, 2022). While both cities share commonalities, such as rapid urbanization, significant historical transformations, and cultural heritage challenges, they represent two distinct political, economic, social-spatial and media contexts in China.

Thus, their comparison informs the conceptualization of heritage conflict evolution and helps generate new knowledge and context-related insights.

Shenzhen, a southern Chinese coastal city, is cosmopolitan and prosperous. Shenzhen's urban policymaking is influenced by rapid modernization, entrepreneurship, and globalization due to Guangdong Province's economic and political liberalization (Young and Young, 2013; O'Donnell, 2019). In recent years, Shenzhen has seen a lot of urban redevelopment, which is relatively bottom-up market-driven (Zhang et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2021). Chongqing is a southwest Chinese inland city. The city is historic and full of regional culture (Gong, 2021). As a municipality under central government control, its urban development is heavily influenced by central and local governments and highly depends on local land capitalization (Zhang et al., 2021). Technology and innovation draw high-earners to Shenzhen, creating a modern city. It has lower poverty and more economic opportunities. Chongqing, with its rugged terrain and manufacturing focus, has socio-spatial disparities from uneven economic development. Social groups differ in income, education, and infrastructure (Young and Young, 2013; Zhang et al., 2021). Shenzhen has a vibrant, tech-focused media landscape, while Chongqing is relatively state-dominated.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

To understand discourse construction processes, it is important to take account of changes over time (Neumann, 2008). The first author, being a long-term observer (Pettigrew, 1997), has participated in five WeChat group chats<sup>1</sup> (three for the Hubei conflict and two for the Chaotianmen conflict) since June 2016, and has monitored relevant Weibo hashtags<sup>1</sup> to trace communication between policymakers and policy challengers. From 2016 to 2023, we collected media data consisting of petition letters, public appeal letters, slogans, public statements, and posts by policy challengers, as well as statements by policymakers in press conferences and journalist interviews. Throughout this period, both cases underwent dynamic changes, and the influence of frames and opportunity structures on conflict evolution became increasingly clear. This long-term period also helps us distinguish thematic frames (Iyengar, 1994), avoiding over-fixation of discrete events. Beyond media sources, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews from December 2020 to August 2023 (see the appendix for all information on the interviewees). Compared with the memorizing-data of interviews, data generated from online media posts, chats, and forums could present relatively more objectivity for this long-term study, which enabled the authors to capture the unfolding process of framing (Zhang et al., 2015). Post-event interviews complement media data by offering in-depth perspectives from key stakeholders and participants involved in the conflict. This allows for a richer understanding of intentions and perceptions of contextual factors. Combining the two enables a nuanced examination of conflict evolution. Several policymakers and scholars were interviewed to identify major contextual changes in the two cities during the conflicts. They were 6 civil servants (3 in the respective cases) in service for Municipal Planning and Natural Resource Bureau, and 4 scholars from research institutes and universities (2 in the respective cases). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to access contending groups, including the main policymakers and challengers. The interview questions concerned actors': i) goals, strategies, activities, and the support received during the conflicts; ii) reasons and arguments to make certain claims and take actions; iii) perceived chances to act in their want, perceived threats and perceived impact on decision-making. Secondary sources primarily consist of

<sup>1</sup> WeChat group chats in China function as interactive online forums, facilitating real-time discussions among members with common interests. Weibo hashtags serve as dynamic channels for tracking and engaging in trending conversations.

project reports, policy positions of policymakers in the form of local and regional articles, and press statements, legal and planning documents, such as ordinances, regulations, minutes of meetings, and plan drafts from 2012 to 2020.

First, multiple data sources were triangulated to help ensure a holistic analysis. Next, we identify frames in the conflicts through thematic analysis of the data. A frame is defined here as a recurring argument that appears multiple times across competing actors and provides reasons for or against heritage preservation. Thematic analysis entails searching for patterns that emerge as important in the description of social phenomena (Iyengar, 1994; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Themes related to them were identified when there was significant recurrence and repetition. In other words, when certain patterns in the data were recognized, the themes became categories for further analysis. We read and reread information in all our data sources, highlighted keywords and phrases, and added notes to identify new and broader themes. Finally, all the data sources were reviewed to produce a timeline and identify the phases and events of the conflict. We weaved the generated overarching themes together chronologically and situated them in the timeline to form an analytical narrative of the whole framing process. The three aspects of opportunity structure were used as changing features of frames. Visibility was measured as the frequency of appearance in local and regional articles, policy documents, news releases, broadcasts, reports, and press statements, and the frequency of mentions by experts and netizens in public. Resonance was quantified in terms of the total number of expressions around certain frames, mostly in the form of relevant public statements. Legitimacy was measured in terms of various forms of support, including supportive claims on media and actions that favor certain frames. Missed opportunities were measured and triangulated through the objective contextual conditions, through statements of policymakers and scholars where they referred to contextual conditions and through the contending actors' perceived contextual conditions expressed in interviews and in the public sphere.

## 4. Within-case analysis

### 4.1. Hubei conflict

#### 4.1.1. Framing process

In Shenzhen's Luohu District, Hubei has 78,000 square kilometers of fishing markets, urban villages, and office buildings. An ancient 500-year-old village in Hubei is where Shenzhen began commercial activity. Hubei was not designated a heritage site by the local government (Shenzhen Planning Bureau, 2013), so in 2012, the city government and developers partnered to turn it into an international business center (Luohu District Committee Office, 2011). Policymakers (governments and developers) and preservationists (architects, planners, civil society organizations, and citizens) debated policy from 2012 to 2020. Table 1 shows the major frames of policymakers and preservationists. Frames are categorized into two main types, including justifications relevant to the projects and considerations of policymaking. Preservationists develop arguments on "local uniqueness", "architectural and environmental sustainability", "social benefits", "innovative and experimental value", "accessibility and inclusion" and "city image". Policymakers engage in frames around city development. Both policymakers and preservationists addressed their concerns about knowledge, technical feasibility, costs and policymaking procedures.

There were three phases to the Hubei controversy, the first being from 2012 to 2015, when preservationists primarily emphasized the "local uniqueness" of Hubei and the "social benefits" of its preservation. They described Hubei as "the only village in the city that has witnessed and told the story of the earliest commercial activity" (HB#A). The architects discussed the possibility of preserving Hubei with the government and the developer, in the hope of being commissioned as designers and using their expertise to preserve Hubei. Their narrative gained some resonance as more architects and planners undertook pro-bono

**Table 1**  
Major frames in Hubei conflict.

Frame type	Pro- or Anti-preservation	Frame	Argument
Justifications relevant to the projects	Pro	Local uniqueness	Preservation maintains cultural identity, history, memory and traditions. Preservation protects local economy, livelihood and aesthetic value.
		Architectural and environmental sustainability	Preservation reduces waste and energy use, making historic buildings and landscapes more sustainable than demolition and redevelopment.
		Social benefits	Heritage sites help schools and universities teach real-world history to future generations. Preservation projects give people a sense of pride and collective ownership.
	Pro	Innovative and experimental value	Preservation demonstrates public innovation capabilities of the city.
	Pro	Accessibility and inclusion	Everyone has the right to access heritage sites.
Considerations of policymaking	Pro	City image	Heritage preservation is a symbol of soft power, enhancing the city's image and fostering cultural exchanges.
	Anti	City development	Redevelopment contributes to the regional economy, transportation, job creation and city image.
	Pro & Anti	Feasibility	Heritage preservation needs to consider expertise, cost and technical feasibility.
	Pro & Anti	Procedure	Transparency, communication and governmental responses should be in place.

mapping, field surveys and public advocacy, and many citizens posted their support on social media, with the government and developers tentatively acknowledging the “local uniqueness” of Hubei. However, the preservationists’ frames failed to gain visibility and legitimacy; the government and developers did not make substantive changes to the planning, and the demolition plans were not altered.

The second phase, from 2016 to 2017, witnessed a more diversified set of debated themes, including “innovation and experimentation”, “accessibility and inclusivity”, and “city image”. They positioned themselves as impartial third parties, constructing narratives of “non-protest”, “seeking consensus, win-win solutions”, “redefining the scope of preservation”, and “trust in the government and experts”. Preservationists referred to a preservation proposal by a university professor, which was subsequently adopted by experts and mainstream media using data and arguments related to maps. To make their proposal more practical, they downplayed the intrinsic value of heritage and emphasized its instrumental value, framing Hubei as a set of experimental and

productive cultural assets. Preservationists argued that heritage conservation could enhance the public sector’s innovation performance and citizen pride. Preservationist claims resonated with some government officials, cultural intellectuals, and citizens. The number of citizens engaging in discussions related to Hubei’s preservation and redevelopment increased on social media (HB#V). By the end of 2017, at least 30 local and national mainstream media outlets had reported on Hubei-related issues. Despite not openly endorsing the cause, some government officials discreetly provided preservationists with information about policymakers’ internal decisions, guiding their actions. The frames constructed by preservationists, such as “innovation and experimentation” and “city image”, gained legitimacy, with several local mainstream media implicitly criticizing the district government for not meeting public expectations regarding innovation and city image enhancement. During this period, due to dissatisfaction with policymakers’ neglect of certain demands, preservationists repeatedly constructed the “procedure” frame, emphasizing the potential for consensus and communication (Hubei120 WeChat public account, 2016a). As the conflict escalated on social and mainstream media, on July 6, 2016, the city government held a press conference to clarify public misconceptions and committed to considering preservationists’ and public opinions (Luohu District Government, 2016).

The third phase covers the period from 2017 to 2020. The discourse shifted from polarization (pro- and anti-preservation) to a focus on balanced development and preservation. Preservationist frames gradually gained acceptance among policymakers. On July 6, 2017, government officials publicly supported the frame of “local uniqueness” and “innovative and experimental value”, but preservationists continued to express concerns about “feasibility”, such as specific cultural heritage management models and transportation issues. On July 29, 2017, a dialogue took place between the district government, developers, and preservationist representatives, committing to adjust the plan to expand the scope of Hubei’s preservation. From the second half of 2016 to mid-2017, Shenzhen’s newspapers, television stations, and independent news media extensively discussed the importance of urban villages, focusing on Hubei’s preservation and ongoing interventions (O’Donnell, 2019). In the following two years, the primary debated frames shifted to “feasibility”. Policy debates centered around how to protect Hubei. Preservationists advocated that they could achieve “architectural and environmental sustainability” with a better design solution than the developer. Policymakers continuously sought preservationist input to incorporate into formal planning. After 2018, the composition of preservationists gradually shifted from grassroots groups to experts. They abandoned some of the “local uniqueness” and “procedure” frames. In October 2021, Hubei Village was included in Shenzhen’s municipal-level heritage protection legislation (Shenzhen Planning Bureau, 2021).

#### 4.1.2. Opportunity structure

Opportunity structures continuously formed and were replicated in Hubei conflict, ultimately benefiting the preservationists’ framing. Firstly, preservationists embedded “local uniqueness” and “social benefit” frames into collectivism. Collectivism is a stable cultural narrative in China (Zheng et al., 2015). Preservationists argued that “Hubei, as a collective asset of Shenzhen citizens, is an irreplaceable public space and cultural asset accessible to all” (HB#B). Through this cultural anchoring, they connected the Hubei issue to the interests of all citizens, garnering civic support. Secondly, the public innovation tradition of Shenzhen encourages government officials to be more open to innovative ideas, experiments, and advocacy. Preservationists strategically leveraged official discourses on public innovation and sustainable development, linking them to urban image and social interest frames. For instance, they mentioned the government officials and experts’ long-standing pride in public innovation, implicitly criticizing the local government and developers for not meeting the national expectations for Shenzhen’s urban policy innovation. Preservationists compared Shenzhen’s urban redevelopment model and heritage preservation

principles with those of other cities, arguing that the city should have a vision and capability to lead change and surpass other cities. The relatively open political environment grants cultural intellectuals the channels to shape what is “visible”, “feasible”, and “legitimate” in certain circumstances. For example, their private relationships with government officials made preservationist framing visible in some government meetings. Some intellectuals had the institutionalized right of policy proposition (Yao and Han, 2016), increasing support from government officials for various frames. While the opportunity structures developed based on discourses like public innovation and sustainable development provided an advantage to preservationists, some ordinary citizens were gradually marginalized from the frames associated with them. Thirdly, Shenzhen offered a relatively free media environment for the preservation-development debate. Preservationist frames resonated with some mainstream media and their posts faced little censorship. Lastly, due to the prevailing discourse from the central government emphasizing that “urban renewal cannot continue with extensive demolition and construction”, Shenzhen initiated a more effective institutionalized heritage preservation approach. In the later stages of Hubei conflict, around 2019, the introduction of historical preservation regulations gradually gained prominence on the policymakers’ agenda. This allowed preservationists to further strengthen their framing while the policymakers’ “city development” frame diminished over time. These opportunity structures provided stable visibility, resonance, and legitimacy throughout Hubei conflict.

In addition to some long-term and stable opportunity structures, some short-term opportunity structures also emerged in Hubei conflict. In 2015, the district government gained more power and became responsible for planning adjustments and implementation, while the municipal government’s power decreased, focusing on guidance and partial review. This led experts closely associated with the municipal government to believe that they could not leverage the municipal government to balance the district government, resulting in the suspension of preservationist framing practices in 2015. In 2016, preservationists lobbied several national academicians, and their intervention greatly enhanced the legitimacy of the preservationists’ frames. This was because of an unwritten rule that government officials needed to respond positively to academicians’ comments due to their high academic status. Although this opportunity was powerful, it was short-lived because academicians kept a low profile and were reluctant to expose themselves to prolonged public discussions (low visibility). In the third stage, from July 2018 to early 2019, a series of exhibitions and events in Shenzhen provided preservationists with an opportunity to present the Hubei issue through exhibitions and artistic participation. Preservationists actively constructed frames of “local uniqueness” and “feasibility” and summarized their entire advocacy journey. However, some storylines and narratives were filtered by the organizers and did not generate much controversy (visibility and resonance were weakened).

## 4.2. Chaotianmen conflict

### 4.2.1. Framing process

Chaotianmen, located at the confluence of two rivers in Yuzhong District, Chongqing, covers 69,000 square kilometers and includes wharves, public squares, a wholesale clothes market, and some residential areas. The ancient city gate at Chaotianmen symbolizes the city’s culture and spirit (Gong, 2021). The municipal government launched Chaotianmen redevelopment in 2010 to relocate markets and residents, build commercial high-rises, and rebuild public squares (Chongqing Yuzhong District Government, 2012). Policy challengers included Chaotianmen residents and merchants, heritage preservation civil society organizations, and citizens and internet users. Table 2 demonstrates the major frames constructed by policymakers and challengers. Frames are categorized into five major types: cultural, economic, environmental, social and procedural arguments. For instance, in the cultural authenticity frame, challengers argued against the reconstruction of

**Table 2**  
Major frames in Chaotianmen conflict.

Frame type	Policymaker or challenger	Frame	Argument
Cultural	PM	Cultural revitalization	Redeveloping heritage sites revitalizes and exchanges cultures.
	PC	Cultural authenticity	Preservation is essential to retaining aesthetics, cultural identity, traditions, culture, history, memory and community belonging. Both tangible and intangible heritage matter.
Economic	PM	Economic benefit	Redeveloping heritage sites stimulates businesses and tourism beyond local, thus boosting economic growth and job creation.
	PC	Local community benefit	Heritage preservation protects local livelihoods.
Environmental	PM	Environmental benefit	Repurposing heritage sites restores deteriorated environments and reduces the subsequent demand for new construction.
	PC	Environmental benefit	Active use and development preserve heritage sites’ structural integrity
Social	PM	Broader population needs	Repurposing heritage sites to meet the needs of a growing population
	PM & PC	Education and awareness	Heritage sites serve as focal points for community engagement, education and display
Procedural	PC	Communication requirements	Call for deliberation and transparency
	PM & PC	Solution and implementation	Means of heritage preservation or development, plan changes, timelines and relevant cost in implementation should be considered.
Others	PM	Collaboration	Public-private collaboration leverages resources and expertise for heritage development; Heritage and modern design create unique architectural projects.
	PM & PC	City image	Preservation/redevelopment strengthens a sense of city pride and collective ownership.

Chaotianmen to retain aesthetics, cultural identity, traditions, culture, history, the memory and community belonging of Chaotianmen.

The Chaotianmen controversy began in 2012, with initially diverse frame themes. Policymakers justified a series of reconstruction actions by emphasizing “cultural revival”, “economic, environmental, social, and collaborative benefits”, and “city image”. Their framing gained visibility and resonance through successive reports by official and commercial media outlets (CTM#P). Challengers framed their claims around “cultural preservation”, “local economic benefits”, “environment”, and “education and awareness”. They highlighted the project’s

consequences, including displacement, livelihood loss, and the destruction of cultural identity. Notably, challengers constructed storylines of “victims”, contending that the Chaotianmen project, led by Singaporean developers unfamiliar with the local culture, amounted to an intrusion of foreign commercial culture and the destruction of local character (Old Street WeChat public account, 2015, 2018). Additionally, they questioned the transparency of the project and called for the disclosure of details regarding the developer’s selection and plans. However, their framing had low legitimacy as it did not receive substantive support from the government, which refused to modify the proposed plans.

From 2012 to 2015, the Chaotianmen redevelopment and preservation issue gained great resonance, with particularly intense contestation between the frames of “economic benefit” and “local community benefit” as well as between “cultural revitalization” and “cultural authenticity”. The frames of both sides enjoyed relatively equal levels of support, but gradually, policymakers’ visibility prevailed. From 2015 to 2016, the prominent frames in public sphere narrowed down to “environment” and “solutions and implementation”. Regarding a section of the old city wall damaged by developers, challengers expressed “government inaction” and “distrust of policymakers”. These frames spread widely on social media, garnering broad and sustained public resonance (CTM#B). During this period, the government initiated several rounds of clarifications and explanations in government-owned media, such as responses to whether Chaotianmen would be renamed, the financial cost and technical feasibility of adjusting the plan and halting the construction. Governmental responses increased gradually after 2017.

By the end of 2017, due to dissatisfaction with new Chaotianmen development strategies that seemed to neglect the tangible heritage and cultural landscape, challengers reconstructed the “cultural authenticity” frame, highlighting the concerns about “solution and implementation” and “city image”. Policy challenger representatives were invited by the government for consultations in January and April 2018. The invited representatives commented that the consultations helped clarify some misunderstandings and looked to establish a potential consensus (CTM#B, CTM#C). However, among the ten suggestions put forward, the government committed to considering opening a path through the middle of the commercial buildings to ensure public accessibility to the public square (CTM#S). Subsequently, many challengers believed there was no need or capability to change the policy and ceased protesting or advocating. A small group of challengers continued to call for reconsideration of the plan to preserve the old city wall.

From March 2018 to 2020, as the construction neared completion, policymakers’ framing gradually gained prominence, with decreased information disclosure. One developer stated that this was done to ensure the smooth implementation of the project without generating public controversy. The Chaotianmen contestation came to an end after a brief gathering of challengers’ opinions through a deliberative meeting on February 28, 2019.

#### 4.2.2. Opportunity structure

Some opportunity structures favorable to policymakers formed in Chaotianmen conflict in Chongqing. Firstly, Chaotianmen redevelopment project was part of Singapore-China cooperation. Because this project involved international collaboration, the central government provided guidance and vision for it, stating, for example, “We hope to use Chongqing as an operational center to initiate cooperation in business connectivity between China and Singapore” (China Economics, 2012). The municipal government strategically leveraged this national discourse by embedding the frames of “economy”, “culture,” and “city image” within the discourse of international cooperation. Storylines included “the Chaotianmen project is conducive to further developing a high-standard international consumption city,” “international cooperation injects vitality into cultural revival,” and “anticipating the unique interpretation of cultural symbols by Singaporean developers designated by the central government”. By continually emphasizing the national

intent, guidance, and vision for the Chaotianmen project, the municipal government successfully replicated the opportunity structures granted by the nation. Secondly, Chongqing boasts a significant number of cultural departments and historical preservation agencies, which are generally considered excellent opportunities for policy challengers—they could determine what forms of preservation are legitimate and realistic. While the arguments of challengers were quickly visible and successfully elicited responses from cultural departments and historical preservation agencies (to some extent increasing resonance), the experts in cultural departments and historical preservation agencies failed to openly express support (lacking legitimacy). This is because the rapid urbanization of Chongqing prioritizes economic development and resource allocation among sectors is uneven. Finances and manpower for cultural departments and historical preservation agencies have long relied on other government departments such as land and urban renewal-related departments, and out of interest, they tend to support the frames of policymakers rather than challengers. Thirdly, Chongqing’s rich cultural heritage and the concerned public seemingly provide strong opportunities for policy challengers’ frames to thrive (Gong, 2021). However, due to socio-economic and cultural transitions, a gap has emerged among groups interested in traditional culture. Most proponents of the “cultural preservation” frame were elderly, while the younger generation tended to support frames like “local economic interests”, “cultural revitalization” “environment”, and “collaborative values”. However, the latter group was the primary audience ensuring the visibility of frames on social media. Consequently, policy challengers gradually abandoned mobilizing public discourse on social media after 2018. Lastly, Chongqing’s government-dominated media environment favors policymakers rather than challengers. Mainstream media were mobilized by policymakers to spread, provoke acceptance and support for the official narratives and storylines. Mainstream media excluded challenging arguments and emotional expressions to some extent when reporting, which reduced the visibility and resonance of policy challengers’ frames. Additionally, social media has undergone considerable censorship (CTM#E). When there was a similar level of resonance with both policymakers’ and challengers’ frames, policymakers’ were more likely to prevail because their discourse received more visibility.

It can be observed that there are some short-term and unstable opportunity structures. First, when challengers embed the concept of “civil rights” within frames like “culture”, “social justice”, and “procedure”, it resonates less because the concept of “civil rights” is relatively unfamiliar to Chinese citizens (Luo, 2013). Therefore, framing efforts around this concept turned out to be a weak opportunity structure for policy challengers. Second, in 2017, the central government’s discourse of “urban renewal cannot continue with extensive demolition and construction” theoretically favored policy challengers’ frames. However, since the project was already more than halfway completed, this discourse did not have an impact, and the municipal government only considered partial adjustments to the challengers’ frames and the project’s details. Lastly, in 2018, during the completion of the commercial buildings, in response to some questions raised by challengers about the policy on social media, the developers organized a public open day, stating that “Welcome citizens to sign up for a visit to the construction site, raise questions, and provide suggestions”. This eight-day activity prompted challengers to reconstruct frames related to “social justice” and “environment”. While these frames gained some visibility and resonance, their legitimacy was undermined as the event organizers excluded certain activists (CTM#B, CTM#P) as official and mainstream media filtered out some arguments opposing the project (Jiemian News, 2018; Worker Daily, 2018). As a result, most media coverage of the public open day portrayed a narrative of “public favor and support for the ongoing Chaotianmen project” (Economic Observation Newspaper, 2018). This confirms the limited opportunities provided by the Open Day for challengers.

## 5. Cross-case discussion: conflict evolution, framing and opportunity structures

Framing strategies and contextual influence are crucial to understanding heritage conflict development. Framing strategies represent the competitive interests and values of actors, propelling the development of heritage conflicts. Both analyzed cases indicate that policy challengers are concerned with issues of heritage authenticity, livelihood, and local identity. However, differences exist between the two cases. In Hubei, challengers are relatively homogeneous, primarily consisting of intellectuals and citizens advocating for cultural preservation who do not reside in Hubei. Their identity and interests are coherent; they advocate heritage preservation as an independent third party. Residents have not joined the policy opposition, largely content with relocation and compensation (HB#O). In Chaotianmen, the interest groups forming policy challengers are more diverse. Residents and tenants are more concerned with demolition plans and compensation amounts; some netizens and citizen protesters address policymaking transparency, while heritage preservation organizations focus on the intensity and means of preservation. They were not able to formulate coherent storylines and feasible plans as the preservationists of Hubei were. One preservationist complained, “Our interests are too scattered, making it difficult to come together to discuss feasible plans” (CTM#A). In terms of procedural justice, both cases show that challengers have doubts about the official decision-making process and call for increased transparency and improved communication. However, the frame and storyline of “procedure” were not claimed by policy challengers in Hubei throughout the framing processes, thus lacking coherence. They only raised transparency and communication opportunity concerns when the governmental response was delayed. This may be related to the fact that they advocated for public interest instead of personal interest. On the contrary, in Chaotianmen, some residents and tenants were deeply concerned about procedural rights because their housing and livelihoods were disrupted by demolition and reconstruction.

Policymakers’ interests mainly involve cultural economic development and land finance. Both Shenzhen and Chongqing municipal governments pursued economic interests in their projects. While Shenzhen Municipal Government sought to profit from the project, its financial abundance allowed for concessions (HB#3, HB#V). However, Chongqing Municipal Government relied on the project to bolster land revenue and strengthen international cooperation. Our cases indicate that in large-scale heritage redevelopment projects, governments conduct communication with various interest groups and weigh the feasibility and costs of incorporating their opinions. Additionally, policymakers also have the tendency to reduce tensions and suppress them. The Public Open Day in Chaotianmen proves this point. The activity was perceived as problematic by policy challengers, who asserted that “the Open Day is at best a strategic measure adopted by the government to appease public anger” (CTM#C). This can be observed from the fact that: i) most attendees are young people; ii) the primary focus of discussion is on business prospects and advanced construction techniques; iii) communication is very brief, and mainstream media only quote praise from the invited public. These findings support the challengers’ criticisms, reflecting the government’s intentions to mitigate tensions rather than resolve conflicts.

Conflict dynamics can be conceptualized not only through framing competing positions but also within the influence of political, economic, cultural, and media contexts. Opportunity structures shape the specific advantages and challenges that actors face. It determines which frames receive attention, how people perceive these frames, and the degree of support for these frames (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Ferree, 2003). Our cases indicate that the presence of three aspects of opportunity structures—visibility, resonance, and legitimacy—concurrently can lead to the prominence and relevance of particular claims within a specific timeframe. For policymakers, visibility within opportunity structures is a significant advantage as it can be gained by governments

through different media and information channels. The primary challenge faced by policymakers is to provoke positive reactions of the various interest groups on the project (consonance). Diverse interests and values need to be dealt with through mass media or offline deliberation meetings. Another challenge lies in the fact that policymakers not only have to gain support but also sustain it through changing circumstances and potential opposition (legitimacy). Particularly, policymakers face public criticism regarding the design of the policy-making process and transparency. If public skepticism is not managed effectively and leads to an escalation of conflicts, this could pose a threat to government officials’ political performance and reputation (HB#W, CTM#S).

Our cases indicate that if policy challengers elicit reactions from the public and policymakers, the resonance of their claims is pronounced. This is because their claims align with issues of common concern of individuals and interest groups in the two heritage districts. The primary challenge faced by them is the visibility and legitimacy of their claims. With the development and widespread use of social media, challengers find it increasingly easier to make their claims visible, resonate with and be supported by the public (Zhang et al., 2019). However, both cases indicate that challengers’ claims and public dissent can be subject to censorship, resulting in highly unstable visibility. In the absence of support from experts or proactive responses from policymakers, the claims can lose their legitimacy (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). This suggests that the opportunity structure created through social media debates may be short-lived or weak. The finding is highly relevant within a restrictive political regime. In democratic states, legitimacy often derives from a broader array of societal groups (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Andrews and Gaby, 2015; Haunss, 2007). In restrictive political regime like China, however, the legitimacy of discourse remains primarily rooted in government or expert authority. In our cases, legitimacy manifests as acceptance and support of policymakers and experts towards dissents, including overt positive responses through media, commitments to amend plans and adjust policies, government authorization and appointment, and the involvement of experts with academic authority. Leveraging prevailing national values and propaganda can also enhance government acceptance and support. The Hubei case illustrates how preservationists can utilize the national discourse and extend it appropriately. The Chaotianmen case shows that the mobilization of policy challengers and alternative discourses can backfire if it embarrasses the government. What seems to be crucial in bringing about policy change is not only rallying potential supporters to create public pressure but also aligning with what is institutionally acceptable to the government system. This finding aligns with studies of “rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li, 2008) and “embedded resistance” (Ho and Edmonds, 2012) which have presented examples of frames constructed cautiously within the discursive and structural legal boundaries set by the government.

Another challenge for challengers pertains to the gap between consonance and legitimacy. We have identified instances in which actors elicit positive reactions (consonance) from the audience without garnering support (legitimacy). Previous literature has offered explanations based on the content of claims, such as disparities in values between the claim makers and the audience (e.g., Hajer, 2006; Lee, 2019); when the claims are not perceived as justifiable, or compliant with societal norms, laws, or established standards (e.g., Benford and Snow, 2000; O’Brien and Li, 2008). Our cases provide potential explanations from the perspective of contextual constraints. Firstly, the structural position of the audience may deter them from expressing actual support. In Chaotianmen, the interests of some experts have long been intertwined with those of policymakers, leading to a reluctance to provide support despite alignment in values with policy challengers (CTM#E, CTM#S). Secondly, if the source of the claims is perceived as lacking authority or credibility, they are more likely to elicit reactions rather than substantive support. The interviews with some conservationists in the two cases indicate that social media platforms present a



mixed bag of information, necessitating the need for credible source labeling of texts and images, to enhance the likelihood of being forwarded (HB#A, CTM#S). Therefore, we advocate that heritage studies can further address the gap between triggering policy or societal contention and winning support as well as the factors leading to this gap.

Despite the two cases having their respective contextual influences, they demonstrate similar patterns of conflict evolution, which reflect deeply entrenched contextual influences of China's urban policymaking system. From the constructed frames and storylines of the two cases, it becomes evident that the rational expression of expert knowledge is gradually becoming more prominent, while emotional expressions are diminishing. In Hubei, to participate convincingly in offline policymaking, preservationists had to adapt frames to the planning protocol by adopting a professionalized lexicon. Terms such as "win-win solution", "rehabilitation", and "technical advice" were frequently mentioned. Hubei preservationists had to exclude frames that had a significant emotional investment in the policy outcome, such as emotive narratives about Hubei's ill-fated history and affective tales and sense of place of tenants (Hubei120 WeChat public account, 2016b). One preservationist stated, *"This is about planning processes, and the chance of attending planning meetings is precious. We must be persuasive. We are careful not to bring emotive points of view into it since they count for nothing in government officials' eyes. They are practically impossible to use for us to affect the planning."* (HB#H). This indicates that preservationists endorse technical rationality as "legitimate" within their framing efforts. However, this adopted vocabulary marginalized preservationists without professional expertise. The Chaotianmen case demonstrated a similar shift in storyline—from emphasizing the emotional bond with the locality (e.g., local traditions, rituals) to predominantly focusing on the preservation means of tangible heritage (e.g., artifacts, monuments, sites). An activist stated, *"The government rarely responds to our advocacy related to local traditions and identity. We proactively downplayed the local traditions and identity narratives and shifted our focus towards the preservation of the ancient city walls"* (CTM#C). This again implies an entrenched opportunity structure in heritage decision-making that gives advantages to technical rationality instead of emotional investment. However, there are also signs that emotive appeals are gradually being recognized as pivotal to form bottom-up heritage struggles (Jones et al., 2017).

Conflict evolution relates to missed opportunities. A missed opportunity occurs when contending actors perceive certain conditions as unimportant, fail to recognize their existence, or have inaccurate perceptions. For example, in Chaotianmen, challengers did not highlight Chongqing as a "famous historical city". This was surprising because such a label is widely regarded as a key tool for Chinese communities combating cultural heritage destruction (Zhang et al., 2019). The explanation here is that the institutional practices of a "famous historical city" have long been focused on heritage tourism and cultural economies (CTM#1). These practices are officially portrayed as highly rewarding. Challengers believe that they have very little chance to present themselves as more profitable than policymakers' practices (CTM#C). The second example is that despite having some media channels to utilize, a few challengers believed it necessary to keep a low profile in the public sphere because they felt they lacked the confidence to endure the consequences of confronting the government (CTM#B, CTM#C). This, to some extent, resulted in diminished resistance from challengers in later stages, leading to a gradual cessation of conflict. Hence, we have added insights to theoretical lenses like "rightful resistance" and "embedded activism", indicating that specific opportunities lead to a choice for mobilization and that even with favorable contextual conditions, contending actors may fail to capitalize on them for various reasons. Additionally, we found that challengers in Chaotianmen missed the opportunity to mobilize some experts and detach their interest from developers. Interviews revealed that some expert advisors within the government opposed the developers' plans (CTM#2, CTM#S). However, they were not adequately mobilized by preservationists because

preservationists were unaware of their existence. In contrast, preservationists in Hubei had extensive interpersonal relationships, providing them with insights into the dynamics of the project process, government meeting arrangements, etc. One insight to be gleaned from this is that opportunities, whether in discourse or institutions, are not objective and preordained, but rather, based on perceptions. Actors are not passive recipients of information; they process this information to seize potential opportunities at a specific time. Actors base their decisions and actions on readily available and accurate information, adapting their actions according to the constraints and possibilities in their environment. Therefore, we believe that information transparency and accuracy are crucial for actors to influence policies. This is more relevant in restrictive political systems where information flow can be strictly controlled by the authorities (King et al., 2013).

## 6. Conclusion

Heritage district (re)development often involves conflictual interests and values (Ginzarly et al., 2019). Actors frame heritage issues in the public sphere to gain public support to defend or challenge policies. This study investigated conflict evolution by integrating frame analysis (Benford and Snow, 2000; Hajer, 2006) and opportunity structure (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Ferree, 2003; McCammon et al., 2007). We found that a major explanation for conflict evolution is the interrelationship between the contextual conditions and strategic frames of contending actors driven by diverse interests and values.

This study shows the value of framing analysis in understanding heritage conflicts. We found that policy challengers not only seek heritage-related interests but also claim procedural rights. Consistent with earlier heritage studies, governmental responses are oriented on the goal of consensus-seeking feasibility and tension reduction (Zhang et al., 2019; Zhu and Maags, 2020). The results also support earlier work suggesting that heritage policymaking is dependent on political, economic, cultural, socio-spatial and media settings (Nyseth and Sognnaes, 2013; Mozaffari, and Jones, 2019). In China, discourses and institutions of the central government strongly influence local policymaking (O'Brien and Li, 2008; Ho and Edmonds, 2012; Sigley, 2016). Our study helps explain specific advantages and dilemmas for competing actors in terms of visibility, resonance and legitimacy aspects of opportunity structures. Policy challengers face visibility and legitimacy issues. Policymakers need consonance and legitimacy to make claims effectively. Both policymakers and challengers need to frame their commitment to social benefits of heritage to gain public support. Furthermore, contention in the public sphere can be unstable since opportunity structures can be produced or disappear in a fast manner.

Heritage conflict is shaped by not only framing strategies but also the presence of short-lived or long-lived opportunities. Opportunity structures powerfully channel and shape what is relevant and possible to achieve in policy contention. Previous contentious literature identified opportunity structure as materialized contextual factors. We demonstrate the empirical value of perceiving opportunity structure as an endogenous mechanism that changes through actors' strategic contestation. Opportunity structures are continuously (re)produced by changing contextual conditions and the strategies and practices adopted by conflict participants. This is illustrated by the reliance on intellectuals by preservationists in Hubei and the use of state authorization by the municipal government in Chaotianmen conflict.

This study may be limited by its focus on China whereas heritage contestations are becoming a global problem (Jones et al., 2017). However, we believe that our study is relevant in a broader context and that it provides a framework for the dynamics of heritage policy debates. Policymakers, heritage practitioners and academics need to recognize the dynamic interplay between practices and contexts to effectively manage and resolve heritage policy conflicts. In restrictive political systems, opportunities are critical for challengers to cultivate alternative discourses. But this only works in conditions when opportunities are

seen and perceived as useful. We suggest that beyond right framing strategies, policy challengers should focus on information acquisition to navigate their efforts.

**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Zhen Li:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Yanliu Lin:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Pieter Hooimeijer:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Jochen Monstadt:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

**Appendix**

**Table 3**  
Interviewee information.

Interviewees	Identity/position	Numbering	Interview time
The Hubei case (n = 28)	Professor from Shenzhen University	HB#1	April 2022, Aug 2023
	Official from Shenzhen Planning and Natural Resource Bureau	HB#2	Aug 2023
	Staff from Shenzhen Urban Renewal Planning and Research Centre	HB#3	Aug 2023
	Founder of Hubei120	HB#A	April 2021
	Media director of Hubei120	HB#B	Dec 2021
	Two leading activists of Hubei120	HB#C, HB#D	Jan 2022; Dec 2021
	Three members of Hubei120	HB#E to HB#G	Dec 2022
	Two planners as senior activists	HB#H, HB#I	Jan 2022
	Five voice leaders on social media	HB#J HB#N	Jan 2022
	Three residents (urban villagers)	HB#O HB#Q	Dec 2020
	Shenzhen Business Daily journalist	HB#R	Dec 2021
	Three tenants	HB#S to HB#U	Dec 2020; Dec 2021
	Two project managers	HB#V, HB#W	Dec 2021
	Two developers	HB#X, HB#Y	Jan 2022
	The Chaotianmen case (n = 22)	Two officials from Chongqing Planning and Natural Resource Bureau	CTM#1, CTM#2
Professor from Chongqing University		CTM#3	Aug 2023
Founder of NGO Oldstreet		CTM#A	May 2022
Two members of NGO Oldstreet		CTM#B, CTM#C	May 2022
Local cultural intellectual		CTM#D	May 2022
Nine members of Chaotianmen Guardians (five tenants and five in-situ residents)		CTM#E to CTM#M	Jan 2022
Two voice leaders on social media		CTM#N, CTM#O	Jan 2022
Jiemian News journalist		CTM#P	May 2022
Two project consultants		CTM#Q, CTM#R	April 2022
Project manager		CTM#S	Dec 2021

**Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Data availability**

The data that has been used is confidential.

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