



Envisioning a People's Neighbourhood: a Case Study that Reflects China's Style of New Social Governance

Zhicheng You

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, 215000, China
Zhicheng.You20@student.xjtlu.edu.cn

Abstract. China's urban governance has traditionally prioritized material infrastructure (the "house")—housing, roads, and utilities—often at the expense of cultural and social dimensions. However, with rapid urbanization, China is shifting toward a holistic governance model that integrates community ties, cultural continuity, and social cohesion—elements of the "home." The Xiaoxihu redevelopment project exemplifies this transition, combining community participation and cultural preservation with infrastructure upgrades, marking a departure from past models focused on economic growth. Rather than comparing China's model to Western urban renewal, this essay highlights Hong Kong's approach under "One Country, Two Systems." Hong Kong's mix of state control and market-driven development offers a relevant comparison, as both regions evolve toward people-centered, culturally sensitive governance. Ultimately, Xiaoxihu reflects China's evolving model, integrating both material improvements and social values.

Keywords: Urban Social Governance; Micro-regeneration; Community Participation; People-Centered Approach; Xiaoxihu Redevelopment; Cultural Preservation

1 Introduction

China's urban governance has undergone significant transformation, but the question remains: How does China's social governance differ from other countries? The answer lies in China's evolving approach to urban renewal, where material infrastructure (the "house") has traditionally been prioritized—improving housing, roads, and utilities—often at the expense of cultural and social dimensions. However, as urbanization accelerates, China is increasingly incorporating community ties, cultural continuity, and social cohesion into its urban governance, signaling a shift from purely physical improvements to a more holistic model.

The "house" refers to tangible urban elements like infrastructure and housing, whereas the "home" encompasses the intangible—community identity, cultural heritage, and social bonds. Historically, China's governance emphasized infrastructure upgrades to drive economic growth, often disregarding the social fabric of communities. Projects in cities like Beijing and Tianjin improved living conditions but displaced residents, eroding cultural continuity and social stability [1,2].

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When we compare Western models of urban governance with China's model of governance, we risk oversimplifying basic structural differences. While Western renewal is market-driven, with private developers central to the process [3], China's model is state-controlled, with a strong focus on public welfare and cultural preservation. A more relevant comparison is Hong Kong, which operates under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, allowing for a hybrid of state intervention and market-driven participation. Hong Kong's urban renewal, with its focus on cultural preservation and public engagement, provides an important contrast to mainland China's more state-controlled model [4].

This essay argues that Xiaoxihu marks a turning point in China's urban governance, blending community participation and cultural preservation alongside infrastructure upgrades, offering a unique approach to urban renewal.

2 Background

Society toward development through ordered, concerted actions. China's urban governance has undergone significant transformation, moving from a historically centralized, state-led model focused on material modernization to an evolving governance style that increasingly incorporates cultural and social dimensions. Historically, China's urban development efforts prioritized physical infrastructure improvements, such as housing, roads, and utilities, with little attention to the social or cultural aspects of community life [1,2]. The state's focus on modernization was primarily driven by the need for rapid economic growth and spatial development, with infrastructure seen as the backbone of this transformation. This approach often sidelined the emotional and social needs of local communities, as the government's priority was the efficient delivery of urban services and the expansion of economic activity [5,6]. This focus on modernizing cities was aimed at fostering rapid economic growth and spatial development, often sidelining the needs and identities of local communities [1,2]. The state's approach to urban improvement resulted in large-scale redevelopment projects that demolished older neighborhoods to make way for modern, high-rise apartment buildings. While these efforts improved living conditions in terms of infrastructure, they frequently displaced long-established communities, erasing local identities and disrupting complex social networks [5,6].

However, the arrival of earth movers and cranes was not without its costs. These physical transformations were often accompanied by social fragmentation, as neighborhoods were destroyed and the emotional and cultural ties that residents had to their homes were torn apart. Cao [7] emphasizes that this kind of urban renewal, often focused on physical improvements, neglects the intangible aspects of community life, such as local identity and emotional attachment to place. This disregard for the "home" dimension in urban redevelopment often exacerbates feelings of alienation and social displacement, leaving communities fragmented and disconnected from their cultural roots [7].

The shift toward neoliberal urbanism, as highlighted by He and Wu [8], further accelerated these trends, as market mechanisms became increasingly embedded in the

governance of urban spaces. State-driven processes of land commodification, along with privatization efforts, intensified the focus on physical development, while the social and cultural needs of residents were overlooked in favor of maximizing profit. This resulted in the prioritization of land value and real estate development, often at the expense of community cohesion and cultural preservation [9].

In cities like Shanghai and Beijing, older, low-income neighborhoods have often been replaced by commercial real estate developments, highlighting the contradictions in China's state-led urban model, where the pursuit of rapid modernization and economic growth often conflicts with the social and cultural needs of the affected populations [8,10]. For instance, Cao [11] emphasizes the importance of grassroots participatory governance, highlighting how local communities' involvement is essential for more sustainable, people-centered urban development. Similarly, Xu and Yeh [12] discuss the role of regional competitiveness in shaping urban strategies, showing how local governments in China have increasingly incorporated market-driven development models, which sometimes marginalize community needs. As Xu and Yeh [12] argue, the resulting social fragmentation and growing inequalities exemplify the challenges of balancing infrastructural development with the preservation of community and cultural heritage.

How governance change gives meaning to the Xiaoxihu project is perhaps the most interesting story to tell. This historical pattern of state-driven modernization, which has focused on infrastructure at the cost of cultural and social dimensions, provides the context for understanding the Xiaoxihu redevelopment project. In contrast to previous models, Xiaoxihu represents an attempt to reconcile the need for physical upgrades with the incorporation of intangible community elements, challenging the traditional focus on purely infrastructural development and paving the way for more inclusive urban governance [8].

If this makes the Xiaoxihu what urban theory might call a "progressive development," then the project also inverts something that urban theory frequently says: that governance units can only impose order on a community and its physical space if they have first won the community's consent. This transformation in governance practices sets the stage for understanding the Xiaoxihu redevelopment project as a microcosm of China's evolving governance philosophy, reflecting an emerging paradigm that prioritizes both the material and social needs of urban communities.

3 Methodology and Framework

Urban redevelopment often swings between two primary ideas: the "house" as a knowable, physical improvement and the "home" as an intangible, deeply personal matter of taste, an unreproducible signature of cultural, emotional, and social dimensions [6,14]. Understanding this dichotomy is essential to analyzing governance approaches, particularly in China's evolving urban transformation. The "house" typically embodies the tangible goals of redevelopment—better infrastructure, modernized buildings, and increased land value—aligned with the objectives of state-led modernization [13]. Conversely, the "home" captures the less visible but equally sig-

nificant aspects of redevelopment, including a community's cultural heritage, emotional ties, and sense of belonging, which are vital for fostering sustainable and socially cohesive urban environments [2,6]. This dichotomy not only informs theoretical perspectives but also offers a critical lens for evaluating the socio-political outcomes of redevelopment projects.

Governance models that prioritize the "house" often reduce urban spaces to units of economic value or administrative control, neglecting the deeper layers of lived experience and cultural continuity. As Harvey [15] observes, neoliberal urban governance frequently emphasizes material outputs such as land commodification and real estate development, sidelining social dimensions in favor of profit-driven metrics. This tendency has been echoed in the Chinese context, where property-led redevelopment strategies have historically prioritized growth at the expense of community identity and equity [9]. Such approaches, while effective in delivering rapid physical transformation, often exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities and displace long-established communities, undermining the broader objectives of urban governance.

Nonetheless, in recent years, perspectives in urban studies have started to integrate the "home" into governance frameworks, with the intent to produce more inclusive, sustainable outcomes. Studies by He and Wu [8] highlight how China's urban transformations are increasingly shaped by tensions between state intervention and social resistance, emphasizing the need to address intangible cultural and communal values alongside infrastructural goals. Similarly, Wu [13] notes that state entrepreneurialism in China has begun to adopt hybrid models, blending central planning with attention to local identities and cultural practices. Deng [16] further discusses how China's governance system has evolved to integrate state entrepreneurialism with broader structural coherence and multiple logics, emphasizing the complex balance between efficiency and cultural values. These shifts reflect a growing recognition that governance must balance measurable improvements with the preservation of social cohesion and historical continuity. Additionally, Derleth and Koldyk [17] highlight how grassroots reforms, such as the Shequ experiment, have played a crucial role in shaping urban governance in China, fostering local engagement and community-driven decision-making. Comparative insights from Hong Kong further reinforce this perspective. Tang [4] suggests that the Chinese state could benefit from "addressing the intangibles"—the cultural and communal qualities of homes and neighborhoods—alongside infrastructural goals, a theme that will be explored further in the comparative analysis below.

Applying the "house" versus "home" framework illuminates why the shift from a purely infrastructural focus, centered on physical improvements and economic metrics, to an approach that integrates community identity and cultural continuity is significant. This shift not only reveals the limitations of traditional governance models but also underscores the transformative potential of approaches that acknowledge both the tangible and intangible aspects of urban life. So-called "community revitalization" that doesn't also revive the community's unique character is house-building at best; it's not creating a home in any meaningful sense. If governance can evolve toward this more holistic, integrated approach, we have an exciting opportunity ahead

of us—one that surely isn't limited to the Xiaoxihu redevelopment project.

4 Case Study

4.1 How Renovations is Conducted

Nanjing's Xiaoxihu redevelopment project affords a rare glimpse into China's evolving urban governance. While the project aligns with traditional state-led urban renewal practices—including infrastructure upgrades such as new housing units, utilities, and public spaces—it also deviates from previous models by incorporating participatory elements and an emphasis on cultural preservation [9,10]. These physical upgrades are in line with the standard goals of urban modernization in China, focused on economic growth and spatial development. However, what sets Xiaoxihu apart is its shift toward small-scale, gradual renewal rather than large-scale demolition, reflecting a more people-centered approach [18]. This gradual approach seeks to integrate community needs with physical development, a move that contrasts with past top-down strategies that often led to social fragmentation and resistance [19].

For the Xiaoxihu project, the integration of public participation and the “Stay-Adapt-or-Demolish” model were key features of the renovation. Unlike earlier projects where residents were often displaced without consultation, Xiaoxihu allowed residents to choose whether to stay or relocate, which helped avoid the public backlash typical of forced relocation strategies [7]. This more inclusive approach aimed to balance the material and social aspects of urban renewal by allowing residents to maintain their cultural and emotional ties to the area while benefiting from improved infrastructure [7]. However, as Cao [8] notes, while public participation was encouraged, it also served the government's interests, suggesting that the process of inclusion was not entirely free from state control or manipulation.

Moreover, the renewal strategies in Xiaoxihu highlight the contradictions inherent in China's evolving governance model. While the project incorporated cultural preservation, shared spaces, and community engagement, it still faced challenges of commercialization and the potential for increased living costs [20]. Property rights played a central role in the redevelopment, with residents receiving varying levels of support based on their choice to stay or relocate, further reflecting the complexity of balancing economic growth with social stability [19].

In many ways, Xiaoxihu does not represent a perfect model, but rather a shift in China's urban governance. The renovation process provides insights into how the Chinese government is attempting to integrate economic, cultural, and social elements in urban renewal. The project reveals the state's recognition that a more holistic approach—which includes cultural preservation, community participation, and infrastructure upgrades—may be necessary to address the complexities of urban transformation [8,21]. Still, this approach raises questions about how far this shift can go in practice, particularly in terms of balancing community involvement with the state's overarching development goals.

Table 1. Summary of Xiaoxihu Renovation: Key Data from People's Daily. Note: Data from People's Daily (2023)

Element	Approach	Key Data
Resident Participation	Stay-Adapt-or-Demolish vs. Demolition	402 households stayed, 408 relocated; high satisfaction rate (approx. 50% stayed)
Cultural Preservation	Shared courtyards, community events	30 renovated courtyards, 4 parks, 2 public centers, 6 interval roads
Tourist Feedback	Public reception and cultural evaluation	88% of tourists rated Xiaoxihu 4/5 or above for satisfaction (high evaluation)

4.2 How Renovations is Perceived

The renovation of Xiaoxihu has had a significant impact on its residents, highlighting the complex relationship between urban transformation and the sense of “home.” For many, home is not just a physical space, but a place embedded with memories, cultural practices, and social networks. As Logan [22] argues, top-down planning often ignores these intangible aspects, imposing changes that disrupt community ties. In contrast, the Xiaoxihu renovation introduced elements that preserved and even fostered local traditions and social bonds. The inclusion of residents in the decision-making process, allowing them to choose whether to stay or relocate, was a significant shift from previous redevelopment projects that often disregarded resident input [23]. This participatory approach is central to the renovation's success, as it recognizes the importance of cultural preservation and social cohesion alongside physical upgrades. The creation of community spaces, such as shared backyards and community cafes, reflects a concerted effort to maintain social ties and enhance the neighborhood's sense of identity [24]. These spaces have not only preserved the area's historical essence but also strengthened the social fabric of the community, fostering a renewed sense of belonging among residents. As shown in Table 1, the data reflects the renovation's success [25].

For example, Xu Qing, the first resident to voluntarily join the urban renewal project, has lived in Xiaoxihu for seven generations and describes his emotional attachment to the area as deep-rooted and irreplaceable. As Brillhart [24] reports, the renovation respected local atmosphere and traditional culture, helping to preserve the socio-cultural characteristics of the neighborhood. This was crucial in maintaining a continuity of place-based traditions, allowing long-term residents to continue their daily rituals and interactions in familiar settings. Xu's story underscores the deep emotional connections that residents have with their homes, demonstrating that the preservation of these connections was integral to the success of the project.

However, if the Xiaoxihu renovation project is truly different from traditional gentrification-type models, we must ask: what exactly makes it different? The renovated spaces may not—the human mind is a wondrous thing—be any less salutary for in-

habitants in a potential state of displacement, but they must still be recognized as part of a gentrifying process. As Cao [8] notes, while public participation was encouraged, it also served the government's interests, suggesting that the process of inclusion was not entirely free from state control or manipulation. The mixed responses from residents further complicate the picture: while many residents expressed satisfaction with the opportunity to stay and engage with the planning process, others voiced concerns about rising costs and the commercialization of the area.

Resident feedback provides strong evidence that the renovated environment still "feels like home," despite the physical changes. Ethnographic studies and interviews with residents highlight that, although the buildings have been upgraded, social bonds and cultural spaces were preserved or even enhanced. Shared spaces like community cafes and backyard courtyards not only serve as gathering spots but also promote local businesses and social interactions, reinforcing community ties [19]. These spaces have become symbols of continuity, providing a place for social cohesion amidst the physical transformation of the area.

However, it is important to recognize that while the renovation was well-received by many residents, some expressed concerns about the commercialization of their neighborhood and the increasing cost of living [8]. These issues point to the broader paradoxes of urban regeneration, where efforts to preserve cultural identity and enhance public spaces can also lead to the displacement of vulnerable residents due to rising costs. As Wang and Aoki [26] argue, urban renewal often involves tensions between heritage conservation and community needs, a dynamic evident in Xiaoxihu's transformation.

Overall, the residents' perspectives on the Xiaoxihu renovation provide concrete evidence that the project's approach differs from traditional, purely materialistic models of urban redevelopment. By incorporating both social and cultural dimensions into the governance process, Xiaoxihu's redevelopment underscores the evolving governance model in China, which seeks to balance economic growth with the preservation of community identity and social cohesion [8,21].

4.3 Comparison with Hong Kong

China's approach to urban governance, exemplified by the Xiaoxihu redevelopment project, represents a unique attempt to balance physical infrastructure upgrades with cultural preservation and social engagement. This contrasts with many Western urban renewal models, where market forces play a dominant role, often prioritizing economic returns over community cohesion. In these models, large-scale private investments frequently drive redevelopment, sometimes leading to the displacement of residents and the erosion of social fabric [9]. This is particularly evident in U.S. urban renewal projects, where privatization and the profit motive can undermine community needs, often creating tension between growth and social equity [3].

On the other hand, European local governments focus more on preserving cultural heritage and ensuring community involvement in urban renewal projects. Although these "slow" models emphasize consultation with the community and the complex balancing act that is needed to ensure "cultural continuity," they often seem to be

unable to achieve the efficiency that the push for "urban renewal" promises [27]. In contrast to American urbanism, which often prioritizes speed and efficiency, many European municipalities place far greater value on "relative inefficiency as a mode of governance" that promises "greater public accountability and social equity."

However, comparing China's urban renewal model directly to Western approaches can be misleading due to fundamental differences in governance structures, historical trajectories, and national conditions. As Robinson [28] argues, urban theories should be adapted to fit the specific contexts in which they are applied. In this regard, Hong Kong offers a particularly relevant comparison. Operating under the "One Country, Hong Kong" urban renewal model—unlike any in the West—integrates state intervention and market forces in a way that preserves culture and involves the public. Strong government planning, together with a significant role for private developers, makes up the blended version of the Hong Kong model [4].

However, Hong Kong's urban renewal model is not without its challenges, as exemplified by the case of Sham Shui Po, a district facing poverty and social inequality despite its central location. As Cheng [29] describes, Sham Shui Po has long been a center for low-income families and new immigrants, with residents living in subdivided units in Tong Lau buildings. Urban renewal efforts here have had mixed results—while some residents were able to improve their living conditions, many still face displacement and the commercialization of their neighborhoods. This situation illustrates the inherent tensions between economic development and social welfare, a challenge that both Hong Kong and China face in urban renewal projects. In Xiaoxihu, similar challenges arose, as the emphasis on community participation and cultural preservation was balanced by concerns about rising costs and commercialization [7].

The differences between Hong Kong's urban renewal and China's approach become more evident when considering the governance framework. While both regions emphasize state control, Hong Kong's system allows for greater private sector involvement and local engagement, whereas China's urban governance remains more centrally controlled, especially in cities like Nanjing [30]. The Xiaoxihu renovation is a clear example of how China's governance model is evolving, moving away from traditional top-down strategies to incorporate more localized and participatory approaches [21]. However, as the Sham Shui Po case shows, the trade-off between growth and social equity remains a key challenge in both regions.

Instead of putting one model on a pedestal, these comparisons reveal that every approach has its merits and demerits. Xiaoxihu exemplifies China's unique urban governance model, which blends strong state capacity with an increasing sensitivity to cultural and social values. That said, the deal struck in Xiaoxihu is not without its trade-offs and is not necessarily replicable across China. But it does offer an alternative to either a model that is too reliant on the market or one that hinges solely on community-led initiatives. And in doing so, it provides a template of sorts for achieving some as-yet-undiscovered balance among efficiency, social harmony, and cultural continuity.

5 Conclusion

China's changing urban governing structure, best exemplified by the Xiaoxihu redevelopment project, indicates a move toward modern governance. Compared to traditional top-down, siloed governance, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, modern governance emphasizes balance and partnership. This kind of governing involves more players—community stakeholders, private businesses—as well as more processes. The integration of state-driven planning with market mechanisms, as seen in Xiaoxihu, reflects a growing sensitivity to social and cultural values [21]. However, this approach remains fraught with challenges, particularly in balancing efficiency and social equity. Cao [8] notes that while public participation was encouraged, it often serves the government's broader objectives, raising questions about the genuineness of community empowerment in the process.

Despite its advances, Xiaoxihu illustrates the contradictions inherent in China's urban renewal efforts. As Harvey [3] critiques in his discussion of neoliberalism, the blending of market forces with state control can result in the commercialization of previously affordable spaces, potentially displacing vulnerable residents. The success of Xiaoxihu in preserving cultural heritage and fostering social cohesion is a significant development, but the project's impact on rising living costs and community displacement must be critically examined. Xu and Yeh [12] argue that urban renewal projects often fail to address the social inequalities they exacerbate, a concern that remains relevant in the context of Xiaoxihu's transformation.

In conclusion, China's social governance model, as reflected by Xiaoxihu, is significantly different from other urban renewal models, especially those in Western countries. While many countries emphasize decentralization, private-sector involvement, and market-driven policies, China's model is marked by centralized control, the integration of state entrepreneurialism, and a growing sensitivity to cultural and social factors in urban renewal. The Xiaoxihu case illustrates how China's governance is evolving to incorporate both physical infrastructure and the intangible aspects of community life and cultural heritage, reflecting a unique approach to urban renewal that balances efficiency with social cohesion and cultural preservation. Although China's model shares some similarities with Hong Kong's hybrid approach, it remains distinct in its degree of state control and its adaptation of market forces within a highly centralized governance framework. This hybrid model reflects China's ongoing shift towards more inclusive and culturally aware urban development, setting it apart from both traditional Western models and Hong Kong's own approach to urban renewal.

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