

## Article

# Authenticity, Integrity, and Cultural–Ecological Adaptability in Heritage Conservation: A Practical Framework for Historic Urban Areas—A Case Study of Yicheng Ancient City, China

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**Abstract:** Historic urban areas must adapt to modern cultural ecology for sustainable development while preserving the authenticity and integrity of their cultural heritage. However, this goal is highly challenging due to the complexity of authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability. To promote the dynamic protection and sustainable development of historic urban areas and their cultural heritage, this study aims to systematically define the authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability of historic urban areas and promote their intrinsic unity through the analysis, integration, and deduction of existing research findings and case validation. The empirical research uses Yicheng Ancient City as a case study. The key findings are as follows: (1) Authenticity must preserve the genuineness of daily life, material cultural carriers, and intangible cultural heritage. (2) Integrity should protect all distinctive cultural elements, social functions, material spatial structures, and visual landscapes. (3) Cultural–ecological adaptability must meet the universal demands and local needs of modern cultural ecologies, with particular focus on cultural subjects, functional efficacy, cultural forms, and spatial attributes. (4) All elements of these three concepts are interrelated, and their intrinsic unity can be effectively promoted by integrating their unique characteristics, change features, and mutual compatibility. (5) The authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability of Yicheng Ancient City face five key issues, and six corresponding strategies have been proposed to address them.

**Keywords:** historic urban areas; cultural heritage; authenticity; integrity; cultural–ecological adaptability; planning strategies; Yicheng Ancient City



Academic Editor: Elena Lucchi

Received: 6 March 2025

Revised: 10 April 2025

Accepted: 13 April 2025

Published: 15 April 2025

**Citation:** Liu, R.; Gao, W.; Yang, F. Authenticity, Integrity, and Cultural–Ecological Adaptability in Heritage Conservation: A Practical Framework for Historic Urban Areas—A Case Study of Yicheng Ancient City, China. *Buildings* **2025**, *15*, 1304. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings15081304>

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## 1. Introduction

Urban cultural heritage conservation has gained increasing public attention [1]. This interest has reinforced the recognition of historic urban areas as dynamic cultural–ecological systems [2], emphasizing their dual role as both repositories of cultural heritage and active ecosystems. This perspective encourages treating historic urban areas as interconnected wholes, promoting both conservation and development. Moreover, historic urban areas are also living environments that are shaped by and shape the experiences of contemporary residents, influencing their daily lives across physical, emotional, psychological, and social relationships [3,4]. In this context, we must respond to their new needs and allow for the value renewal of historic urban areas [5], which can be achieved through cultural–ecological adaptability [6]. While adapting to modern cultural ecology is essential, preserving the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage is equally critical to retain its commemorative value [7]. However, authenticity is dynamic and polysemous, the elements of integrity

are multifaceted, cultural ecosystems are complex, and the pathways for their integration are still unclear. Therefore, challenges persist, including the following: (1) How can the authenticity and integrity of historical urban areas be systematically defined? (2) How can their adaptability to evolving cultural ecosystems be enhanced? (3) How can their internal unity be effectively promoted? To promote the dynamic conservation and sustainable development of historic urban areas and their cultural heritage, it is crucial to develop an intuitive framework for interpreting and implementing them while addressing their relationships.

Authenticity focuses on the original and genuine state of cultural heritage and the credible expression of its value. However, cultural heritage is diverse and constantly evolving, with its value continually shaped by societal and human perspectives [8,9]. This makes its concept both dynamic and polysemous [10,11], encompassing various forms, including static, living, subjective, and objectivist authenticity [12], as well as constructivist [13], postmodernist [14], existentialist [15], interventionist, anti-interventionist [7], cool, and hot authenticity [8]. In this regard, the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) emphasized that evaluating the value and authenticity of cultural heritage could not be confined to fixed standards due to the diversity of world cultures and heritage types [16]. Its concept and application must be grounded in the cultural context and characteristics of each culture [17,18], particularly the value preferences of the heritage site's host culture [10]. Additionally, it should reflect dynamic development attributes emerging from social participation and sustainable development processes [19].

Integrity originated in natural heritage, highlighting the importance of large, undisturbed natural areas for maintaining ecosystem health [17]. It was later extended to cultural heritage to highlight its completeness and intactness [20], becoming an integral component of site definition, fundamental quality, and effective management [21]. Over time, international heritage documents, such as the Venice Charter (1964) [22], the Nairobi Recommendation (1976) [23], the Washington Charter (1987) [24], the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (2005) [25], the Xi'an Declaration (2005) [26], the Beijing Document (2007) [27], and the Valletta Principles (2011) [28], have extensively discussed integrity, establishing a dynamic consensus (Table 1). The scope of environmental elements has expanded from "the sites of monuments" to include "multiple environmental elements, both artificial and natural, historical and contemporary, tangible and intangible, static and dynamic, and resource and technological". This reflects a shift from single-site conservation to regional or urban-scale conservation, taking into account a series of complex factors: temporal continuity, heritage characteristics, regional environment, historical features, functional development, spatial relationships, technological progress, resident participation, and contemporary life, as well as dynamic cultural, social, and economic development. It also reflects the adaptability of integrity to changes over time. Scholars agree that definitions of integrity vary by heritage type and advocate for multidisciplinary approaches to its study and preservation [17,29]. For example, Gullino and Larcher (2013) analyzed UNESCO's conceptual tendency toward rural landscape integrity [17]. Jukka Jokilehto classified it into three types—social–functional, historical–structural, and visual–aesthetic—based on the relationships between cultural heritage elements and their connection to the whole [30]. In summary, integrity builds on authenticity and must align with the heritage type and environmental context. For living cultural landscapes, such as historical cities and rural settlements, it often holds greater importance than authenticity [31].

**Table 1.** Discussions on integrity in some international documents.

Document	Source Text
The Venice Charter (1964) [22]	6. The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. 11. The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration. 14. The sites of monuments must be the object of special care in order to safeguard their integrity and ensure that they are cleared and presented in a seemly manner.
The Nairobi Recommendation (1976) [23]	3. Every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which it is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings, the spatial organization and the surroundings. 4. Architects and town-planners should be careful to ensure that views from and to monuments and historic areas are not spoilt and that historic areas are integrated harmoniously into contemporary life. 31. Member States and groups concerned should protect historic areas and their surroundings against the increasingly serious environmental damage caused by certain technological developments. . . 33. Protection and restoration should be accompanied by revitalization activities. . . These functions should answer the social, cultural and economic needs of the inhabitants. . .
The Washington Charter (1987) [24]	Qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements that express this character, especially: (a) Urban patterns as defined by lots and streets; (b) Relationships between buildings and green and open spaces; (c) The formal appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by scale, size, style, construction, materials, colour and decoration; (d) The relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and man-made; and (e) The various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time. Any threat to these qualities would compromise the authenticity of the historic town or urban area.
Operational Guidelines (2005) [25]	88. Integrity is a measure of the wholeness and intactness of the natural and/or cultural heritage and its attributes. Examining the conditions of integrity, therefore requires assessing the extent to which the property: includes all elements necessary to express its Outstanding Universal Value; is of adequate size to ensure the complete representation of the features and processes which convey the property's significance; suffers from adverse effects of development and/or neglect.
The Xi'an Declaration (2005) [26]	Principles and objectives: The setting of a heritage structure, site or area is defined as the immediate and extended environment that is part of, or contributes to, its significance and distinctive character. Beyond the physical and visual aspects, the setting includes interaction with the natural environment; past or present social or spiritual practices, customs, traditional knowledge, use or activities and other forms of intangible cultural heritage aspects that created and form the space as well as the current and dynamic cultural, social and economic context. Methods and instruments: The conservation plan should be supported by the residents of the historic area.
The Valletta Principles (2011) [28]	Definitions: . . . Historical or traditional areas form part of daily human life. . . Elements to be preserved: 1. The authenticity and integrity of historic towns, whose essential character is expressed by the nature and coherence of all their tangible and intangible elements, notably: (a) Urban patterns as defined by the street grid. . . (b) The form and appearance, interior and exterior of buildings. . . (c) The relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and manmade; (d) The various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time; (e) Cultural traditions, traditional techniques, spirit of place and everything that contributes to the identity of a place. 2. The relationships between the site in its totality, its constituent parts, the context of the site, and the parts that make up this context. 3. Social fabric, cultural diversity. 4. Non-renewable resources, minimizing their consumption and encouraging their reuse and recycling.

The numbers and parenthetical letters in the table indicate the original order of the clauses in the original document.

In 1955, Julian H. Steward founded cultural ecology, emphasizing the interaction between culture and environment. He argued that cultural adaptation to its environment

drives cultural evolution and diversification [32]. Damage to cultural ecology can erode local cultures through cultural gene mutation and ecological imbalance, leading to loss, degradation, and oblivion [33]. The protection, transformation, restoration, reuse, and sustainable development of cultural heritage are, in fact, processes of adaptation to new environments [34,35]. In China, Yang (2016) argued for moving beyond a single-space perspective and enhancing urban–rural cultural heritage conservation through a cultural ecology lens [36]. Wen (2022) emphasized the importance of cultural–ecological vitality in preserving authenticity [10]. Xu (2022) explored the cultural–ecological integrity of cultural landscapes [37]. Lin (2022) constructed an evaluation system to assess the cultural–ecological adaptability of traditional villages [38]. Recent studies on resilience, recovery capacity, climate responsiveness, and adaptive reuse of cultural heritage have further underscored the need for adaptation to changing natural, economic, and social conditions [39–42]. The cultural ecology approach to heritage conservation and development is widely acknowledged. However, it is inherently complex and systematic, particularly in historical urban areas with distinctive characteristics of temporal succession and layered historical accumulation. These areas require a nuanced and integrated strategy for adaptation to changing conditions.

Significant progress has been made in cultural heritage conservation and utilization through the lenses of authenticity, integrity, and cultural ecology. However, previous studies have seldom effectively integrated these three concepts or applied them holistically to historic urban areas. Therefore, this study refines the definitions of authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability for historic urban areas, building on previous literature and adopting applied and practical perspectives. It then examines the relational elements that form a dynamic, interconnected system. Finally, the study tests the framework’s effectiveness by applying it to the case of Yicheng Ancient City.

## 2. Theoretical Framework Construction

### 2.1. Authenticity

Regardless of how authenticity is defined, it must be grounded in the dynamic, objective reality of the “initial-process-result” cycle [43,44]. This study expands the concept by emphasizing dynamic, objective facts and the authentic historical information embedded in cultural heritage.

The authenticity of daily life. Historical urban areas are spatial continuities where countless life scenarios from different periods overlap and integrate over time. Their authenticity arises not only from their initial creation but also from their developmental processes [43], together forming the “real” that has evolved to the present [44]. Within this evolution, life and the lifeworld hold primacy, occupying a fundamental position [45]. Therefore, conservation and sustainable development must return to the real lifeworld of residents, ensuring that their lived practices always remain vibrant.

The authenticity of material cultural carriers. Material cultural carriers typically exhibit a conventional relationship between visual forms and symbolic meanings, serving as the most direct repositories of historical information. They evoke historical perceptions through sensory experiences, stimulate specific beliefs, values, and aesthetic preferences, and engender associated cultural practices. This process enables the dynamic perpetuation of historical culture. Conservation should preserve their original appearance, while repairs, maintenance, modifications, and additions must authentically reflect their historical and cultural characteristics. Based on international consensus and China’s Standard of Conservation Planning for Historic Cities (2018) [46], the authenticity of material cultural carriers can be systematically categorized into five aspects, as detailed in Table 2.



**Table 2.** The authenticity types and contents of material cultural carrier.

Type	Content
Natural geographical	Natural geographical environment related to the site selection, construction, and site changes
Structural layout	Spatial structure and spatial order
Morphological scale	Style texture and spatial scale
Architectural heritage	Form and design, materials and texture, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, etc.
Environmental elements	Wells, walls, stone steps, pavements, riverbanks, etc.

The authenticity of intangible cultural heritage. Given the subjectivity and variability of intangible cultural heritage, it is challenging to establish material and objective evaluation criteria as for tangible cultural heritage. However, it should still accurately reflect the actual situation of the project [47]. Following the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People’s Republic of China (2011), it is crucial to understand its core significance and reintegrate it into the daily lives of diverse groups through cultural actions. This process must preserve the authenticity of cultural expressions, related physical objects, and cultural spaces (Table 3). By doing so, new intersections and sustained local identities can be fostered, connecting identity, space, belief, physical objects, and actions in a meaningful way [47,48].

**Table 3.** The authenticity types and contents of intangible cultural heritage.

Type	Content
Cultural expressions	(i) Traditional oral literature and its languages. (ii) Traditional visual arts, calligraphy, music, dance, drama, quyi, and acrobatics. (iii) Traditional craftsmanship, medicine, and calendars. (iv) Traditional etiquette, festivals, and other folk customs. (v) Traditional sports and games. (vi) Others
Related physical objects	(i) Tools, utensils, costumes, musical instruments, musical scores, etc., related to traditional visual arts, calligraphy, music, dance, drama, quyi, and acrobatics. (ii) Tools, utensils, and props related to traditional sports and games
Cultural spaces	(i) Spaces related to traditional cultural expressions. (ii) Venues that regularly host traditional cultural activities or centralized showcasing of traditional cultural expressions

## 2.2. Integrity

The integrity of distinctive cultural elements: Every distinctive cultural norm in historical settlements should be regarded as a valuable asset, which not only supports sustainable development but also helps enhance local residents’ awareness of their own heritage. Only historical urban areas that preserve all historical information can vividly reflect past life, culture, and society, thereby maximizing their value [44]. Following the principle of “every distinctive cultural norm”, we strive to conserve all distinctive elements, including material and intangible cultural elements, as well as official and folk cultural expressions, that reflect the developmental trajectory of historical urban areas. However, this does not mean deliberately preserving every trace from each stage.

The integrity of social functions: Social functions mirror the evolution of historic urban areas, connecting past production, daily life, culture, values, resource use, and human activities. It is imperative to preserve enduring functions like commerce, residence, and

religion, as they maintain historical information and ensure social continuity. Simultaneously, efforts should focus on guiding cultural heritage to develop new functions aligned with modern production methods, lifestyles, and resource use. This adaptive approach will empower cultural heritage to sustain social stability, drive progress, and remain relevant in contemporary society.

**The integrity of material spatial structures:** Guided by material cultural carriers and considering both human-made and natural elements, we categorize the integrity of material spatial structures into four levels. First, the integrity of natural geographical patterns, which emphasizes the foundational principles behind site selection, layout, and construction, bearing both ecological and cultural significance. Second, the integrity of historical spatial structure, expressed through the relationships of points, lines, surfaces, and axes shaped by human construction or the adaptation of natural features. Third, the integrity of morphological texture, visible in the overall appearance and landscape of historical urban areas, particularly in the texture of buildings and the arrangement of streets and alleys. Fourth, the integrity of the surrounding environment of individual cultural heritage, specifically defined by the spatial scope necessary to ensure its safety and the realization of spatial fields. The spatial field plays a critical role in enabling related cultural activities. Additionally, the spatial scope should consider the integrity of property rights boundaries to facilitate efficient urban management.

**The integrity of visual landscapes:** The Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context (2011) highlights that many new construction projects often negatively impact the appearance, skyline, key sightlines, and other attributes that contribute to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of heritage sites [49]. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of visual integrity and intactness in the perception of cultural heritage. Visual integrity requires preserving various visual elements that influence or constitute the heritage's value. Visual intactness involves maintaining a harmonious relationship between the heritage and its surroundings, highlighting its prominence while prohibiting any inappropriate elements that disrupt its aesthetic appeal.

### *2.3. Cultural–Ecological Adaptability*

Historical urban areas are cultural–ecological entities composed of people, economy, society, culture, nature, and space [2]. In traditional China, people were homogeneous and lacked individuality, bound by familial and national ethics. Economic development prioritized agriculture over commerce, resulting in a singular structure. Cultures were insular and introverted, society was cohesive and defensive, and natural geography primarily served military purposes. Spaces reflected a ritual-based order and closed form, embodying ethical and value systems.

In contrast, modern cultural ecosystems exhibit new and universal characteristics. People place greater emphasis on freedom, equality, individual liberation, and the realization of self-worth. Economic forms are richer and more diverse. Society prioritizes justice, fairness, openness, democracy, and multi-party cooperation. Culture has become more open, individualistic, diverse, and integrated. The ecological security, leisure and recreation, and landscape functions of natural geography are increasingly prominent. Within the modern “people-economy-society-culture”, spaces have gained new attributes, such as equitable rights sharing, multifunctionality, and multicultural inclusivity [50]. To integrate with modern society, the conservation and sustainable development of historical urban areas must adapt to these changes while maintaining authenticity and integrity.

**Cultural subject adaptation:** Residents' value preferences and daily life needs. Historical urban areas should reflect the development and changes of society and adapt to residents' evolving needs in a cyclical manner [51]. As the original inhabitants are gone,

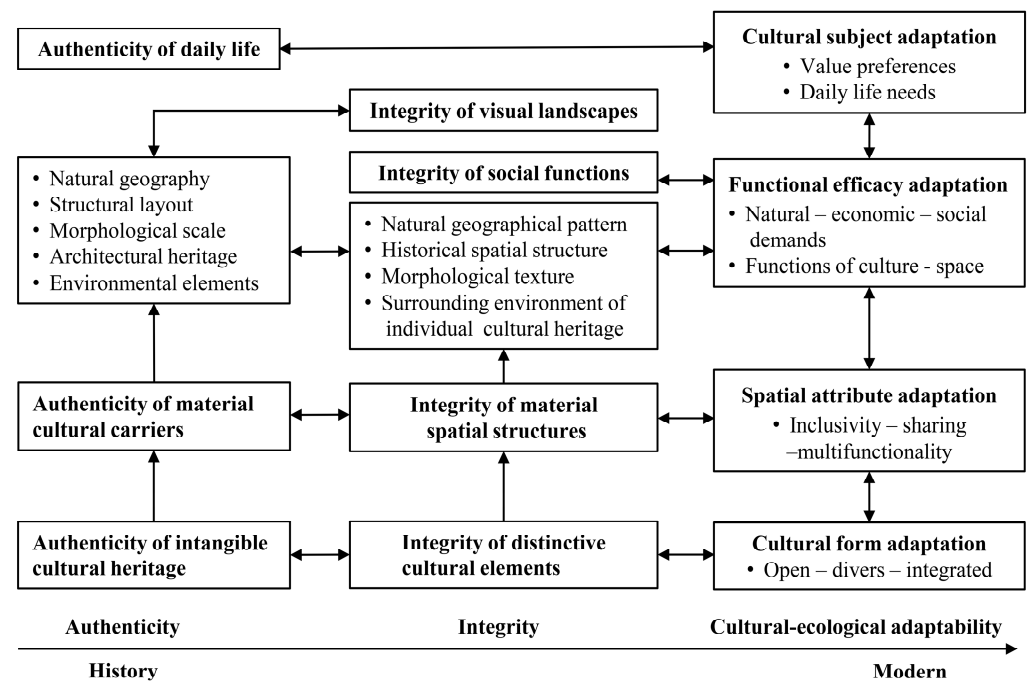
conservation and sustainable development must focus on local residents [44], prioritizing their value preferences and daily life needs—employment, housing, cultural education, leisure and entertainment, and social interaction. This prevents cultural heritage decline due to a lack of regional identity and daily practice support.

**Functional efficacy adaptation:** Economic, social, and geographic demands. The new classical structure–function theory on cultural heritage conservation indicates that cultural functions evolve with economic and social changes, resulting in corresponding shifts in material space [52]. Thus, adapting to new demands of economic and social development requires reshaping the functions of culture-space, rooted in a thorough understanding of the heritage’s value and relevance. However, we must avoid the pitfalls of cultural consumerism, such as over-entertainment, and over-commercialization [53]. Additionally, efforts should also highlight natural geography’s roles in ecological security, leisure, recreation, and landscape.

**Cultural form adaptation:** Open, diverse, and integrated. To maintain cultural continuity, we must promote dialogue between generations and blend historical heritage with modern culture. This requires reinterpreting historical values, practices, and products through innovative concepts, elements, forms, and methods. These efforts will create new cultural models that combine historical legacy with modern contexts, maximizing cultural assets’ industrial potential and social value.

**Spatial attribute adaptation:** Inclusivity, sharing, and multifunctionality. Space, as the venue for human activities, should accommodate the diverse needs of various social groups. Guided by inclusivity, sharing, and multifunctionality, it is essential to create accessible public spaces that strengthen social relationships across levels and integrate multicultural elements. Key strategies include optimizing functional systems, fostering modern public spirit, and preserving spatial texture. These efforts will help promote the formation of a dynamic scenario system characterized by intrinsic coherence and spatiotemporal connectivity among “culture-behavior-space” dimensions.

In summary, authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability are dynamic unities, with all elements of them being interrelated (Figure 1). Specifically, authenticity provides the value base for historic urban areas and their cultural heritage, integrity ensures that these values are fully preserved at both physical and social levels, and cultural ecology provides the contemporary contextual foundation for sustainable development. The adaptation to new cultural ecologies involves maintaining the original and genuine state while enriching them with new significance, as well as extending and transforming existing environmental elements. Daily life, as the lived experience of cultural subjects, plays a primary role. Functional efficacy captures the multifaceted functions of culture-space, mirroring the characteristics of daily production and lifestyle. Cultural forms emphasize the inheritance and innovation of distinctive cultural elements, embodying the value preferences and behavioral norms. Spatial attributes encompass the diverse characteristics of material cultural carriers and their spatial structures, emerging from the interplay of cultural subjects, social functions, and cultural forms. In practice, it is crucial to identify and strengthen the convergent aspects of the three concepts while effectively reconciling their differences. This approach ultimately helps to achieve the intrinsic unity of the three, which is conducive to enhancing the commemorative value of cultural heritage and the overall value of historic urban areas, thereby advancing the dynamic conservation and sustainable development of historic urban areas and their cultural heritage.



**Figure 1.** Relationships among authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability. Source: Drawn by the authors.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Study Area

Yicheng Ancient City is located in Shanxi Province, China (111°34′–112°03′ E, 35°23′–35°52′ N). Its origins trace back to the early Western Zhou Dynasty, linked to the legendary tale of “Enfeoffment of the Younger Brother with a Paulownia Leaf”. According to historical records, the young King Cheng of Zhou and his younger brother, Shuyu, were playing in a garden when the king cut a catalpa leaf into the shape of a jade gui (a symbol of power) and gave it to his brother, promising to enfeoff him as the lord of Tang state. True to his word, Shuyu later ruled Tang and established his capital in Yicheng, which now has a rich history spanning over 3100 years. Additionally, it is the only historical ancient city situated within an urban village—Chengnei Village—in China.

#### 3.2. Data Acquisition

Historical documents, visual materials, and relevant planning documents provide a comprehensive record of the urban site selection, evolutionary development, cultural resources, immovable cultural relics, architectural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, and festive folk traditions of Yicheng Ancient City. Among these materials, the following contents were selected for in-depth analysis: Yicheng County Annals, a Chengnei Village promotional video, Lady Li’s homecoming live-action drama, the Chasing Dreams in the Ancient City immersive theater production, the Master Plan of Yicheng county, the Conservation and Plan for the South Cross Street Historic and Cultural Block, and the Detailed Plan for the South Cross Street Area, along with photographic documentation of Yicheng Ancient City Cultural Festival and immovable cultural relics.

To comprehensively document the current state of Yicheng Ancient City, aerial photography and field investigations were systematically employed to further clarify its spatial morphology, land use patterns, street network configuration, and existing issues in ancient city protection. Detailed environmental records were made of the existing structures within Yicheng Ancient City, including immovable cultural relics, architectural heritage sites,

historic-style buildings, and residential complexes. Additionally, the types, forms, and development of related industries were recorded in detail as part of the investigative process.

Questionnaires, random interviews, and focus group discussions can intuitively and effectively reflect the diverse needs of local residents and the government. Empirically grounded data regarding the development and construction of Yicheng Ancient City were obtained by distributing questionnaires to residents of Yicheng Ancient City, random interviews conducted during field investigations, and focus group discussions held with the Chengnei Village Committee and relevant management personnel from the People's Government of Yicheng County and Tangxing Town.

### 3.3. Methods

#### 3.3.1. Thematic Clustering and Identification of Authenticity and Integrity Elements

Themes and their corresponding keywords were extracted by systematically examining visual materials, reviewing Yicheng County Annals, and analyzing relevant planning documents. Primary data from field investigations were then employed to verify and supplement these findings. Based on this, the common characteristics of Yicheng Ancient City were clustered and extracted. Subsequently, building on the established definitions of authenticity and integrity, the core elements of these concepts in Yicheng Ancient City were systematically identified.

#### 3.3.2. Analysis of Real Needs for Cultural–Ecological Adaptation

Yicheng Ancient City comprises 665 households. A questionnaire survey was conducted with “household” as the unit. A total of 335 questionnaires were distributed, and 307 were collected. After excluding invalid responses, the effective questionnaire recovery rate reached 70.75%. Data from 237 valid questionnaires were organized and analyzed using cluster analysis to comprehensively understand local residents' daily life needs. The questionnaires focused on three key questions:

- (1) What are the priority issues that need to be addressed in the development and construction of Yicheng Ancient City?
- (2) Which public service facilities need to be supplemented or improved in Yicheng Ancient City?
- (3) What are the urgent problems to be resolved in environmental rectification?

To achieve more comprehensive survey results, open-ended interviews were conducted with 56 randomly selected participants during field surveys. These participants included the elderly, middle-aged and young individuals, external renters, local residents, and tourists. The interviews centered on their views on the current living environment and future development of Yicheng Ancient City.

In addition, in accordance with the progress of the Yicheng Ancient City Conservation and Development Plan, two focus group discussions were held with the following stakeholders to clarify the achievements, existing issues, and future development plans for the protection and development of Yicheng Ancient City:

The Chengnei Village Committee, including the village director, deputy director, five committee members, and over 20 villagers' representatives.

Relevant management personnel of the People's Government of Yicheng County, including one vice-county magistrate, three staff members from the Natural Resources and Planning Bureau, and the secretary, town mayor, and one deputy mayor of Tangxing Town.

The discussions were held during the preliminary planning phase and after the initial plan had been drafted.



### 3.3.3. Element Comparison and Assessment of Intrinsic Connections

The temporal evolution of the authenticity and integrity elements of Yicheng Ancient City was analyzed through historical–present comparative studies. Elements that did not meet the conservation standards were identified as priorities for future protection efforts. Secondly, by leveraging the universal inherent connections among authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptation components, each element in Yicheng Ancient City was meticulously examined. These elements were categorized into three groups based on their unique characteristics, change features (weak–moderate–significant), and the degree of mutual compatibility (low–moderate–strong):

- (1) **Relatively Independent Direct Conservation:** Elements that are functionally clear, with minimal changes, low compatibility, and no significant interactions with other elements.
- (2) **Mutually Inclusive Integrated Convergence:** Elements that are flexible and open, with moderate changes and strong compatibility.
- (3) **Differentiated Adaptation for Potential Conflicts:** Elements that show significant changes, involving demolition and renovation, requiring targeted strategies to resolve potential conflicts.

This classification framework provided foundational support for the formulation of effective conservation and development planning strategies.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Distinctive Cultural Elements

Yicheng Ancient City is renowned for its urban origin, landscape patterns, academies, temples, notable figures, literary works, thriving trade, and folk customs. Through the clustering of themes and their respective keywords, its distinctive cultural elements can be categorized into seven key groups (Table 4).

**Table 4.** The distinctive cultural elements of Yicheng Ancient City.

Group		Element
Formed by enfeoffment	Enduring historical culture	Legendary tale of urban origin and thousand-year history of county governance
Built according to the terrain	Harmonious landscape relationships	Built with deep moats and high plateaus, nestled against mountains, and encircled by water, with its city walls winding along the land’s contours
Blessed by Feng Shui		Located by the Hui River on an ox-shaped plateau; legend says a glance here creates scholars and a sip of its water yields beauties
Marked by landmarks		Immovable cultural relics and architectural heritage
Enriched by culture	Well-developed traditional education	Home to thriving academies, schools, and many temples
Prospered by commerce	Prosperous market trade	Bustling with merchants and thriving shops, with the north gate area once earning the title of “dry dock” in Yicheng county
Vitality with folk customs	Vibrant local life customs	Two national and one provincial intangible heritage, a folk worship event, and lively traditions

#### 4.2. Historical Evolution of Social Functions

Historically, the area served various functions, including residential, economic, educational, religious, political, and military. Nowadays, in addition to being a residential area, there are five schools within Yicheng Ancient City, four of which—excluding Chengnei Village Primary School—serve residents across the entire Yicheng County. This has also led to a significant influx of external renters, resulting in traffic congestion and insufficient facility capacity. Industrially, the area focuses on sightseeing tourism, but its tourism products are underdeveloped and projects are insufficient. Additionally, it supports a small number of scattered retail businesses, basic catering services, and one school uniform manufacturing facility, all of which contribute limited economic value. This is in stark contrast to the once-thriving economic trade in the past.

#### 4.3. Material Cultural Carriers and Spatial Structure

Yicheng Ancient City is located in the northwest, bordered by gullies to the south and east. The space between the walls and the Hui River served as both a flood buffer and a military barrier. The original county government office was centrally positioned, flanked by four city gate towers and four neighboring districts (Figure 2). Today, although the city's boundaries and remnants of walls and gates remain discernible, the original urban fabric has been mostly lost, and the gully areas have also been encroached upon by some buildings. Three historical alleys—Shifang Street, Mufang Street, and Tangyao Road—form the spatial axis. The city features 56 architectural heritages, a 2 km long section of the Ming Dynasty South City Wall, and seven immovable cultural relics, including the Stone Archway, Wooden Archway, Guanyu Temple, Wenfeng Pagoda, Wukui Pagoda, Jin Dynasty Bell, and the Earth Mother Temple (Figure 3). Conservation metrics showed that the integrity rate for immovable cultural relics was 95%, while that for architectural heritages was 70%. The Leqing City Gate, Yongding Archway, and the southern half of the western city wall have been rebuilt in recent years. The spatial texture (Figure 4) reveals that the historical “Six-Foot Alley” (about 1.8 m) has been well preserved. Residential buildings were mainly 1–2 stories, typically featuring symmetrical, enclosed, single-depth quadrangle courtyards. Common floor plans measured 12 m × 15 m, 15 m × 15 m, 13 m × 25 m, and 20 m × 25 m.

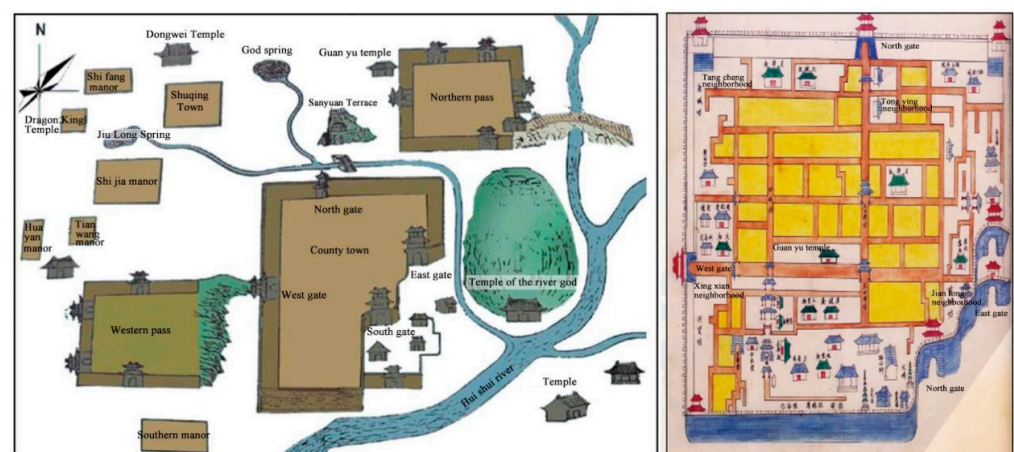
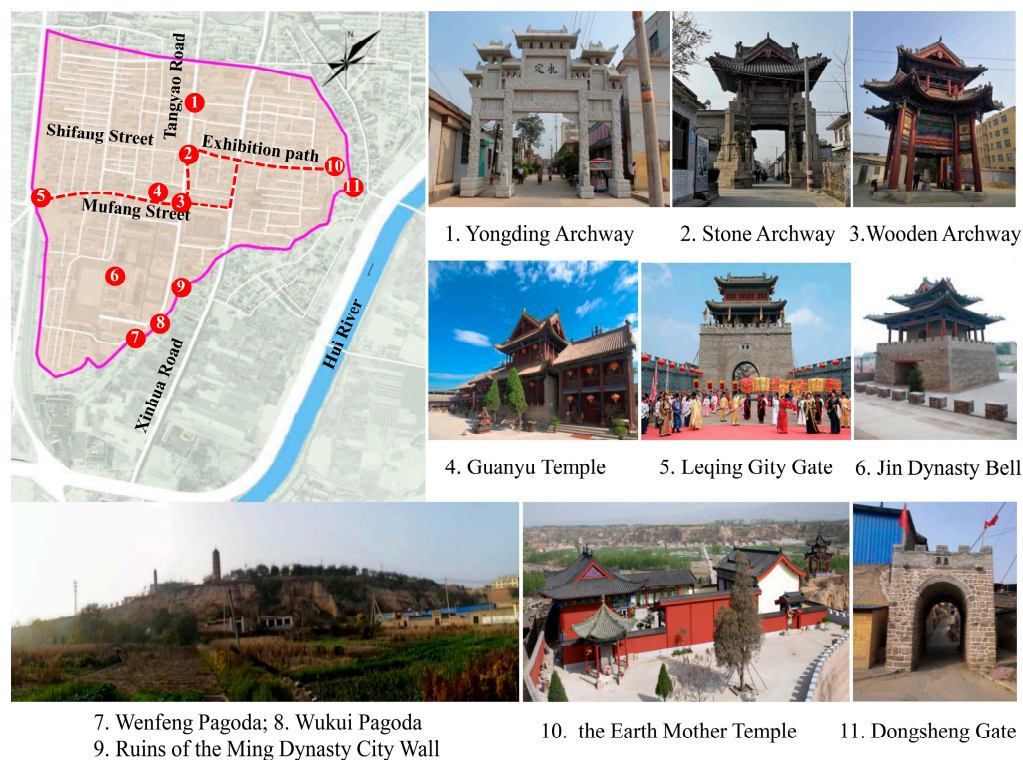


Figure 2. The urban layout of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Source: Yicheng County Annals.





**Figure 3.** The current situation of cultural heritage. Source: Edited by the authors.



**Figure 4.** The spatial texture of Yicheng Ancient City. Source: Edited by the authors.

#### 4.4. Visual Landscapes and Their Integrity

Both historically and today, the city wall atop the high platform has functioned as a continuous panoramic viewpoint overlooking the surroundings. It was also the visual focal point when observing the ancient city from its exterior (Figure 3). However, the integrity of this visual continuity has been severely compromised by structural breaches in the city wall and signal tower and the presence of large-scale cave dwellings along the steep gully slopes. The Wenfeng Pagoda, Wukui Pagoda, and the Lookout Pavilion of the Earth Mother Temple collectively established a dominant visual elevation (Figure 5a,b). Meanwhile, the Stone Archway, Wooden Archway, Guanyu Temple, Leqing City Gate, and Yongding Archway functioned as pivotal visual anchors within the urban fabric



(Figure 3). The three remaining historical alleys constituted critical visual corridors, but their architectural facades have suffered substantial aesthetic deterioration due to insufficient systematic building management, renovation, and environmental remediation (Figure 5c–f). Additionally, Yicheng Ancient City is also confronted with severe visual pollution caused by poor garbage collection and disordered overhead cables.



**Figure 5.** The visual landscapes of Yicheng Ancient City: (a) the Lookout Pavilion of the Earth Mother Temple; (b) the Wenfeng Pagoda and Wukui Pagoda Tower on the city wall; (c) the Mufang Street visual corridor; (d) the architectural heritage of Mufang Street; (e) the Tangyao Road visual corridor; (f) the architectural heritage of Tangyao Road. Source: Photographs by the authors.

#### 4.5. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Its Exhibition

Yicheng Ancient City boasts two nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage items—the Yicheng Flower Drum (a traditional drum dance) and the Yicheng Qin Book (a form of narrative singing)—and one provincial-level heritage, the Legend of Lady Li (a wedding custom). Additionally, the Earth Mother sacrificial ceremony, rooted in Chinese mythology, remains a significant folk practice. The three official intangible cultural heritage items are predominantly showcased during the annual Ancient City Cultural Festival, with particular venues and procession routes (Figures 3 and 6) and indoor performance spaces. Earth Mother sacrificial activity is centered around the Earth Mother Temple. These cultural practices have become an integral part of the local residents' collective cultural identity. However, daily engagement with these traditions has gradually declined due to the limitations of spatial venues.

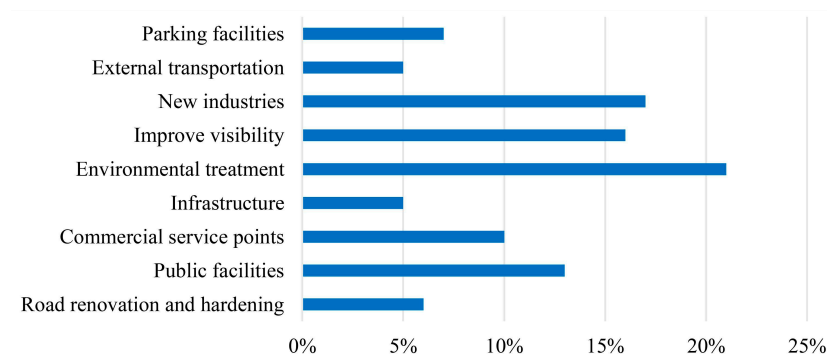


**Figure 6.** Venues and routes of Yicheng County's festive activities: (a) Guanyu Temple; (b) Leqing City Gate; (c) Earth Mother Temple; (d) Tangyao Road; (e) Mufang Street; (f) Shifang East Street. Source: Provided by the Chengnei Village Committee.

#### 4.6. New Needs of Local Development

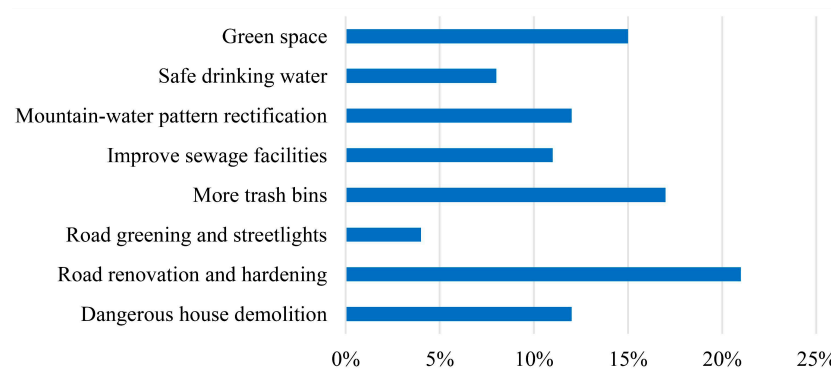
The data analysis from the questionnaire survey (Figures 7–9) highlighted that the daily life needs of local residents were primarily reflected in the following areas:

- Environmental treatment
- New industries
- Improve visibility
- Public facilities
- Commercial facilities and service points
- Parking facilities
- Road renovation and hardening
- More trash bins
- Green spaces
- Dangerous house demolition
- Leisure activity venues
- A performance platform
- Outdoor fitness facilities
- A cultural library

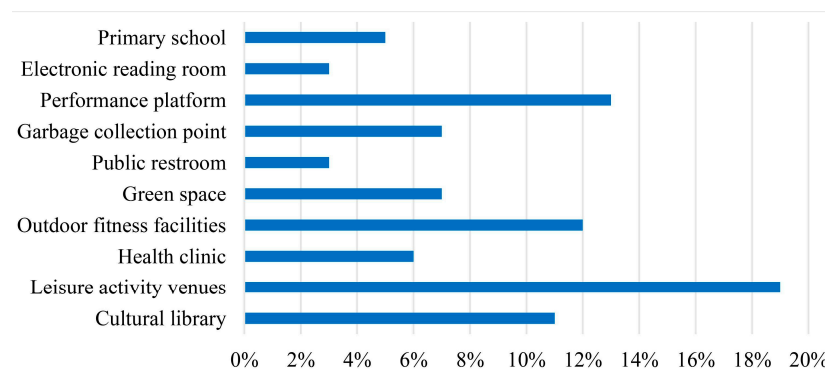


**Figure 7.** Development and construction needs of local residents. Source: Edited by the authors.





**Figure 8.** Environmental rectification needs of local residents. Source: Edited by the authors.



**Figure 9.** Public service facility needs of local residents. Source: Edited by the authors.

Through a statistical analysis of feedback from 56 randomly selected respondents, results similar to those from the survey questionnaires were obtained. Overall, the following issues were widely emphasized: greening the environment, reducing dust, increasing employment opportunities, improving traffic and parking accessibility, enhancing commercial vitality, boosting tourism, and expanding or adding cultural spaces and squares. For example:

- A middle-aged resident commented: “Yicheng No. 4 Middle School and Yicheng Senior High School are located next to each other. During dismissal times, the areas near the Wooden Archway and Mufang Street become extremely congested—electric bikes can barely get through, let alone cars. Most of the alleys are too narrow for vehicles to enter, and even if they could, there’s nowhere to park. Many people have to park their cars outside the ancient city. . .”
- A young resident stated: “While there are some small shops in the village, they mainly sell basic school supplies and daily necessities. The tourism development initially envisioned for the village hasn’t materialized as hoped. We want the planning efforts to genuinely drive tourism here. . .”
- An elderly resident exercising at Guanyu Temple Square noted: “This is the only public square in the village. Everyone usually exercises and holds activities here, but it’s too small, especially during the annual Ancient City Cultural Festival when it’s overcrowded. . .”
- A parent renting housing to accompany their child’s studies shared: “Aside from caring for my child, there are few suitable job opportunities here. Earning extra income is difficult. We’d welcome more employment options. . .”

Through two focus group discussions, the official direction for the protection and development of Yicheng Ancient City was clarified from the perspectives of functional

positioning, land use, heritage conservation, and economic development. Key points include the following:

- Emphasize the commercial, entertainment, and tourism service functions of the ancient city of Yicheng.
- Planning to relocate Yicheng No. 4 Middle School, Yicheng Senior High School, the Teacher Continuing Education School, and Lida Technical School in the future.
- Planning to relocate Yicheng Honor House, with the original site designated for green space in the future.
- Protecting all historical structures within Yicheng Ancient City while integrating its historical and cultural information—rooted in the Tao Tang and Jin State period—into urban development strategies.
- Avoiding large-scale underground development until the status of underground cultural relics is thoroughly assessed.

#### 4.7. Intrinsic Connections and Type Division

Table 5 presents the unique characteristics, change features, degree of mutual compatibility, and classification of the elements related to authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability. Corresponding planning strategies should be developed for these classifications to enhance the intrinsic coherence of these elements.

**Table 5.** Element type, main content and characteristics, and strategic orientation.

Type	Main Content	Characteristic	Change–Compatibility	Strategy
Directly conservation	Immovable cultural relics, city gates, and archways	Relatively independent, well-preserved, and functional clarity	Weak–Low	Maintaining original states and enhancing surroundings
Integrated convergence	Architectural heritages	Good material base, strong flexibility, and certain public and openness nature	Moderate–Strong	Optimizing environmental elements and implementing a modern functional system
	Natural geographical, intangible cultural heritage, city wall ruins, and alleys			
Differentiated adaptation	Public facilities, commercial facilities and service points, parking facilities, green spaces, leisure activity venues, a performance platform, outdoor fitness facilities, and a cultural library	Demolition and renovation, changing the current spatial layout	Significant–Moderate	Resource reallocation, spatial optimization, cultural linkage, and style coordination
	New industries and facility relocation			

## 5. Discussion

Historic urban areas serve as both cultural heritage repositories and residential living spaces, presenting dual challenges: preserving the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage while adapting to modern cultural ecosystems. Yicheng Ancient City is a prime example of this dilemma, where sustained conservation efforts have yielded suboptimal outcomes in both cultural heritage protection and cultural–ecological adaptation. Three core issues remain unresolved:

Firstly, some important elements of authenticity and integrity, such as the urban layout, city wall ruins, visual landscapes, and the surroundings of immovable cultural relics—whose characteristics have been significantly damaged—have not been adequately protected.

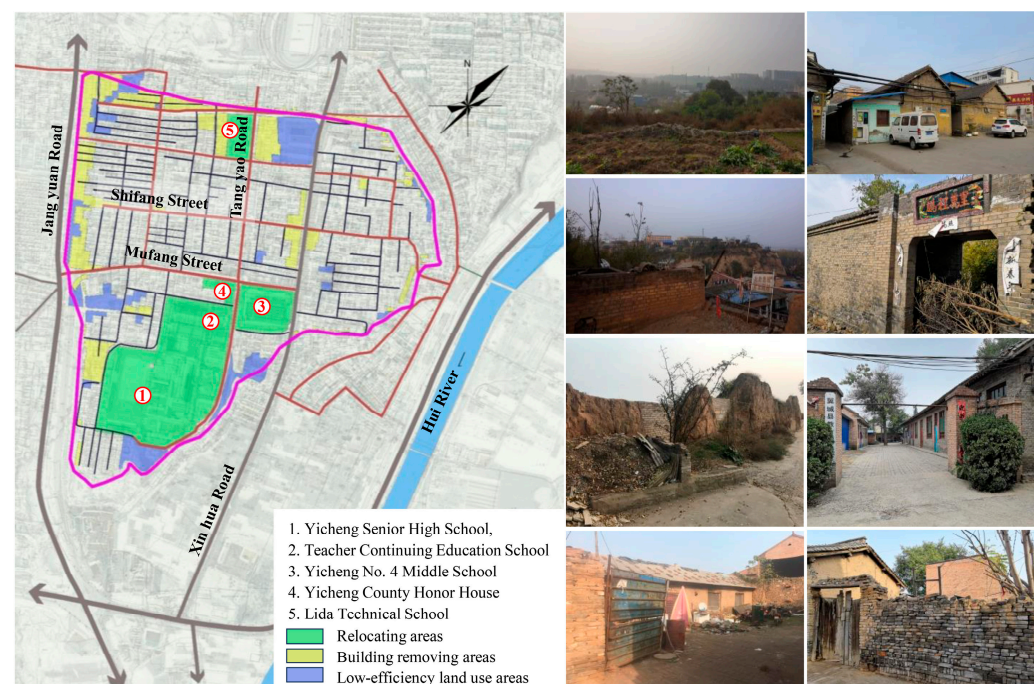
Secondly, distinctive cultural elements, including the legendary tale of urban origin, the thousand-year history of county governance, prosperous commerce, and well-developed traditional education have not been fully protected or effectively integrated into contemporary contexts. Meanwhile, the relocation of schools will also diminish the educational function of Yicheng Ancient City.

Thirdly, the neglect of prioritizing the living world and daily needs of residents has resulted in the absence of corresponding social functions, spatial venues, and service facilities—all of which have undergone significant changes—making it difficult to meet the diverse demands of modern cultural–ecological development.

These results indicate that the cultural heritage protection and value revitalization of Yicheng Ancient City urgently call for innovative strategic guidance to promote the overall integration and long-term effectiveness of authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability.

### 5.1. Generating New Spaces and Land Resources for Returning to the Lifeworld

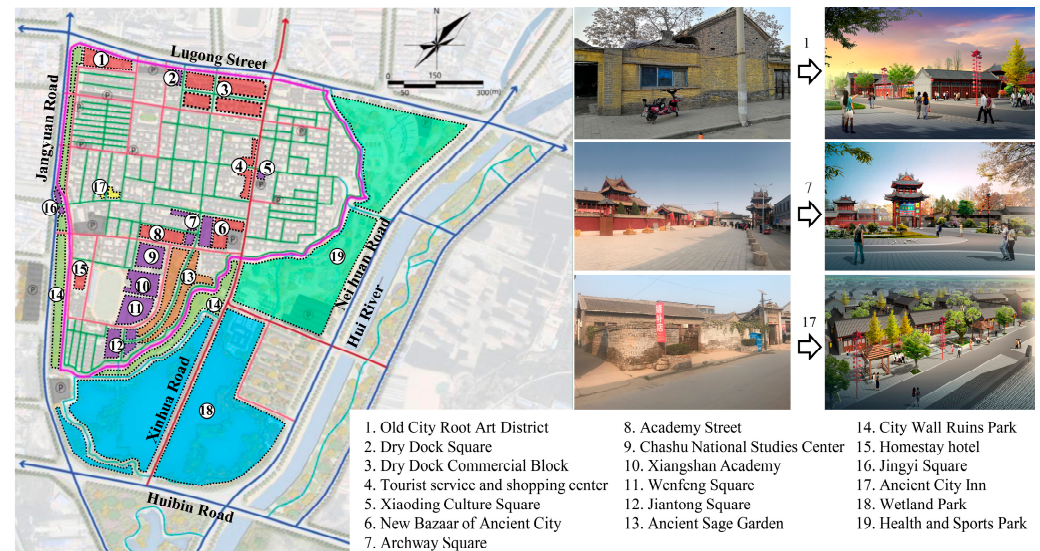
To address the current issues, respond to the daily needs of local residents, and meet the universal demands of modern cultural ecosystems, new spaces and land resources need to be generated (Figure 10). Key actions include systematically removing unsafe non-architectural heritage and non-historic-style buildings, relocating Yicheng No. 4 Middle School, Yicheng Senior High School, the Teacher Continuing Education School, Lida Technical School, and Yicheng Honor House, redeveloping low-efficiency land use areas, enhancing the surroundings of immovable cultural relics, and upgrading alleys. These steps are guided by a detailed evaluation of building quality, architectural compatibility, and land use efficiency.



**Figure 10.** Land and spatial resource generation. Source: Edited by the authors.

## 5.2. Cultural Resource Integration and Project Planning for Social Function Enhancement

To enhance functional systems—including historical commemoration, heritage conservation, cultural education, leisure, social interaction, and the industrial economy—a series of public and commercial projects need to be planned around the seven distinct cultural elements while fully utilizing the newly generated spaces and land resources (Figure 11). This will also facilitate the integrity protection and contemporary integration of distinctive cultural elements and promote the development of tourism.



**Figure 11.** Cultural project planning and spatial layout. Source: Edited by the authors.

### 5.2.1. Series on History and Landscape

To commemorate the urban origin of Yicheng Ancient City and showcase its growth, Jiantong Square is proposed, inspired by the legend of “Enfeoffment of the Younger Brother with a Paulownia Leaf”. In honor of Yanbo Wen, who established Jingyi Pavilion within Leqing City Gate, and to highlight the governance anecdotes, Jingyi Square is also proposed. Additionally, a City Wall Ruins Park is planned through the integration of the city wall ruins and their protection zones. If feasible, a wetland park and a sports park will be established in the gully area to preserve the historical landscape pattern.

### 5.2.2. Series on Academies and Celebrities

To bridge historical and modern educational functions, plans are underway to create a range of cultural, leisure, and commercial facilities. These include the Chashu National Studies Center, Xiangshan Academy, Wenfeng Square, and Academy Street. Additionally, to protect local culture and enhance cultural identity, an Ancient Sage Garden is proposed, featuring the life stories and renowned poetry of eight historical celebrities.

### 5.2.3. Series on Business and Services

To address modern economic and social demands and boost local employment and income, efforts are aimed at revitalizing historic commercial streets. This will be achieved by enhancing Tangyao Road and Mufang Street, reflecting the area’s historical thriving trade. Along the northern boundary, an Old City Root Art District and a Dry Dock Commercial Block are proposed, along with a tourist service and shopping center to be established along Xinhua Road.



#### 5.2.4. Series on Folklore and Cultural Life

To preserve and enhance social interaction areas for residents, Yicheng County Honor House and part of Yicheng No. 4 Middle School are planned to be redeveloped into Archway Square. This new square will be centered around the Wooden Archway and integrated with the existing Guanyu Temple Square. This redevelopment will also eliminate the visual pollution caused by the surrounding modern architecture to the Wooden Archway and Guanyu Temple. To celebrate the Legend of Lady Li, Xiaoding Cultural Square is designed along Xinhua Road. Furthermore, to enrich community cultural life, certain architectural heritage and historic-style buildings will be repurposed as open museums, exhibition halls, homestay hotels, and Ancient City inns.

#### 5.3. *Authenticity and Integrity of the City Site Pattern and Spatial Structure*

Yicheng Ancient City was notable for its harmony with the natural landscape. To preserve this unique feature and its internal spatial structure, the following measures can be implemented:

- Safeguarding historical boundaries by removing harmful attached structures and reinforcing the structure, slope, and escarpment.
- Integrating the gully area between the city walls and the Hui River into the protection zone to preserve the historical pattern.
- Preserving the urban spatial structure by using key historical elements—such as Tangyao Road, Mufang Street, Shifang Street, Guanyu Temple, the Wooden Archway, Stone Archway, Wenfeng Pagoda, Wukui Pagoda, Earth Mother Temple, and the recently reconstructed Leqing City Gate and West City Wall—as the foundational framework to ensure authenticity and integrity.

#### 5.4. *Authenticity and Integrity of Immovable Cultural Relics, Architectural Heritage, and Alleys*

Following the Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China (2024), a systematic protection plan must be implemented for the seven immovable cultural relics. Architectural heritage should be preserved in its historical appearance and courtyard environment, including volume, style, color, and materials. Renovations must employ traditional methods and local materials. New buildings are required to align with the spatial continuity and morphological patterns of the historic urban fabric. For Tangyao Road, Mufang Street, and Shifang Street, strict controls need to be enforced as follows:

- Street dimensions: Maintain direction, width, and proportion.
- Road surface: Pave with bluestone slabs and restrict motor vehicle access.
- Advertisements and signs: Regulate form, size, color, and placement.
- Utility lines: Convert overhead cables to underground installations.
- Building facades: Preserve walls, doorways, windows, and traditional patterns.

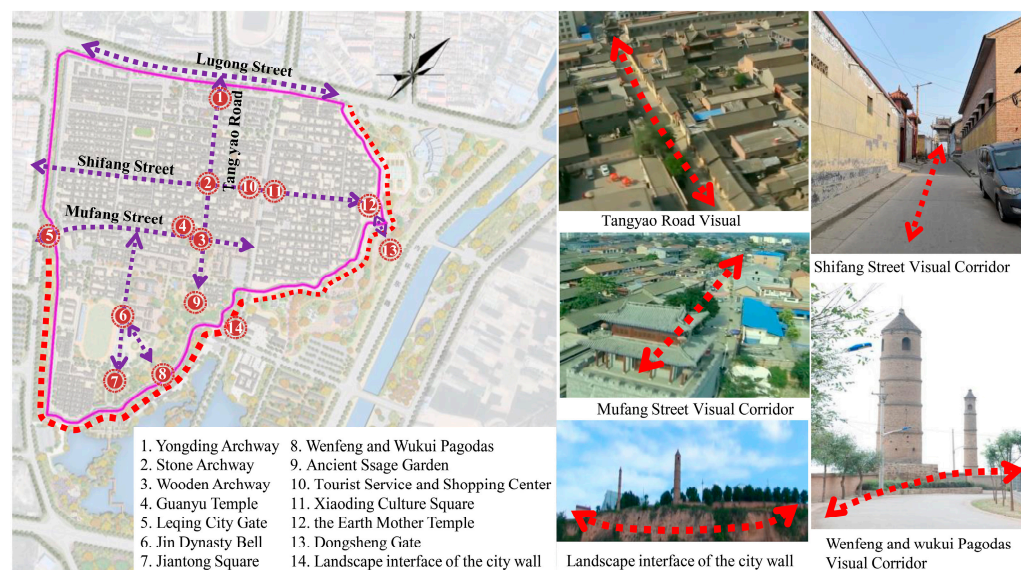
Other alleys may follow these measures but allow vehicle traffic and include scattered micro-parking spaces (Figure 11).

#### 5.5. *Integrity of Visual Landscapes*

To preserve and enhance the visual landscapes of Yicheng Ancient City, the following measures can be implemented:

Circular roads and panoramic views: Circular roads along the inner side of the City Walls are meticulously arranged to maintain panoramic views from the walls (Figure 12).





**Figure 12.** Organization of visual corridors. Source: Edited by the authors.

**Visual system organization:** The visual system inside Yicheng Ancient City is structured around key landmarks, including the Yongding Archway, Stone Archway, Wooden Archway, Guanyu Temple, Leqing City Gate, Jin Dynasty Bell, Wenfeng Pagoda, Wukui Pagoda, Earth Mother Temple, and Dongsheng Gate. Core visual corridors are defined by Tangyao Road, Mufang Street, Shifang Street, and Lugong Street, with newly planned open spaces as important nodes (Figure 12).

**Facade renovation:** The historical street facades of Tangyao Road and Mufang Street are slated for renovation. These facade improvements will preserve and enhance the visual integrity of the Ming and Qing Dynasty commercial street style.

#### 5.6. Preserving and Expanding the Spatial Venues for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Behavior reflects internal culture in the real world. The actions of people in specific spaces represent a common way to preserve intangible cultural heritage, showcasing the values, beliefs, habits, and aesthetic preferences of particular groups [54]. Therefore, the conservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage in Yicheng Ancient City can be achieved through daily cultural activities and inclusive programs by fully utilizing both existing spaces and newly established venues—such as squares, the Old City Roots Art District, and the Dry Dock Commercial District. This approach can foster a living scenario system that integrates culture, behavior, and space and the harmonious integration of daily life with commercial performance.

## 6. Conclusions

This study systematically constructs the definitions of authenticity and integrity in historic urban areas and proposes a cultural ecology-oriented approach to enhancing their adaptive development. Authenticity is not only reflected in the initial state of cultural heritage but also in its evolutionary process and outcomes. Through categorized discussions of authenticity in daily life, material cultural carriers, and intangible cultural heritage, this study provides concrete guidance for manifesting authenticity in conservation practices. Regarding integrity, while inheriting the integrity of social functions, material spatial structures, and visual landscapes, all distinctive cultural elements should be preserved. These elements expand the scope of integrity by emphasizing more comprehensive historical information. In terms of cultural–ecological adaptability, the sustainable development of historic urban areas must adapt to both the universal demands and local needs of modern

cultural ecosystems while focusing on specific cultural subjects, functional efficacy, cultural forms, and spatial attributes. These three concepts are closely interconnected, and their intrinsic unity can be effectively promoted by integrating their unique characteristics, change features, and mutual compatibility.

Through detailed investigation and analysis of the cultural heritage and contemporary needs of Yicheng Ancient City, this study identifies the following issues: (1) Seven groups of distinctive cultural elements have not received adequate attention or effective presentation. (2) Incomplete social functions. (3) While the urban layout, city walls, historic alleys, and architectural heritages retain certain historical features, some areas have suffered damage, and the visual landscape is incomplete. (4) There is a lack of performance venues for intangible cultural heritage, and its daily presence is gradually diminishing. (5) Significant discrepancies between current development status and real demands. To address these challenges, the following measures can be implemented to promote the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage, thereby advancing the sustainable development of Yicheng Ancient City: (1) Returning to the lifeworld by reallocating space and land resources to meet real local needs. (2) Consolidating distinctive cultural resources by planning public welfare projects and commercial initiatives to enhance the functional system of Yicheng Ancient City. (3) Preserving the ecological integrity of urban layout and spatial structure. (4) Strictly protecting the authenticity and integrity of immovable cultural relics, architectural heritages, and historical alleys. (5) Organizing the visual corridors of Yicheng Ancient City and its surrounding areas with landmark buildings and path spaces as a framework and improving the landscape interfaces of historical alleys. (6) Expanding and optimizing temporal-spatial venues for intangible cultural heritage transmission and exhibitions.

Meanwhile, the formulation of any conservation and development strategy may involve issues of authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability that are simple versus integrated, short-term versus long-term, and partial versus holistic. In response to this, we suggest emphasizing their intrinsic synergy and unity from a more comprehensive and dynamic perspective to avoid potential contradictions and conflicts.

This study provides scientific theoretical support and practical guidance for the cultural heritage conservation and cultural–ecological adaptability of Yicheng Ancient City. It also offers replicable experience for the protection and sustainable development of other historic urban areas. However, this process is dynamic and complex. The key challenge lies in properly balancing the relationships among authenticity, integrity, and cultural–ecological adaptability. Future research will further explore the dynamic balance between cultural heritage protection and socio-economic development. It will also investigate how to better utilize modern technological tools to enhance the level of cultural heritage protection and public participation.

**Author Contributions:** R.L. conceived the entire structure, carried out the data collation, and wrote the paper; W.G. and F.Y. carried out the validation and revised the paper. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are available within the article.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank the Editor-in-Chief, associate editor, and reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. We also appreciate the staff who previously participated in the conservation planning of Yicheng Ancient City for their hard work.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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