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Accumulating *Positive Energy*: affective urbanism, inclusionary governance, and creative heritage space-making in China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines affective urbanism at the intersection of urban heritage regeneration and socio-cultural governance in contemporary China. Urban governance in China increasingly seeks legitimacy through public participation in the developmental model of 'People's City', wherein atmosphere has become a central means of governing and mobilising the public. Against this backdrop, we introduce a mode of affective urbanism centred on the accumulation of *Positive Energy* – a socio-cultural governance initiative in China that promotes happiness and hope, and ultimately aims to mobilise public engagement. Drawing on the heritage renewal of Wenshu Square in Chengdu, we analyse how positive energy affect is embedded through spatial design and branding events, transforming the space into a dynamic site of affective circulations where emotions, practices, cultures, identities, and economies interact and amplify one another. Beyond momentary joy, such affective space fosters a relational self that consolidates identification with developmental agendas, resulting in a 'self-generating' atmosphere that enhances the resilience of urban governance. Our findings reveal the infrastructuralisation of affect, which involves not only its distribution but also its generativity and circulation within affective economies, offering insights into the affective-political conditioning of public space. Furthermore, the risks and vulnerabilities embedded in this governance mode – such as responsibilising individuals and (de)politicising public participation – raise questions about the contested affective politics of space as shaped within a broader socio-political context.

1. Introduction

Urban spaces are not merely physical entities; they are emotional and atmospheric constructs shaped by intricate interactions between material environments, governance strategies, and lived experiences (Thrift, 2004). By developing its sensorial and emotional qualities of urban landscapes, affective-oriented urban strategies aim to craft the city as creative, playable, and safe to live or visit, shaping a vibrant atmosphere that many people can collectively recognise and celebrate (Degen & Rose, 2024; Ernwein & Matthey, 2019; Yu, 2019). Yet affective atmospheres are neither stable or universally experienced but are continually shaped, challenged, and redefined by the assemblages of everyday practices (Mowri and Bailey, 2023). Moments of improvisation, resistance, and lived practices can also disrupt these atmospheres or create 'collateral' ones (Paiva & Sánchez-Fuarros, 2021; Stephens, 2016). This dynamic sheds lights on the ongoing interplay – and even contestations – between a structured, conceived urban atmosphere and lived, embodied affective practices that can produce alternative affects, a debate remains unsettled in current scholarship.

Within an affective urbanism framework, geographical studies have identified 'a series of experience-oriented urban interventions' (Paiva, 2024) that govern the production of atmospheres. Some of this work foregrounds exclusionary affective mechanisms that marginalise certain groups, identities, and practices – particularly in the context of urban regeneration (Degen & Rose, 2024; Wall, 2022). Others have explored how emotions and sensations are not only central to urban life, but also mobilised as integral components of urban development (Paiva, 2023; Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015; Wang et al., 2024; Yu, 2019). Increasingly, atmospheres are understood not as passive products of spatial arrangements nor as merely spontaneous and fleeting phenomena, but as contingent on more complex, dynamic, and networked processes and governance mechanisms (Anderson & Holden, 2008).

Recent scholarship has further discussed the political nature of atmosphere, its capacity to endure, and crucially, the conditions that enable such endurance, reframing affect from being 'inert, background, or ephemeral' to being a deliberately structured and sustained process

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(Paiva, 2023; Vašát & Váně, 2023; Yu, 2019). Building on these developments, this study aims to advance debates on affective urbanism by exploring the mechanisms through which atmospheres are circulated, channelled, and reproduced in coordinated ways. It does so by examining a space-making process, focusing in particular on how affects are spatially, politically and institutionally organised to sustain the production of specific urban atmospheres (Bosworth, 2023) that serve long-term governance objectives.

Through our empirical study of an urban heritage regeneration project in China, we introduce a mode of affective urbanism centred on the accumulation of positive energy, which, we argue, mobilise the public through systematic arrangement, mediation, and alignment of affect. In Chinese, the term *positive energy* [正能量] broadly refers to uplifting force symbolising positive emotions – such as happy, hope and gratitude. Since 2012, it has become a state-led discourse advocated by President Xi Jinping, aimed at promoting 'positive emotions and beneficial social behaviours' that affect individuals' daily practices (Lin & Liang, 2024). Recent cultural and political studies have begun to examine how this discourse and its promotion function as a mode of affective governance – particularly in the post-pandemic era – to cope with social depression, foster solidarity, and maintain sociopolitical stability (Cui, 2023; Ip & Fan, 2024; Zhang, 2022). In this process, the public are not merely passive recipients of positive energy, but also active participants in and promoters of, its circulation.

In line with the national agenda outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan,[1] released in 2021, the central government issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Protection and Inheritance of Historical and Cultural Heritage in Urban and Rural Development*.[2] This policy document calls on local governments not only to preserve cultural heritage but to actively integrate historical resources into urban development strategies. Core principles, such as 'promoting socialist core values[3]', 'strengthening cultural confidence', and 'enhancing public participation', are framed as objectives for urban redevelopment under the broader framework of national cultural governance. This policy context highlights the instrumentalisation of urban heritage spaces – spaces that are shaped by affective, ideological, and participatory dimensions of Chinese urban governance. How, then, are values and ideology embedded in urban planning and enacted through urban spaces as affective environments that shape everyday practice?

In this paper, we use 'Positive Energy' both discursively and conceptually. In discursive terms, it refers to a state-led semantic framework that embodies the core socialist values and is consistently articulated in planning discourses as a governance objective. Conceptually, it functions as a state-led system of ideology alignments and public mobilisation, providing an analytical lens for exploring the affective mechanisms underpinning such urban and social governance. In the next section, we conceptualise Positive Energy governance by synthesising insights from the literature on affective governance and urbanism, drawing on contextually relevant studies from China. We then apply this analytical framework to examine how political intentions are translated into everyday experiences through the spatial and affective (re)production of Wenshu Square.

2. Conceptualising *Positive Energy Governance*

2.1. *Understanding Positive Energy with Affect and Affective Governance*

This section reviews how Positive Energy in China has moved beyond discursive and ideological origins to become not only a socially embedded affective force, but also strategically orchestrated system of affective governance. The roots of 'positive propaganda' can be traced back to the 1980 s, when the state selectively reported political events intended to inspire 'faith and affection' through the shared understandings of collective hardship and struggle (Brady, 2002). From 2003 onwards, campaigns such as CCTV's annual '*Touching China*' [感动中国] programme exemplified this ideological technique by presenting moral exemplars who represented sacrifice and perseverance embodied collectivist ideals (Chen & Wang, 2019).

While these early campaigns shaped the ideological foundations of Positive Energy, its state-sanctioned meaning has not been static but highly contextual. The dominance of a one-dimensional state-society relation – exemplified by narratives of sacrifice and devotion to the nation – has been partially changed and challenged in post-reform China, where market forces, consumer culture, and individualism have introduced new conditions that necessitate evolved form of socio-cultural governance (Su, 2015). This indicates that the discourse of Positive Energy has expanded from a political slogan into a diversified socio-semantic network. For example, Chen et al. (2021) analyse Positive Energy dissemination on *Douyin* as a state-supported form of nationalism characterised by 'playfulness': light, everyday content and meme-like formats that appeal to young users, while promoting optimism, unity, and collective progress. Unlike the traditional logic of top-down ideological inculcation, the current state use of Positive Energy foregrounds individual desire, popular culture, voluntary choice, and active participation (Peidong & Lijun, 2018).

While Western scholarship recognises affective dynamics as a potential ground for resistance – either in the form of alternative infrastructures (Barney, 2021) or as political stances expressed through different structures of feeling (Anderson & Secor, 2025) – China's Positive Energy model features a more top-down political and ideological framework, even as its modes and trajectories of mobilisation remain diverse. More specifically, despite its apparent emphasis on individual agency and market dynamics, social governance in contemporary China ultimately seeks to cultivate a stable atmosphere, grounded in ideals such as social integration, collectivism, and social harmony (Peidong & Lijun, 2018; Wu et al., 2025). For example, Lin and Liang (2024) study of people with disabilities shows how individuals internalise and negotiate Positive Energy tropes (e.g., optimism, work ethic, patriotic service) to forge belonging and derive personal meaning within dominant value systems and mainstream society. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, state media amplified public perceptions of global hostility toward China, mobilising 'defensive nationalism' – rooted in historical resentment toward colonialism – and framing it as Positive Energy in the promotion of national unity and the vision of 'national rejuvenation' (Zhang, 2022). Therefore, the criteria for what qualifies as Positive Energy are both contextual and relational.

Semantically, although such 'positivity' lacks a precise definition, its state-led promotion is closely tied to the discourse of 'core socialist values' that affects individuals work, life, and daily practices, with emphasis on public morality, national pride, collective effort, and shared development goals (Peidong & Lijun, 2018). This value- and ideology-oriented semantic framework underpins the subsequent theoretical discussion of its variations and inform the methods of discourse analysis and coding. Its ambiguity, combined with its top-down nature, necessitate a multi-scalar analysis of how the Positive Energy circulates across discursive layers in urban planning (Chung & Xu, 2021) – from identifying its centralised discursive origins to tracing how it is appropriated by local actors within specific spatial and social contexts.

This duality of ambiguity and authority is not unique to the present

[1] China's Five-Year Plan is a national development blueprint that sets out key economic and social priorities for a five-year period. The central government issues overarching policy guidelines, which are then interpreted and operationalised through responsive and locally adapted plans by various ministries and local governments.

[2] Government planning document (in Chinese): https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021–09/03/content_5635308.htm.

[3] The core socialist values are a set of ideological principles and concepts outlined by the party-state.

moment but resonates with longer traditions of Chinese political philosophy. In particular, the ideal of social harmony has deep historical roots in Confucian ethics of the relational self: between individuals, between people and society, between humans and heaven, and between subjects and the ruler. The maintenance of such harmony has long been central to governance, relying on each person's acknowledgement of their designated role within the hierarchical order and the respect accorded to those in superior positions, grounded in moral principles (Yuan, 2019). We argue that today this relational approach provides not only a moral but also an affective foundation for governance. It engages diverse social groups to explore, self-motivate, and identify their own pathways into alignment with, and the (re)production of, the national agenda. This approach also highlights the *infra*-ness of the Positive Energy governance mechanism – not by directly targeting emotional responses to national agendas, but by creating affective conditions in which individuals feel, think, and act in ways that sustain these alignments (Bosworth, 2023).

Understanding the governance mode of Positive Energy – characterised by self-motivation, infra-ness, relational identification – offers a novel lens to theorise the affective dynamics of state-society relationship *in*, *through*, and *with* China. The following section synthesises how the logic of Positive Energy governance is spatially materialised in state-led urban development, drawing on the analytical perspectives of affective urbanism and affective economies.

2.2. Contextualising Affective urbanism and Affective Economies with Positive Energy Model

This section examines how the state has adopted Positive Energy as a core mechanism for shaping the affective landscape, economy, and atmospheres of urban development. As the capacity for economic growth – particularly that underpinning youth nationalism (Zhang, 2023) – has diminished amid economic slowdown and land scarcity, urban governance strategies have increasingly sought legitimacy in non-economic domains (Wu et al., 2025). The 14th Five-Year Plan's emphasis on 'high-quality development' marks a shift from the priorities of the past two decades in China – which often privileged economic growth and large-scale construction at the expense of cultural and environmental sustainability – towards a greater focus on the humanistic and sustainable values of space (F. Zhang et al., 2022). In parallel, developmental discourses such as 'People's Cities' and the model of 'co-construction, co-governance, and co-sharing' have been introduced to empower social actors and agencies, foster public participation, and cultivate collectivist mindsets that reinforce citizens' identification with the developmental vision (Wu et al., 2025). The new discourse of 'People's Cities', we argue, reflects a contextualised variant of the Positive Energy governance model, manifested through the governance of urban atmospheres.

First, atmosphere has become an integral part of the design and management of urban development projects (Anderson & Holden, 2008). Beyond institutional design and procedural justice, Wang et al. (2024) study on neighbourhood communities' involvement in urban village renovation in Guangzhou highlights the role of affective atmospheres in cultivating a collective sense of home. These atmospheres foster belonging and future imaginaries, sustaining everyday participation and mobilisation beyond the scope of and duration of institutional intervention. Another salient manifestation of affective urbanism in China is what scholars have termed *Wanghong* (online celebrities in Chinese) *urbanism* – a mode of urban development in which local governments collaborate with neoliberal actors such as social media platforms, influencers, and commercial spaces to generate emotionally charged urban experiences and the accompanying processes of gentrification (A. Y. Zhang et al., 2022). Urban space is increasingly constituted through the layering of physical and various affective dimensions, mediated and intensified by digital technologies (Xu and Bailey, 2024).

This is not simply an appropriation of the global experience economy that produces pleasurable and consumable experiences (Degen et al., 2017; Sarmiento, 2018). Rather, the entrepreneurial state also actively observes, captures, and mediates social atmospheres and market trends, securing them into digital 'emotional values' (Cao, 2024) of urban space that feed into reproduction of developmental agendas. Beyond cultural and creative policies, by enhancing the 'attention-drawing' and 'fan-building' capacity of new media platform (Yang, 2022), this governance strategy is able to convert internet users into 'fans-like' followers who are more receptive to government messaging and emotionally attuned to its developmental projects (Yu, 2019). At its core, this mode of urban governance leverages atmosphere to generate 'spontaneous' public participation, resonance, and consent in urban development projects.

On the one hand, an atmosphere-driven – rather than administratively pre-scripted – mode of governance demonstrates greater potential for enhancing collective capacity for action, adaptability to changing environments, and long-term sustainability (Paiva, 2023; Vašát & Váně, 2023). On the other hand, urban governance shaped by the logic of Positive Energy remains a strong top-down orientation centred on mainstream values – by actively seizing upon the dynamism, emergence, and generativity of affect and atmosphere through conditional and selective policy support. We now unpack this nuanced aspect further by reviewing how the state governs the affective economies of heritage in China.

This article presents urban heritage renewal as a significant and revealing site through which Positive Energy governance takes shape. Heritage spaces often act as repositories of shared histories and of the affects residents experience as most 'authentic'– organised through material forms, inscriptions, memories, practices, and visual elements (Zhu, 2025). As Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010) argue, heritage space is a crucial site for the 'circulation of affect' and the 'organisation of sensibility'. Emotions such as pride, nostalgia, or fear, are central to processes of inclusion and exclusion, shaping who belongs and who does not. This nexus of emotion and power has been theorised by Ahmed (2004) as *affective economies*, in which emotions are not only private, internal states, but are also socially and politically constituted – through historical sedimentation or change, transmission, repetition, and circulation – thereby producing boundaries of self and other in this process.

One illustrative example is the state-led renovation of Hanfu (traditional clothing of the Han Chinese) culture, which, we argue, exemplifies how the Positive Energy governance model enables the state to restructure and institutionally embed affective economies in everyday cultural life as part of its broader project of national socio-cultural governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state initiated and promoted multiple Hanfu-related events (Ip & Fan, 2024) as a way of actively responding to and enhancing the rising tide of online nationalism and anti-colonial sentiments (Zhang, 2022). For instance, a mayor in Zhejiang Province appeared in Hanfu and performed ritual bows in public, framing Hanfu and traditional etiquette as a 'culturally superior' way to promote social distancing compared to Western practices (Jia, 2023).

Before this recent wave of revival, however, Hanfu and many other traditional cultural practices had long been marginalised in post-Cultural Revolution China, regarded as incompatible with dominant urban imaginaries of modernity, progress, and technological advancement by the official (Zhu, 2025). Despite the persistence of grassroots Hanfu movements, their development remained limited and peripheral to the mainstream (Law & Qin, 2022). It was within the political context of 'cultural confidence' championed by Xi that Hanfu was redefined as 'excellent traditional culture' aligned with the socialist core values, officially promoted and incorporated into historical districts and everyday urban spaces.

By reviewing this process, we argue that Positive Energy governance operates on heritage renewal not only at the level of policy or spatial planning but also more profoundly through the recoding of emotion, imaginaries, and values – in ways that restructure affective economies (Ip & Fan, 2024), and accordingly, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. This involves how Hanfu is imagined within society, how it is

associated with the state, and ultimately, how the Hanfu-state relationship is rendered meaningful and affectively resonant in public identification with the state – through its incorporation into the Positive Energy discourse. This review provides the context for our empirical study of Wenshu heritage renewal, where Hanfu-driven experiential economy has emerged both as a significant developing initiative and everyday practice, as well as a *Wanghong* consumption trend. We thus examine how the local governments, by incorporating the Hanfu culture, seek to recode the affective economies of Wenshu Square – selecting, adopting, and embedding the emotional values and meanings now attached to heritage forms such as Hanfu.

3. Research design and methods

Empirically, this study focuses on the heritage renewal of Wenshu Square in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China, located adjacent to the thousand-year-old Wenshu Monastery. Historically, Wenshu Square housed a distinctive Western Sichuan architectural complex, alongside spaces dedicated to local crafts, traditional snacks, and Buddhist and Taoist cultural exhibits. Since the 2021 urban renewal, it has been developed as a fashionable urban cultural tourism landmark oriented toward younger generations, with a renewed focus on ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage)- and Hanfu-based experiential economies. Its renewal project has received significant recognition as a role model of urban governance during the 14 Five-Year Plan period. It reflects its close alignment with state-led urban governance objectives, with the potential for replication across other regions. These characteristics make Wenshu Square a compelling empirical site for this study.

This study draws on multiple data sources, including policy documents and news, social media content, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. First, 11 policy documents and 23 news articles published between 2020 and 2024 by official central and local agencies were collected, focusing on urban planning and heritage renewal activities purportedly aligned with the 14th Five-Year Plan. In addition, 31 social media posts were gathered from public accounts, including *Wenshu Square*, *Chengdu Intangible Heritage Centre*, *Chengdu Planning and Natural Resources Bureau*, *Sichuan Hanfu Association*, and *Chengdu New Economy*, offering insights into spatial development, management and marketing strategies.

Between September 2023 and January 2024, the first author conducted 57 field visits to Wenshu Square, spending a total of 247 h onsite. During this period, 27 interviews were carried out with Hanfu participants, as Hanfu-related economies have been identified as key enablers in the renewal of Wenshu Square. The Hanfu-wearers participants (n = 19) were highly diverse, ranging from long-time Hanfu enthusiasts with over ten years of involvement in Hanfu communities to newcomers who had recently started wearing Hanfu because of being drawn to Wenshu Square's activities. Semi-structured interviews were designed to explore participants' embodied meaning-making processes and the cultural and emotional significance they attribute to Wenshu Square (Hood, 2016). The remaining interviews were conducted with Hanfu industry practitioners, including models (n = 2), Hanfu experience shop owners (n = 3), and Hanfu community managers (n = 3). These interviews explored topics such as marketing coordination, business management strategies, and practitioners' perspectives on consumer preferences in Chengdu.

First, discourse analysis was conducted on policy documents to identify not only their discursive prominence, but also how they operate as structuring narratives that align multiscalar policy actions to shape everyday experiences (Chung & Xu, 2021). This coding process clarified the renewal mechanisms through which heritage spaces are configured to align with key policy objectives. Finally, drawing on participant observation and interviews, the study examines how individuals adopt distinctive emotions and stances while engaging with what is on offer, revealing how top-down discourses are stratified, reinterpreted, or contested (Waterton, 2018), and how a 'relational self' is formed. This multi-scalar methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how governance discourses are translated into spatial strategies and experienced in everyday life. It does not imply that the government's promises of prosperous development are automatically accepted; rather, our focus is on examining how the evolving modes of governance take shape under such conditions (Wu et al., 2025).

In addition, we developed a sensory map (Fig. 1) as both a descriptive illustration and a theoretically informed analytical device. Methodologically, the purpose is not to produce a static, representational map that fixes sites as generating a single type of sense, but rather to give examples of how diverse and contingent affective encounters unfold across space – encounters that, as we argue, is institutionally curated. The map plots sensory narratives – such as smell, sight, and touch – in relation to particular locations and activities. We overlay affective nodes with spatial elements such as plazas and streets, and incorporates textual data from fieldnotes, interview quotes, and marketing materials, together with annotations that capture affective interactions between them. In doing so, it demonstrates how affect is embedded, organised, and spatially reproduced within the urban fabric, rather than being understood as merely spontaneous, discrete, or fleeting. Ultimately, we aim to use this visualisation to render these affective mechanisms visible and to strengthen our theorisation of the infrastructuralisation of affect (Wilson, 2023). We will next contextualise how the state-led discourse has shaped Chengdu's affective urbanism and developmental goals, laying a groundwork for analysing specific Wenshu Square's spatial renewal's goals and schemes.

4. Creative Heritage Space as Affective Governance

4.1. Framing the 'Happy City' of Chengdu

In 2021, the Chengdu Municipal Government implement the *Ten Major Projects for a Happy and Better Life* [十大幸福美好工程] (hereafter the *Happiness Project*) as a response to the national goals of 'High Quality Development' set forth in the 14th Five-Year Plan. The urban project's alignment with national governance objectives was reaffirmed during President Xi's 2023 visit to Chengdu,[4] and he praised Chengdu as 'one of the most vibrant and happiest cities in China.' This positioning was further elaborated and institutionalised at the 2023 Annual Summary and Promotion Conference, where the 'shared benefits with people' and 'common prosperity' was articulated as core values of urban development.[5] Here, Chengdu's positioning as a 'Happy City' [幸福城市] is a direct and localised response to Xi's vision of 'People's City' (Wu et al., 2025). This conference provided its explanations of what constitutes a 'Happy City':

> '…where the broad public expresses deep love for their city and life itself, where people uphold moral virtue, strive with dedication, embrace optimism and inclusiveness. Countless everyday acts of kindness by ordinary citizens together weave the warm and humane fabric of Chengdu, collectively painting the most beautiful and diverse scenes of urban life.'

This conception of 'happiness' goes beyond individual pleasure or joy. It foregrounds a collective and contagious atmosphere of optimism, positivity, and inclusivity, along with citizens' affection for and identification with the city (Lin & Liang, 2024) – together forming the urban affective atmosphere of a 'Happy City.' Such an envisioning of affective practices and atmospheres indicates the strategic mobilisation of affect

[4] News article published by Chengdu Development and Reform Commission (CDDRC): https://cddrc.chengdu.gov.cn/cdsfzggw/ztlm041001/2024–09/14/content_1a9cf198229d4457898b8efcb21a6713.shtml.

[5] News article published by CDDRC: https://cddrc.chengdu.gov.cn/cdsfzggw/ztlm041001/2024–09/14/content_fe9b9a6e5ec24161bddb039c87357263.shtml.

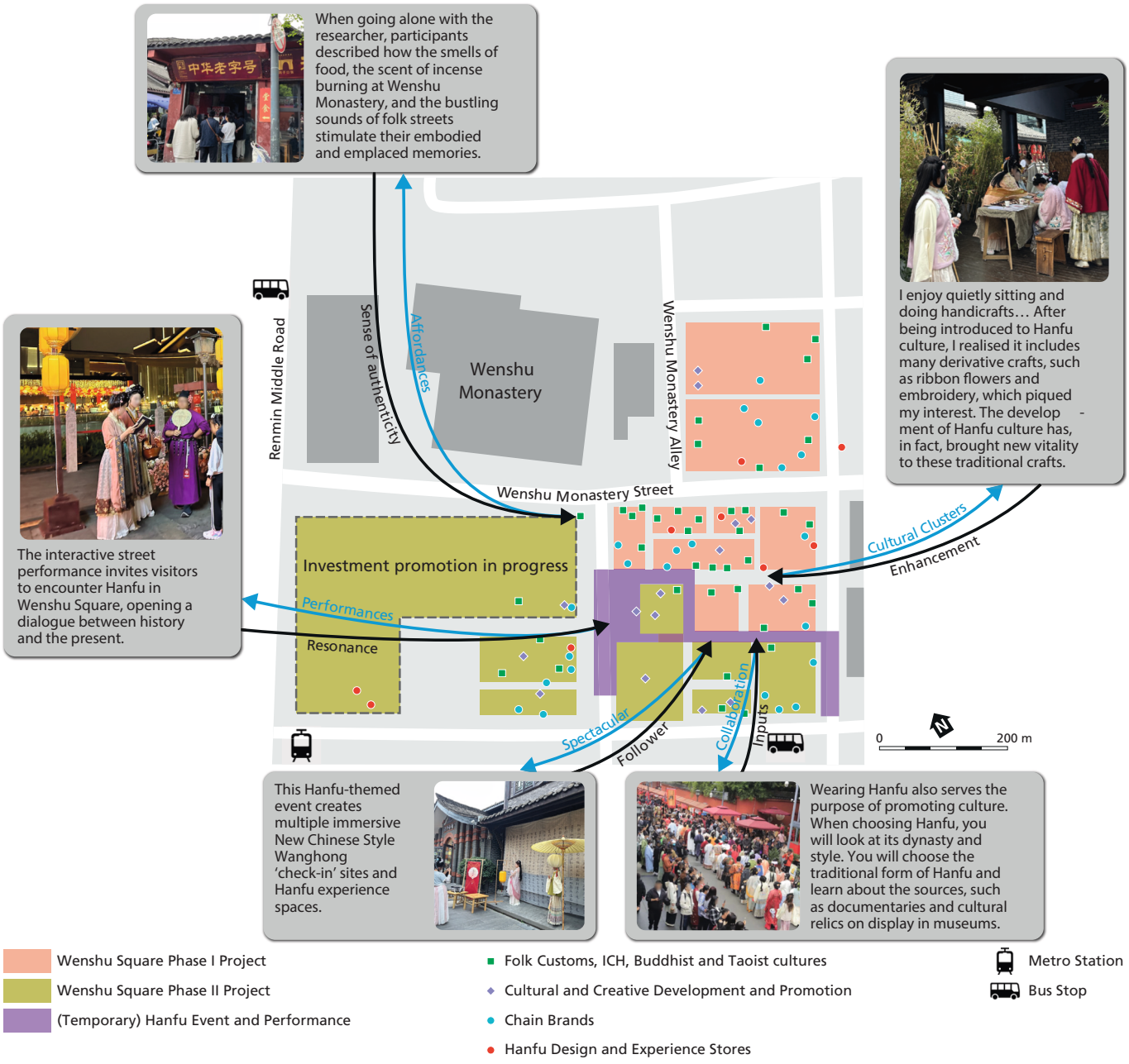

Fig. 1. Sensory map created by the authors.

as both a means and a medium of social co-governance and public participation (Wang et al., 2024). But how is such affective atmosphere 'measured' by the government, and how is it cultivated in the context of spatial renewal in Chengdu? Notably, the Chengdu Planning and Natural Resources Bureau (CDPNRB) outlined strategies to advance the high-quality development in parallel with the city's branding efforts to position itself as a historical and creative city[6]:

> 'In the course of building a Park City Demonstration Zone that embodies the new development concepts, Chengdu has carried forward the legacy of *Bashu* civilisation and advanced *Tianfu* culture.[7] It has further strengthened its sense of responsibility for the protection and inheritance of historical and cultural heritage, embraced innovative conservation approaches, undertaken top-level planning, refined institutional mechanisms, and ensured effective implementation, with the aim of building Chengdu into a world-renowned cultural city and to promote Chengdu culture on the global stage.'

By framing the revitalisation of *Bashu* civilisation and advanced *Tianfu* culture as core features of 'Happy Chengdu,' the policy discourse frames 'new development' as a process of re-creating, conserving, and promoting cultural heritage. On the one hand, by emphasising *Bashu* and *Tianfu* traditions, this narrative lends the urban imaginaries of 'happy city' historical authenticity and cultural legitimacy. On the other hand, cultural protection is no longer conceived as static preservation

[6] News article published by CDPNRB: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/RGI5q1IZDUVzfjxq2bWOkQ.

[7] The concept of *Bashu* civilisation and *Tianfu* culture encompasses the historical heritage and evolving cultural identity of the Sichuan region.

but as a dynamic, future-oriented mode of development. An affective approach to heritage space is more specifically explained in Chengdu's Master Plan (2021),[8] which identifies experiential and creative cultural economies as key strategies for heritage renewal. The plan places strong emphasis on cultivating a 'new economy' to revitalise heritage spaces and 'unlock' their historical and cultural value for urban development (page 7). In the document, the 'new economy' is defined as to 'promote the integrated development of experiential economies while optimising technologies to stimulate demand potentials through the creation of new scenarios' (page 20). This planning highlights how economy and technology are employed to make heritage spaces attractive, consumable and investable, while simultaneously positioning heritage as a cultural resource capable of endowing the economy with symbolic depth and emotional engagement (Sarmiento, 2018).

More recently, in 2024, Chengdu's New Economy initiative launched the 'Top 100 Most Chengdu-Style Aesthetic Life Scenes' campaign, which placed emphasis on the deep integration of aesthetic lifestyles of 'Happy Chengdu' with spatial cultural-tourism consumption – further positioning urban space as a cultural product to be extensively shaped by industries and technologies, and consumed by the public[9]:

> 'It aimed to more precisely identify and promote spaces that not only stimulate tourists' desire to consume, but also embody and convey Chengdu's distinctive aesthetics of everyday life. Selected streets and spaces receive a package of promotional support – including featured coverage on official platforms, priority inclusion in Chengdu's cultural tourism marketing plans and travel routes, and the production of promotional videos – to further enhance their visibility and influence. Through this, the city seeks to cultivate a strong urban cultural atmosphere, while showcasing and reinforcing the unique charm and brand identity of Chengdu's cultural tourism.'

These state-led conferences, investment promotions, and evaluative campaigns initiated by the Chengdu municipal government illustrate how the government exercises supervision through selective promotion of particular forms of spatialised cultural content, guided by aesthetic criteria, through policy incentives and media amplification (Degen & Rose, 2024; A. Y. Zhang et al., 2022). This mode of governance – characterised by selective policy supports, discursive framing of space, and partnership with neoliberal platforms – largely determines what forms of cultural content become readily encounterable, visible, and legitimate, as well as how such content circulates in public life, shaping the texture of everyday life (Bosworth, 2023). In doing such planning, the local government not only treats heritage space as a cultural asset for urban growth (Zhu, 2025), while also asserting its authority in defining its social meaning – shaping how people should perceive, value, and practice it (Crang & Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Ernwein & Matthey, 2019). The Wenshu Square renewal project was also among the 2024 officially recognised 'Top 100 Aesthetic Life Scenes'. Its inclusion illustrates how such aesthetic spatial governance logic underpinning state-led urban regeneration is concretely materialised in Chengdu's heritage spaces.

4.2. *Curating Affective Atmospheres of Wenshu Square*

This section examines how Wenshu Square is renewed by the discursive-material spatial reorganisation. Wenshu Square today is themed with slogan of 'happiness in old Chengdu, modern experiences in new Chengdu', which reflects its two-phase development (Fig. 1). The first phase, completed in 2017, focused on preserving local folk traditions and national heritage. The second phase, initiated after 2017, has introduced high-end chain brand and creative cultural industries to attract younger audiences, emphasising experiential economies. While these two phases are were formally planned as distinct spatial functions, in practice, they align more closely with investment promotion and commercial strategies, reflecting evolving commercial stages rather than a fixed spatial layout. Nowadays, Wenshu Square envisions the desired portrayal of local life in its post as follows[10]:

> 'By day, stroll through historic cultural alleys, immersing yourself in the vibrant local atmosphere of old Chengdu. By night, indulge in gourmet food, watch performances, and enjoy drinks – savouring the fashion and artistry of new Chengdu under the moonlight and neon glow.'

By juxtaposing the cultural tradition with consumption-driven modernity, Wenshu Square encapsulates Chengdu's vision of an urban landscapes imbued with 'vibrant local atmospheres [烟火气]', preserving cultural heritage while simultaneously integrating a thriving night economy that signify modernity and urban liveability (Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015). Old Chengdu, in the official promotional narratives, is represented through local culinary, folk culture streets, Buddhist cultural handicrafts, and the traditional Western Sichuan architectural style.[11] These sites are framed as cultural assets that embodies Chengdu's historical slow-paced lifestyle, essential for fostering a rich everyday atmosphere, evoking a sense of warmth and place (Zhu, 2025). Our field observations reveal that these local cultures and businesses are deeply embedded in the rhythms of community life. When going alone with the researcher, participants described how the smells of food, the scent of incense burning at Wenshu Monastery, and the bustling sounds of folk streets evoke their embodied memories and sense of authenticity about the place (Fig. 1) (Degen & Lewis, 2020).

In addition to heritage preservation, Wenshu Square's spatial renewal design places significant emphasis on openness of architectures and interconnected structure of spaces, which are designed to foster an interactive environment and dynamic commercial landscapes. The developers frame this openness not merely as an architectural or commercial design feature, but as a spatial strategy for generating encounterable community life, consumptions, and affective engagement[12]:

> 'Through an open-block layout of ancient courtyard architectural styles, it creates a parallel spatial experience, forming a lifestyle curation space that spans across ages and cultures. This fills the consumption needs of the customer base and fulfils our mission of joining hands with the city for a happy life.'

This spatial vision aligns with broader municipal discourses and values of 'Happy City', wherein ideas of consumption, historical aesthetics, and inclusivity and diversity are spatialised to produce serendipitous encounters. Within this framing of a 'lifestyle curation space', beyond the design of numerous outdoor commercial seating and display areas, Wenshu Square frequently utilises plazas and open streets to host events related to traditional culture and aesthetics, such as open markets, exhibitions, and pop-up activities themed around heritage. In this way, heritage space is reimagined as a stage for performing lifestyle through active spatial design and industrial curation (Degen et al., 2017). Here, space becomes an active medium that channels affective experiences, shifting visitors from passive observers to active participants (Ernwein & Matthey, 2019).

However, while the thematic spatial planning emphasises on

[8] Government planning document (in Chinese): https://mpnr.chengdu.gov.cn/ghhzrzyj/ztgh/2021–07/06/e67c4752beaf43c4af7e18d1709d0346/files/afe553f019c04cfc90d451bd3ff30719.pdf.

[9] News article by *Chengdu New Economy*: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/64eik5O3lQuvx49n1UL9nw.

[10] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2m9ASQZfP7cnSkcyoatJVA.

[11] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dXihBeXINlzrR9NqLyuAEg.

[12] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/UUdKAbWGHTQjeMAkP5pBlw.

atmospheric vibrancy and seemly authenticity, they are not entirely spontaneous. Wenshu Square embeds its urban imaginaries into aesthetic criteria in its daily governance – rendering its atmospheres rather carefully curated. This mode of spatial orchestration is framed under the term 'refined management' [精细化管理], and is framed as a key governance outcome of the heritage renewal process[13]:

> 'The goal of implementing a comprehensive design-led approach to street-level management is to establish a model of urban block governance that embodies six dimensions of beauty: hygiene, public order, facilities, spatial form, social conduct, and smart governance…A "one store, one strategy" approach is adopted to guide businesses in creating customised shop signage, resulting in a diverse yet harmonious streetscape. Altogether, these efforts aim to foster a high-quality urban environment where the vibrant atmosphere of everyday life [烟火气] coexists harmoniously with cleanliness and aesthetic order.'

Cultural diversity is encouraged and visibly present, while, simultaneously, practitioners are essentially required to navigate their 'one strategy' and operate within a pre-defined framework of 'harmonious diversity' – one that aligns with officially endorsed aesthetic standards such as the 'six dimensions of beauty'. Cultural elements or practices that do not find a place within these aesthetic criteria are rendered affectively illegitimate. For instance, in a local newspaper interview, the General Manager of the Industrial Development Centre at Chengdu Urban Investment Real Estate – the development company of Wenshu Square – explained the rationale for removing 'Funeral Street' in developing the site's new identity[14]:

> 'We want to attract more young people and make this a gathering place for the new generation. How can we strike a balance between protecting and passing on traditional culture while ensuring market viability? This was a key consideration during the second-phase development.'

This statement underscores that heritage is not merely preserved but actively curated to serve urban governance objectives. In this interview, the general manager emphasised that Wenshu Square was once a place far away from words like 'bustling,' 'prosperous,' or 'trendy.' Its backstreets were once known as 'funeral street,' lined with shops selling incense, wax offerings, paper money, and funeral wreaths, attracting visitors mainly for incense burning and spiritual blessings. As part of the renewal project, the funeral street was replaced by newly introduced food and snack shops – an 'upgrade' that aligns neatly with urban development goals centred on modernity, vibrancy, and cultural trendiness (Zhu, 2025). While 'Funeral Street' was erased from the urban fabric, traditional snack streets were revitalised as authentic cultural assets. This shift altered the area's symbolic and affective meanings (Degen & Lewis, 2020). The reconfiguration of spatial-material elements entailed not only a physical restructuring, but also a reorganisation of associated memories, emotions, everyday practices, and aesthetic atmospheres (Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015) – filtered and recombined to produce affective affordances for attracting targeted young user groups.

This section reveals how urban governance operates through material reconfigurations that distribute and circulate affect – where meanings are relationally produced through the spatial configuration and the everyday practices they enable (Degen & Rose, 2024). In doing so, it encourages the desirable spatial practices, such as cultural consumption, by reimagining the embodied and aesthetic contours of Wenshu Square in accordance with the discourses of being 'happy', 'vibrant', and 'modern.' In this sense, heritage space becomes not only a curated cultural landscape, but is also positioned as a material and affective medium through which governance objectives are sensed and lived in everyday space (Waterton, 2018).

5. Integrating Hanfu: Affective Economies of Cultural Nationalism in Wenshu Square

5.1. Mobilising the Affective Labour of Hanfu Communities

As discussed in the literature review, the post-pandemic years saw the rise of online nationalism and growing state efforts to capture and institutionalise the nationalistic emotions associated with Hanfu (Cui, 2023; Jia, 2023). These dynamics elevated Hanfu from a cultural niche to a visible cultural symbol of patriotism and rejuvenation, reconfiguring it into an 'affective apparatus' for performing cultural confidence (Ip & Fan, 2024). Within this broader ideological and affective context, Chengdu government began to recognise and mobilise these affective dynamics in the Wenshu Square renewal – primarily through strategic collaborations with local Hanfu communities.

In 2020, the Deputy Mayor of Chengdu, together with the Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism and other leading departments, conducted a field study on the operation of Hanfu culture in Wenshu Square and held a symposium.[15] At this meeting, the municipal government released its plan to position Chengdu as 'China's Hanfu Capital' and to realise this goal in collaboration with local Hanfu businesses and communities. The 'shared' development vision was summarised as follows:

> 'As a city rich in historical and cultural heritage, Chengdu possesses abundant Hanfu cultural resources. The Hanfu cultural industry holds promising prospects and immense potential. Therefore, all Hanfu businesses should continue to reform and innovate, using Hanfu as a medium to promote Chinese civilisation and carry forward the great national spirit and valuable cultural heritage passed down by our ancestors.'

The ambition to construct Chengdu as the national centre of Hanfu culture was grounded in their reading of social and market dynamics. First, the municipal government's reference to 'abundant Hanfu cultural resources' builds on the already vibrant grassroots Hanfu communities in Chengdu. A co-founder of 'Back to Tang Dynasty' [重回汉唐] – founded in 2006 and one of China's most renowned Hanfu brands – once proclaimed Chengdu as 'China's Hanfu Capital.' She drew upon 2018 Taobao consumer data, which showed a 92 % year-on-year increase in Hanfu purchases, identifying those born after 1995 as the primary consumer group and ranking Chengdu first among all cities in Hanfu sales.[16] These grassroots narratives, movements, and emotions (Law & Qin, 2022) were subsequently appropriated into official discourse and began to appear in government-affiliated media outlets by 2020.

Thereafter, Wenshu Square entered into a long-term collaboration with the Sichuan Hanfu Association and communities, encompassing the development of creative industry clusters, the organisation of traditional festivals and events, and the promotion of the space as a cultural destination through social media. In its marketing materials, Wenshu Square highlight the strategic role of Hanfu practices in its spatial renewal, aimed at cultivating its new identity as 'a cultural, experiential and commercial hub for ICH and Hanfu culture[17]'. These practices are

[13] News article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ck4iSx8ystqi1DX3vOED3Q.

[14] News article by *Huaxi Metropolis Daily*: https://cdwglj.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwglj/c133208/2023–01/30/content_2dee34345e9745339d-d9e0d34856c1b4.shtml.

[15] News article by Sichuan Hanfu: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/I_XcwmESlVY4n9C-mw0RfA.

[16] News article by Chengdu News: https://m.sohu.com/a/740628948_355475/?pvid=000115_3w_a.

[17] News article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2m9ASQZfP7cnSkcyoatJVA.

designed to infuse the site with greater affective dynamics, transforming Wenshu Square into a festive, lived, shared, and participatory cultural space (Wang et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). Such transformation, we argue, is dynamic yet not random; it can be reasonably anticipated by harnessing – rather than overtly controlling – the experiences and mediations of existing social relations and identities (Carah, 2014).

Crucially, in such collaboration, Wenshu Square provides a platform for Hanfu communities to generate their 'inputs' (A. Y. Zhang et al., 2022): expressing their passion and expertise, expanding their cultural influence, and voluntarily participating in heritage-related events. According to the leader of a local Hanfu community that partnered with Wenshu Square, many developers regularly invite Hanfu groups to take part in festivals and public celebrations in Chengdu. Their motivation to collaborate may stem less from the attractiveness of these events *per se*, and more from the desire to sustain the social vitality of the Hanfu community and enhance its cultural visibility in the public sphere. Furthermore, as one Hanfu participant, who had been recruited from local Hanfu communities to serve as a part-time performer during festivals, explained her motivation for participating in Hanfu performances at Wenshu Square (Fig. 1):

> 'To me, Hanfu represents more of China's culture. Wearing Hanfu also serves the purpose of promoting culture. When choosing Hanfu, you will look at its dynasty and style. You will choose the traditional form of Hanfu and learn about the sources, such as documentaries and cultural relics on display in museums… In addition, there is also the reason for cultural self-confidence, because our own culture is very diverse and very rich. Chinese in our generation at least should know our own culture.'

The affective experiences of Hanfu participants – especially those with extensive engagement – often go beyond individual and instant enjoyment and extend into shared senses of purpose, cultural identity, and collective achievement (Zhang et al., 2023). As exemplified in this quote, the participant positioned herself not merely as a consumer or performer, but as a self-motivated cultural transmitter and bearer of tradition. Her voluntary engagement in Wenshu Square's heritage practices was driven by a sense of historical continuity, cultural pride, and responsibility for preserving and promoting traditional cultures – sentiments that resonate with recent research on the emerging Hanfu economies in China (Fan & Ip, 2023; Jia, 2023). In this sense, participants' engagements reflect an alignment with national cultural values – a form of (self-)conditioning grounded in pre-existing relations, affective resonance, and a shared sense of commitment (Zhang, 2022). Arguably, while this collaboration empowers Hanfu communities, it simultaneously allows Wenshu Square to capitalise on their affective labour – including costume preparation, cultural communication, and the mobilisation of cultural nationalism – largely driven by participants' own values, desires, and beliefs (Carah, 2014).

Here is another example. The renewal also raises questions about the commodification of cultural heritage. One experienced Hanfu communities' member deemed these 'playable' heritage activities as commercial and superficial, which might lose the essence of traditional cultural preservation:

> 'It really just has some commercial nature… In my view, there is no difference between these people and those holding advertisement signs in shopping malls. It just attracts people under the banner of a Hanfu Festival. In our smaller circles before, the level was higher. For example, we held poetry gatherings or tea ceremonies. Through a piece of clothing, we should let people come to understand ancient culture, and only then could we truly achieve what we call cultural confidence.'

On the one hand, the participant's narrative reflects a sense of emotional illegitimacy within the dominant atmosphere of consumption, where the desire for deeper cultural richness feels out of place or undervalued. On the other hand, the participant emphasised the need for Hanfu communities to remain true to their original aspiration and continue the mission of promoting culture. He tends to actively negotiate their roles, seek a balance between promoting Hanfu culture and resisting its over commercialisation, while maintaining a commitment to meaningful cultural engagement. Rather than offering a counter-narrative to the discourse of positive energy, this quote illustrates how governance modes of 'co-construction' and 'co-sharing' can entail both empowerment and responsibility and risk displacement (Wu et al., 2025), particularly in the realm of affective experience. When outcomes fall short of expectations, participants who have been involved in in the development and construction process are less likely to challenge it's the project's legitimacy; rather, through the relational self they have formed in connection with the project of Hanfu renovation, they undertake affective labour of self-conditioning and negotiation (Lin & Liang, 2024; Yang, 2022). Here, Positive Energy governance transforms heritage space into a participatory and shared platform that invites individuals to navigate, position, and express their situated and relational roles – such as those of cultural intermediaries – within a system of state-framed affective-political meanings (Bosworth, 2023), thereby generating sustained affective alignment.

5.2. *Hanfu as Affective Nodes for Accumulation*

In 2020, Wenshu Square has launched themed forums and Hanfu events under the banner of 'the inheritance of Chinese civilisation and the innovation of cultural and creative industries.'[18] The Chair of the China Cultural Promotion Society delivered keynote speeches offering strategic guidance on how to 'showcase the unique charm of Chinese culture and enhance understanding and recognition of Chinese civilisation,' and proposed that Chengdu and Wenshu Square should 'innovate modes of cultural exchange, enrich its content, and improve the quality of cultural communication.' In direct response, Chengdu Urban Investment Group released plans for a Hanfu-themed street – one of the flagship projects in Wenshu Square's renewal – centred on Hanfu's creative economies and industry clusters, integrating ICH-related research and development, design, sales, rental, styling, photography, and tourism.

On the same afternoon, Wenshu Square staged a Hanfu street event. Alongside coverage by official media outlets such as Xinhua News and Sichuan News Online, major social media platforms. The event was also exclusively livestreamed on Douyin, where the campaign slogan 'Hanfu Lights Up Chengdu' [汉服点亮成都] appeared on the app's launch screen, garnering over 50 million views. This illustrates how Wenshu Square interprets and leverages the Hanfu economy to respond to the requirement for an 'innovative mode of communication' aimed at enhancing the state-society relationship. Following these initial attempts and their evaluations, Wenshu Square officially launched the Chengdu Hanfu Cultural Festival in 2022 under the IP 'Let Hanfu Bloom in Chengdu' [衣起锦官城].

While summarised sequentially in the Table 1, the three festival years do not represent a linear evolution of practice. Many activities overlapped across years, and many of earlier strategies were retained rather than discarded; rather, the emphasis here is on the layered and deepening mediations of affect. The festival shifted from a spectacle-oriented strategy – marked by Wanghong check-in sites and celebrity appearances (Fig. 1) – to one of affective resonance, embedding Hanfu within national heritage narratives through historical performances (Fig. 1) and mobilising influencers to extend its emotional reach. By 2024, the festival explicitly foregrounded collaborative participation, reframing Hanfu as a creative medium for cultural innovation, as well as intergenerational learning. This trajectory reflects a layered and mediating form of governance that extends beyond the attention-grabbing

[18] News article by Sichuan Hanfu: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/s6PRtOjfuU2PhT9hDmJPsQ.

Table 1
Content of the Chengdu Hanfu Cultural Festival (2022–2024).

Year	Core Strategy	Key Activities & Practices
2022	Activating participant engagement	Theme: 'NPC-driven Immersive Hanfu Gala' slogan Activities: Culinary market; Wanghong 'check-in' spots; Hanfu exhibition; Historical role-play game; Celebrity promo videos[1]
2023	Deepening affective resonance through aesthetic experiences	Theme: Be the Inheritor of Outstanding Traditional Chinese CultureActivities: Hanfu celebration with Mid-Autumn Festival; Guofeng (traditional Chinese style) market with 'check-in' spots; Hanfu parade; 38 Guofeng influencers; Street performance[2]
2024	Consolidating participation through co-creative cultural practices	Theme: Be the Inheritor of Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture Activities: Designer Hanfu runway shows; Styling competitions; Parent-child fashion show; Shu embroidery workshops and educational content[3]

[1] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/JBfCWx7hoJ84ckWRsh1jdg.
[2] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/KQ9C3Tdd3lulwfSCAnqLJw.
[3] Marketing article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bBgUvc0iSuv95jbOHyDdaQ.

qualities of photogenic sites and their dissemination via social media – sometime concerned for their unsustainable spectacle (A. Y. Zhang et al., 2022) – to mobilising this attention toward cultivating affective attachment and resonance, and ultimately fostering deeper cultural participation. Its ambition is not merely to turn audiences into consumers (Cao, 2024) of heritage space, but to transform them into self-motivated creators and active participants by mobilising atmosphere (Wang et al., 2024), aligning personal creativity with the ideological framework of cultural revitalisation and confidence.

Another concrete example of cultivating such longer-term, deeper engagement is Wenshu Square's development of creative cultural clusters in the Hanfu-themed street, which expand opportunities for immersive, experiential interactions and aim to realise the aspiration of 'making heritage a lifestyle' as a means of revitalising Chinese traditions.[19] Specifically, in the practical operations of the Hanfu economy, a complete Hanfu performance integrates diverse elements of ICH, such as velvet-flower hair accessories and tung oil-paper umbrellas, which are often used as props. Wearing Hanfu thus becomes an embodied practice of engagement with ICH, as illustrated in an interview (Fig. 1):

> 'I feel as if I was born in ancient China. The clothing I like is Hanfu, and I am also fond of traditional crafts from the past. I enjoy quietly sitting and doing handicrafts. As I grew older, I discovered there are so many different types of handicrafts. After being introduced to Hanfu culture, I realised it includes many derivative crafts, such as ribbon flowers and embroidery, which piqued my interest. The development of Hanfu culture has, in fact, brought new vitality to these traditional crafts. To truly understand Hanfu, one cannot only focus on the clothing itself; it represents a heritage of craftsmanship and aesthetics.'

This account demonstrates how a sense of belonging and national identity is cultivated through repetitive, iterative, and synergistic embodied practices in such affective environment. Participants do not merely consume heritage passively but also actively engage with its textures, techniques, and values. The sensory and material qualities of traditional crafts – such as embroidery or velvet-flower making – are intertwined with Hanfu as a wearable medium of cultural expression. Together, they form affective assemblages that foster storytelling, sensory engagement, and participatory creation (Merriman & Jones, 2017). Over time, these fleeting embodied encounters gradually sediment into long-term attachments and value alignment, driven by a reinforcing loop of positive emotions – such as meaning, fulfilment, and, as participant described, the emotional belonging of feeling 'born in ancient China' – through which her cultural identification with China is cultivated. These positive emotions are repeatedly amplified through spatial atmosphere and sustained heritage interactions (Xu and Bailey, 2024). In this sense, Wenshu Square's spatial integration of Hanfu and ICH industries produces an affective space infrastructured through multiple and experientially resonant affective nodes (Fig. 1), where diverse emotions are echoed, amplified, and disseminated. Such spatial configurations and materialities enable individuals to internalise a space-infused identity through touch, repetition, and embodied meaning-making (Andersson, 2022).

Nonetheless, lived and contested narratives surrounding Hanfu persist – such as conscious and unconscious Han-centric discourses on dress and the exclusionary scrutiny of clothing styles from non-Han-ruled dynasties. These radical or critical voices are often moderated, marginalised, or silenced within the ideological frameworks of a 'harmonious society' and 'national identity' (Law & Qin, 2022). On behalf of Wenshu Square, the Hanfu Association recruited participants, sets dress codes, and manages and coordinates the Hanfu performances. The association's selection criteria specify:

> 'Participants must wear Hanfu that adheres to established Hanfu standards. Counterfeit Hanfu, studio-style costumes, theatrical costumes (e.g., emperor or martial hero costumes), Hezi skirts, Qing-style cloud shoulders, Qing Han women's attire,[20] and similar garments are not permitted. Additionally, male participants must not wear their hair loose or dress in women's clothing (including, but not limited to, mamian skirts).'

According to the organisers, these classifications, restrictions, and prohibitions are not meant to exclude other ethnic cultures but are intended to educate audiences and visitors about the 'correct' histories and offer them a genuine sense of historical authenticity. 'But there are basically no public restrictions on what visitors choose to wear,' explained by the event coordinator. This regulation of cultural diversity allows the state to assert its authority in defining identity and historical authenticity in the background (Crang & Tolia-Kelly, 2010). Another subtle layer of political significance lies in the exclusion of public performances deemed capable of triggering overt political expression or confrontation, particularly when they challenge the boundaries of Positive Energy content (Yang, 2022). Such act of public political expressions therefore is conceived as undermining 'public order and social harmony', rendered incompatible with the official vision of public culture.

By this we could argue that the 'innovative mode of cultural communication', enacted though Hanfu-themed street, is less concerned with civic engagement and more oriented toward affective resonance and ideological alignment (Yang, 2022). In this context, governance operates like a supervisor and programmer of space by managing the (re)production of atmospheres – selectively amplifying and endorsing certain narratives and performances that are deemed to embody desired affective meanings, while discreetly marginalising or erasing elements that might provoke tension or contestation, thereby sustaining an ideologically sanctioned affective environment.

[19] News article by Wenshu Square: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2m9ASQZfP7cnSkcyoatJVA.

[20] Hezi skirts, Qing-style cloud shoulders, and Qing Han women's attire originated from the clothing culture of non-Han ethnic groups during dynasties ruled by non-Han peoples in ancient China.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In the analysis of Wenshu Square renewal, we examine how the heritage space's production of atmosphere is 1) governed through discursive-material spatial reorganisation and 2) shaped by, circulated within, and interacting with broader affective-political economies. Affect and emotion function not only as the objects of governance but also as its instruments (Bosworth, 2023) – facilitating emotional consent, relational identification, and public participation in (Ernwein & Matthey, 2019; Yu, 2019) the co-production of vibrant atmospheres that make Chengdu a 'Happy City'. Affective urbanism shaped by Positive Energy governance logics operates through enabling the infrastructuralisation of affect, underpinning the production of space by: 1) instrumentalising affect; 2) unevenly distributing and arranging affect across spaces and publics; 3) conditioning its circulation, trajectories of channelling, and reproduction; and 4) fostering self-conditioning through the deliberate shaping of affective spaces. Arguably, 'infrastructural affect' (Bosworth, 2023; Wilson, 2023) functions as a foundational relational force that simultaneously transforms and instrumentalise space and secures national political legitimacy.

First, the official imaginaries of how to deploy experiential economies and affective technologies in renovating heritage space and creating a 'Happy Chengdu' reveal how affect is envisioned, managed, and constructed as a form of infrastructure to serve developmental objectives within urban planning and governance instruments (Anderson & Holden, 2008). By examining the spatial renewal of Wenshu Square, we illustrate how the affective conditioning happens through selective inclusion and reconfiguration of material heritage elements and its discursive meanings – such as snacks and funeral streets – which actively contribute to the affective transformation Wenshu Square's urban imaginaries (Crang & Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Waterton, 2018). In this way, spatial interventions embed developmental intentions into fabric of everyday experiences through policies, planning, and design, making urban projects affectively persuasive and sensorially lived (Degen & Rose, 2024; Paiva, 2023; Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015).

Furthermore, what further distinguishes the Positive Energy governance from the mere distribution of affordances is its orchestration of spatial affective dynamics, which circulate, interact, and orient themselves toward a broader affective-political organisation – one in which affective atmospheres are entangled with multiscalar ideological narratives and structured by national agendas. Through strategic collaboration with Hanfu communities, it harnesses local Hanfu atmosphere and their affective labour as affective 'inputs' (Carah, 2014; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021) to serve for Wenshu Square's identity as a 'Hanfu and ICH hub' and contribute to Chengdu's broader branding of a 'creative and historical city'. Here, Wenshu Square functions as an incentive platform where certain communities are encouraged, supported, and self-motivated to navigate, position, and perform themselves relationally – conditionally supported by policies and official agencies.

Meanwhile, in branding a Hanfu-themed street as a *Wanghong* product, affective governance in Wenshu Square operates through layered mediation – moving from attention-grabbing appeals, to emotional resonance, and further to the cultivation of long-term attachment and commitment to participation and collaboration. In this process, the street is transformed into a highly participatory space through creative cultural clustering dense with affective nodes, where emotions, economies, practices, and identities mutually amplify (Ahmed, 2004). Sustained engagement – embedded in a continuous feedback loop generated from experiences and repeated embodied practices over time – cultivates space-induced affective subjectivities (Andersson, 2022), through which attachments, values, and a relational self identified with cultural China are gradually formed and enhanced. These, in turn, reinforce 'co-governance, co-construction, and co-sharing' as enduring strategies of urban governance, demonstrating their sustainability and resilience (Wu et al., 2025).

Co-governance's ambition of turning the public into participants and then into co-creators also reveals a deeper governance logic of Positive Energy – one that intervenes in the subjective world through the conditioning of affective environments (Ernwein & Matthey, 2019), thereby fostering processes of self-conditioning. Within such governance contexts, citizens are expected to derive diverse positive emotions and resonance from curated forms of participation and atmosphere, which nevertheless often appear self-driven and spontaneous in everyday spatial experiences (Wang et al., 2024; Yu, 2019). Here, we argue for more creative methods such as the sensory map that both sharpen our sensitivities to embedded affective dynamics and help to theorise the mechanisms through which power relations are constituted and reproduced spatially (Wilson, 2023).

Yet, despite its idealistic rhetoric, Positive Energy governance rests more on securing stability and legitimacy than on promising justice (Wu et al., 2025; Yuan, 2019), and the self-conditioning loop on which it relies may also break down in practice. Beneath the harmonious façade lie the risks and undercurrents inherent in such forms of public participation and mobilisation. First, although the Positive Energy framework imagines the affective dynamics of society, cultural authenticity, and marketisation as mutually reinforcing, in practice Hanfu communities report diminished authenticity and over-commercialisation, while taking on additional burdens and labour to mediate these tensions. This sense of inconsistency illustrates how 'co-governance, co-construction, co-sharing' model may also entail the displacement or diffusion of burdens – whereby participating publics are mobilised to emotionally accommodate both desirable and undesirable outcomes of urban development without questioning its legitimacy (Wu et al., 2025). Similarly, Lin and Liang (2024) observe that Positive Energy discourses can heighten anxiety among marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities, who struggle to meet social expectations and the goals they have internalised.

This raises the question of whether such governance can result in a form of double marginalisation through subtle yet intensifying affective governance, especially in the absence of fair and equitable institutional support. In more extreme cases, as Yang (2022) study of the cyberfeminist movement shows, the excessive burdens arising from structural inequality can cause the breakdown of self-conditioning, leading to collective acts of resistance – even if such public expressions are quickly curbed under state censorship. This, in turn, leads to our next discussion on the (de)politicisation of public participation within Positive Energy governance model.

As noted in Section 5.2, public expression or performance of potentially contentious ethno-national debates around Hanfu is not permitted in Wenshu Square. Among participants drawn to the space by the popularity and aesthetic appeal of the Hanfu street, many remain unaware of the ideological and institutional selection embedded within the events, engaging instead in a form of 'participatory consent' through emotional resonance instead of critical civic engagement (Yu, 2019; A. Y. Zhang et al., 2022) – for example, reinforcing ethno-centric national narratives without critical awareness (Law & Qin, 2022). This (de)politicisation operates on two intertwined levels: first, through the vetting of the value orientations embedded in cultural content (Su, 2015), and second, through the regulation of the act of that expression itself (Yang, 2022), because public expressions that contest official value systems may spark social debates and thereby reconfigure the state-managed infrastructure of affective nodes (Stephens, 2016) that underpins the environment of a 'harmonious society.' Overall, these mechanisms reveal the dual nature of Positive Energy governance: empowering publics through attraction, inclusion and collaboration, while at the same time conditioning affective practices and redefining the boundaries of belonging and exclusion.

Finally, this study is limited by its focus on the occasions and mechanisms through which individuals and communities are mobilised, thus not capturing the perspectives of those who resist or abstain from participation. In a governance model where participation is central, a withdrawal of engagement itself may be read as a subtle, private form of

resistance (Anderson & Holden, 2008), a political stance that might gain its significance in a context where collective and public acts are subject to rapid regulation and censorship (Yang, 2022). In addition, as we have identified, Positive Energy social governance does not primarily regulate 'negative' social dynamics, but rather operates relationally – capturing and amplifying core value orientations embedded in cultural content that can reinforce the state-society relationship. Thus, strategically framed yet less radical forms of collective actions may be accommodated – as in the case of Hanfu communities' development, prior to its recent revival, when it remained preserved but not fully integrated into the social mainstream (Law & Qin, 2022). Examining such instances – small in scale yet affectively persistent – and their transformations can offer valuable insights into the ways in which, in specific social and political contexts, engagements with the state can acquire different political meaning, gesturing toward more contested and plural possibilities for public space and participation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chu Xu: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ilse van Liempt:** Writing - reiview & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ajay Bailey:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

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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