

Whose Old City? Spatial Politics and Gendering in the Gentrification of Chengdu's Yulin and Taikoo Li

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Abstract: Ruth Glass first put forward the concept of gentrification in 1964, and since then, it has been applied to cities around the world. Neil Smith, through the "rent gap theory", was one of the first to explain gentrification in terms of political economy. In his book **The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City**, he said that it is "a back-to-the-city movement driven by capital, not by people". However, during my reading, I noticed that the influencing factors of gentrification may include not only capital and rent gaps but also the influence of middle-class sexual minorities and female groups. Additionally, the locations where gentrification occurs require basic conditions such as transportation infrastructure and cultural heritage. I observed the gentrification phenomena in Yulin Street and the Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li in Chengdu. Through research, I found that the gentrification of Taikoo Li represents a "top-down" production of consumption space jointly decided by the government and capital, characterized by exclusivity and an international orientation. In contrast, Yulin Road exhibits a "bottom-up" gradual renewal process, attempting to find a balance between capital discourse and community daily life. However, neither path has completely escaped the predicament of gentrification; both are undergoing gentrification under the influence of rent and capital, shaping the class and gender order of urban space in different ways. In my view, gentrification also constructs the identity of individuals or groups, while differentially affecting different classes within these groups. Women of different classes also bear the differentiated spatial consequences brought about by gentrification.

Keywords: Gentrification; Spatial Politics;

Gendered Subjectivity; Chengdu; Urban Anthropology

1. Introduction: Gentrification as a Key Concept in Urban Studies

The term "gentrification" was coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the phenomenon of rising property values and changing social characteristics in London's working-class neighborhoods after being "invaded" by the middle class. In the past half-century, gentrification has changed from a few isolated cases in Western cities to an all-around transformation of cities around the world. Gentrification in large cities is occurring in all parts; from Islington in London and the Lower East Side in New York to Glebe in Sydney and Paris in France, these changes are becoming increasingly evident and essential for studying urban development today [1-3].

Among the various theoretical explanations, Neil Smith explicitly pointed out that gentrification is first and foremost "a capitalist economic profit-making activity in the name of modern urban renewal," whose core driving force is not the cultural preferences or lifestyle choices of the middle class, but capital's pursuit of profit. His "rent gap theory" posits that when the gap between potential rent and actual rent in an area is large enough, capital will flow back, thereby driving gentrification. Smith thus inferred that gentrification "is a structural product of the land and housing market" and "a back-to-the-city movement driven by capital rather than by people." Smith's theoretical contribution lies in bringing gentrification back from cultural explanations and middle-class aesthetic preferences and lifestyle choices to the theoretical analysis of political economy [4]. However, I believe he overemphasizes the "structural" power of capital and, to some extent, neglects the influence of subjective experience, identity politics, and gender dimensions in the

process of gentrification.

A core theory for understanding urban gentrification, proposed by geographer Neil Smith in 1979. This theory explains why capital flows back from suburbs to dilapidated inner cities and drives their renewal and transformation [5,6].

As a relatively developed city in western China, Chengdu is also experiencing gentrification in different spaces within the city. This city features both flagship consumer spaces jointly created by the government and capital, represented by Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, and gradually renewed communities struggling to balance local vitality and commercialization, represented by the Yulin area. Although only a few kilometers apart, they present quite different faces of gentrification. Based on these two cases, this study explores the spatial politics and class life differences in the process of gentrification, asking a fundamental question: When urban spaces are reshaped by capital [7], who owns the old city, and who is abandoned by it?

2. Capital's Urbanization: The Consumer Space and Subject Exclusion in Taikoo Li

Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li is located in the Daci Temple area in the center of Chengdu, which has been the commercial center of Chengdu since the Tang and Song dynasties. In 2010, Swire Properties and Sino-Ocean Group jointly initiated development, and the project officially opened in 2015. The spatial transformation and production logic of Taikoo Li clearly reflect Smith's rent gap theory. The local government has given the area around Daci Temple a negative label of being "backward" and "not in line with Chunxi Road", and through policy direction and land transfer, has collaborated with foreign developers to promote high-end development in this area.

Taikoo Li has taken the idea of "interpreting tradition with modernity", retained the green-tiled sloping-roof parts of Sichuan-style residential buildings, and used a large number of glass curtain walls and corridors to create a new style of Chinese architecture. Therefore, the Design Idea is Cultural Consumption Spaces for History. The Buddhist culture of Daci Temple, the historical memory of the Guangdong Guild Hall and the spatial characteristics of late Qing official-style courtyards have all been integrated into the elegant consumption venue. As Bin Liu and Zhongnuan Chen have pointed out, there are

problems with "superficial representation of local culture, spatial exclusivity and lack of public participation" in this 'spatial creation and use process', and culture is employed as a symbol of capital to increase the value of commercial space. Taikoo Li also has implicit class selection by means of entry thresholds. The list and filtering for tenants by the developer are relatively brief; thus, only first-tier luxury brands and famous restaurants will be listed here. The high consumption level is not suitable for most people. As a former resident of the Daci Temple community said: "Taikoo Li is indeed beautifully built, but the things inside are too expensive; we can't afford them. We just walk around the plaza and leave." This dual gene of "spatial democratization and consumption privilege", continuing from the era of Quanyechang, constitutes the consistent class stratification of Chengdu's commercial spaces. Furthermore, the gentrification of Taikoo Li is not limited to its walls; the commercial gentrification of the Daci Temple community forms two sub-places: "core" and "periphery." The core place composed of Taikoo Li and IFS is jointly promoted by the local government, developers, and gentrifying groups, following a "top-down global capital logic." In contrast, the surrounding old residential areas constitute the periphery, dominated and influenced by the core place [8]. Although original residents received demolition compensation, they lost the long-accumulated neighborhood social space resources. Meanwhile, surrounding merchants were forced to transform to cater to new consumer groups, and their rents nearly quintupled.

Taikoo Li tells us that gentrification is not entirely a natural result of the middle class returning to the city center, but a systematic reconstruction of urban space by capital with government cooperation. While creating high-end consumption spaces, this reconstruction also produces new social boundaries and spatial exclusion [9].

3. Catch-22 of the Everyday Atmosphere: Gradual Gentrification in Yulin and the Erosion of Daily Life

Unlike the "flagship" development of Yulin Road and Taikoo Li, the renewal of the Yulin area presents a different face. Yulin was originally built in the 1980s as an industrial supporting residential area on the southern

outskirts of Chengdu, once serving as a "cultural living room" for artists such as Duoling He and Chunya Zhou. In 2016, the folk song "Chengdu" made "Yulin Road" a check-in spot. Subsequently, driven by a series of projects such as "Tianfu Community Tour," "Flowers Bloom in Yulin," and "Market Life Circle," Yulin gradually explored an "inclusive community scenic area renewal path".

Yulin's uniqueness lies in its preservation of "diversity." Western gentrification "has an important relationship with the erasure of diversity in its results," but "Chengdu's Yulin presents a connotation of gentrification different from the West, and the key lies in the preservation and nurturing of diversity." The 2021 renovation allowed Yulin East Road to achieve "reverse growth": the shop rental rate reached 100%, and the average daily foot traffic tripled. Most importantly, a three-way discussion group of "residents' planners, community planners and professional planners" was also established to hear the people's suggestions in the dam meeting and other places. Thus, the old shops were not lost and could continue to offer traditional food culture, such as egg puff cakes, along with new coffee shops, vintage stores, etc. Has the notion of "inclusiveness" also been swept away by the tide of gentrification? The answer is not good. Remodelling in Yulin is actually an arrangement of Space for capital. The so-called dual logic of "value spillover" and "social embedding" is in fact the use of cultural capital in place of economic capital. It will make cultural brands such as "Little Bar" and "Folk Music Season" into new, desirable places in the city for young people and capital. Although the creative transformation of cultural capital is more "humane" than simple demolition and reconstruction, it does not change the basic direction of spatial appreciation [10]. The story of "coexistence of old and new" hides the underlying change in social class. The renovation of Yulin East Road has introduced new business models, such as coffee and light meals, and baristas from all over the world have been holding pop-up events here. The new form has removed the target groups of lower-income individuals and non-coffee drinkers; now, the new users are young people who want a place to "check in for their good looks, style and global food culture". When making popular life circles, it is necessary to satisfy the daily needs of older residents and the aesthetic desires of young

people at the same time, but there is an insurmountable division in economic and cultural levels between these two types of life. The community scenic area is structurally prone to over-commercialisation and social differences, and its own form of "participation" also has limitations. Although Yulin's renovation will be based on the ideas of public participation, what the residents can decide on is only the specifics of "changing trees", "widening streets" and "adding lights"; the main direction of altering the space will change from a residential area to a consumption scenic area, and this is out of the hands of the residents' suggestions. This kind of "participation" is more a way of governance that enables the people to feel heard but does not change the capital-dominated spatial production pattern.

In my view, the case of Yulin is very similar to the transformation of the Hamle community, perfectly embodying the essence of Catch-22. It attempts to find a third path between gentrification and community protection, but "inclusive gentrification" is still gentrification after all. When the atmosphere of everyday life itself becomes a marketable urban brand, the authenticity of daily life is quietly being drained away. The "success" of Yulin precisely demonstrates the strong elasticity of capital logic: it does not need to achieve spatial reorganization through violent expulsion, but can transform the everyday life of the community into a consumable urban cultural landscape through strategies of value spillover and social embedding.

4. The Identity Politics of Gentrification: Whose Middle Class? Whose Everyday Life?

Gentrification research has long been characterized by the theoretical debate between the "production-side" and the "consumption-side". Smith insists on the production-side explanation, arguing that gentrification is a structural product of capital's pursuit of profit; while scholars represented by David Ley emphasize the cultural preferences and consumption choices of the middle class. This debate is vividly illustrated in the case of Chengdu: Taikoo Li clearly aligns more with Smith's explanation, being a product of collusion between capital and the government; whereas Yulin seems closer to the consumption-side explanation, where the middle class's pursuit of "artistic," "fresh," and "international" styles

drives spatial transformation. However, both explanations implicitly involve an unreflective use of the category of the middle class. But who is the "middle class"? And how does gentrification differentially affect people of different classes, genders, and generations?

In the Daci Temple (Dacisi) community, original residents are "in a relatively passive position" in the gentrification process. Their low economic capital cannot give them the freedom to choose their own homes in the market; after the relocation, the well-built social networks they had formed have gradually broken down, and their accumulated social capital has steadily diminished. At the same time, there are other groups of tenants who are also affected by this, such as migrant workers who work in cleaning and catering at Taikoo Li and rent apartments in the nearby old neighbourhood; "typically 10 people live together in one apartment", but they are also "nurturing the core field by working at Taikoo Li and IFS", forming a link between the core and the periphery.

At the same time, after the renovation in Yulin, the streets are wider and the lights are brighter; now, young people are not inclined to leave upon returning. But what about the other residents who cannot participate in the community discussion, do not drink coffee, or do not check in? Are the voices of the people sufficiently represented in the heated discussions of the "Baba Meeting" (outdoor community meeting)? When "Yanhua Yulin" (Smoky Yulin) is selected as one of the country's representative cases of urban renewal, who is to be consulted about the meaning of "Yanhua Qi" (the vibe of everyday life)?

All of the above problems are, in fact, symptoms of gentrification. Spatial restructuring is not only a change in the physical environment but also a reordering of social identities. Who has the right to remain in the city center? Whose lifestyle is "legitimized" as tasteful? And whose daily practices are transformed into consumable spectacles? The answers to these questions are never neutral outcomes of market choices but rather the order of urban space shaped jointly by power and capital [11].

5. Gendered City: Performance of Female Subjectivity in Gentrification

The gender dimension of gentrification has been rarely mentioned in existing studies, and Smith's rent gap theory hardly addresses gender at all.

Consumption-side explanations, while focusing on middle-class lifestyles, often treat the middle class as a gender-neutral category. However, in my view, urban space has never been gender-neutral. Historically, urban space has always been "a center of unequal power relations, oppressive sociopolitical structures, and exclusionary and discriminatory practices", and the same applies to the gentrification process. In fact, "gentrification has not improved women's daily lives, and the urban framework has yet to adapt to the massive influx of professional women."²⁰ This judgment also reminds us that women are not a monolithic group of beneficiaries or victims in the gentrification process; rather, they experience differentiated spatial consequences based on class, occupation, and age.

In the case of Chengdu, we can identify at least three different types of female subjectivity, for which we can draw character portraits.

The first type: professional women as gentrification "pioneers." Smith once noted that the number of high-income single women increased significantly in gentrifying neighborhoods in New York. As seen in the consumer group of Taikoo Li, young women engaged in high-income occupations such as finance and design account for a significant proportion. They form a group identity through the consumption of luxury goods. As one of the interviewees said, "I go to cafes or lounges here every week to get inspired for work". Gentrified spaces have given these women the symbol of a professional identity and social status.

The second type: Women as "marginal gentrifiers". The concept of "marginal gentrifiers" proposed by Rose refers to a group of low-income but educated women who move into transitioning neighborhoods in the early stages of gentrification. In Yulin, young female entrepreneurs running independent cafes and cultural and creative shops may, I believe, fall into this category. They are neither spokespersons of capital nor traditional "middle class," yet they play the role of cultural intermediaries in spatial transformation.

The third type: women as victims of spatial displacement. The most brutal consequence of gentrification is the displacement of people and the disintegration of their communities, and these costs are often borne by the most vulnerable groups in society, among whom women are the majority. Low-income women,

single mothers, and elderly women face greater survival pressures amid rising rents and community changes. In the Daci Temple community, after relocation to "remote resettlement areas,"²⁴ "spatial capital" such as transportation and commuting is affected. For women who need to balance work and family, this deterioration of spatial location means a forced comprehensive restructuring of their daily lives.

The gender politics of gentrification also remind us that spatial justice cannot be discussed solely from the class dimension. When cities are reshuffled by capital, women can be both beneficiaries and victims, and more often than not, a complex interweaving of the two. We should adopt a dialectical approach, avoiding the simplification of any group into homogeneous "victims" or "beneficiaries."

6. Conclusion: Whose Old City?

Taking Chengdu's Yulin and Taikoo Li as typical cases, this paper explores the spatial politics and class subjectivity in the process of gentrification. Taikoo Li's flagship development exemplifies the capital logic revealed by Smith, where the government and developers collaborate to produce exclusive high-end consumption spaces through the operation of capital power and active class selection. Yulin's slow renovation is another case of gentrification: The goal of inclusive community landscaping is to integrate capital operations with daily life in a balanced way, but even the brand of a lively atmosphere is a type of capital invasion into people's daily lives.

We cannot help but ask, "Whose city is the city we live in, and whose old city is the old city after gentrification?" Smith's answer in **The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City** is that "the city belongs to capital" and gentrification is "a back-to-the-city movement driven by capital, not by people". The two cases in Chengdu are mainly in line with this judgment; whether it is the exclusive area of Taikoo Li or the inclusive renovation of Yulin, both ultimately aim to increase the value of space and accumulate capital in a cycle.

However, we should also consider that the city is a place for living, a place of memories, a place where people build their identities, etc., not merely a place of capital. In the loss of neighborhood spatial networks for original residents of Daci Temple community, in the

limited hearing of elderly residents' voices in Yulin, and in the daily life dilemmas faced by lower-class women, we find practical life experiences that are out of the scope of capital logic. Although these experiences may not change the structural forces of gentrification, they show us that the city is always a living place with many forces and diversities, not merely a one-way inscription of capital.

"Whose city?" is finally about the possibility of spatial justice. When urban renewal is shifted from demolishing old buildings and building new ones to developing organically by renovating old buildings, and when it moves from being led by the government to having public participation, can we open up new forms of spatial production that are not based on capital logic? Yulin's Experiment will provide us with an idea. It is not an ideal case, but it can be considered that "another gentrification" is possible. Finally, whether this "alternative" will become the new normal and whether it can be realised as actual spatial justice has not yet been decided.

In my opinion, the answers to these questions are not in theoretical deductions but in the actual operation of all urban space renovations and in the daily voice and negotiation of every citizen. As people living in the city and as students of ethnology, we should have the courage to question. Behind every declaration of "Better City, Better Life", we need to ask whose better life and at what cost. This will help us better know the answer to "Whose city?".

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