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Small tourism entrepreneurs, heritage authenticity and tourism gentrification: a critical engagement with more-than-representational theory

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing economic uncertainties have a significant impact on how heritage is experienced. In the context of tourism gentrification, small tourism entrepreneurs (STEs) are often criticised for (over)commodification of the past, thereby altering perceptions of heritage authenticity. This study adopts Waterton's (2014) more-than-representational approach, suggesting authenticity is relational, contextual and negotiable through embodied everyday heritage experiences. Drawing on focus groups with thirty interviews and participant observation, this study identifies two central challenges faced by STEs: (1) the loss of consistency and cohesion in the meaning-making of heritage and (2) the insufficient integration of local everyday practices in performing heritage. These challenges demonstrate the need to negotiate power relations and to perform heritage authenticity within a gentrified context where cultural meaning, economic survival and place-making interplay. The conclusion offers recommendations for tourism development and historic place marketing, with a practical emphasis on the importance of supporting STEs as active agents in negotiating meaning-making and performing heritage authenticity as everyday entrepreneurial practices.

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Introduction

As global urban development increasingly influences cities, gentrification follows a circuit of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005; Zhang et al., 2022). In many declining industrial cities, heritage-led regeneration has seen dramatic changes. Yet heritage tourism is becoming a central component of city strategies for urban regeneration (Caffyn & Lutz, 1999); however, it faces conceptual and operational challenges in 'the integration of heritage within broader holistic urban planning and development' (Duxbury et al., 2016, p. 7).

Tourism gentrification is one of these consequences. Recent research has shown how tourism gentrification is transforming historical places into business destinations, attracting investments, enterprises and talents (Su et al., 2018). This is also supported by local government and authorities as part of the revitalisation of city branding, often through the enlightenment of cultural heritage

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(del Mármol & Santamarina, 2024) or increasing the housing value for residential displacement (Bouzarovski et al., 2018).

Small tourism entrepreneurs proactively participate in this gentrified process. They are not merely middle-class urbanities relocating in the inner city (Liang & Bao, 2015; Smith, 2016) but play a crucial role in the innovation of cultural heritage products for emerging upper-class consumption. While scholars extensively examined tourism entrepreneurs in city destination marketing (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Yang & Wall, 2022), urban regeneration (González-Pérez, 2020) and heritage innovation and commodification (Martínez, 2016), there remains limited discussion on how STEs represent cultural meaning, especially the 'authentic' dimension of heritage.

In critical heritage studies, authenticity is crucial to accumulate cultural and economic capital (González-Pérez, 2020; Rickly et al., 2025; Teo & Yeoh, 1996). Many scholars understand authenticity through three dimensions, such as the objective, the constructive and the existential (Belhassen et al., 2008; Cheng et al., 2025), and it can be constantly reinterpreted with changing societal needs and views (Mérari & Kulikov, 2024). Rickly et al. (2025) engage authenticity debates by moving beyond purely immersive heritage experiences linked to tourist behaviours or community identity. Instead, they propose a balanced approach between heritage conservation and commodification. The latter one is often perceived as undermining historical authenticity and, in some cases, leading to displacement and gentrification, which intensify tensions between host communities and visitors (Font & McCabe, 2017; Zhang & Xie, 2025).

Although heritage authenticity can be purposefully interpreted (Ashworth & Page, 2011), limited research has explored how small tourism entrepreneurs strategically use, maintain and represent heritage authenticity, especially articulating the effect of heritage, values and experiences during the gentrification-induced transformation. Understanding how tourism entrepreneurs perceive heritage authenticity and developing a coherent approach to heritage conservation, have become critical to the long-term viability of heritage and tourism (Qu et al., 2025). To address these gaps, this paper draws on Waterton's (2014) observations of more-than-representation theory to examine how small tourism entrepreneurs (STEs) represent heritage authenticity through their sense- and meaning-making process, as well as everyday entrepreneurial practices. The discussion will shift our paradigm of thinking about heritage authenticity from a single sector-specific approach to a more integrated system, incorporating economic, spatial and cultural-social values within the context of gentrification.

A more-than-representational understanding of heritage authenticity

Waterton (2014) further extends Lorimer's (2005) more-than-representational theory in the relationship between heritage and geography. She summarises three observations in the politics of heritage. First, it shifts the understanding of heritage to quest engagement, experience and performance (Harrison, 2013). Second, it encourages a phenomenological thinking that experiences heritage in a complex process of meaning- and sense-making. Third, it recognises the spaces of heritage as 'agents or co-participants/producers of a heritage experience' (Waterton, 2014, p. 824).

These observations provide us with a theoretical lens for understanding heritage authenticity. Authenticity was previously examined through the objective (real), the constructive (sociopolitical) and the existential (phenomenological) (Belhassen et al., 2008). Bernardi and Arenas (2022) identified four dimensions of authenticity by social enterprises: consistency, conformity, connection and exploration. Yin et al. (2023) classified authenticity as indexical and iconic. That said, when an object has a factual connection to history, it has indexical authenticity. When an object is perceived to be real, it has iconic authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In addition, Zhang et al. (2024) distinguished host authenticity from tourist-perceived authenticity, that being objects gazed upon by tourists in intangible cultural heritage tourism.

While the existing research has widely explored the definition and categorisation of authenticity (Chhabra et al., 2003; Park et al., 2019), more-than-representational thinking reframes heritage

authenticity as a lived and embodied experience (Di Domenico & Miller, 2012). This experience is not an isolated social phenomenon, nor ‘as a code to be broken’ (Dewsbury, 2003, p. 438), but a process of becoming. Objects, sites and landscapes are typically defined as ‘being historic’ that signify history (Waitt, 2000, p. 838). They offer an alternative perspective to subjective existential authenticity (Wang, 1999) and simultaneously include past and present, elsewhere and elsewhere (Waterton, 2014).

Furthermore, the more-than-representational approach redirects us to understand authenticity as perceived and negotiated through ‘a response of the phenomenologies of being-in-the-world’ (Wylie, 2007, p. 172). Park (2014) states that heritage is ‘not a fixed and unchanging entity, instead, it is a socially produced, conditioned and negotiated process’ (p. 22). Studies, such as DeLyser’s (1999) research on California ghost towns and Tiberghien et al. (2023)’s study of space heritage in Kazakhstan, demonstrate that authenticity is partially informed and influenced by how the images of landscapes, built heritage and artefacts are experienced. These experiences convey new meanings, which become tangible evidence, informing heritage interpretation. Su and Park (2023) also examined the negotiation of cultural trauma at battlefield sites, where the reliving of historical memories contributes to shared consciousness and collective belonging.

As heritage itself cannot be extracted from its material and spatial contexts, authenticity cannot be separated from physical representation alone. Instead, authenticity is understood as a process of sense and meaning-making with ‘tentative and fractional orderings’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 302). From this perspective, heritage authenticity is dynamic to invite interaction, response, and transformation (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Zhang & Liu, 2021). Heritage users and stakeholders actively engage with emerging heritage spaces (Crouch & Parker, 2003; Poria et al., 2001), in which they thus shape reflection on what is already known and what remains unknown.

Tourism gentrification

Gentrification has emerged as a global urban strategy for transforming the social spaces of lower-income communities into spaces for upper-class consumption. Gotham (2005) summarised three waves of gentrification in the US. In the first wave (1950s–1973), federal funds supported local redevelopment, primarily aimed at upscaling urban housing development in the areas considered ‘blighted’, typically inhabited by the poor and the working class. The second wave (1970s–1980s) saw the integration of new investments in cultural and historical institutions with the creative development of real estate and banking finance. The third wave introduced more decentralised and privatised low-income housing policies, opening new markets in previously marginalised neighbourhoods and increasing access to mortgage capital.

The three waves of ‘economics of gentrification’ help us understand how relatively poor or marginalised neighbourhoods are transformed into affluent areas, often marked by the proliferation of entertainment and tourism venues. These waves are evident in the revitalisation of historical places and rural areas, when the upgrading of tourism infrastructure and specific commercial services is linked to touristification. Commodification, as well as involving the privatisation of public spaces (Dürr & Jaffe, 2012; González-Pérez, 2020), produces various forms of displacement as outcomes of gentrification. Three main characteristics of gentrification remain, including ‘the investment of capital, the alternation of land uses or landscapes, and the socioeconomic change of gentrified neighbourhoods’ (Chen et al., 2024, p. 10). These characteristics underline different types of gentrification, including tourism gentrification in this research.

Several scholars examined various dimensions of tourism gentrification, such as consumer demands (Gotham, 2005), residential, commercial and urban renewal plans (Cócola, 2018; Pendlebury et al., 2009; Skoll & Korstanje, 2014) and community development (Liang & Bao, 2015). Harvey (1989) introduced the concept of urban entrepreneurialism as an emerging strategy that commodifies the urban landscape for multiple urban users. To enhance place-specific

socioeconomic assets and attract capital investment and state policy support, the commodification of heritage often reflects institutional arrangements and, at times, negotiations between the market economy and localised urban development (Su, 2015). Others also explored the processes, consequences and applications of tourism gentrification in market towns (Liang & Bao, 2015; Philips, 2004; Smith, 2002; Su, 2012); Richards (1996) highlighted how capital accumulation and real estate development shift heritage economic values towards property protection and the designation of conservation zones. Tourism gentrification thus becomes a critical force in reshaping contemporary urban landscapes and socioeconomic structures (Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017).

For small tourism entrepreneurs (STEs), commodifying the past is an entrepreneurial strategy in new heritage production (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Ho & McKercher, 2004; Milojevic & Pavlovic, 2017; Su & Teo, 2009). Researchers explored entrepreneurs from entrepreneurial characteristics, attitudes and entrepreneurship stages (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2003; Katongole et al., 2013; Koh, 2014). Other scholars focus on the relationships between STEs and local communities (Shaw & Williams, 1998) or between STEs and destinations (Komppula, 2014; Mottiar et al., 2018). It is noted that small tourism entrepreneurs, government officials and even residents do not always share similar values and understanding of authenticity. These differences can generate potential tensions that result in various perspectives on heritage conservation and commodification (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2020; Rickly et al., 2025). Neighbourhoods can be overexploited by low-quality and low-cost tourism consumption, while maximising profits and short-term economic returns. In addition, rising rental prices and the demolition of old properties make it increasingly difficult for cultural artists and heritage inheritors to maintain life-work studios and exhibit their work (Amin & Thrift, 2007; Hutton, 2015). Insufficient social and economic resources may even force them to leave their neighbourhoods, resulting in the loss of locally rooted cultural expressions and practices (Brown-Saracino & Ghaziani, 2009; Canavan, 2016; Hyra, 2015; Zukin, 2010). This dual displacement, affecting both residents and cultural producers, raises critical concerns about heritage authenticity. In light of these issues, it is, therefore, important to examine the characteristics, priorities and responsibilities of small tourism entrepreneurs, how power relations and decision-making are negotiated in terms of heritage authenticity, and to what extent implications arise from the process of tourism gentrification.

Case study

Case context

The case study was selected in Tunxi, Anhui Province, China. Tunxi is well known for its ‘*Huishang*’, representing Hui merchants’ enterprise culture and heritage. ‘*Hui*’ was identified by ‘affiliation with their home preference’ (Du, 2015, p. 6), such as Huizhou (now Huangshan city) in the present study. ‘*Shang*’ means merchants, either individuals or groups, involved in trading, finance and business.

As one of the most influential entrepreneurial groups, *Huishang* gained its reputation, not only as frequent travellers trading in high margin salt, silk and tea and engaged in pawn broking, but more important as Confucian merchants (Mount Huangshan, 2017), known for their business ethics, especially ‘integrity, righteousness, and straightforwardness’ (Du, 2015, p. 34). Their own houses often symbolise the Hui family’s wealth and specialised business.

The focus of this study was Hui merchant heritage in Tunxi Ancient Street (Figure 1), located in Huangshan City (also named Huizhou) in southern Anhui Province in China. After Emperor Hui-zong of the Song Dynasty (1082–1135) moved the national capital to Lin’an (now Hangzhou City), wood craftsmen and merchants stimulated city planning and architecture in Tunxi Town. Tunxi Ancient Street (Figure 2), 832 metres in length, contained 47 old merchant houses historically trading in tea, mushrooms, dry bamboo shoots and fungus, as well as brushes, ink, ink stone and paper since the early Ming Dynasty (Zhou & Li, 1998).



Figure 1. Tunxi Ancient Street. Source: Taken by the first author.

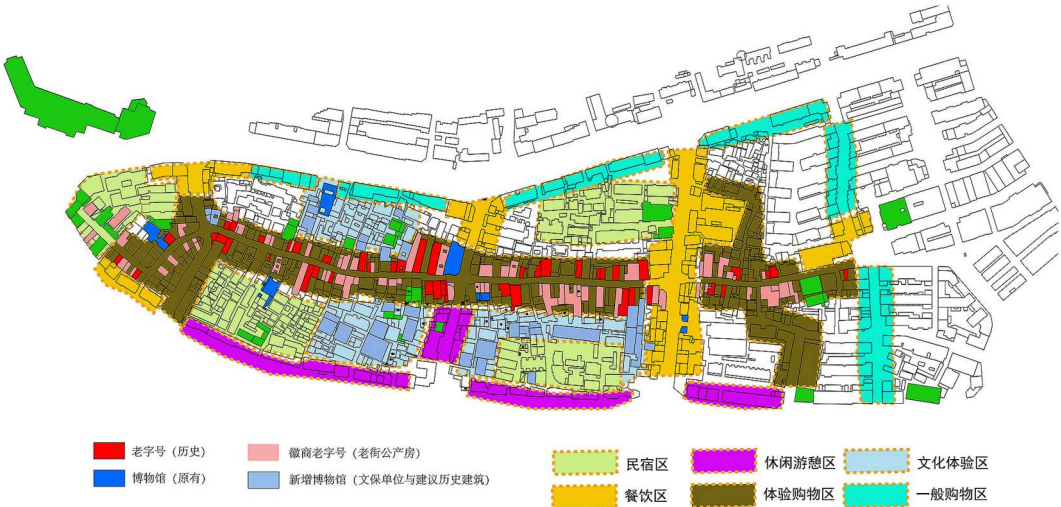


Figure 2. Enterprise and heritage resources in Tunxi Ancient Street. Source: Design by the first author.

Tourism gentrification significantly reshaped Tunxi's neighbourhoods. In 2022, a survey for the Tourism Development Master Plan revealed that 60% of entrepreneurs in Tunxi Ancient Street had rented houses for tourism for less than five years, 22.5% for over 20 years and 14.5% for over 10 years. Considering its historical challenges and economic contribution, the case of Tunxi and *Hui* merchant heritage was, therefore, chosen to evaluate heritage authenticity via a more-than-representational perspective.

Methods for data collection

We organised three focus group meetings to bring together a range of stakeholders who could have different perspectives on heritage authenticity and tourism gentrification (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Using a group interview approach, the focus groups invite individual participants to express their own opinions and encourage interactions among participants (Conradson, 2005; Vernon et al., 2003). These interactions enable contrasting views to be compared and explored in depth.

Purposive snowball sampling was employed to access appropriate informants (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of targeting government officials, urban planners, cultural and historical professionals and STEs is to seek a comprehensive understanding of heritage authenticity and tourism gentrification in Tunxi. Participants, who were interested in the research questions or actively involved in policy planning and development, had different opinions, knowledge and awareness. In order to provide the representativeness of focus group members (Creswell, 2013; Teddlie & Yu, 2007), participants should be able to answer the questions, such as how STEs preserve and promote merchant heritage, by what practices STEs respond to tourism gentrification and to what extent the authenticity of merchant heritage influences local cultural livelihoods and quality of life.

The first author contacted government officials who recommended prospective respondents from other government departments and urban planning institutions. Then, STEs' representatives were invited from a range of tourism sectors, such as hotels, restaurants, shops, museums, exhibition galleries and travel agencies. Regarding sample size, it is widely acknowledged that qualitative researchers tend to work with relatively fewer respondents (between 15 and 40), focusing on depth, rather than breadth, of an inquiry (Mason et al., 2010). Thus, the focus group meetings consisted of 13 government officials, 10 urban planners and 7 representatives of STEs.

The meetings were conducted on May 23 and 27, 2022. Each meeting comprised a facilitator and a note taker (the first and third authors). Open questions were prepared to generate discussions, and additional probing questions were raised by the facilitator whenever necessary. With permission, the discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed for later data analysis. Each focus group lasted around 2–4 h.

All focus groups discussed the same topic (Conradson, 2005), but urban planners and the enterprise representatives were more active in responding to the questions. By contrast, government officials were less open, as most participants only gave official responses, rather than their own personal opinions. All focus group interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

In addition, the first author chanced to participate in the urban planning of Tunxi Ancient Street. By collecting on-site observation data, the first author was also involved in listening and talking to the participants studied (Agapito, 2020; Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011; Rossetti, 2024). Such participant observation provided a holistic perspective on how STEs represented *Hui* merchant heritage and to what extent their entrepreneurial activities engaged with heritage authenticity. All focus group and participant observation data were transcribed and translated for data analysis. In order to retain the original meanings and to avoid ambiguity, some specific terms were kept in Mandarin.

Methods for data analysis

We employed thematic content analysis to organise, code and interpret the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Based on Waterton's (2014) three observations of more-than-representational theory, data coding is theory-independent (Cope, 2010), and it can lead to data reduction, organisation and analysis.

To ensure analytical rigour (Jakobsen, 2012), we assembled focus group data into three mini cases: government officials, urban planners and STEs. Each researcher was assigned to one mini case (Su et al., 2026), which allowed the methodological reflexivity regarding the interaction among the empirical focus group data, observations and the existing literature (Stoffelen, 2019). The necessitated cross-checking between cases ensured consistency and reliability in data interpretation.

We employed NVivo software in data coding, including topic coding, analytical coding and descriptive coding. Following Stoffelen's (2019) coding steps, Waterton's (2014) three observations of more-than-representational theory, and the literature review, the research team collaboratively started descriptive coding with 153 'free nodes' (i.e. concepts, reasons, problematic issues) and defined a list of 14 'tree nodes', including 'Actively use cultural heritage', 'Cultural heritage production', 'Cultural meaning', 'Displacement', 'Gentrification', 'Industrial innovation', 'Intangible cultural heritage', 'Privatisation', 'Everyday heritage', 'Preservation', 'Urban space planning', 'Commodification', 'Governance and regulation' and 'Transportation'. This list was not exhaustive but supported other thematic searching and data retrieval across (Neale & Bishop, 2012). Data interpretation was based on the relationships between and among different themes, which were interpretive and explanatory.

Findings

Meaning-making of authentic merchant heritage

Given its initial nature of 'more-than-representational', the meaning of 'authentic merchant heritage' should be actively interpreted through tangible objects (Thrift, 2008), such as merchant houses, merchant products and enterprises. Here, tangible heritage functions as an objective dimension of authenticity (Belhassen et al., 2008), carrying out the significance of 'being real'. Small tourism entrepreneurs (STEs) then play a key role in interpreting merchant trading history, the family business model and entrepreneurship characteristics. This finding adds a new perspective that STEs, standing between hosts and tourists (Zhang et al., 2024), can process their own interpretations of authenticity. Most of the STEs believed the *Hui* merchant heritage was not a logo or a name only, but carried unique symbolic meaning and historical value. This uniqueness signified a traditional Chinese business community, and more importantly, contributed to a cultural identity of the merchant community (de Bernardi & Arenas, 2022). One of them said,

Selling traditional *Hui* stationery has very limited profits, but I keep the marketing promotion of *Hui* merchant heritage and its uniqueness. If our current generation does not take this responsibility, cultural heritage will disappear, and nothing will be left for our future generations.

Another STE, running a stationery business at a merchant's house, emphasised the importance of preserving *Hui*'s time-honoured heritage brands (*laozihao* 老字号). He believed these brands to be as powerful as cultural icons to be inherited by future generations,

Over 100 shops in Tunxi have distinct *Hui* merchant heritage, including Chinese medicinal herb shops, sauce houses, and money exchange offices. I mainly sell ink stones, which symbolise one of the most important *Hui* merchants' characteristics, being well educated.

From a more-than-representational perspective, heritage authenticity is a complex meaning-making process, which should constructively align with enterprises' commission and business decisions.

Such consistency is identified as an asset used by STEs to gain legitimacy, attract investment and ultimately enhance social and economic performance over time (de Bernardi & Arenas, 2022). However, most STEs struggled to maintain this consistency, even though they were aware of the importance of aligning with the historical significance and cultural values of merchant heritage with their daily enterprises. One urban planner worried that this inconsistency in the entrepreneurial commission might result in a loss of heritage authenticity.

Most souvenir shops are the same as others, and some souvenirs and handcrafts are irrelevant to the Hui merchant heritage.

This is confirmed by another architecture professor, and she agreed.

A principle called repair old as old (xiu jiu ru jiu 修旧如旧) has been widely used to rebuild the shops as the same as in the past. These buildings obtain the traditional Hui architecture style, but they cannot represent the authentic meaning of Hui merchant heritage, nor do they connect with the surrounding environment.

Nearly half of the STE members reported that rising rents and extremely small profit margins made it difficult for them to survive. One shop owner described his financial pressures,

I spent 150,000 Yuan every month to rent this house, and I had to pay an additional 1 million Yuan for the decoration. The profits from selling ink stones are very small.

Another STE also explained

I used to sell ink stones and artistic works, but there was very little market demand. I now have to sell local souvenirs to survive.

Over one-third of tourism products and services lack a clear interpretation of Hui merchant heritage values, meaning and cultural identity. This challenge appears in the maintenance of authenticity, integrity and even reliability that are relevant to tourists (Zhou et al., 2022). Signs of inconsistency, in particular, weaken external perceptions of authenticity and thereby risk the identity and legitimacy of STEs. A history professor indicated that STEs' disconnection from the cultural roots of Hui merchant heritage was a key factor, leading to potential negative perceptions of inauthenticity. He explained why,

Traditionally Hui merchants used to work and live together, and their houses represented a merchant community, where they supported each other. However, many investors come here only for business, rather than for local life. Most STEs only rent Hui merchant houses for their businesses. The loss of connection with the past makes enterprises struggle to sustain themselves in today's commercial market.

Another urban planner further confirmed that many STEs were not familiar with the cultural meaning of Hui merchant heritage and instead primarily commodified it for tourist consumption. This commodification rarely reflects the 'staged authenticity', but in some cases, even loses their own distinctiveness in the process of 'emerging authenticity' (Gardiner et al., 2022). As she observed,

Although most STEs occupy buildings that have the Hui architecture style, they rather sell products such as glasses, watches, and bags, but none has direct relationships with Hui merchant heritage.

The loss of consistency and cohesion with heritage commodification has significantly altered the historical landscape in Tunxi. Over 70% of the population is involved in tourism-related enterprises, which brought a boom in upscale real estate. Many historical houses have been converted into small shops, hotels, restaurants and museums, and 336 of them are now selling tourist souvenirs, such as carved wood and lacquerware (Du, 2015). However, STE-led gentrification brought commodification in the name of safeguarding Hui merchant heritage, and their economic returns, generated through heritage commodification, are largely directed to covering operational costs. This imbalance raises concerns about the tensions between heritage preservation and entrepreneurial practices, especially regarding how heritage can be meaningfully preserved when its economic value is prioritised over its historical significance.

Furthermore, Waterton's (2014) more-than-representation of heritage perspective suggests that meaning-making of heritage authenticity should engage the negotiation of power relations. This negotiation is especially crucial to embed STEs' values, knowledge and voices in the broader processes of identity formation, belonging, inclusion, and even marginalisation (Crang & Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Di Domenico & Miller, 2012). Incorporating this perspective also would enable heritage authenticity, as an asset grounded in STEs' insights and their understanding of community needs (O'Neil et al., 2022). In this view, authenticity emerges through relational engagements with heritage.

For instance, the majority of STEs did not own the merchant houses in which they operated, and as a result, they experienced challenges in reconciling cultural and historical values with the demands of their business performance. This lack of ownership hindered their ability to represent heritage authenticity as part of their entrepreneurial identity. Instead, most of the STEs called for more constructive approaches to allow their voices to be included in policy-making and decision-making processes. Such negotiation can encourage stronger collaborations among different heritage users – an approach that not only yields sustainable growth of tourism entrepreneurship (Holt & Wiedner, 2024; Lammers & Galinsky, 2009; Smith, 2016) better but also promotes a careful engagement with heritage authenticity.

Two interviewees from the local authorities described recent efforts to involve STEs, urban planners, merchant representatives and residents in consultation meetings for two new housing projects. The original merchant houses were too small to accommodate new uses, such as hotels or exhibition galleries. To ensure the houses can maintain their historical value even as their functions change, a series of consultancy meetings were conducted, including discussions on how heritage authenticity should be represented, how the politics of heritage are reproduced in the context of tourism gentrification and market commodification and how the boundaries between past and present, time and space, self and other should be reconceptualised. One of the hostel managers presented his success,

Tourists often stay overnight in Tunxi, so hostels are the most important place to represent Huishang's culture. I used to have several problems at the beginning of transforming this house to a hostel. However, local government and officials from the housing authority have visited my place several times and they provide me with many useful tips and support on the hostel renovation. My guests now like the decoration inside, particular the Hui characteristics of the house presentation.

The negotiation of power relations embedded within heritage narratives and places encourages different collaborations. There is also a need for a relational and contextual process of meaning-making, where authentic merchant heritage is interpreted through actions, interactions and situated experiences (Waterton, 2014). A common suggestion from STEs is to share safeguarding responsibilities and power relations in heritage interpretation, preservation and commodification. This approach calls for STEs to engage in 'hot interpretation' (Uzzell, 1989) actively negotiating entrepreneurial needs with heritage presentations and tourist experiences.

5.2 Performing heritage through everyday entrepreneurial activities

Although *Hui* merchant heritage has great potential to attract tourists, challenges remain. As heritage relies on metaphorical dwelling or embodied engagement (Pons, 2003), its authenticity, particularly existential authenticity, is closely tied to activity and living experience (Wang, 1999). Such existential authenticity is a format of being that is true to oneself, contrasting with the performative roles often adopted in public spheres. From a more-than-representational perspective, performing heritage authenticity should be naturally embedded in everyday entrepreneurial activities. This also allows overwhelming tourists with the capacity to be affected and more deeply connected.

In Tunxi, the commodification of *Hui* merchant heritage, however, raises concerns about 'inauthentic' heritage experiences and places. Place in the entrepreneurship literature has long been demonstrated its significance in entrepreneurial production and innovation (Downey et al.,

2024; Rickly et al., 2025). Commodification and the displacement of local neighbourhoods in Tunxi have generated negative place perceptions that risk damaging entrepreneurs' identities, brands and business performance. An urban planner noted that one of the barriers STEs faced was the growing distance between their entrepreneurial activities, the local place and everyday life experiences traditionally shaped by Hui's merchant culture.

Tourism gentrification had created negative impacts on local communities' everyday lives. New tourist shops, bakery shops and mobile tofu vans commercialise Tunxi, but they are individual profit driven, not suitable for locals.

One tourism official, worried about displacement, increasingly demolished the historical characteristics through tourism gentrification

Tunxi used to be a welcoming and sociable business street where people could shop, enjoy, leisure and relax. Local people regularly interacted with international tourists as part of their everyday lives. Journalists and photographers often visited, freely collecting data and materials about the merchant community. However, many local people have now moved away, and a mixture of outside merchants and tourist-oriented shops have taken over. This has really damaged Hui merchant heritage and the business environment of Tunxi.

This finding supports what Gotham (2005) and Chan et al. (2016) argued; tourism gentrification often brings increased business investment and upgrades to cultural heritage and tourism facilities, yet simultaneously contributes to involuntary displacement. In response to such displacement pressures, many STEs and urban planners suggest performing merchant heritage as part of everyday entrepreneurial activities. Although STEs may not share the same values as residents, the finding here aligns with Zhou et al. (2023), who argued that residents construct their perception of authenticity, largely through everyday experience.

In particular, Hui merchant heritage, with its deep cultural and historical roots, cannot speak for itself nor directly respond to tourist demands. Instead, STEs should act as agents to assemble objects, people and places that articulate heritage authenticity through everyday social and material practices (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2003; Harvey, 1996a; Su et al., 2018). This approach is crucial for not only discovering the authenticity of Hui merchant heritage for tourists but also actively performing it for the local community (re)engagement. One STE representative highlighted the importance of performing the 'intangible' element of Hui merchant heritage,

We need to perform Huishang's stories and their business history in our contemporary everyday lives. Other intangible cultural heritage, such as Hui opera, wood carving skills, tea trading and Hui language reflect the cultural taste, entrepreneurs' traits and Confucius principles particularly.

Another urban planner recommended representing the everyday trading activities of Hui merchants near the port of Xin'an River

The re-use of the merchant houses near the Xin'an River will perform the past Hui merchants' trading process and their everyday business activities. It would also encourage wider community engagement, so that tourists are able to observe merchants' activities, as well as locals feeling proud of their own Hui heritage.

This performative approach represents authenticity through STEs. It reflects shared collective values around heritage preservation, locality, and place identity, rather than individual or small-group interests. These values emerge especially in the contexts that move beyond narrow definition of objective authenticity (Ireland et al., 2025; Waterton, 2014). Three groups of urban planners further introduced three local cultural tourism plans, including a new medicinal exhibition and medicine tourism to represent Hui's medical brand, 'Tong De Ren' (同德仁), the redevelopment of a Huizhou food district and a new performance of Hui Opera. Local authorities also allocated tourism venues for light entertainment and cultural performance, such as creating stories, making live performances and designing visitor-friendly experiences. These contemporary, everyday lived experiences reframe an additional layer of interpretation that corresponds to the performative dimension of authenticity. Such authenticity can coexist with the past while also being continuously co-created by STEs, public sectors, tourists and residents (Gardiner et al., 2022; McKercher & du

Cros, 2002; Tiberghien et al., 2023). Experiential authenticity of heritage, thus, can be articulated, expected or represented through day-to-day practices, even including aesthetic, symbolic and cultural meanings beyond a general materialised process.

Conclusion

This study adopted a more-than-representational approach to examine how small tourism entrepreneurs (STEs) engage heritage authenticity through the meaning-making process and everyday entrepreneurial practices. The notion of a more-than-representational approach challenges sector-specific understanding of heritage authenticity; instead, it incorporates economic, spatial and cultural-social values within the context of tourism gentrification. This theoretical lens aligns with situated epistemology (Thrift, 2008) and moves us towards a new way of looking over heritage authenticity, not as an existing object or an isolated social phenomenon (Zhu, 2012) but as a process embedded in varied possible interconnections, relations and negotiations with everyday practices (Harrison, 2013).

While substantial progress has been made in conceptualising and evaluating authenticity in tourism and entrepreneurship research (Rickly et al., 2025; Tiberghien et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2023), this study identifies consistency and cohesion as key criteria, shaping small tourism entrepreneurs' engagement in heritage authenticity. Using a case study of *Hui* merchant heritage tourism in Tunxi, China, this finding suggests an alternative approach to define and categorise authenticity, as well as its implications in different products, experiences and destinations. To address the preservation, commodification and marketing of heritage authenticity, this study also demonstrates that STEs, standing between hosts and tourists (Zhang et al., 2024), can develop their own interpretations of authenticity. This perspective shifts the authenticity literature towards an entrepreneurial perspective, one that views authenticity as relational, negotiable and contextually embedded. It contributes to ongoing debates on authenticity in modern philosophy (Zhou et al., 2023), particularly regarding how power relations and negotiation unfold over time, across space and between different spatial scales. Future research is encouraged to adopt more holistic and integrated frameworks to examine additional dimensions of authenticity across other forms of tourism development and entrepreneurship management.

Furthermore, the focus on STEs highlights their roles not as passive commodification, but as active agents in articulating and performing heritage authenticity through local everyday practices. The case study of Tunxi confirms that the existing STEs' commodification weakens the perceptions of the place. As Harvey (1996b) notes, 'We are all embroiled in a global process of capitalist urbanisation or uneven spatio-temporal development' (p. 414). Future research should further evaluate the intersections between heritage, tourism and gentrification, with particular attention to authenticity in other urban contexts.

In addition, this study highlights the importance of everyday entrepreneurial practices as a pathway to approaching authenticity and recognising the process of heritage-making. This 'everyday' perspective encourages STEs to construct their perceptions of authenticity from local culture and everyday routine living experience. It also reinforces a contextual understanding of heritage authenticity as a mechanism to promote local engagement and heritage participation (Ireland et al., 2025). With this approach, performing heritage through everyday entrepreneurial practices becomes a vehicle for bridging heritage preservation and tourism entrepreneurship as the outcomes of urban gentrification. Other scholars could build on this by moving beyond heritage meaning-making and everyday practices towards more interdisciplinary inquiries.

As with all research, this study has limitations. First, data collection was limited to a single case study. The relatively small sample size suggests future research should adopt larger, more diverse samples, including tourists and residents, to enhance generalisability. Second, while this study offers a strong producers' perspective on heritage authenticity, future work should explore consumer perspectives, including tourists' emotions and affective responses. Third,

applying the more-than-representational approach to other heritage sites in gentrified settings could contribute to broader insights in urban planning, heritage marketing and tourism development.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Aili Liu**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft; **Rui Su**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Zhiyong Deng**: Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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