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# Young Pioneers, Vitality, and Commercial Gentrification in Mudan Street, Changchun, China

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**Abstract:** The pioneers who started the gentrification process have contributed significantly to the activation of gentrified neighborhoods, but are often overlooked in top-down urban governance strategies. We studied the core participants, who were avant-garde café owners, in the initial stage of the commercial gentrification of Mudan Street in Changchun, China. By participatory observations and in-depth interviews, we closely investigated the statuses, behaviors, and preferences of the early gentrifiers, their contributions to block revivals, and the impacts of urban renewal policies on the gentrifiers themselves. Our conclusions are as follows. Most early gentrifiers were young and highly educated. They started the process of gentrification by youth culture production, which exhibited idealistic operating behaviors, such as the decoration of shops, creation of cultural atmospheres, and organization of cultural activities. They were the pioneers who drove bottom-up block renewal, reshaped traditional blocks into youth cultural consumption centers, and stimulated commercial vitality. However, commercialization was followed by soaring rents and increasing business competition that have forced many pioneers with low economic capital to leave. Furthermore, urban governance has had strong impacts on block renewal and gentrification. Inclusive management has promoted bottom-up neighborhood renewal, whereas arbitrary management has quickly destroyed the cultural landscape and business atmosphere, thereby accelerating the displacement of the pioneers. This study provides new evidence for gentrification theories, and offers a practical reflection for urban governance by constructing the profiles of early gentrifiers and discussing the paradox of gentrification in the context of urban China.

**Keywords:** commercial gentrification; urban renewal; block vitality; young pioneers; Changchun

## 1. Introduction

The concept of gentrification was born in the 1960s with urban regeneration in Western countries, and has been a hot issue for more than half a century [1]. For its considerable effects, such as the upgrading of landscapes and enhancing of land values, on urban management, gentrification has been a preferred strategy for city renewal by municipalities around the world [2]. However, gentrification strategies based on Western contexts are often impractical in developing countries because of the different political systems and economic conditions, and the different spatial and temporal paths of urban development [3]. In the 1990s, urban renewal in China started in the large cities [4,5]. Many traditional commercial streets were demolished or renovated on a large scale by the building of new gentrified and upscale landscapes that reflected the will of the elites, such as urban managers and

planners [6]. Although the material landscapes could be rapidly improved, the real needs and feelings of the street users were often ignored, the connections between the commercial spaces and the people were often severed, and the consumption culture and atmosphere were often damaged [7]. The usual results were new buildings that stood nearly empty, and businesses that became depressed. To some extent, these results suggest gaps in the micro-cognition of the evolutionary mechanisms of bottom-up commercial space renewal, and in the research of gentrification in Eastern contexts [3,8].

The stages of gentrification have been widely recognized by scholars, but the participants of different stages have not been studied in sufficient depth. This paper focuses on young pioneers with low economic/high cultural capital in the initial stage of gentrification, and who endowed gentrified neighborhoods with cultural attractions and commercial vitality by sweat capital [9]. Unlike the controversial gentrifiers criticized in much of the literature on gentrification, young pioneers were often limited by their economic vulnerabilities, which determined that they would be the next victims of gentrification [10]. Even so, they were the most dynamic pioneers in gentrified blocks and were able to attract other young people by youth culture productions, as well as motivate more creativity and innovation, thereby promoting the social and economic vitality of the cities [11,12]. As a result, these pioneers, as key pillars driven by innovation and consumption, are being sought out by many local governments and developers in post-industrial economies [13,14]. However, scholars seem to prefer debating more serious issues, such as the characteristics, mechanisms, and displacements of gentrification, while ignoring the specific participants in the different phases of gentrification [15]. Therefore, to fill the gap in the research on gentrification in Eastern contexts and remedy the dearth of intensive studies on the pioneers of gentrification, we studied the early gentrifiers through participatory observations and interviews while taking the commercial gentrification caused by young avant-garde café owners in the inner city of Changchun, China, as a case study. In the next sections, the following questions will be answered in sequence: Who were the young pioneers? Why did they come to the gentrified block? How did they promote cultural vitality and trigger gentrification? What impacts did the changes in the attitudes and practices of urban governance have on the young operators and commercial gentrification?

## 2. Literature Review

From the 1970s to the 1990s, many Western scholars participated in intense debates on gentrification [16–18]. On the one hand, Neo-Marxist geographers, such as Neil Smith, emphasized capital as the main promoter of gentrification [19]. Drawing upon the unbalanced development theory, they created the concept of "rent-gap", and explained that the ultimate cause of gentrification was "capital" rather than "people" [20–22]. On the other hand, humanist geographers, such as David Ley, emphasized the dynamic role of "people" in the process of gentrification, and believed that the demands and behaviors of gentrifiers played decisive roles in gentrification [23–26]. Zukin explained the gentrification of the SoHo neighborhood in the city of New York from the perspective of cultural capital, arguing that the inflows of art and capital had been responsible for the transformation of the decaying industrial area [10,27]. Her explanation, which combines cultural and economic factors, was generally accepted by academic circles. Scholars have come to realize that neither the production nor the consumption side can be taken for the whole [20,28]. It is necessary to integrate the multifaceted factors of production and consumption, economy and culture, the behaviors of the participants, and the practices of urban governance to better interpret the complexities of gentrification [25,29].

Pioneers in the initial stage of gentrification have caught the attention of scholars [9,30–32], who generally believe that such gentrifiers often possessed high cultural but low economic capital, while widely accepting the socio-demographic concept of the new middle class to refer to young people with higher education, upward mobility, and preferences for cultural consumption and expressions of good taste [9]. In the beginning, young artists with low incomes had concentrated themselves in the older inner cities mainly for the affordable rents, then gradually endowed new symbolisms into the old neighborhoods by renovating old buildings, producing countercultures, etc. [15,33,34]. Scholars

considered stylish university students as a kind of participants of gentrification because they had a certain cultural vitality in common with artists and other creative types [35,36]. Such early young gentrifiers were the most dynamic group in neighborhood revitalization, and their cultural productions initiated the possibility of gentrification [12,37]. However, these hipsters were often described as proletarians [15].

The relationships between the pioneers and early gentrified places have been described in the literature. Some scholars believe that such places had the cultural attributes of spiritual homes for the avant-garde young people and artists [38]. Old communities in the inner city, where the pioneers could find low-cost places for living and working, were often gentrified first. In addition, these pioneers with high cultural/low economic capital often shared the artist's distaste for commerce and convention, but valued highly the esthetics of the old inner cities, as well as the social and cultural diversity of the working-class communities [6,8,9]. Identification with the proletariat, freedom from middle-class traditions and constraints, and the dynamism of working-class life were all associated with artistic, bohemian lifestyles. Here, despite their limited incomes and capital, the benefit-sharing pioneers creatively rebuilt the symbolic meanings of gentrified places. Unlike the traditional middle class, the new middle class contributed sweat equity to community renovation and were more like urban artists with esthetic sensitivities, who identified and capitalized on the devalued inner-city estates, as well as transformed urban decay into hyper-fashion.

The paradoxes regarding the displacement of the pioneers in the next stage of gentrification have been hotly debated by scholars [15,31,39,40]. There is a path to gentrification by which gentrifiers with high economic capital displace those with high cultural, but low economic, capital [41]. While building new artistic lifestyles and creating new cultural symbols, the early gentrifiers believed themselves to be risk-free and had never thought about being displaced, but as being tastemakers who contributed to the identity of the high-income middle class [42]. Precisely because of the investment of cultural capital [43], the pioneers' tastes could be translated into price, whereas the low-income pioneers would be displaced by businesspeople and other members of the upper classes who had greater economic capital [44]. The culture-led transformation turned marginalized areas into ideal places for residential and commercial use, but as the rents soared, the early gentrifiers, such as artists, were forced to leave [12]. Scholars have expressed sympathy for the leaving of these artists and other pioneers [34,45,46]. Furthermore, the loss of authenticity has been criticized because avant-garde young people and artists often rejected spaces colonized by commercialization and entrepreneurialism [10,32,47].

To sum up, the early literature provided a theoretical framework for us to tell the stories of the pioneers in the initial stages of gentrification in the context of China. However, in the existing research, there are still some deficiencies, such as the lack of close observations of the early gentrifiers and the lack of micro-studies of the initial stages of gentrification. Although a few scholars have paid attention to the roles of the artists in promoting gentrification, not enough attention has been paid to the young avant-garde gentrifiers who were similar to the artists and were willing to pursue idealized lifestyles, and more importantly, were grassroots activists in the cities [48,49]. They were the ones who drove the broader phenomenon of commercial gentrification. The existing research pays more attention to residential spaces and less attention to commercial spaces, ignoring the production functions of the gentrifiers to some extent [8]. Therefore, we focused more on the ordinary young people who initiated gentrification by opening their own ideal shops, and, to explain the ubiquitous commercial gentrification occurring in urban China, we considered the roles of the young pioneers as producers.

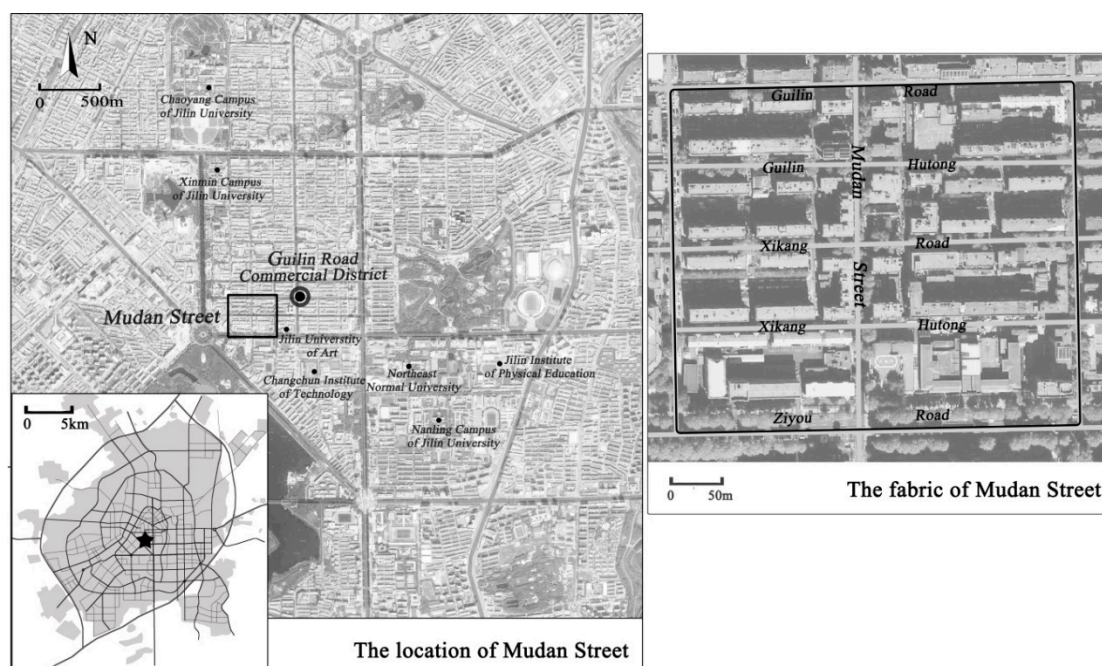
### 3. Study Area and Method

#### 3.1. Study Area

With a population of 3.8 million people, Changchun is a large city in northeastern China. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was the capital of the State of Manchukuo and was under the influence of the

concepts of Western consumption. Thus, Changchun was a representative modern consumer city. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Changchun was transformed into a manufacturing center. After the reform and opening up of the country, the city's service industry developed rapidly, and commercial spaces gradually formed.

Mudan Street is located in Changchun's downtown area adjacent to the Guilin Road Commercial District, one of the main shopping centers. Because of the continuous proliferation of commercial activities, businesses have not been limited to Mudan Street, but taking it as the core, have extended to surrounding streets, such as Xikang Road, Xikang Hutong, Guilin Road, and Guilin Hutong. People who live nearby used to call the whole block Mudan Street. Therefore, in this paper, Mudan Street represents a block 450 meters long and 350 meters wide, constituting an area of about 0.16 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). Mudan Street is the first coffee culture district in Changchun, and a typical commercial gentrification district bottom-up motivated by young people.



**Figure 1.** The location and fabric of Mudan Street.

Since 2008, Mudan Street has presented a significant occurrence of commercial gentrification. According to our field investigation, before 2008, there were less than 80 shops, including grocery stores, repair shops, and other small shops serving daily necessities, whereas in 2019, the number of shops had increased to 206. In particular, the number of cultural and leisure consumption outlets had reached 112, two-thirds of which are cafés, bars, and restaurants, and the rest are flower shops, photo studios, handicraft studios, music studios, etc. Mudan Street has become not only the most concentrated block of cafés, bars, and restaurants, but also the new consumption destination and fashion landmark of the current youth culture in Changchun (Figure 2).

By participant observation, we found that both the consumers and operators in Mudan Street are mainly young people. The latter are young pioneers who established small independent cafés, bars, and other places to express and display their personalities and idealism at relatively low economic costs in order to construct spiritual homes belonging to the urban youth and to realize the symbolic reconstruction of the block. In addition to attracting young people, it also gained the cultural identity of the middle class, thereby stimulating commercial vitality and actuating commercial gentrification. However, rising rents and commercialization often accompany gentrification. Faced with rising rents, fierce competition, and the weakening of the youth culture atmosphere, many young operators have had to leave Mudan Street. Moreover, the municipal government initiated new street renovation



projects and refitted most of the shop façades according to institutional regulations, accelerating the displacement of the young pioneers. Overall, the story of Mudan Street's gentrification provides a typical case for understanding the micro-mechanisms of commercial gentrification from the perspective of the early participants and for rethinking the effects of institutional adjustments on urban renovations.



**Figure 2.** The cafés in Mudan Street. (Photos taken in September 2017).

### 3.2. Method

Since 2012, we have been tracking the commercial evolution and changes in the streetscape of Mudan Street by taking photographs of all the stores every six months. We analyzed the historical data of the evolution of the businesses while recording the oral memories of the local shopkeepers and residents. In October 2012, July 2015, and June 2017, we conducted field investigations to fully track the developing paths of the cafés in the block. We interviewed café owners, shop assistants, and consumers to closely observe business operation statuses, interior characteristics, and the behaviors of the operators and consumers. Related to this paper, there are 24 interviewees including 16 café owners (designated by O01 to O16) (see Table 1), 3 actors (designated A1 to A3), and 5 consumers (designated by C1 to C5) (see Table 2). The number of café owners we interviewed is 9 in 2012 (40% of the total number), 6 in 2015 (10% of the total number), and 7 in 2017 (10% of the total number). Moreover, these owners exhibit diverse age, gender, and background, and are representative of the owner group in the block. Our interview is semi-structured, including the required questions such as age, education background, establish time of café, and costs and sources of investment, and the optional questions, such as reasons of starting business and locating in Mudan street, ways of defining and constructing cultural atmosphere, operating situation and risks, personal perspective of future, and so on. In addition, we obtained some information from consumer review websites, such as Dianping.com and Meituan.com, as well as from local media and advertisements.

## 4. Young Pioneers and Commercial Gentrification in Mudan Street

To understand the micro-mechanisms of commercial gentrification in Mudan Street, we focused on the core participants, the early café owners, who were present at the initial stage. This section answers the following questions: Who were the café owners? Why did they choose Mudan Street? Why did they choose cafés as their business? How did they operate their cafés? What were the effects of their operation behaviors on the block and themselves?

**Table 1.** List of interviewed café owners.

No.	Year of Set Up Café	Gender	Age *	Interview Time
O01	2004	Female	26	October 2012
O02	2004	Male	24	October 2012, July 2015, June 2017
O03	2009	Male	33	October 2012, July 2015, June 2017
O04	2009	Male	30	October 2012
O05	2009	Female	22	October 2012
O06	2010	Male	22	October 2012, July 2015
O07	2011	Male	36	October 2012
O08	2012	Male	24	October 2012, July 2015
O09	2012	Male	27	October 2012
O10	2013	Male	31	July 2015, June 2017
O11	2013	Female	23	July 2015
O12	2014	Female	24	July 2015, June 2017
O13	2015	Male	22	July 2015
O14	2015	Male	22	June 2017
O15	2015	Female	23	June 2017
O16	2016	Female	24	June 2017

Note \*: It is the age at which the owner set up his café.

**Table 2.** List of Interviewed actors and consumers.

	No.	Gender	Age *	Status	Interview Time
Actors	A01	Male	27	Lounge singer, Artist	July 2015
	A02	Male	24	Cross talker	October 2012
	A03	Male	26	Photographer	October 2012
Consumers	C01	Female	28	Editor	October 2012
	C02	Female	22	University student	July 2015
	C03	Male	25	Office clerk	July 2015
	C04	Male	27	Office clerk	June 2017
	C05	Female	26	Teacher	July 2015

Note\*: It is the age at the time of interview.

#### 4.1. Young Pioneers in Mudan Street

The gentrification of Mudan Street was initiated by cafés. The street was originally a community with a strong sense of life. The businesses there served mainly the residents nearby. In 2004, the first small independent café opened, and, by 2008, the number of cafés had increased to six. These novel, romantic, and delicate cafés set the tone for the youth culture with its literary and artistic styles, becoming a spiritual home for young hipsters, and quietly starting the gentrification of the block. Subsequently, new labels were added to the café map of Mudan Street, which, by 2015, had become the first café cluster of Changchun, with a total of over 60 cafés, all of which were independent.

Sharon Zukin believes that the commercial gentrification had been triggered by pioneering businesses with cultural sensitivities [50,51]. The story of Mudan Street demonstrates this view. As shown in the left panel of Table 3, the early café owners in Mudan Street include lawyers, editors, writers, other professionals who set up part-time shops, returnees from work or study overseas who brought coffee culture back to local places, and young white-collar workers who were dissatisfied with their jobs and turned to start-up businesses. Later, many college graduates, and even students, contributed to the cluster of cafés in Mudan Street.

**Table 3.** Outcomes of café owners' interview (Sample size = 16).

Feature	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)	Feature	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Gender			* Motivation for setting up a café		
Male	10	62.5	Make money	16	100.0
Female	6	37.5	Build an ideal space for oneself	14	87.5
The age at which the café set up			Share favorite things with friends	13	81.3
20–25	10	62.5	Office work makes limited income and little freedom	9	56.3
26–30	2	12.5	* Reasons for locating in Mudan Street		
>30	4	25.0	Low rent	13	81.3
Level of education			Adjacent to trendy and youth-oriented shopping district	11	68.8
High school	1	6.3	Silent and leisurely living atmosphere	6	37.5
Undergraduate Degree	13	81.3	Growing coffee culture	9	56.3
Graduate Degree	2	12.5	* Sources of financing		
Undergraduate Major			Personal saving	10	62.5
Art	6	37.5	Parents' support	9	56.3
Literature	3	18.8	Borrow from friends	3	18.8
Other major	7	43.8	Social investor	1	6.3
Overseas life experience			* Ways of attracting customers		
None	12	75.0	Build chic façade and interior	16	100.0
Study	2	12.5	Organize cultural activities	11	68.8
Work	2	12.5	Build social networks with regular customers	11	68.8
Operate a café as a			Provide a comfortable and warm place	10	62.5
Part time job	6	37.5	Provide special drink and food	4	25.0
Main job	10	62.5	Profitability of the café		
Main job/Old job			Good profit	2	12.5
Graduate	7	43.8	Limited profit	9	56.3
White collar	9	56.3	No profit	3	18.8
Artist	3	18.8	Deficit	2	12.5
Editor/Writer	2	12.5	* Difficulties and risks		
Office clerk	2	12.5	Rising rent	16	100.0
Lawyer	1	6.3	Low current capital	11	68.8
Psychologist	1	6.3	Increasingly fierce competition	10	62.5
Restaurant manager	1	6.3	Unstable customers	8	50.0

Note \*: It is a question with multiple responses.

These café owners had distinct “pioneer” characteristics. First, they were highly educated with many having backgrounds in literature and art, which gave them high cultural tastes and esthetic abilities. They were also good at beautifying old and plain shops, creating cultural atmospheres, and providing tasteful commodities, thereby driving the commercial gentrification with their cultural capital [52]. Second, they were relatively young, with most having been born in the 1980s and 1990s. Like the Beat Generation in 20th-century American cultural history, the generation born in China during that time was called China’s “Beat Generation”, which was also obsessed with liberal ideals and bohemian culture [53]. The young operators in Mudan Street were eager to fashion their cafés on their ideas of spiritual utopia, which catered exactly to the culture and leisure consumption needs of contemporary urbanites in China. Third, the young operators lacked economic capital and business management skills, even though they were full of enthusiasm to realize their dreams of having their own cafés. This lack meant that most of them would become sacrificial heroes for the gentrifiers with high wealth in the next stage of gentrification.

“The people in Mudan Street are relatively in the forefront in the whole city of Changchun. They are more receptive to new things.” (A03)

“I knew I had to do it (set up a café) even if I was going to fail. But if I don’t do it now, I won’t be young anymore and I won’t have the impulse anymore.” (O02)

“My family gave me 150,000 yuan for this coffee shop. Café is my dream. I hope I can keep it going well.” (O15)

Concerning the reasons for business location, most of the responses indicated that affordable rent, which was generally the most important factor considered by gentrifiers, was also the first factor to influence young shopkeepers to choose Mudan Street [44]. Proximity to consumer groups and the conformance of the block’s material environment to cultural esthetics were also important factors. Fortunately, Mudan Street had the above three conditions. Firstly, it was adjacent to the Guilin Road Business District, which was a mature youth fashion consumption block gathering the freshest and most fashionable trends. Located within 1.25 km of the street were seven universities, including Jilin University, Jilin University of the Arts, and Northeast Normal University, together with more than 50,000 students. The cafés were not only suitable for the fashionable and popular styles of the Guilin Road Business District, but were also close to a large number of young consumers. Secondly, the existing plain and old buildings in Mudan Street were ordinary residential buildings, built from the 1970s to the 1990s, with low rents, which provided a lower threshold for young operators with low capital. Thirdly, Mudan Street, which was established in the 1930s, had escaped the great demolitions and constructions of modern China’s earth-shaking urbanization, and continues to have a small-scale grid network, as well as a walkable and friendly texture. Additionally, the street has always been a residential area for government employees and university scholars, as well as always had a certain cultural, leisurely, and comfortable living atmosphere. All these qualities catered to the young pioneers seeking spiritual independence, resisting the mainstream business culture, and trying to build their own utopias in relatively quiet corners [32,54].

“It’s closer to Guilin Road but not too noisy. Just right.” (O10)

“Guilin road is noisy and busy. But here (Mudan Street) is like a quiet, peaceful garden downtown. Whenever I’m not working, I always come here, and it seems that when I come here, I escape from the hustle and bustle of city life and the trivialities of life.” (C01)

“In October 2008, here was still a little bleak, but I liked this kind of living atmosphere. So, I had my own café opposite the small red building where my mother-in-law grew up.” (O02)

## 4.2. Cafés of Young Pioneers’

### 4.2.1. “Utopia” for Young Operators

The cafés in Mudan Street are, above all, the owners’ personal utopias. When asked about their motivations for setting up the café and the operating strategy to attract customers, some shop owners



admitted that making money was the purpose of having opened their cafés, but the primary task was to show their idealism and cultural esthetics so as to attract customers and generate operating incomes. Cafés were regarded as a platform for the display of youth culture. The focus of business management was on things, such as interior decorations, the construction of a cultural atmosphere, and the organization of cultural activities, other than coffee. In these ways, the idealized attitudes of young people toward freedom were expressed.

"Make money but make different money." (O03)

"In fact, the income from operating a café would be similar to that of a job, but operating a café would be free, and the café would be like my family members, it would be very fulfilling to communicate with it seriously." (O09)

"My initial goal was to find a place to put my CDs, books, and other favorite things, and a place to talk and drink with friends. Later, it became a coffee shop because my wife likes coffee." (O02)

O08, a café owner who had returned from studying in Japan, did not choose a job conforming to his university major, and did not treat profit as the first goal of opening a café. He said:

"I just wanted to be different and I wanted people to know that this was a coffee shop with attitude." (O08)

#### 4.2.2. "Home-Like Place" for Urban Youth

A home usually refers to a home with one's parents or one's spouse, but a young person who has just moved to a city is usually unmarried and has already left their parents' home [55]. They often have a desire for a home and social belonging in the city. A home-like space has the emotional connotations, such as privacy, freedom, familiarity, and security, to a certain extent of a home, and compensates for the lack of a home by providing a home-like environment, organizing youth-oriented activities, and building social networks [56]. The owners in Mudan Street have built their cafés not only as extensions of their own "homes", but have also imbued them with spiritual meanings and constructed "home-like" places to connect with like-minded people. For example, the Christian owner of a Christian-themed café who hosts chanting, English corners (a kind of English speaking and practicing club), and other activities every Saturday to provide a place of belonging for customers with the same religious beliefs.

Cafés also act as emotional bonds. Many young people in the city form small communities based on cafés, which become their particular "homes".

"Everyone who wants to see a movie, play Werewolf Kill (a board game), or something like that could notify our WeChat Crowd and then just come here (the café) to do that. That's how we become friends." (C02)

"I had a few friends when I first came to Changchun to work, but I have made some friends here, and now, I come here frequently." (C03)

The establishment of emotional connections between the café owners and consumers not only meets the social needs of young people in modern cities but also guarantees the business incomes of the cafés.

"The vast majority of our customers are repeat customers. Even some old consumers who have moved to other cities come here to find old feelings when they return to Changchun." (O09)

#### 4.2.3. "Small Stages" for Artistic Youth

To attract customers, cafés in Mudan Street often hold cultural activities, such as reading or singing parties, English corners, and painting and handicraft salons. With the gathering of young people, vanguard youth culture atmospheres have been formed, and youth cultural activities have also been upgraded and diversified. Some cafés have begun to hold small shows and exhibitions, such as unplugged music shows, Chinese traditional comic dialogues, photo exhibitions, graffiti exhibitions, and creative and art markets. Gradually, Mudan Street has become an open and diverse space for youth cultural activities, inspiring the young people's enthusiasm for art and culture. It is worth noting that most of these activities are free or just require the purchase of a cup of coffee. The cafés here do

provide small stages for young people, such as fresh artists who have not yet been recognized by the market and amateurs whose compositions are not professional enough, to express themselves and present their achievements.

"I never thought that Chinese traditional comic dialogue (a kind of Chinese folk comedic performance) and Western coffee could go together, but, in Mudan Street, they do. It is, so to speak, unique in the whole of China. Special thanks to Lao Zhang (the owner of Goin Café) for giving us such a stage." (A02)

"This is like a glass with a little bit of water in it, and what we are doing is putting pebbles in the glass one by one, and when the pebbles reach a certain amount, the crow can drink the water. Like Beijing's 798 (Art District), it took a long time to build up to its current size."(O10)

To sum up, the pioneer owners of the cafés in Mudan Street have gradually evolved from building their own spiritual homes at the very beginning to building home-like spaces for young people, then to building urban youth cultural circles, and even new urban public cultural spaces.

### 4.3. Effects

#### 4.3.1. Positive Effects in Early Stage of Gentrification

With the gathering of young people in the initial stage from 2009 to 2015, Mudan Street transformed from a traditional community into a new literary, artistic landmark and a dynamic cultural community of youth culture. During this time, some young artists formed a cultural and creative ecosystem composed of new forms of cultural consumption, such as ceramic crafts, clothing and leatherworks, floral arrangements, jewelry design, Chin art, and music, film, and television productions. According to a field survey in October 2016, there were 206 shops, of which 75 were cafés, bars, and fashion restaurants, while 37 were cultural consumption outlets, such as photo studios, ceramic shops, video game arcades, and florists.

The landscape of the block has been gradually updated in a bottom-up manner. Every independent store tries its best to create a cultural and artistic façade, as well as an internal environment with its own theme and characteristics. Through the means of art, the original plain old apartment buildings have also begun to show their unique historical and cultural charms. Compared with large-scale block renovations, this bottom-up do-it-yourself approach produces more cultural connotations and diversity, avoids the monotonous and boring problems caused by large-scale renovations, and has lower overall economic costs.

In Mudan Street, the commercial atmosphere is becoming increasingly intense, commercial competition is becoming increasingly fierce, and rents are rising sharply. Under the influence of the cafés, the businesses have become more diversified. From 2011 to 2016, the number of cafés soared to more than 60. The numbers of bars, Western and Japanese restaurants, bakeries, boutique clothing stores, and other global consumption facilities have also been increasing. In the meantime, the block has attracted social capital to provide financial support to the better young operators or for direct investments made in the shops. This attraction has intensified the competition in the block. The rents for shops have risen sharply. For shops with spaces of 100 square meters, in 2008 the average rent in Mudan Street was about 3000 yuan per month, which is 30-50% lower than that in Guilin Road Commercial District, while in 2017 it increased to nearly 10000 yuan per month, which was even higher than that in Guilin Road Commercial District.

#### 4.3.2. Displacement Effects in the Next Stage of Gentrification

The romantic coffee dream was gradually broken up by business realities and the young pioneer owners either grew up to be rational and skilled operators, or were displaced. The new streetscape, commercialization, and high rents brought by the pioneer gentrifiers had triggered the next stage of gentrification. The threshold of operations in Mudan Street had been raised by much and many young shopkeepers who once pursued the ideal lifestyle had to leave in the face of increasing real-life

and operational pressures. According to the field survey in May 2019, the number of cafés was about 40, which was a third less than that in 2016. Only 25 remained in steady operation. Most of the owners were already in their forties. Compared with the many young shopkeepers who had dreamed of starting their own businesses but failed to manage them, those who stayed behind became more rational, and so, were better able to invest and operate.

"I'm going to get married and I'm going to face so many problems in real life that I really don't have enough energy or courage to run a business on my own. The café was my dream, but I have to say goodbye to it now." (O09)

At the same time that the idealized avant-garde pioneers left, cultural capital was gradually being replaced by economic capital. The liberal, bohemian, idealized youth culture had become weak. For the most part, youth cultural activities were no longer sustainable.

"Now, some consumers like taking pictures or talking loudly in my shop. The warm, heart-to-heart atmosphere of the old days has gone." (O02)

## 5. Policies and Street Renewal

In the early stage, the management policy adopted in the urban area of Mudan Street was relatively tolerant and kept the block in a state of self-growth and renewal, providing opportunities for the arrival of the pioneers, as well as fertile ground for landscape renovation and cultural production [57]. Since 2000, the municipal government has always described the Guilin Road Business District adjacent to Mudan Street as a young, fashionable, and international shopping destination, which laid a foundation for the entry of outlets, such as bars and cafés, for foreign consumption cultures. More importantly, the municipal government has taken a moderately tolerant attitude to the businesses around Mudan Street as regards business licenses, safety supervision, and business inspections, providing a tolerant environment for small commercial facilities, and even, the informal economy. For example, allowing the first floors of residential buildings to be converted into commercial use has led directly to a substantial increase in commercial facilities. Because of the tolerance toward the occupation of pedestrian lanes, stores have been able to design a variety of distinctive façades, and even, expand their business areas [58].

With the improvements in the streetscapes and the formation of a youth culture atmosphere in 2010, Mudan Street attracted attention and support from the municipal government. The Changchun Urban Planning and Design Institute set up a branch of the Community Pioneer Research Base in the block in 2015, and the municipal government designated Mudan Street as a Youth Entrepreneurship Demonstration Zone in the 13th Five-year Commercial Development Plan of Changchun in 2016 (<http://www.changchun.gov.cn/>). Some relevant administrative departments and shop owners jointly organized a Creative Bazaar and promoted the event to the whole city in order to motivate the innovation and entrepreneurship of young people. During this period, shop owners in Mudan Street seemed full of confidence that the block could be rapidly developed. However, when Mudan Street gradually became a new bright spot of the city, the municipal government promoted a top-down old city renovation project to optimize the block's environment, and the management attitude changed from leniency to zero tolerance, which struck a fatal blow to the pioneer shopkeepers and caused irreversible damage to the youth culture atmosphere.

In April 2017, a street environment renovation project was conducted by the municipal government, and Mudan Street became a key block because of the irregular exterior styles of the shops and the occupation of the pedestrian lanes. Most of the shops received notices of rectification and were required to remove the façades occupying the street spaces, as well as adjust their shop facades to conform to the new standard proposed by the project. Shopkeepers jointly consulted with several departments, but no satisfactory solution was found. Faced with the costs of redecorating, most shopkeepers were disappointed with the business prospects because they were worried that the project would completely destroy the physical streetscape and the cultural atmosphere that had been cultivated with great difficulty over many years. Until June 2017, more than half of the stores in Mudan Street had to remove

their facades, as well as one third of them were suspended or directly closed down (see Figure 3). The sharp rise in rents had already put huge operational pressure on the shop owners as the sudden implementation of the project accelerated the departure of young operators lacking political voices, investment abilities, and anti-risk abilities. However, the project provided new opportunities for other social commercial capital to enter the block. Although the commercial development of the block continued, the youth culture atmosphere was no longer strong. Mudan Street, a bottom-up activated block, has attracted the attention of government managers, who habitually tend to choose top-down renovation strategy that promotes the physical environment, but neglects the original contributors for commercial vitality.



**Figure 3.** The streetscape after the removal of façades in 2017. Photos taken in September 2015 (top) and June 2017 (bottom).

“If the government had given us a chance to participate in the project’s design or supported us to refit our shops with the renovation project fund, we could have both met the requirements and continued the young, fashionable styles of the streetscapes, but they did not accept our proposals at all.” (O08)

## 6. Conclusions and Discussion

### 6.1. Conclusions

We studied the initial stage of the commercial gentrification of Mudan Street in Changchun from the perspective of the early business owners, who were the core participants. Using participatory observations and in-depth interviews, we closely observed the statuses, behaviors, and preferences of the pioneers, as well as their contributions to urban revival. Further, we studied the relationship of urban management and policies with street renewal. Our conclusions are as follows.

The pioneers were mostly highly educated young people with high cultural/low economic capital and esthetic sensitivities. They regarded cafés as romantic spaces for exhibiting the ideal lifestyle. Low rent was the first factor, followed by market location and material environment, in determining the locations of their businesses, which were good at cultivating tastes, but not at making money. The pioneers tended to focus on shop decorations, cultural atmosphere, and cultural activities to build and display their own utopias, to construct public home-like spaces for urban youth, and to provide informal stages to showcase and disseminate youth culture. By forming an idealistic youth culture, the young pioneers motivated business vitality; however, their low economic capital and lack of operating experience left them at risk of being displaced in the next stage of gentrification.

The operations of the pioneer shopkeepers in Mudan Street have produced both positive and negative effects. These individuals had driven a bottom-up urban renewal and transformed a traditional

commercial block into a youth cultural leisure block, but such activities also led to the commercialization of the block with soaring rents and increasing business competition, which undermined the youth culture and forced many of the early pioneers to leave as a result of the gentrification that they had started themselves.

Urban governance has had strong impacts on block renewal and gentrification. In the early days, an inclusive management approach provided a loose institutional environment for the increase in the commercial facilities of the block and the construction of a commercial landscape. Subsequently, the policies that supported and encouraged youth entrepreneurship brought strong confidence to the operators and promoted the development of youth culture. However, the late, sudden changes brought by zero tolerance, as well as the sweeping new urban renewal projects and policies, quickly destroyed the cultural atmosphere that had been cultivated over many years and accelerated the departure of the young pioneers.

## 6.2. Discussion

Using Western theories about the features of the stages in gentrification, this study investigated the story of a gentrified block in a Chinese city and provided some new evidence for the theories, as well as constructed the profiles of the early gentrifiers and introduced a case illustrating the paradox of gentrification in urban China. The results have revealed that the avant-garde gentrifiers with high cultural/low economic capital had exchanged cultural and commercial vitality with sweat capital, but were significantly vulnerable because of the lack of economic capital and political discourse power. Therefore, the story of Mudan Street is a practical revelation for the municipal government.

The young pioneers had been an important factor activating the block's revival and had been able to improve the landscape and vitalize commerce at low economic costs, but, in China, the usual top-down, centralized approach in urban renewal tends to ignore individual power and creates significant conflicts with bottom-up urban renewal. Most Chinese cities have stepped into post-industrial phases. Refined urban renewal will replace extensive urban expansion and urban rebuilding as the theme of urbanization. Bottom-up urban renewal would be the main mode of urban development, and municipal governments should try to protect the economic and political interests of every individual, especially those with low economic capital, as well as maintain a moderately relaxed institutional environment and provide fertile ground for individual entrepreneurship and innovation, so as to continue bottom-up vitality and realize the sustainable development of the urban economy, society, and culture.

There are still some issues, such as the impacts of consumers on commercial gentrification and those of changes in commercial functions on the original business owners and residents, that need to be investigated in future studies for a more complete story. In addition, the complexities of the processes and mechanisms of gentrification in developing countries, the transformation of cultural capital and economic capital into commercial gentrification, and other theoretical issues should be addressed.

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