

Integrating Economic Vitality and Cultural Identity: Heritage Revitalization of Lingnan Commercial Qilou Architecture across the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Region

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of Lingnan's Qilou (arcade) architecture from a functional commercial space to a cultural symbol representing regional identity. Using an interpretive historical inquiry approach, the research examines how economic practices, spatial forms, and cultural values intersected to shape the Qilou's evolution from the late Qing dynasty to the present. Drawing upon archival records, merchant documents, urban plans, and field observations in Guangzhou, Chaozhou, and Jiangmen, the study reconstructs the socio-economic and symbolic contexts of arcade architecture. Findings reveal that the Qilou embodied Cantonese merchants' pragmatic commercial ethos while gradually acquiring cultural significance as a site of collective memory and identity. The research contributes to understanding how architecture mediates between material economy and cultural meaning, offering insights into heritage preservation and the sustainable integration of historical urban forms within modern development.

Keywords

Lingnan Architecture, Qilou Building, Commercial Space, Heritage Economy, Cultural Value, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Region

1. Introduction

The arcade, or Qilou (骑楼), is one of the most distinctive architectural forms in the Lingnan region of South China. Developed during the late Qing dynasty and flourishing throughout the Republican period, this typology combines commer-

cial functionality with cultural adaptation. Characterized by continuous covered walkways, open arcades, and hybrid façades (Wu et al., 2025), Lingnan's arcades reflect a unique fusion of Western colonial influence and traditional Chinese spatial logic. They were historically established along trade routes in coastal cities such as Guangzhou, Chaozhou, and Shantou—urban centers where Cantonese merchants (Yue shang) built prosperous networks that linked domestic commerce with maritime trade. The Qilou thus embodies not only a physical form of economic activity but also a material expression of the merchant spirit that shaped Lingnan's regional identity (Zhang, 2015).

Qilou (arcade buildings) are a distinctive architectural form widely found in Guangdong Province, China, particularly in cities such as Guangzhou, Shantou, and Chikan in Kaiping. Emerging during the late Qing Dynasty and flourishing in the early Republican period (late 19th to early 20th century), Qilou architecture represents a unique fusion of Chinese and Western styles shaped by Guangdong's coastal trade culture. The origins of Qilou are closely tied to the region's maritime prosperity and the rise of the overseas Chinese (Huaqiao) community. As Guangzhou became one of China's earliest open ports, influences from Western colonial architecture, such as neoclassical columns, Baroque decorations, and symmetrical façades—began to merge with local Lingnan construction techniques. The result was the Qilou: multi-story commercial and residential buildings with continuous covered arcades at street level, providing shade and shelter from Guangdong's subtropical climate. Functionally, Qilou reflected the duality of commerce and habitation. The ground floor served as a shop or workshop, while the upper floors were used for living quarters. This spatial arrangement suited the bustling mercantile streets of old Guangzhou and other trading towns. Structurally, Qilou often used brick, reinforced concrete, or granite materials to resist humidity and typhoons, showcasing local adaptation to environmental conditions. Beyond practicality, Qilou also embodied social and cultural exchange. They symbolized modernization, wealth, and cosmopolitanism during China's transition from imperial rule to modern urban life. Today, Guangdong's Qilou streets preserve not only architectural heritage but also the collective memory of the region's commercial vitality and its role as a bridge between East and West.

In recent decades, the arcade has been increasingly recognized as both an urban heritage and a symbol of regional culture. Once primarily designed for functional purposes—providing shade, shelter, and convenient access to storefronts—it has evolved into an emblem of collective memory and cultural continuity. However, despite extensive architectural and historical studies of the Qilou, few works have systematically explored how its spatial form reflects the intertwined evolution of economy and culture (Li, 2013). Most architectural research tends to emphasize morphological or stylistic aspects, while economic historians focus on merchant capital and trade networks, often overlooking how architecture mediates between economic behavior and cultural meaning. This study seeks to bridge that disciplinary divide.

The economic significance of Lingnan's arcade lies in its role as an adaptive commercial infrastructure. The continuous corridors facilitated pedestrian flow and trade interaction, fostering a dense urban marketplace. These structures became spatial instruments through which Cantonese merchants projected their commercial ethics—emphasizing pragmatism, openness, and mutual benefit. Over time, as commerce declined and modernization transformed city centers, these same arcades acquired a new meaning: they became visual markers of historical identity, nostalgia, and urban memory (Cheng, 2019). Thus, the Qilou represents a dual transformation—from an economic structure to a cultural symbol, and from a pragmatic urban form to an emblem of regional belonging.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this transformation exemplifies what Henri Lefebvre describes as the “production of space”—the process through which social, economic, and cultural forces continuously shape and reshape spatial forms. The Lingnan arcade, born out of mercantile modernity, demonstrates how spatial design not only serves economic utility but also encodes symbolic and ideological values. The façades, arcades, and decorative motifs of Qilou streets express a balance between functionality and cultural narrative, between trade pragmatism and aesthetic identity. As a result, the Qilou stands as a living artifact in which material economy and intangible culture converge.

This paper, therefore, aims to investigate the economic and cultural meanings embedded in Lingnan arcade architecture and to trace how its commercial function evolved into cultural symbolism. Specifically, it asks:

- 1) How did the Qilou architecture support and reflect the commercial practices of Cantonese merchants?
- 2) In what ways did this economic space transform into a cultural symbol of Lingnan identity?
- 3) What insights does this transformation offer for understanding the relationship between urban heritage and cultural economy?

By integrating perspectives from cultural geography, architectural semiotics, and economic anthropology, this study contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of Lingnan's built heritage. It situates the Qilou within the broader discourse on how architecture mediates between commerce, culture, and collective memory. The findings aim to provide not only academic insight but also practical implications for heritage conservation, urban revitalization, and the sustainable development of culturally distinctive urban spaces in contemporary South China.

2. Methods

This study adopts an interpretive historical inquiry approach to explore the economic and cultural meanings embedded in Lingnan's Qilou (arcade) architecture. Rather than relying on quantitative data or formal architectural typology, this method emphasizes contextual understanding, interpreting how historical circumstances, cultural values, and social practices have shaped the evolution of the Qilou from a commercial space to a cultural symbol. The interpretive historical

framework allows the researcher to reconstruct the interplay between material form and social meaning over time. Primary sources include archival documents, such as municipal construction records, merchant guild materials, urban plans, and photographic archives dating from the late Qing to the Republican period. These were complemented by secondary literature on Cantonese merchant culture, Lingnan urban history, and Chinese architectural modernity. The study also integrates field observations and visual documentation from contemporary Qilou districts in Guangzhou, Chaozhou, and Jiangmen, where architectural and social continuities remain evident.

3. Results

3.1. The Historical Development of Qilou Buildings

The evolution of Qilou architecture in Guangdong reflects the dynamic intersection of commerce, culture, and colonial influence in South China. From its origins in the late Qing dynasty to its transformation in the 21st century, the Qilou (arcade building) has served as a vivid architectural record of the region's economic vitality and cultural hybridity.

Qilou architecture emerged during the late Qing dynasty, a period marked by China's increasing engagement with global trade through the Treaty Ports system. Guangzhou, one of the earliest open ports, became a focal point of exchange between Chinese merchants and Western traders. Influenced by neoclassical and baroque architectural forms introduced by European colonial powers, local builders adapted these foreign styles to the subtropical Lingnan climate. The result was a hybrid structure—multi-storied buildings with Western façades and Chinese interior layouts, featuring arcaded walkways to protect pedestrians from heat and rain. These early Qilou lined the prosperous commercial streets of Guangzhou, Chaozhou, and Shantou, symbolizing the economic ambition of the Cantonese merchant class.

During the Republican era, Guangdong's coastal cities flourished as hubs of commerce and modernity. Qilou architecture reached its architectural and cultural peak in this period. Cities like Guangzhou's Shangxiajiu Road and Shantou's Zhongshan Road became showcases of urban modernization, where merchants displayed their wealth and cosmopolitanism through ornate façades and decorative columns. The integration of reinforced concrete and imported materials improved durability, while bilingual signage and stylistic eclecticism reflected the cosmopolitan identity of Lingnan's merchant elite.

Simultaneously, social reform movements influenced urban design. Qilou were not only business centers but also social spaces where public life unfolded under covered corridors. These arcades facilitated the emergence of modern urban culture—bookstores, tea houses, and guild halls coexisted, promoting intellectual exchange and civic consciousness. The 1930s urban renewal projects in Guangzhou further standardized Qilou design, making it a defining visual identity of the city.

After 1949, the socialist transformation of urban space reshaped the function of

Qilou architecture. Private ownership of buildings was replaced by state control, and many Qilou were repurposed into collective housing or small workshops. Economic centralization and limited maintenance led to gradual physical decay. Between 1966 and 1976, Qilou experienced a decline in development, and historical architecture was often neglected or destroyed. Despite this, Qilou districts remained vibrant local communities, preserving intangible cultural practices such as neighborhood trade and Cantonese street markets.

From the 1990s onward, as China embraced market reforms and cultural tourism, Guangdong's Qilou architecture experienced a revival. Heritage conservation campaigns in Guangzhou's Enning Road, Jiangmen's Chikan Town, and Shantou's Little Park district recognized Qilou as vital cultural assets. Restoration projects balanced preservation with adaptive reuse—transforming arcades into creative industries, art galleries, and cultural tourism hubs. UNESCO's emphasis on "living heritage" inspired local governments to integrate preservation with urban development.

Recent initiatives also employ digital documentation, 3D modeling, and GIS mapping to record and analyze Qilou districts. These technologies not only preserve architectural details but also reinterpret Qilou as a living dialogue between past and present. Today, Guangdong's Qilou architecture stands as a testament to the region's commercial ingenuity, cultural openness, and enduring urban memory—a living bridge linking traditional Lingnan identity with modern heritage consciousness.

3.2. From Commercial Infrastructure to Urban Economic Space

The Qilou architecture of Lingnan emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a direct response to both economic modernization and environmental adaptation (**Figure 1**). Built along dense commercial corridors such as Guangzhou's Shangxiajiu Road, Chaozhou's Taiping Road, and Jiangmen's Beijie Street, these arcades provided merchants with a spatial solution that combined trade accessibility, pedestrian protection, and architectural identity (**Zhang, 2015**). The continuous covered corridors allowed for uninterrupted commercial circulation, shielding customers from tropical rain and intense sunlight while facilitating vibrant street life. In this sense, the Qilou was not merely an architectural typology but a functional infrastructure for urban commerce.

The façade design—typically consisting of a European-style upper story above a recessed Chinese shopfront—symbolized the adaptive nature of Cantonese commerce. Its vertical segmentation mirrored the hierarchical structure of traditional family-owned businesses: the ground floor served for trade, the mezzanine for storage, and the upper floors for residence. This integration of living and trading space reflected the social structure of merchant families and their embeddedness within the community. The open arcade, meanwhile, encouraged collective visibility and mutual trust, reinforcing the moral economy central to Cantonese trade networks.



Figure 1. The existing appearance of the old Qilou buildings.

Spatially, the Qilou also mediated between private ownership and public interaction. The corridors belonged to private buildings yet functioned as semi-public spaces, allowing fluid movement between shops, streets, and neighborhoods (Zhang, 2015). This blurring of boundaries produced a distinct urban rhythm that balanced individual entrepreneurship with communal participation. As such, Lingnan arcades can be viewed as spatial manifestations of the Cantonese business ethos—practical, flexible, and socially embedded.

Economically, these arcade districts became nuclei of urban growth. The spatial continuity of the Qilou streets facilitated horizontal commercial clustering, which reduced transaction costs and enhanced market visibility. At the same time, the architectural uniformity created a recognizable urban identity, turning Lingnan cities into cohesive trade environments. This economic ecology mirrored the adaptive resilience of Cantonese merchants, whose prosperity relied on collective infrastructure rather than isolated enterprise. The Qilou, therefore, functioned as both a physical framework for economic interaction and a symbolic expression of communal prosperity.

3.3. From Economic Space to Cultural Symbolism

Over time, as modernization and globalization reshaped urban economies, the function of Lingnan arcades gradually transcended their original commercial purpose. What once served as a utilitarian trade environment evolved into a cultural symbol embodying memory, identity, and aesthetic heritage. This transformation reflects a broader shift from economic pragmatism to cultural representation within urban spaces.

Architecturally, the decorative features of the Qilou—arches, columns, floral reliefs, and bilingual signage—became markers of historical hybridity. They expressed both the global outlook of the Cantonese merchant class and the local

values of balance and harmony. In Guangzhou's Enning Road and Chaozhou's Kaiyuan Street, for example, façades exhibit Western baroque influences intertwined with traditional Chinese motifs such as cloud patterns and auspicious beasts (Wu et al., 2025). These hybrid aesthetics visualize the cosmopolitanism of the Lingnan region, a cultural openness rooted in centuries of maritime exchange.

Culturally, the Qilou has evolved into a collective memory space. Interviews revealed that residents often associate these arcades with childhood experiences, community festivals, and the "human warmth" of traditional street life. The arcades thus operate as a living repository of local identity—spaces where intangible cultural values are continuously reproduced through everyday practices (Cheng, 2019). The sound of merchants calling out, the smell of herbal shops, and the visual continuity of shaded corridors all contribute to an emotional landscape that sustains cultural belonging amid rapid modernization.

This symbolic transformation is also tied to the heritage economy. In recent years, local governments have launched revitalization projects to restore Qilou districts, recognizing their potential as cultural tourism destinations and creative commercial zones. Streets once filled with traditional trades now host cafés, art galleries, and boutique stores. Such adaptive reuse strategies, while economically beneficial, reveal the tension between heritage preservation and commercialization. The Qilou's cultural value risks being diluted when reduced to a decorative façade for consumerism. Nonetheless, these transformations demonstrate how the Qilou continues to mediate between the economic and the symbolic, embodying a form of cultural sustainability.

Moreover, the spatial and cultural endurance of Lingnan arcades highlights their role as living heritage. Unlike preserved monuments, these buildings remain inhabited and economically active, maintaining their relevance in contemporary urban life. This continuity exemplifies what UNESCO describes as "heritage as process"—a dynamic relationship between people, place, and practice. The Qilou thus serves as an architectural narrative of Lingnan's historical resilience: a space born from trade, adapted through culture, and sustained by collective memory.

3.4. Strategy and Recommendations for Digital Visualization and Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Lingnan Merchant Architecture

To further advance the understanding and preservation of Lingnan merchant architectural heritage, it is essential to establish a systematic research strategy that integrates digital technologies with spatial and historical analysis. Rather than focusing solely on the static documentation of architectural forms, future studies should emphasize dynamic modeling and temporal mapping of cultural evolution. It is recommended that a comprehensive framework be developed for collecting, classifying, and analyzing historical data related to Lingnan merchant buildings, including textual archives, architectural drawings, oral histories, and photographic records. This integrated dataset could later serve as the foundation for constructing a digital heritage information platform capable of supporting

cross-disciplinary visualization and comparative research among Guangzhou, Foshan, Chaozhou, and the Macao-Hong Kong regions.

Methodologically, the proposed strategy suggests employing GIS to locate and map historical trade networks, architectural clusters, and urban development patterns associated with Cantonese merchants. Combined with artificial intelligence and big data technologies, such spatial mapping could allow future researchers to identify correlations between economic flows, social mobility, and architectural typologies. Additionally, adopting 3D modeling, laser scanning, and virtual reconstruction technologies would enable gradual visualization of the architectural morphology and decorative evolution of merchant buildings across different historical phases. This approach should not only focus on reconstruction accuracy but also on interpretive storytelling—linking architectural transformations to socio-economic changes and transregional cultural exchanges within the Lingnan-Hong Kong-Macao context.

From a policy and practice perspective, it is further advised to develop collaborative platforms that connect academic institutions, cultural heritage agencies, and digital technology enterprises. Such cooperation could foster the sharing of spatial data resources, enhance technical interoperability, and promote the creation of an open-access digital heritage atlas for Lingnan merchant architecture. In sum, this strategy-oriented framework emphasizes phased data collection, interdisciplinary integration, and interactive visualization as core pathways for future research. By doing so, it lays a conceptual foundation for the long-term digital conservation, knowledge dissemination, and sustainable revitalization of Lingnan's merchant architectural culture.

3.5. Interaction between Economic Practice and Cultural Representation

The transformation from commercial infrastructure to cultural symbol does not imply a complete separation of economic and cultural functions; rather, the two remain interdependent. The contemporary Qilou street operates as a hybrid space where material commerce and symbolic expression coexist. On one hand, it supports urban livelihoods through small-scale businesses and tourism-driven retail; on the other, it preserves a sense of continuity with the past. This interaction reveals that the economic and cultural dimensions of space are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional.

Field observations in Jiangmen's Dixi Road demonstrated this hybridity vividly: traditional hardware stores coexist with design cafés, while residents still engage in informal trade under the same arcades where their ancestors once did. The economic transactions themselves have become ritualized performances of cultural identity, reinforcing community cohesion through everyday economic life.

Lingnan Qilou architecture, as a hybrid urban form integrating Chinese spatial order with Western colonial façades, embodies the cultural inclusiveness and adaptive resilience of South China's coastal cities. Within the framework of the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Qilou serves as both a tangible and symbolic medium for promoting cultural connectivity, heritage-based urban regeneration, and sustainable tourism development. Its arcaded streets, climate-responsive design, and human-scale commercial spaces illustrate a model of vernacular modernity that aligns with contemporary green and livable city strategies across Southeast Asia. By reinterpreting Qilou as a cross-cultural interface, cities such as Guangzhou, Haikou, and Penang can enhance transregional architectural dialogue and foster creative industry collaboration under the BRI. Moreover, Qilou heritage districts can function as cultural exchange nodes, facilitating soft power diplomacy through architectural conservation, digital heritage initiatives, and Sino-ASEAN cooperation. Thus, the revival of Lingnan Qilou not only reinforces regional identity but also exemplifies how traditional urban forms can actively contribute to inclusive and culturally rooted economic development in the new Silk Road era.

Therefore, the Qilou can be interpreted as both an economic artifact and a cultural text—a spatial narrative where trade practices encode ethical values, and architectural form expresses collective aspirations. Its endurance reflects not only architectural adaptability but also the ongoing negotiation between commerce, culture, and identity within Lingnan’s evolving urban landscape.

4. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that Lingnan’s Qilou architecture embodies a dual logic of economic functionality and cultural symbolism, illustrating how material space serves as both a medium and a metaphor for social transformation. This duality aligns with Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the “production of space,” which posits that spatial forms are continuously shaped by the interplay of economic structures, social practices, and symbolic meanings. In the case of Lingnan, the Qilou reflects the historical synthesis of commerce, culture, and identity—each embedded within the physical fabric of the arcade street.

The Qilou’s commercial origins reveal how architectural form directly responded to the economic pragmatism of Cantonese merchants. Its spatial continuity and hybrid design not only facilitated trade but also mirrored the ethical codes of reliability, openness, and mutual prosperity central to Cantonese mercantile culture. Yet, beyond these utilitarian functions, the Qilou simultaneously produced cultural value—it became a stage for social interactions, rituals, and urban storytelling. Over time, economic practices embedded in the Qilou—such as negotiation, exchange, and trust-building—transformed into symbols of collective identity and regional pride (Zhang, 2015). This confirms the proposition that economic space, when continually inhabited and interpreted, evolves into cultural space.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital helps explain this transformation. As the economic vitality of Qilou districts declined, their cultural and aesthetic attributes gained prominence, transforming them into sources of symbolic value

for both residents and cities. The Qilou's distinctive façades and architectural rhythms became integral to the visual identity of Lingnan cities, branding them as culturally unique within the global urban landscape (Wang et al., 2023). Municipal governments have leveraged this symbolic capital through heritage revitalization projects, aligning cultural preservation with urban economic strategies. However, this process raises critical questions about authenticity and commodification—whether the preservation of form truly sustains the cultural essence it represents.

The contemporary revalorization of Qilou streets exemplifies the fusion of heritage and economy. As cities pursue cultural tourism and creative industries, Qilou districts are increasingly positioned as “cultural consumption zones.” While these initiatives contribute to urban revitalization and local income, they also risk reducing heritage to spectacle. The challenge lies in maintaining a balance between economic exploitation and cultural integrity. A sustainable approach would recognize Qilou not merely as architectural relics but as living spaces that continue to foster community participation and local enterprise.

In this sense, the Qilou embodies what scholars term “heritage as process”—a dynamic negotiation between memory, identity, and modernization. Its continued social use and adaptation reinforce the idea that heritage preservation is not about freezing the past but about enabling continuity through change.

Recent advances in digital technology and cultural heritage research offer new perspectives for understanding and preserving Lingnan's Qilou architecture. Bibliometric reviews of the field demonstrate a rapid integration of artificial intelligence and building technology into heritage conservation, enabling more precise digital modeling, documentation, and simulation of traditional structures (Li et al., 2025a). Similarly, a scientometric study on digital heritage trends identifies challenges and opportunities in applying virtual reconstruction and intelligent data systems to safeguard intangible values embedded in historical environments (Li et al., 2025b). These studies suggest that the Qilou—as a living architectural form representing economic, aesthetic, and communal meanings—could benefit from digital preservation tools that enhance accessibility and interpretive depth without compromising authenticity. Digital technologies thus not only archive Qilou's materiality but also sustain its evolving cultural narrative within smart heritage frameworks.

The Lingnan Qilou provides a valuable model for understanding the broader relationship between architecture, economy, and culture in rapidly urbanizing societies. It demonstrates that economic modernization need not erase historical forms; rather, it can coexist with them through adaptive reuse and cultural reinterpretation. The evolution of the Qilou underscores the potential of architectural heritage to serve as both an economic resource and a cultural language that narrates local histories. For policymakers, this suggests that urban heritage management should emphasize inclusivity—encouraging the participation of local communities in preserving the meanings and memories embedded in architectural

spaces.

Qilou architecture in Guangdong (**Figure 2**), Macao (**Figure 3**), and Hong Kong (**Figure 4**) shares a common origin in Lingnan's subtropical climate and mercantile culture, yet each region developed distinct stylistic identities. In Guangdong, particularly in cities like Guangzhou and Chaozhou, Qilou buildings emphasize regional craftsmanship and cultural hybridity—combining traditional Chinese layouts with Western façades, colorful ceramic tiles, and decorative reliefs symbolizing prosperity. Macao's Qilou architecture, shaped by Portuguese colonial influence, exhibits stronger Mediterranean aesthetics, featuring stucco façades, arched colonnades, and pastel tones. Its arcades integrate seamlessly with Iberian urban planning, reflecting a unique Sino-European synthesis. Hong Kong's Qilou, often called “Tong Lau”, reveal a more modernized and vertical evolution, influenced by British colonial building regulations and high-density urbanism. They adopt simpler facades, reinforced concrete structures, and balconies suited for compact residential-commercial use. Collectively, these variations illustrate how shared architectural traditions adapt to distinct cultural, political, and environmental contexts within the Lingnan region.



Figure 2. Qilou buildings in Guangdong.



Figure 3. Qilou buildings in Macau.



Figure 4. Qilou buildings in Hong Kong.

This research advances the field of architectural heritage studies by reframing Lingnan Qilou architecture as both an economic infrastructure and a cultural symbol. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates architectural history, economic anthropology, and cultural geography, the study reveals how spatial forms mediate between commerce, identity, and collective memory. It contributes theoretical depth to understanding the “production of space” in South China, demonstrating how built environments evolve through the interaction of economic practice and cultural representation. Practically, the proposed framework for digital visualization and GIS-based analysis offers innovative tools for documenting and preserving Qilou architecture in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao region. These methods support sustainable heritage revitalization, bridging traditional craftsmanship with contemporary urban planning. Ultimately, the research provides new insights for policymakers, conservationists, and urban designers on how historical architecture can drive the cultural economy and foster regional identity in the context of modern urban development.

Equally significant are the ritual and cultural dimensions underpinning Lingnan’s architectural tradition. Research on the decorative and ritual art of Guangdong’s ancestral halls reveals that spatial aesthetics and visual motifs are deeply influenced by regional belief systems and communal symbolism (Yuan, 2025; Li et al., 2024). Likewise, cultural geography analyses of Lingnan ancestral halls during the Ming and Qing dynasties demonstrate that interior spatial art and ornamentation conveyed social order, kinship, and identity (Zhang et al., 2023). These insights parallel the symbolic transformation of the Qilou: both architectural types act as ritualized spatial narratives, where collective memory and aesthetic order reinforce community belonging. Moreover, studies of historical commercial streets such as Guangzhou’s Beijing Road highlight how public perception of historical space intertwines sensory experience, cultural identity, and economic engagement (Zhong, 2020). Together, these findings reaffirm that the Qilou’s evolution from

commerce to culture is not only a spatial-economic process but also a ritual and perceptual one—where technology, symbolism, and collective experience co-produce heritage value in contemporary Lingnan society.

Ultimately, the discussion affirms that the Qilou's lasting vitality lies not solely in its architectural beauty or historical age, but in its capacity to mediate between the material and the symbolic, the economic and the emotional. It is through this mediation that the Qilou continues to function as a living embodiment of Lingnan's commercial wisdom, cultural hybridity, and enduring urban spirit.

This study's main limitation lies in its reliance on qualitative and interpretive historical analysis, which may constrain the generalizability of its findings. While archival records and field observations provide rich contextual insight, they lack quantitative data to measure the socio-economic impact of Qilou revitalization objectively. Additionally, the research focuses primarily on selected cities in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao region, limiting the comparative perspective across other Southern Chinese or Southeast Asian arcade typologies. The study also acknowledges the need for greater integration of digital technologies in empirical analysis—such as spatial mapping, AI-assisted heritage modeling, and participatory digital archives—to enhance accuracy and inclusivity. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic inquiry with computational tools like GIS and 3D modeling. Expanding collaboration among historians, architects, and technologists will strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue and contribute to a more dynamic and data-driven framework for cultural heritage preservation and adaptive urban development.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the transformation of Lingnan's Qilou architecture from a commercial space grounded in Cantonese mercantile practice to a cultural symbol embodying collective memory and regional identity. Through a qualitative approach integrating archival research, field observation, and cultural interpretation, the research reveals that the Qilou functions as a dynamic socio-spatial form—where economic activity, cultural meaning, and architectural adaptation converge.

The findings highlight three interrelated dimensions of this transformation. First, the Qilou's physical structure—its continuous corridors, hybrid façades, and mixed-use typology—was a product of pragmatic economic needs. It facilitated trade efficiency and social interaction, representing the entrepreneurial ethos of the Cantonese merchant class. Second, as urban modernization and economic shifts diminished its commercial dominance, the Qilou accrued new significance as a symbolic and emotional landscape. Its aesthetic hybridity and spatial rhythm became carriers of local identity, expressing the historical resilience and openness of Lingnan culture. Third, the interplay between economic and cultural forces ensured the Qilou's endurance as a living heritage, sustaining both livelihood and memory within changing urban environments.

In conclusion, Lingnan's Qilou architecture stands as more than a relic of the

past; it is a living testament to the adaptive dialogue between commerce and culture. Its enduring presence affirms that economic vitality and cultural identity need not exist in opposition, but can instead coexist harmoniously within the evolving landscape of the modern Chinese city.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

Author's Contributions

S.W.: Conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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