

## Article

# Tourists' Motives for Visiting Historic Conservation Areas in the Post-Pandemic Era: A Case Study of Kuanzhai Alley in Chengdu, China

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**Abstract:** Much current discussion about the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health focuses on urban green space and rarely on historic conservation areas (HCAs). With the pandemic's lasting influence and advances in medical technology, people's mental health needs and attitudes toward epidemic prevention changed, and the importance of HCAs has received great attention. This study aims to explore the positive impact of heritage tourism on mental recovery under the influence of the pandemic. The Kuanzhai Alley HCA was selected as the location for the field survey and in-depth interviews. A total of 48 respondents were recruited for the semi-structured interviews, and qualitative data were analyzed through MAXQDA 2020, and the motives and mental feedback of tourists visiting Kuanzhai Alley were summarized. The results showed that there is great landscape integrity and continuity in the area. During the pandemic, the inclusive cultural atmosphere, human-based spatial scale, and cultural activities in the form of intangible heritage, such as Sichuan opera and live-action role-playing (LARP), had significant effects on eliminating loneliness, relieving anxiety, and improving happiness. The study results are expected to provide reference and guidance for current and future management of heritage tourism, social well-being, and a sustainable cultural economy.

**Keywords:** cultural sustainability; heritage tourism; post-pandemic era; mental health; visitor perceptions



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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between heritage protection and tourism development has evolved over the past 50 years since the implementation of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (hereinafter: the Convention). In the early days of the Convention, tourism was considered a threat to heritage conservation due to its emphasis on the main structure of heritage [1,2]. With the evolution of sustainable development, the study of cultural heritage has gradually evolved from the one-sided understanding of conservation as being in inevitable conflict with development. Tourism has gradually been recognized as an effective means of heritage conservation [3–5]. In 2019, a global public health outbreak (the COVID-19 pandemic), social isolation, and urban lockdown accompanying the impact of the epidemic affected people's mental health, manifesting varying degrees of reduced well-being, fear, depression, and an increasing risk of mental health disorders [6–8]. In recent years, how to help people recover their mental health as soon as possible has become a major topic of academic research. It is worth mentioning that heritage tourism can not only strengthen the urban spatial form and core competitiveness [9], but also achieve the effects of optimizing the urban environment, enhancing well-being, and promoting spiritual recovery through a high-level integration capacity of natural and social resources [10–13]. Therefore, the impact of heritage tourism experiences on individual mental health should receive our utmost attention in the post-epidemic era.

Motive is the intrinsic factor that guides human behavior, deriving from the expectation of achieving a specific result or benefit [14]. In general, the study of heritage tourism motivations follows two themes. The first is based on heritage attributes. It is generally believed that heritage tourism motives include pilgrimage, nostalgia, dark tourism, hunting and exploring, and study, while also covering mass tourism motives, such as leisure and recreation, and learning and education [15–17]. The second emphasizes the degree of tourists' connection to heritage as a classification criterion for motivation based on their needs [18]. As Poria [19] argued, there is a core-fringe structure of heritage tourism motivation, which consists of motivation to connect with history, to learn, to have an emotional connection with heritage, and to have no connection with heritage attributes [19]. Needless to say, urban green space as an empty space with the function of a green buffer zone became an important place to relieve people's mental pressure, and being close to the natural environment was undoubtedly the main motive in the early years of the pandemic [20–22]. However, with the pandemic's lasting influence and the pathogenicity of the novel coronavirus being relatively weakened [23], a way to maintain social distance and recreational experience forced people to seek change and emotional stimulation, that is, to heal post-traumatic stress disorder, especially loneliness, and anxiety [24].

Interestingly, HCAs usually preserve the traditional pattern and historical customs [25] and have been shown to evoke place attachment and nostalgia as a memory place carrying a strongly human atmosphere [26,27]. Meanwhile, a growing number of studies have pointed out that perceptual cognition has significant effects on maintaining and enhancing human physical and mental health, such as stimulating positive emotions, enhancing positive self-evaluation, maintaining self-continuity, enhancing the sense of existential meaning, and promoting pro-social behavior [13,28–31].

Other studies have also revealed the tourism experience's unique value in terms of mental recovery. In 2009, a study by the Center for Urban and Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University found that visiting heritage sites can help create a unique sense of place [32]. In 2012, Ander et al. also proved that the appreciation activities provided by historical heritage for patients with mental disorders improved their mood and self-confidence [33]. In 2014, Fujiwara et al. examined the relationship between heritage tourism and well-being through social survey data and concluded that visiting historic sites has a statistical effect on well-being similar to that of attending an art activity, larger than visiting a museum, but less than attending a sport [34]. In addition, in Runcorn, UK, the Norton Abbey project engaged people to participate in farming activities in the heritage garden, increasing people's sense of belonging and happiness [35]. In China, Liu and Li pointed out that appreciating music, drama, and dance in the form of intangible heritage as part of a tourism experience can directly or indirectly affect people's emotions, overcome social isolation, and promote mental recovery [36]. In response, the development of heritage projects with healing tourism as the theme has also attracted wide attention [37,38]. In view of the positive impact of heritage tourism on mental health, cultural departments in some Western countries have begun to strengthen cooperation with health and social care institutions by taking advantage of the natural and historical resources of cultural heritage sites and by carrying out participatory heritage activities that not only provide health promotion activities based on the historical environment but also provide intervention for people experiencing mental problems, learning disabilities, and social exclusion. Practical results show that people who participate in heritage tourism have higher life satisfaction and mental health than those who do not have such an experience [39]. These studies show that different types of heritage tourism experiences have different effects on the promotion of mental health. The motive of people to visit heritage mirrors their expectations. Understanding these motives is important for determining why people participate in heritage tourism and the impact of such experiences on individuals' mental health. Although previous studies have clarified the relationship between heritage tourism and mental recovery, the research on tourists' motives for engaging in heritage tourism in the

post-pandemic era is still limited, and which specific approaches or tourism experiences can psychologically heal remains to be further investigated.

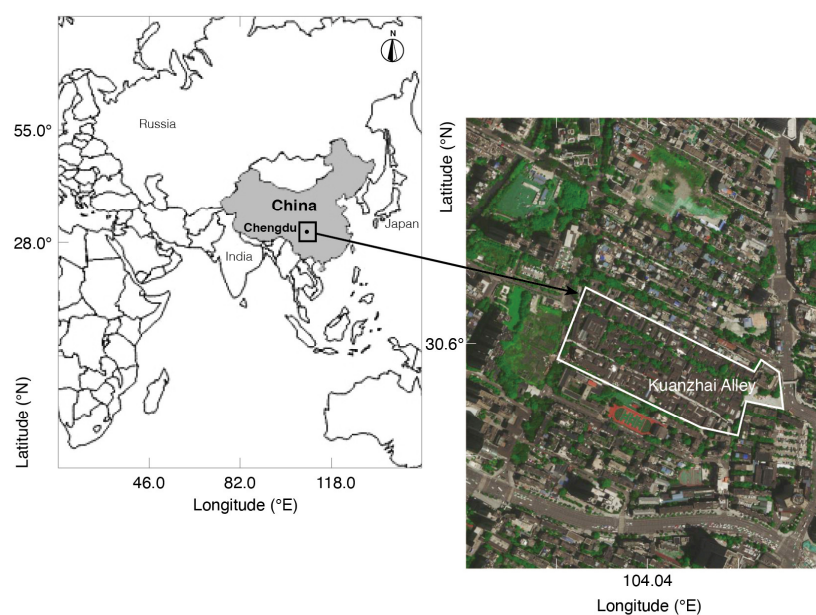
Kuanzhai Alley HCA (hereinafter, Kuanzhai Alley) was built in 1718, however, the location has been part of the core urban area since Chengdu was founded 2000 years ago. Kuanzhai Alley accumulated profound cultural connotations and inherited various cultural heritage resources during the changes and development of the past dynasties, especially from the culture characterized by inclusive social interaction, and a spatial scale representing more humanistic care. Additionally, Kuanzhai Alley is well known and receives many visitors. According to public data, Kuanzhai Alley receives more than 20 million visitors annually, and in 2019 alone, the number of visitors reached 41.637 million, a year-on-year increase of 32.8% [40]. Therefore, the selection of Kuanzhai Alley as the object site is conducive to providing convenience and representativeness for investigating tourists' motives.

In summary, this study takes the example of Kuanzhai Alley as the research object and aims to explore the impact of heritage tourism on mental health in the post-pandemic era through semi-structured interviews, especially for the feedback of participation motive and mental recovery. Understanding these motives and feedback is important for the current and future management of heritage tourism, social well-being, and the sustainability of the cultural economy. In addition, the study results can also provide some suggestions and references for heritage tourism managers in dealing with similar events in the future.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Location Context

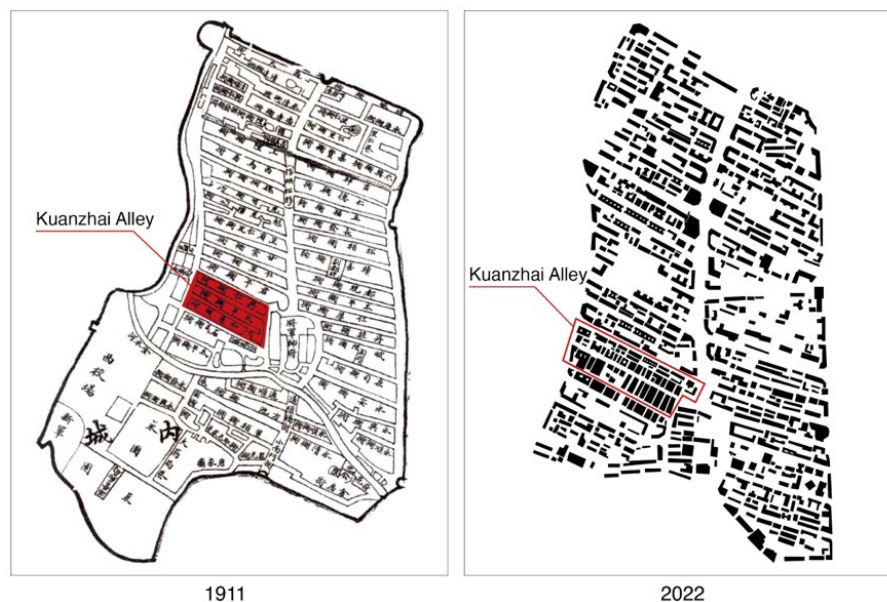
Kuanzhai Alley is located near the People's Park in Qingyang District in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan Province (Figure 1). The site was built in 1718 and covers an area of approximately 320,000 m<sup>2</sup>, with a core conservation area of about 72,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Kuanzhai Alley follows the old urban pattern of three parallel alleys: Kuan Alley, Zhai Alley, and Jing Alley. The use of space in its southern portion shows a clear influence from hutong (a kind of traditional streetscape found in Beijing).



**Figure 1.** Location of the study area.

In the 57th year of Emperor Kangxi (1718), the Junggar tribe attacked Tibet. After the Qing government sent 3000 soldiers to Tibet to quell the war, more than 1000 soldiers from the Eight Banners (army) were permanently stationed in Chengdu. The military commander of the Qing government constructed Man City almost exactly on the original

site of Shao City from the Qin Dynasty. Man City was planned and constructed by the Qing government for soldiers of the Eight Banners and their families who were stationed in Chengdu. The remnants from that period comprise today's Kuanzhai Alley (Figure 2).

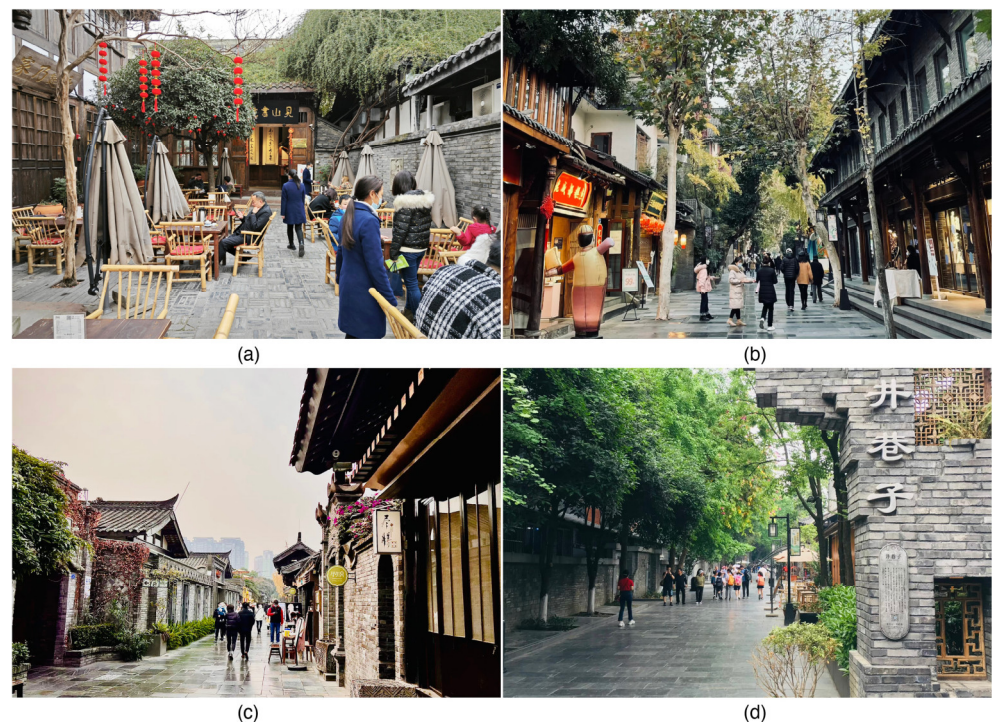


**Figure 2.** Spatial structure of Kuanzhai Alley and the city of Shao at different times.

By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period, most people living in Kuan Alley were military officers, displaying a grandiose style and an imposing manner. Zhai Alley was inhabited mostly by commoners, displaying a simpler style. Although the two alleys differ widely in style, they both carry the strong flavor of old Chengdu and maintain an atmosphere of folk culture. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government allocated Kuanzhai Alley to employees of state-owned enterprises as welfare housing. During this period, Kuanzhai Alley still maintained its main function of housing and living. In addition, it is a place with a high flow of people, which is conducive to the formation of gatherings, as it is a popular place for the public to communicate with each other daily. Thus, the public culture of Chengdu takes shape here.

Currently, the newly renovated Kuanzhai Alley is composed of 45 courtyards in the style of the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. There are garden mansions with artistic and cultural aspects and newly built special hotels (Figure 3). The Alley is bustling with a hundred stores that are Chinese and Western, traditional and modern, and cultural and commercial. These stores coexist and flourish, and the spirit of the city has prevailed for a long time. Kuan Alley mostly represents popular folk culture. Hospitality and cuisine, featuring folk catering, leisure teahouses, and hotels, constitute a unique attraction element and the Chengdu vocabulary, which represents the memory of modern people in relation to the city. The Zhai Alley is characterized by the slow pace of life in old Chengdu and has the traditional elegance of the courtyard culture of the city. Through regeneration, the green plants in the area are mainly golden bamboo and climbing plants, and the street is decorated with classic wall lamps. The courtyard facing the street displays the essence of its special commerce through the shop windows. The positioning of Jing Alley indicates the new life of Chengdu's people, and the concentration of modern culture. As the most open, diverse, and dynamic consumption space, Jing Alley serves as a fashionable and dynamic entertainment area with bars, nightclubs, dessert shops, wedding venues, retail, light meals, and creative fashion.





**Figure 3.** Kuanzhai Alley: (a) Courtyard; (b) Kuan Alley; (c) Zhai Alley; and (d) Jing Alley. Source: taken by the authors.

## 2.2. Research Method and Data Analysis

Under the umbrella of qualitative research, semi-structured interviews (also known as in-depth interviews) are a method of obtaining qualitative material that focuses on obtaining cases or real ideas from the experiences and mental activities of the interviewees and exploring their deeper implications [41]. They have the advantage of successfully enabling the interviewer to improvise appropriate questions based on the participant's responses and leaving space for the participant's personal verbal expression [42–44]. The interviews that authors conducted were divided into six phases: (1) discourse organization; (2) interview outline design; (3) interviewee recruitment; (4) interview execution; (5) data code and analysis; and (6) report generation. Thematic analysis is an effective method for analyzing qualitative data [45]. The interview data were then analyzed using the MAXQDA2020 software for transcripts, which had the advantage of being compatible with multiple types of data, allowing easy management of teamwork, and quick qualitative analysis [46,47]. Specifically, first, we organized the initial texts, conducted open coding, identified conceptual categories from texts by repeated reading and comparison, and named and differentiated them. Then, we verified the consistency of the attributes and coding categories, and further revised the coding. Finally, we extracted the coded texts that matched the themes and presented the results.

## 2.3. Interviewees

From June to October 2022, we initially recruited 89 respondents at the site, and 48 respondents were finally screened after a short communication (Table A1). The screening criteria were to cover as many different occupations, education levels, and ages as possible to better understand the motives of different groups. Regarding the reasonableness of the sample size, it has been suggested that an adequate sample size is reached when explanations are visible and clear and new findings are not revealed by new informants [7,48]. For most in-depth interview studies, even very large qualitative studies usually do not exceed 50 or 60 interviews [49]. At the same time, Robinson [50] explains that interview studies with specific objectives seek small enough sample sizes to obtain more accurate

information. The 48 respondents included 20 men and 28 women. The respondents were between 18 and 81 years old, with an average age of 37.2 years ( $SD = 16.7$ ). The sample size essentially allowed us to capture sufficient data. Therefore, the current information ( $N = 48$ ) can provide certain support for the results.

#### 2.4. Materials

To accurately capture the psychological activities of the interviewees, interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the location was chosen to be a cafe or teahouse in Kuanzhai Alley, with the cost of drinks and snacks covered by the research team. All participants were interviewed anonymously, with their concerns considered, and verbally promised that no personally identifiable information, such as photos, names, or contact information, would ever be revealed. Additionally, although the semi-structured interviews had a certain degree of freedom and encouraged the interviewees to speak freely, it was necessary to set core questions to focus on the research needs and prevent the interviewees from deviating from the topic, which may have ultimately affected the progress of the whole interview execution and subsequent data compilation. Specifically, it primarily included but was not limited to: (1) activities and experiences in Kuanzhai Alley; (2) the impact of the pandemic on study/life/work; (3) reasons for visiting Kuanzhai Alley; (4) how to evaluate the role and value of Kuanzhai Alley during the pandemic; and (5) their own experiences and feelings. Although the researcher listed the questions to be discussed in advance, the interviews remained open-ended (language expressions were not specified in advance, and the order of questions was not fixed) [51,52], and discussions with the respondents were centered on problems closely related to the research topic. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and then converted into text, which was collated and translated from Chinese into English by the authors. One-on-one interviews were conducted collaboratively by the authors. A total of 48 interviews were carried out, each interview lasting approximately 24 min. Interview timings were determined in consultation with the interviewees and were generally chosen between 2 and 5 p.m. and 6 and 8 p.m.

### 3. Results

The multiple perceived benefits of a sense of place, subjective satisfaction, and cultural heritage reflect a variety of social effects [45,53]. HCAs with fascinating historical landscapes, diverse recreational facilities, and profound cultural connotations have become contributors to maintaining mental health and promoting cultural economies [13,26,31]. Through visitors' feedback on Kuanzhai Alley, the authors coded, analyzed, and categorized the interview contexts to summarize the motives for visiting into three aspects: eliminating loneliness, relieving anxiety, and improving happiness. Each theme will be discussed in the following sections, using the interviewees' own words to explain.

#### 3.1. Eliminating Loneliness

Social interactions are positively associated with people's health, well-being, and quality of life [54], and reduced or a lack of social interactions may lead to social isolation and increased potential health risks [6,7,24,55]. According to available studies, the virulence of COVID-19 has diminished to some extent but remains extremely infectious, and it remains to be determined whether virulence and transmissibility will increase or decrease in the future [23,56]. Therefore, social distancing and reducing unnecessary outings have become the norm. However, 94% of the respondents indicated that this way of life had pushed their tolerance limits, and a return to free social interaction and eliminating loneliness became the strongest desire. For example, one lady complained, "I used to camp or go shopping with my friends twice a month... Yet now, the lack of close interactions gradually diluted our friendships. I haven't had any new friends for a long time either" (female, 29 years old, staff).

As older adults are more likely to become seriously ill [57] several retirees mentioned that they had to stay at home for a long time, however, this constant state of loneliness

made them moody and unstable: “I am simply fed up with this unfree and joyless life! In the first year, I could understand, after all, medical technology was limited, and people’s knowledge of COVID-19 was still shallow . . . But now, after three years, am I going to spend the rest of my life at home, quietly and alone” (female, 72 years old, retired)?

Social media greatly served the need for social interaction during the epidemic. However, for people who are not used to using electronic devices, offline interaction is even more crucial. As one older adult man living alone said: “My cell phone helps me to contact my family and friends, but it does not give me companionship . . . Social interaction does not stop at verbal communication, but face-to-face interaction is more emotionally satisfying, such as hugging, shaking hands, and feeling warmth and breath . . . More importantly, there are many new reliable friends to meet [referencing a high probability of social media scams] . . . When visiting Kuanzhai Alley, the warm life atmosphere breaks the invisible barriers between strangers and creates opportunities for communication. It’s because of [their] friendly interactions that I feel less alone” (male, 72 years old, retired).

It is worth mentioning that according to visitors’ feedback on their tours, in addition to the atmosphere created by the local citizen culture, they also think the spatial scale of Kuanzhai Alley (building to street, 1:1/1.1.5) can bring people closer to each other and generate a higher frequency of interaction, especially in Zhai Alley (1:1). One interviewee shared his experience with us: “Looking back on the experience of urban green spaces, it seems that people are easily diverted by the variety of open spaces, which makes it difficult to happen much interaction; on the contrary, in Kuanzhai Alley, the stories and historical relics are always able to subconsciously gather many people, while at the same time, the simple and narrative flow of the roads not only ensures the integrity of the experience but also allows for deeper emotional interaction with others . . . I’m grateful to have met so many interesting friends on this journey” (male, 32, designer). As such, Kuanzhai Alley served as a place for social interaction during the pandemic, helping to reduce loneliness.

### 3.2. Relieving Anxiety

From January 2020 to October 2022, China’s pandemic prevention policies became stricter, and city lockdowns and travel restrictions have become more frequent. In addition to this, both governments and companies discourage cross-province and cross-city travel and require people not to leave the local area unless necessary [58]. Once infected or having had close contact, tourists may face several days of quarantine, disrupting their work and life plans. Quarantine and lockdown were seen as sources of stress during the pandemic [7,59,60]. People who have been in the same living environment for a long time are more likely to develop psychological disorders such as insomnia, depression, and anxiety [61,62]. Of the respondents, 85% stated the normal management of the epidemic has caused a varying degree of mental anxiety.

A university student said: “It becomes extremely difficult to get in and out of school during the pandemic. All students are not allowed to leave school without a special reason to avoid group infection. Although the current situation has eased and the access control has been somewhat lax, I recall my youthful time in the university, for example, stay at home or school, and lack of communication with the outside world . . . I often feel insecure about my future” (female, 24, student).

79% of respondents state that participating in cultural activities in the form of intangible heritage is an effective means to reduce anxiety, such as Sichuan opera (Figure 4), folk music, tea art learning, etc. The main reason can be attributed to diverting attention and then slowing down the frequency of anxiety. For example, feedback from an interviewee stated: “When appreciating Sichuan opera [a close-range interactive traditional performance in Sichuan area], the actors’ facial mask changes as the plot turns. Driven by curiosity, my eyes, brain, breath, and heart kept pace with the performer. I did not have the mind to worry about anything” (male, 39, bank clerk).





**Figure 4.** Sichuan opera in Kuanzhai Alley. Source: taken by the authors.

Interestingly, among the feedback from young respondents aged 18 to 36, Jing Alley's immersive LARP became an important medium for relieving mental pressure. LARP is a project in which players come to a live action setting to act out an open-ended story. LARP is not only a game, but also a set of knowledge attributes, psychological battle attributes, and strong social interaction attributes. Nevertheless, different from other indoor LARPs, Kuanzhai Alley's LARP takes the whole HCA as the narrative scene (Figure 5). Such real historical space can further enrich the players' game experience and stimulate their emotional changes to a certain extent. As one veteran player explained: "It's amazing! Dressed in traditional clothes, I walked from indoors to outdoors, from Kuan Alley through Zhai Alley, and back to Jing Alley to complete the game mission with a strong sense of substitution . . . The emotional experience is continuous and stimulating, and the anxiety emotion is also dissipated in the narrative push [interacting with heritage, communicating with players and non-player characters, and resonating with the story]" (male, 25, designer). LARP oriented toward emotional experience and heritage background may be a helpful connection between heritage tourism and mental recovery.



**Figure 5.** LARP in Kuanzhai Alley. Source: taken by the authors.

### 3.3. Improving Sense of Happiness

Happiness refers to a group of joyful and pleasant emotions produced subjectively by human beings based on their own satisfaction and sense of security [63]. In heritage tourism, cultural experience is a unique psychological and behavioral activity of tourists, which is a way for them to gain insight into the material and spiritual civilization accumulated by social transformation through their own experience and to realize satisfaction [64]. In the recorded statement, when asked about the reasons for visiting Kuanzhai Alley, 45% of the respondents mentioned too much negative energy had been input during the pandemic (deaths, rumors, and negative attitudes around them), and that they hoped to refresh themselves through the tour experience. It is worth mentioning that several studies have pointed out that appreciating cultural relics and experiencing the heritage environment can give people enjoyable mental experiences, regulate better mood, and generate a sense of self-worth [33,35,65]. Therefore, Kuanzhai Alley, known for its Sichuan cuisine, casual life,



western Sichuan culture, and the most well-preserved HCA in Chengdu, then became one of the key destinations they envisioned.

A doctor told us: “Recently more and more people have been infected with the novel coronavirus, which has led to great pressure in hospitals. On the one hand, I was worried that I would be infected, and on the other hand, I was more worried that I would infect my family at home . . . To be honest, the epidemic has made life a sense of crisis. I feel helpless and hopeless in this situation” (female, 41, Doctor). When we continued to ask whether this trip made her feel satisfied or changed her negative attitude, she affirmed this, answering, “During the process of visiting the historical exhibition, I put down my struggling self and walked into the corridor of history and colorful culture, allowing the organizer to lead me forward. In this process, those troubles in life, and the pain of work, all seem small and insignificant at this moment . . . Although this disaster has caused so much pain and suffering, I believe it will end like the events in history, and our lives will begin anew”.

The common understanding of nostalgia in modern psychology is that of longing and affection for the past [66,67]. Sedikides et al. pointed out that nostalgia is a storage room for positive emotions, storing happiness, tranquility, and other positive emotions [68]. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a comprehensive impact on economic development and triggered a series of dramatic chain reactions, such as high unemployment rates and suicides [69,70]. Among our interviewees, three people lost their jobs because of the pandemic. They said they suffered from a strong sense of inferiority and insecurity. One man who used to work in Kuanzhai Alley confided in us: “Before the pandemic, our store’s turnover occupied the top ten in Kuanzhai Alley. Since the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia in 2019, with the massive decrease in tourists, there were serious problems with cash flow last year, which eventually led to me being laid off . . . Today, whenever I step into Kuanzhai Alley again and see people coming and going, I always feel as if nothing has changed . . . Strangely, the feeling is hard to express, it’s a little bit warm and moved at somewhat moment” (male, 38 years old, unemployed). Heritage tourism can stimulate nostalgia and improve people’s sense of self-identity.

#### 4. Discussion and Implications

According to a report released by the World Health Organization, although multiple mutant strains of the virus have appeared, the vaccine triggers a broad immune response as vaccination rates increase. This means that the vaccine remains effective against existing variants, especially in preventing serious illness, hospitalization, and death [23]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing, and there are many unknowns as to whether existing medical conditions can fully contain the virus. Mental health problems affected by the pandemic may continue for some time [7].

In situations of normalized epidemic prevention and control, traditional heritage tourism is limited by time, space, and management costs, which can no longer meet the needs of operation management. Moreover, in the consideration of the protection of ancient buildings and cultural relics, some scenic spots cannot be opened to tourists, or cannot be opened for long periods, which exposes the weaknesses of current offline tourism and highlights the problems of inadequate and backward operation management of the traditional tourism industry [71]. To satisfy the sustainable development of heritage tourism, heritage digitalization has attracted wide attention. Franczuk et al. [72] introduced the direct use of point clouds in real-time interaction with the cultural heritage, using Kłodzko Fortress, Poland, as an example, with the intention of popularizing the region’s cultural heritage resources in pandemic and post-pandemic times. Qiu et al. [71] took China as an example to show that live streaming can reduce losses in the tourism industry associated with travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study by Lu et al. [73], it was also shown that virtual tourism can not only serve as an effective marketing tool to promote destinations but can also contribute to sustainable tourism by reducing unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions from transportation and increasing virtual accessibility, especially for older

adults and people with disabilities. Heritage digitization opens up new forms of heritage tourism, which on the one hand reduces the virus' transmission, while on the other hand breaks through the barriers of time and space, allowing ancient cultural artifacts to enter one's life in a more vibrant manner [73,74]. Nevertheless, although digital technology has compensated for the lack of economic benefits and cultural impact of heritage sites in the post-epidemic context, according to respondents' feedback, offline visits remain irreplaceably important, particularly in terms of mental healing. As such, in addition to expanding different tourism management modes to cope with the threat of public health events, heritage managers should also pay more attention to how to better promote mental recovery for tourists through offline heritage tourism and optimize the tourism experience in a timely manner.

Chengdu has been known as the "land of abundance" since ancient times, and the natural conditions of fertile land and abundant products have nurtured people's attitude of enjoying life. The city's long history, authentic cuisine, and lively and casual atmosphere attract vast numbers of people to visit and live in Chengdu. According to official statistics, the resident population of the city reached almost 21 million people in 2021, and the city received 205 million visitors that year [75,76]. As previously mentioned, Kuanzhai Alley not only preserves traditional patterns and local customs but also carries a diverse and inclusive local culture. This unique cultural atmosphere reduces people's wariness, unconsciously connects people with different cultural backgrounds, and creates opportunities for them to communicate, thus mitigating loneliness. Additionally, the spatial scale of Kuanzhai Alley follows traditional Chinese block planning, and the sense of closeness is more familiar to Chinese people. At the same time, Ashihara pointed out that when the ratio between buildings and streets is 1:1, there is a sense of symmetry between height and width. Otherwise, a larger scale generates a sense of distance, while a smaller scale generates a sense of nervousness [77]. In the process of protection and development, the spatial scale of Kuanzhai Alley continues the historical appearance of 1:1 and 1:1.5. The local government has always been committed to coordinating the relationship between the block and the surrounding environment. This spatial scale of humanistic care provides the possibility for deeper emotional communication. Therefore, on the one hand, heritage managers need to strengthen the protection of citizen culture. Considering that citizen culture is characterized by real life and spontaneous activity [78], relevant departments should mainly intervene as lightly as possible, such as by improving the livability of the environment and the inclusiveness of public space. On the other hand, the transmission distance of COVID-19 in the air is 1–2 m [79]. Heritage managers should therefore also improve the neighborhood's supporting infrastructure services, reasonably divide activity areas, and appropriately control population density.

Diversion of attention and input of positive information are effective approaches to relieving anxiety and improving happiness [80,81], such as appreciating art performances, reminiscing, and visiting cultural exhibitions. Notably, the effect of LARP on mental healing seems to need more attention. Under the normal condition of prevention and control, people pay more attention to the beauty of life, and their demands for self-identification with content and stimulating interactivity of tourism experiences are constantly upgraded. According to the data released by the China Academy of Culture and Tourism, when people choose tourism for leisure, they have both superficial needs for relaxation and entertainment (44.3%) and functional needs (47.8%), such as broadening knowledge and expanding social contact [82]. LARP is one of the most popular experiences for people to reduce pressure and create social opportunities in the imaginary world it presents [83]. During the epidemic, some tourists said that in the process of participating in the immersive LARP in Kuanzhai Alley, they let off their emotions by playing roles and performing and made up for the comfort they could not get, which played a psychological healing role. This indicates that LARP may be an important means to relieve anxiety and expand new industrial directions for the sustainable development of heritage tourism.

However, some respondents expressed concern. They believe that if the script is not properly controlled, it could easily bring about new psychological problems. For example, if the character is designed to be dark, the actor is prone to anxiety, panic, insomnia, and other conditions. Several veteran players also mentioned that each person's situation is different: some people can be susceptible to hidden dangers to mental health associated with a difficult script, difficulty distinguishing between reality and the virtual, and even addiction to the LARP world. In the field of psychiatry, psychodrama is a common way for doctors to treat patients [84–86]. In a sense, psychodrama and LARP are very similar in nature; only the method of promoting emotional change and effectiveness are different. In a broad discussion, interviewees said that it was more immersive to experience LARP in a real heritage setting [Kuanzhai Alley]. Hence, heritage managers can consider creating the LARP script with mental recovery and positivity as the emotional orientation, combining it with heritage characteristics to create a relaxed and pleasant spiritual world for visitors.

In the post-epidemic era, most existing studies focus on the digital transformation of heritage tourism [71–74,87]. Even in the field of mental health, it is also reflected in urban green space [7,20]. Few studies have explored the impact of heritage tourism on mental recovery during the pandemic and are more limited in HCAs. In terms of only heritage tourism and mental health, their findings seem to be broadly consistent with ours, for example, that social interaction helps to eliminate loneliness [24,55]. In the process of heritage tourism, participation in intangible heritage activities can effectively reduce anxiety [36]. At the same time, heritage tourism can stimulate nostalgia, improve self-identity, and increase happiness [88]. However, there is a lack of further investigation into which specific heritage tourism experiences contribute to mental recovery in the context of the post-pandemic era. There are certain similarities between urban green space and HCAs in terms of mental health, as well as their own unique advantages [7,13,59]. According to the survey results, as epidemic prevention and control measures become more stringent and social isolation becomes more frequent, it is difficult to continue to meet people's mental needs with urban green space alone. Therefore, it is necessary to attach importance to the value of heritage tourism in promoting mental health. In this study, we took Kuanzhai Alley as an example and used semi-structured interviews to investigate the motives and mental feedback of tourists in the post-epidemic era. The results showed that the atmosphere of the citizen culture, the spatial scale, the activities in the form of intangible cultural heritage (Sichuan opera, folk music, and tea art learning), and the theme exhibition had positive effects on recovery, especially LARP. In a sense, this study expands the understanding of mental recovery and heritage tourism experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, our findings also provide certain references for other similar HCAs in China, as well as heritage sites in other countries or regions dealing with similar events.

Finally, this study aims to recommend governments and heritage managers pay more attention to and follow the guidelines of the World Health Organization and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to meet the mental health needs of people as much as possible while preserving and utilizing HCAs. At present, there are still many unknown aspects of the virus that need further research, and whether herd immunity or a strict blockade policy is chosen, governments should be alert to the negative effects of a pandemic and leverage the unique value of heritage tourism to avoid more serious potential mental health problems and secondary disasters. Additionally, there are some limitations to this study. Although our selection of Kuanzhai Alley is representative, it cannot cover the motivational characteristics of all tourists. More research is needed on HCAs in different regions to gain a more comprehensive understanding. LARP has been proven to promote mental recovery, and how to better utilize the resource advantages of heritage sites to bring about a better immersive experience or healing needs to be further explored in the future.



## 5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the sustainability of urban heritage and mental health. This study used qualitative methods to conduct in-depth interviews with 48 respondents, with the aim of investigating the positive impact of heritage tourism on mental recovery. The unique value of heritage tourism during the pandemic is demonstrated based on the respondents' motives, experiences, and mental feedback. The findings suggest that HCAs are not only important for cultural heritage and that visiting HCAs can relieve psychological stress and help improve quality of life, but also that they are important places for regulating people's mental health. As the management of the pandemic triggered varying degrees of posttraumatic stress disorder, tourists hope that heritage tourism can eliminate loneliness, relieve anxiety, and improve happiness. Understanding these mental motives and providing feedback is clearly necessary for the future management of heritage tourism. In addition, the study also found that the landscape continuity and integrity of Kuanzhai Alley can provide tourists with a strong sense of substitution, and the combination of LARP or other activities in the form of intangible cultural heritage can help regulate emotions and improve mental health. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, people are eager to experience a beautiful cultural life and focus more on heritage tourism with stories, interactions, and resonance. However, special attention needs to be paid to the fact that the new coronavirus, as an RNA virus, is unstable, and thus, undergoes rapid mutation. Therefore, when we draw conclusions from the study, we should also be aware of the potential risks presented by this issue. Finally, some suggestions are made for the management of HCAs. To cope with future emergencies, a long-term effort is needed to make HCAs meet the mental health needs of visitors while bringing better tourism experiences.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** List of interviewees.

No.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education
1	22	Male	Blogger	Bachelor's
2	21	Female	Blogger	Bachelor's
3	25	Female	Teacher	Bachelor's
4	32	Female	Civil Servant	Master's
5	18	Female	Student	Bachelor's
6	19	Male	Student	Bachelor's
7	19	Female	Student	High school
8	57	Female	Doctor	Master's
9	39	Male	Bank Clerk	Bachelor's
10	40	Male	Self-employed	Bachelor's
11	42	Male	Self-employed	Bachelor's
12	32	Female	Lawyer	Master's
13	23	Female	Staff	Bachelor's

Table A1. Cont.

No.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education
14	28	Female	Unemployed	High school
15	72	Male	Retired	High school
16	73	Female	Retired	Bachelor's
17	72	Female	Retired	Bachelor's
18	81	Male	Retired	Primary school
19	80	Female	Retired	High school
20	29	Female	Nurse	Bachelor's
21	28	Male	Unemployed	High school
22	25	Female	Designer	Bachelor's
23	22	Female	Staff	Bachelor's
24	38	Male	Teacher	Master's
25	21	Female	Student	Bachelor's
26	33	Female	Self-employed	High school
27	38	Male	Unemployed	High school
28	36	Male	Staff	High school
29	36	Male	Blogger	Bachelor's
30	38	Male	Engineer	Bachelor's
31	41	Female	Doctor	Master's
32	28	Female	Nurse	Bachelor's
33	26	Male	Engineer	Bachelor's
34	20	Female	Unemployed	High school
35	27	Female	Bank clerk	Master's
36	24	Female	Student	Master's
37	39	Male	Civil servant	Bachelor's
38	36	Male	Civil servant	Bachelor's
39	49	Female	Self-employed	High school
40	54	Male	Security	High school
41	52	Female	Designer	Bachelor's
42	55	Female	Engineer	Bachelor's
43	37	Male	Staff	Bachelor's
44	32	Female	Self-employed	Bachelor's
45	48	Male	Self-employed	High school
46	29	Female	Staff	Bachelor's
47	32	Male	Designer	Bachelor's
48	18	Female	Student	High school

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