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Urban Transformation in Muslim Neighborhoods: From Shanghai's Women's Mosque into a Retirement Home

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Abstract: Since the mid-19th century, the migration of Hui Muslims to Shanghai has fostered the development of stable residential neighborhoods around the Small Peach Garden Mosque, turning the area into a hub for religious gatherings and a bustling economic center, especially for the beef, mutton, and catering sectors. However, the dawn of the 21st century brought with it swift economic expansion and urban redevelopment, gradually replacing the neighborhoods surrounding the mosque with high-end residential zones. Soaring land prices slashed the profits of Muslim food businesses in the area to the point of unsustainability, disrupting the traditional pattern of life around the mosque. This study offers insights from interviews with older Muslim women who stayed at the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque after its demolition, slowly transforming it into a retirement home. Their stories underline that architectural conservation alone is not sufficient to preserve the character of historic and cultural sites. The study calls for a deeper understanding of urban transformations in historic urban landscapes for religious minorities.

Keywords: Muslim; historic urban landscape; minorities; adaptive reuse



Citation: Liu, X.; Liu, X.; Yang, Y. Urban Transformation in Muslim Neighborhoods: From Shanghai's Women's Mosque into a Retirement Home. *Land* **2024**, *13*, 983. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land13070983>

Academic Editors: Thomas Panagopoulos, Bojana Bojanic Obad Scitaroci, Nerma Omičević and Tamara Zaninović

Received: 4 March 2024

Revised: 26 May 2024

Accepted: 13 June 2024

Published: 3 July 2024



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1. Introduction

Recent geographical research on religion has increasingly focused on the dynamic relationship between sacred spaces and urban landscapes, highlighting how places of worship such as mosques contribute to society and the urban fabric [1,2]. In the contemporary era, many of these historic landscapes have seen the collapse of their traditional and social foundations [3]. The Hui community in China, with its Islamic faith and distinct culture, provides a unique case study in this regard. Known as Huizu and recognized as an ethnic minority, the Hui are noted for their Islamic heritage. Unlike other Islamic minorities in China, the Hui primarily speak Chinese, which linguistically aligns them with the Han majority while culturally distinguishing them from other minority groups. English-language scholarship frequently refers to the Hui community as Chinese Muslims or Sino-Muslims, emphasizing their integration into Chinese society [4].

The Small Peach Garden Mosque in Shanghai's Huangpu District, constructed in 1917, represents a focal point of the Hui's urban presence and has been an exemplar of West Asian Islamic and Chinese architectural influences. Adjacent to the main mosque building is the Small Peach Garden Mosque for women, established in 1933, which provides a dedicated space for Muslim women to engage in religious activities. This study used the approach of case study and qualitative methods to explore the profound transformations of the Small Peach Garden Mosque, particularly its transition into a retirement home for older Muslim women following urban redevelopment pressures.

Our case analysis draws upon archival and historical materials, census data, and recent fieldwork. We conducted interviews in the women's mosque as well as on-site surveys involving diagram drafting, photography, and observation; we also integrated archival blueprints and historical urban redevelopment data from the Shanghai Islamic Association

and other archives. By employing a multifaceted methodological approach, we aimed to capture the complex interplay between religious practice and urban planning in the context of China's rapid urbanization.

Our research focuses on the following objectives: The primary goal is to explore the impact of urban redevelopment projects on religious communities, especially in megacities like Shanghai, with an emphasis on the Hui Muslim community. A key component of our study is the examination of the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque's transformation into a retirement home. This case acts as a prism to understand the wider effects of urban redevelopment on religious spaces, shedding light on the challenges and potential benefits of such transformations.

Building on this foundation, our research integrates methodologies and theoretical frameworks from urban sociology, the sociology of religion, and case analysis. We aim to enrich the ongoing discourse surrounding cultural preservation and the sustainability of communities within the dynamic context of urban transformation. By highlighting the experiences of the Hui Muslim community in Shanghai, we hope to inform policy and planning processes that respect and protect the cultural and religious heritage of urban communities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the intersection of urban sociology and the sociology of religion, providing a lens through which we examine the impact of urban transformation on religious spaces. It draws upon theories of urban development that emphasize the transformation of cityscapes in response to economic, political, and social forces and integrates perspectives from the sociology of religion that highlight the role of sacred spaces in maintaining community cohesion and identity [5]. This dual approach informs our exploration of adaptive reuse of religious spaces and enables a comprehensive analysis of how the mosque-centered communities of Shanghai's Hui people have navigated the challenges posed by urban redevelopment.

Urban transformation in historically significant neighborhoods is a complex process that encompasses more than the physical redevelopment of spaces; it profoundly affects the socio-cultural and economic dynamics within these communities [6]. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space [7], this study interprets urban spaces as both physical structures and manifestations of social relations, reflecting and shaping the lives of those who inhabit them. The transformation of the area around the Small Peach Garden Mosque in Shanghai illustrates this dynamic vividly. This mosque, central to the life of the local Hui Muslim community since the mid-19th century, has witnessed how economic expansion and urban redevelopment can reshape community structures and cultural identities.

As land values surged in the early 21st century, traditional businesses like those in the beef, mutton, and catering sectors, vital to the community's economy, faced declining sustainability. This economic pressure has not only altered the physical landscape but also disrupted the social fabric and cultural practices centered around the mosque. The case of the mosque's gradual transformation into a retirement home serves as a poignant example of adaptive reuse, where architectural conservation efforts alone have proved insufficient to maintain the community's historic and cultural character.

Critiques by thinkers such as Jane Jacobs [8] and Lewis Mumford [9], who emphasize the need for urban planning to respect the organic, lived experiences of community inhabitants, resonate deeply with this case. They advocate for a planning approach that values the community's social fabric over mere economic gains. This perspective is complemented by the concept of 'creative destruction', which captures the inherent tension in urban transformation efforts between generating economic opportunities and eroding established social networks and cultural landmarks [10]. This tension is particularly acute in religious and minority spaces, which are crucial for maintaining community identity and cohesion.

Moreover, this study underscores the necessity for urban policies that recognize and respect the cultural and religious dimensions of urban spaces. Policies should aim not only at economic rejuvenation but also at preserving the social and cultural heritage, enriching urban life in a comprehensive manner [11,12]. The concept of ‘living heritage’, which advocates for the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural facets that define urban communities, further supports this approach [13–15]. By integrating living heritage into urban transformation efforts, cities can foster environments that preserve their architectural treasures while enriching the social and cultural fabric, thus ensuring that urban spaces retain their authentic essence and continue to foster a sense of belonging and continuity among their residents.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Background

3.1.1. Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam

The Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque (小桃園清真女寺), also known as the Shanghai Women’s Mosque, is located at the intersection of South Henan Road and East Fuxing Road in Shanghai (see Figure 1). It holds the distinction of being the city’s only mosque exclusively for women. The architectural design features a distinctive pink exterior complemented by a green, onion-shaped dome, indicative of its Islamic heritage (see Figure 2). Although the building’s dimensions are compact, the meticulously organized interior accommodates prayer and scripture study areas alongside essential living amenities. The emergence of such mosques in the 19th century provided a dedicated space for worship, addressing the exclusion of women from traditionally male prayer spaces.



Figure 1. Small Peach Garden Mosque location. Map source: © Map World (<https://map.tianditu.gov.cn/>, accessed on 4 May 2024).

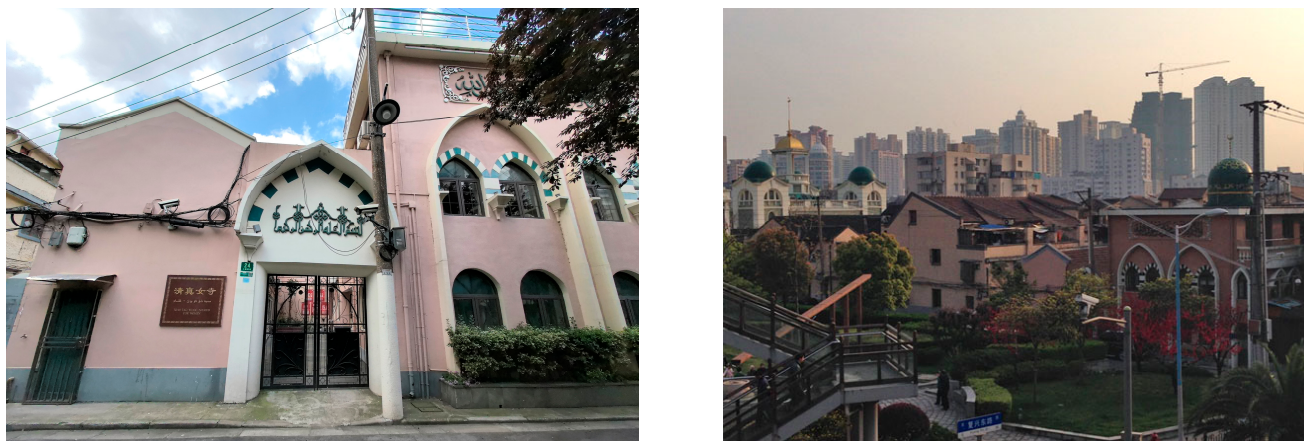


Figure 2. Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque, a mosque in China dedicated exclusively to female worshippers. [Photographed on 4 May 2024]. (Source: the authors).

This mosque, initially founded in 1917 on Xicang Bridge Street (西倉橋街), has navigated historical shifts, including a period of dormancy during the Sino-Japanese War. The school was revived in 1945, and in 1950, it was relocated to its current address due to the expansion of Henan South Road and became known as the Shanghai Women's Mosque. Today, the Shanghai Women's Mosque is an important venue for Shanghai's Muslim women to study, connect with each other and Muslims abroad, and conduct religious activities. It stands as a symbol of Islamic culture in Shanghai.

Figure 2 presents two buildings with green onion-shaped domes, emblematic of Islamic architecture. The white building on the left is the Small Peach Garden Mosque. Adjacent to it, on the right, is the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque, distinguished by its pink exterior.

Female-oriented Islam in China represents a distinctive adaptation of Islamic traditions, shaped significantly by the nation's cultural and historical context. Globally, women's roles in Islam vary widely, but typically, direct religious leadership in mosques and religious education are male-dominated domains. In contrast, the rise of women's mosques and the pivotal role of female imams in China showcase a unique divergence from these more widespread Islamic practices [16,17].

The origins of this phenomenon are deeply rooted in the Ming Dynasty, an era that marked significant cultural and religious identity development within Chinese Muslim communities. It was during this period that the development of Jingtang education was extended to women, necessitating dedicated spaces for their religious learning. Initially, women's Quranic schools were adjunct to male mosques, comprising a few rooms or a small courtyard segregated from male Muslim activity areas. By the mid to late Qing Dynasty, these schools evolved into full-fledged women's mosques, establishing themselves as exclusive venues for female Muslims, mirroring their male counterparts [17].

Women's mosques serve as spiritual havens where female imams guide Hui minority women in worship and Quranic studies, adhering to the Sunni tradition. In the absence of such mosques, women's participation in religious practices might be confined to domestic spaces or designated areas within male-dominated mosques [18]. Beyond being mere places of worship, women's mosques play an indispensable role in fostering the spiritual well-being of Muslim women. They are instrumental in preserving cultural heritage and ensuring the intergenerational transfer of Islamic teachings, often amidst challenging conditions [16]. Distinct to the Muslim milieu of China, these mosques have become crucial hubs for education and cultural preservation, safeguarding the continuity of Islamic traditions and knowledge within the Hui minority [19,20].

3.1.2. Founding and Cultural Significance of the Small Peach Garden Mosque

Since the opening of Shanghai's port in 1843, the city has been characterized by its large immigrant society and fluid population. Hui Muslims from the areas surrounding Shanghai (Jiangsu Province) started to settle in the city due to the Taiping Rebellion in 1853, initially residing in the northern part of Shanghai's Old City (see Figure 3), which was the original urban core of Shanghai before its modern expansion. Known historically as the Shanghai Old Town, the Old City served as the political, economic, and cultural center for centuries, defined by the boundaries of the Old City walls, which were dismantled in the early 20th century [21]. This area became the earliest Hui Muslim enclave. As the northern part of the city's Hui populace swelled, the Fuyou Road Mosque (also called the North Mosque) built in 1870, struggled to accommodate the growing community [22]. In response, in 1917, a donor named Jin Zi Yun (金子雲, 1869–1937) allocated funds to procure a 2.4-acre garden property, leading to the inception of the Small Peach Garden Mosque, also known as the West Mosque [23].



Figure 3. (a) Downtown map of Shanghai County and concession areas (1884). (Source: Virtual Shanghai); (b) Locations of two historical mosques within Shanghai's Old City walls, marked by the red outline, which represents the city walls from the late Qing dynasty. Base map: © Map World.

The Small Peach Garden Mosque was a pivotal congregation hub for Chinese Muslims embarking on their Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca via Shanghai. According to a report, between 1923 and 1933, a total of 733 mainland Chinese Muslims departed from Shanghai for the pilgrimage [24]. To facilitate this sea journey for Muslims from inland regions, the mosque was equipped with over 30 rooms capable of housing more than 100 pilgrims. The mosque also provided specialized travel services, including arranging passports and visas, purchasing steamship tickets, and exchanging currency. The founder of the Small Peach Garden Mosque, Jin Zi Yun, negotiated with British shipping companies to charter annual voyages directly from Shanghai to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, exclusively for Chinese Muslim pilgrims.

The Hui community, as an urban minority, preserved its unique identity and cultural mores through a distinctive urban layout termed the “mosque-block system”. This ingenious configuration, with the mosque at its core, functioned as both a spiritual haven and a communal nexus, engendering a tightly knit social structure known as *Jamā‘at*. This Arabic-derived term, denoting unity and communal assembly, mirrored the Hui's predilection for concentrated, mosque-centered habitats. Hui culture is characterized by a firm social structure with four dimensions: a geographic–residential structure; an economic–occupation structure; a religious–educational structure; and a lineage–marriage (endogamous marriage) structure [25].

The relatively concentrated residential pattern provides favorable conditions for interaction and constitutes a basis for Hui society's significant degree of endogamy. Like many

Han Chinese, many Hui families have their own genealogies, recording their kinship and marital relationships. Endogamy has ensured the continuity of the Islamic faith and cultural inheritance in Hui society. Mutual marriage facilitates the formation of networks between Hui communities and individuals.

In terms of economic and professional structures, the Hui community around the Small Peach Garden Mosque developed thriving businesses such as halal catering and jade and jewelry trading [23]. The area became famous for its beef and mutton street, a culinary hub for authentic halal meat markets and diverse halal eateries.

Within the spheres of religious and educational infrastructure, the mosque stood as the cornerstone of Islamic instruction. Distinguished among the renowned quartet of Islamic scholars of the Republican era, two Imams—Da Pusheng (1874–1965) and Ha Decheng (1888–1943)—upon their return from an international study of Islamic culture in 1938, founded the Shanghai Islamic Normal School at the Small Peach Garden Mosque. They mentored eminent Hui scholars like Ma Jian, spearheading reforms in mosque-based education. This marked the beginning of a transition from traditional mosque-based learning to a contemporary educational framework, though the new system retained the mosque as the foundational setting.

Between 1949 and 1978, China underwent a series of social and political upheavals that profoundly affected religious practice, impacting the Hui Muslim community in Shanghai along with the rest of the country. Starting in the mid-1950s, various campaigns critically questioned religious beliefs, resulting in the shutdown of mosques and scrutiny of religious figures [23]. During the Cultural Revolution, the Small Peach Garden Mosque, including its women’s section, was repurposed as residential housing. Additionally, schools for Hui children were established in the vicinity of the mosque, integrating mosque-centered education into the national education system and marking a significant shift from traditional religious teachings to state-regulated schooling.

With the implementation of “reform and opening” policies in 1978, the Small Peach Garden Mosque was reclaimed from residential use. In 1993, the Shanghai Islamic Association made a decisive investment to rebuild on the original site and revive the women’s mosque. The construction of the Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque was completed in 1994 and the mosque opened to the public. In anticipation of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the Shanghai Islamic Association invested over 1.5 million yuan (approximately USD 219,750, based on the 2010 exchange rate) in a major renovation of the women’s mosque. The mosque now features a three-story building with the main prayer hall on the second floor, adorned with exquisite decorations and numerous Arabian architectural elements. Beyond the prayer hall, the mosque houses a study room, reception room, offices, kitchen, and other well-equipped facilities.

In summary, the transformation of the Small Peach Garden Mosque can be categorized into four distinct phases. Figure 4 provides a historical overview of the mosque’s 20th-century transformation.

Initial Establishment (1917–1949)	Political Turmoil and Repression (1949–1978)	Reform and Restoration (1978–2000)	Economic and Urban Growth (post-2000)
1917: Initially constructed. 1925: Rebuilt into the current West Asian-Arabic style mosque.	1950s: Political campaigns questioning religious beliefs led to the shutdown of mosques. 1966–1976: During the Cultural Revolution, repurposed as residential housing.	1978: The mosque was restored for religious use. 1990: The Shanghai government allocated funds for restoration. 1994: The Shanghai Islamic Association renovated the mosque, opening it to the public.	2000: Designated as a cultural heritage site. 2010: Renovated in preparation for the Shanghai World Expo. Post-2010: Large-scale demolition projects began.

Figure 4. Historical overview of the 20th-century transformation of the Small Peach Garden Mosque.

3.2. Research Methods

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview for On-Site and Off-Site Groups

This study primarily employed ethnographic fieldwork methodologies, utilizing techniques such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. We conducted ten interviews with relevant governmental officials and engaged in discussions with thirty local residents, herein referred to as “Remaining Residents”, which included six Hui Muslims working in the halal food industry in the neighborhood. Crucially, we secured interviews with eighteen Hui Muslim women at the Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque.

We opted for semi-structured interviews for both on-site and off-site groups, balancing flexibility in discussions with a thorough coverage of essential research topics (see Table A1). This approach enabled us to delve into personal experiences, perceptions, and the social dynamics within the Hui Muslim community, yielding rich and detailed data.

Field research was carried out at the Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque from March to June 2023, with a focus on Friday afternoons, a pivotal time for weekly Islamic prayers. Interviews, conducted post consent, typically ranged from 30 min to an hour. Some participants also engaged in follow-up interviews via WeChat video calls. Interviewees were selected randomly on-site, often starting with casual conversations. Additionally, visual data were captured through photography. The demographic information is summarized in Figure A1. The findings from these interviews are referenced as ‘M’ followed by a sequential number in subsequent sections.

Figure A1 presents the demographics of 18 interviewed women, all of whom are retired. The youngest among them was 50 years old, the retirement age in Shanghai, and the eldest was 79. All of them are Shanghai locals, with their grandfathers, as revealed in Section 3.1, having migrated from Jiangsu Province to Shanghai.

On-site interviews with local residents were conducted using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods. Initial participants were approached based on their availability and willingness to participate, after which they were asked to recommend other potential respondents. The interview guide for residents included questions about the neighborhood’s appearance in the early 1990s, the impact of urban redevelopment on the Small Peach Garden Mosque’s surrounding area, where residents relocated, and their stories during the relocation process. The demographic information for the 30 local resident participants is summarized in Figure A2. The results of these interviews are denoted as R followed by a number in the following sections.

For the off-site interviews with governmental officials, we targeted two specific offices known for their specialization in urban planning, community affairs, and ethnic minority policies. These offices collectively housed ten individuals who were directly involved in areas relevant to our research. We conducted interviews with all ten officials to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the governmental perspective on the issues at hand. These interviews were carried out over the phone to accommodate the officials’ schedules while still allowing for in-depth discussions. The semi-structured interview guide for this group covered topics such as policies impacting the Hui community, the effects of urban redevelopment on minority communities, and the government’s role in supporting religious and cultural preservation. Additionally, these discussions were designed to complement the narratives provided by residents regarding the changes around the mosque and their personal experiences. The results of these interviews are denoted as O followed by a number in the following sections.

We emphasized ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study’s aims and their rights. Rapport building was prioritized by engaging in informal conversations before formal interviews, creating a foundation of trust. Respectful engagement was maintained by allowing participants to guide the conversation, ensuring they felt heard and valued. In anticipation of the diverse cultural backgrounds of our participants, particularly the Hui Muslims, our interview team underwent specialized training in cultural sensitivity and awareness. This training included understanding the cultural norms, religious practices, and language nuances

specific to the Hui Muslim community. Furthermore, to accommodate language preferences and ensure clear communication, we conducted interviews in both Mandarin and Shanghaiese, the local dialect spoken by our participants. These measures were essential in creating a respectful and inclusive environment for our interviews, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of our research approach.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the data and identifying recurring themes and patterns related to the study's objectives. The study involved the collation and thematic analysis of field notes, photographs, and transcribed interviews—in total, nearly 50,000 words of field and ethnographic data. Additionally, relevant historical documents and policy papers were reviewed to enrich the research context.

The structure of interviews with local residents and governmental officials is presented in Section 4.1 “Urban Transformation in Shanghai’s Old City Area” and Section 4.2 “Urbanization and Its Impact on the Religious Landscape”, while the findings from interviews with Muslim women are presented in Section 4.3 “Women’s Mosque as a Retirement Home”.

4. Results

4.1. Urban Transformation in Shanghai’s Old City Area

Entering the 21st century, China experienced a profound urban metamorphosis driven by market-oriented reforms. Shanghai, in particular, saw its urban landscape rapidly transformed, fueled by economic growth that sped up the city’s development [26,27]. The Small Peach Garden Mosque, nestled near the bustling Yuyuan area, found itself in a locale ripe for commercial exploitation due to soaring property values. The Old City, known for its historical and cultural landmarks, became a magnet for developers eager to capitalize on its scarce land and rich cultural backdrop, building a series of high-rise luxury developments that marketed the Old City’s cultural depth and central location as prime features.

Originally, the neighborhood around the Small Peach Garden Mosque was dominated by lower-income households, with halal food businesses operating on slim margins. As property values and rents increased, many of these establishments could no longer sustain operations. The younger Hui Muslim population was compelled to relocate their businesses to areas with more affordable rent, often moving to the suburbs (R9, 6 March 2023). Locals recall numerous long-standing halal restaurants such as the “Qingzhen Yongfeng” on Jia’an Road, which, despite the popularity of its dishes such as curry beef noodles that catered to the tastes of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, succumbed to rising rents and closed around 2012 (R1, 6 March 2023). As of 2023, in the vicinity of the mosque, only two halal restaurants persist (Figure 5). These establishments have expanded into substantial catering operations, now part of state-owned enterprises.

As redevelopment intensified, many Hui Muslims residing in the traditional Shikumen houses¹ faced relocation. The area beside the Fuyou Road Mosque was one of the first plots in the Huangpu District earmarked for such development starting in 2004, and as of 2023, the mosque is entirely encircled by new commercial housing. Residents of the Small Peach Garden Mosque area were designated for relocation early in this process, but not all have moved yet. Cramped and outdated housing, surrounded by new, upscale residences and historic buildings, offers no employment opportunities, so younger adults have mostly moved away for work and other reasons, leaving mostly older adults behind (O4, 2 June 2023).

As depicted in Figure 6, the Small Peach Garden Mosque is centrally located in Shanghai’s Old City, in close proximity to the Bund. It is ensconced within the city’s elite residential districts and bustling commercial hubs. The area labeled as “site” on the map represents a residential zone that, in 2023, became another high-value property newly auctioned off.



Figure 5. The two remaining restaurants in the vicinity of the Small Peach Garden Mosque (a mosque located within a historically lower-income neighborhood in Shanghai, known for its Hui Muslim community). [Photographed on 4 May 2024]. (Source: the authors).



Figure 6. Schematic map of the Old City area in Shanghai, as published on the Shanghai government's website. (Source: Huangpu District Government website). Reproduced with permission.

As Figure 7 shows, the mosque is situated between two clusters of towering high-rise buildings, signifying just the beginning of a broader relocation and redevelopment process for the surrounding plots (Shanghai Huangpu District People's Government 2021).

While Hui Muslims harbor a deep nostalgia for their traditional neighborhoods, they generally accept the inevitability of urban development. Although they prefer to maintain their communal living, direct negotiations with developers typically focus on compensation rather than ethnic considerations (O5, 2 June 2023). The most pressing questions from the Hui residents concern the availability of relocation benefits. The once-vibrant mosque-

block social structure around the Small Peach Garden has largely disintegrated in the face of these changes.



Figure 7. Old City Quarter area planning map displayed on the Shanghai Government website, 2021. This expanded effect model map illustrates the government’s redevelopment plans for Shanghai’s Old City. Red area: high-rise buildings; yellow area: relocated/demolished traditional alleyways. (Source: Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau). Reproduced with permission.

4.2. Urbanization and Its Impact on the Religious Landscape

The diminishment of the Small Peach Garden Mosque’s position as the center of a cultural and religious community reflects a significant shift. With the advancement of urbanization across China, the floating population of Hui Muslims coming to Shanghai for business, education, and marriage has been increasing. In 2019, approximately 10,000 individuals, including Hui, Salar, and Dongxiang Muslims, moved with their relatives from Qinghai Province to Shanghai to operate halal noodle restaurants offering Northwestern flavors [28]. Many of them have chosen to settle in the suburbs of Shanghai due to various factors such as location, affordable rent, and reliance on relatives and friends, opening or working for halal businesses in these areas (R11, 20, 6 March 2023). These migrants who settle in the suburbs generally prefer to perform their religious rites, primarily the Friday Jumu’ah prayer, at the Huxi Mosque or the Pudong Mosque because the Small Peach Garden and Fuyou Road Mosques outside of the city center are too far away. Our survey indicates that in recent years, the total number of worshippers at the Fuyou Road Mosque, Small Peach Garden Mosque, and the Mosque for Women in the city center combined is less than half of that at the Pudong Mosque.²

As discussed in Section 3, the Fuyou Road Mosque and Small Peach Garden Mosque were among the first mosques to be established in the Old City of Shanghai after the modern opening of the port and have long been considered the undisputed center of Shang-

hai's Muslim community. However, their status has now become more symbolic, largely attracting visits from foreign Muslims (O8, 11 June 2023).

4.3. Women's Mosque as a Retirement Home

The neighborhood surrounding the Small Peach Garden Mosque for Women is predominantly inhabited by retired older adults, including a portion of the Hui Muslim community. As urban redevelopment policies take effect, some Hui Muslims, particularly women accustomed to city center life, choose to return to the Small Peach Garden Mosque for Women post retirement to live amongst their fellow worshippers, treating it as a sanctuary for their twilight years. They commonly report that relocating to the suburbs makes attending mosque services challenging, as the round trip can take up to four hours—a daunting task for individuals of their age. Interviewee M18 (12 May 2023) expressed the sentiment shared by many in the community: “For us Muslims, being close to a mosque is ideal. Living near a mosque is not just a matter of convenience but a crucial aspect of our daily lives, enabling easy access to prayer and halal provisions. Regrettably, the rising costs of new apartments in this vicinity are prohibitive, pushing us to consider relocating further away from the mosque”.

Living near the mosque allows them to better enjoy the sense of belonging central to their Islamic faith, and with the forced move of much of the local Muslim community to the suburbs, the mosque has gradually become not just a place of congregation but also their dwelling place. They take pride in this adaptation, seeing it as a continuation of the historical establishment of women's mosques, where community members would contribute household items, gradually enriching the mosque's resources. Within the mosque, they study the Quran and practice the five pillars of Islam, discuss upcoming religious events or daily news, and, like other older adults, talk about family and children. The challenge of accessing halal food makes the mosque's kitchen facilities especially appealing, influencing their decision to convert the mosque into a retirement home. Additionally, the Small Peach Garden Mosque, being a hallmark of Islamic culture in Shanghai, regularly receives attention, funding, and maintenance from city and district officials, offering a certain level of economic security to its residents.

The area surrounding Small Peach Garden Mosque is predominantly composed of residential buildings in the Shikumen style, constructed in the 1920s and 1930s (see Figure 8). As mentioned earlier, these buildings have been included in the urban redevelopment plans, and it is only a matter of time before the residents are relocated.



Figure 8. Shikumen buildings adjacent to women's mosque, awaiting demolition, with most residents already moved out [photographed on 4 May 2024]. (Source: the authors).

Over time, the congregation at the Small Peach Garden Mosque for Women has become predominantly local Shanghai women, many of whom previously resided near Small Peach Garden Street, with younger women less frequently seen. M8 (12 May 2023), whose father was an Imam, was immersed in Islamic teachings from a young age. M1 (12 May 2023), a Hajji who proudly completed her pilgrimage to Mecca in 2016 at her own expense, commands respect among her peers for achieving this significant religious milestone. When asked about their children's participation in religious life, M1 expressed a desire for her children to simply acknowledge their Islamic faith and adhere to basic practices, such as dietary habits. M1 mentioned that more than half of her children and their spouses are not Muslim. This reflects broader trends within the Hui community since 1949, characterized by a decline in Islamic practices, partly due to diminished religious education and changes in traditional lifestyles. As a result, intermarriages between Hui individuals and those from outside the Hui community have increased. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the offspring of these intermarriages to continue this trend by also marrying individuals who are not from the Hui community [29]. M1 has chosen to reside in the women's mosque, valuing a community that upholds shared religious beliefs and provides opportunities for spiritual engagement.

As an increasing number of young Hui Muslims move away for work or education, the percentage of older adult Muslims living alone is on the rise, particularly among women, who generally outlive men. For these older widowed women, the primary challenge lies in enriching their spiritual lives. M11 (26 May 2023) shared her experience, noting that her husband had traditional views, believing that Islamic law discourages gatherings of women for conversation lest they lead to domestic discord. She understood his concerns. However, since her husband's passing, she has found solace in joining other female worshippers at the women's mosque to chat about daily life, without causing any disruption to family harmony. Another interviewee, M2 (12 May 2023), remarked that although many in the Hui community believe that gatherings of women could lead to gossip and trouble, for the older women, such gatherings offer comfort and camaraderie without these issues. All of them were capable of living independently and thus focused on the need for spiritual and religious fulfillment in their lives. They frequently mentioned facing numerous challenges when considering moving into retirement homes, including issues related to Muslim culture and dietary habits.

The research findings presented in this section illuminate the profound transformations occurring in the neighborhood surrounding the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque, primarily driven by urban transformation efforts. The escalation of property values, coupled with the consequent rise in rental costs, has compelled Muslim catering establishments in the vicinity to migrate to more financially viable locations in the suburbs. This exodus marks a pivotal shift in both the demographic composition and the cultural fabric of the area. Moreover, the ongoing urban redevelopment initiatives loom as a constant threat, portending additional demolitions in proximity to the mosque. Within the context of Shanghai's expansive urban landscape, elderly Muslim women face a particular quandary. The imperative of living close to the mosque for communal and religious reasons clashes with the financial impracticality of affording the escalating housing costs in the area. Faced with this dilemma, these women have made a decision to relocate to the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque, effectively transforming it into a residence for their retirement years.

5. Discussion

5.1. Advocating for the Living Heritage of Urban Spaces

The economic reforms initiated in the late 1990s have spurred urban economic growth, leading to widespread urban transformation efforts [30,31], including the restoration of religious sites affected during the Cultural Revolution. However, the impact of the reforms, the market economy, and globalization has posed new challenges to religious and cultural traditions. The large-scale urban redevelopment of the old areas has reduced the size and

fragmented the historic spaces. In the process of urban reconstruction and demolition in Shanghai, geographical communities that have been the backbone of Hui ethnic traditions for a century have nearly vanished. The once-thriving mosque-block social structures have largely disintegrated in urban China. The crucial question remains: how can urban Hui communities build their social networks, preserve their culture, and maintain their identity under these new circumstances? This paper presents a rather somber view of the outcome.

As the Shanghai municipal government has emphasized the preservation of historical ambiance via projects such as the restoration of early Shikumen architecture alongside the construction of high-rise residences [32], the academic community has extensively studied the conservation of historic buildings in Shanghai's Old City [26,33,34]. The successful restoration of the Small Peach Garden Mosque stands out as a noteworthy case [35], symbolizing not just the preservation of an ethnic and cultural identity but also the embodiment of Shanghai's historical and cultural essence. However, the fragmentation of residential areas, following the disappearance of the overlapping centers of population, economy, and religion within the Hui enclaves, ultimately led to the erosion of the Hui community's historical and cultural heritage. The disconnection between physical conservation efforts and the vibrant community life that these structures once supported highlights a crucial aspect of cultural heritage that remains unaddressed. This scenario underscores the imperative of "living heritage", a concept that advocates for the holistic preservation of not just architectural forms but the intangible cultural aspects they represent, including social practices, traditional customs, religious observances, and communal vitality [13–15]. Hence, protecting urban heritage requires a comprehensive strategy that safeguards architectural landmarks while simultaneously nurturing the social and cultural tapestry that bestows these places with their true essence and vibrancy.

5.2. Adaptive Reuse of Religious Spaces

Religious heritage sites like monasteries and mosques are central to local communities, shaping the urban landscape. These sites are not only venues for religious practices but also emblematic of cultural identity and social unity. Nonetheless, secularization trends and demographic changes are leading many such sites, including churches and monasteries, to lose their original roles [36].

The adaptive reuse of these heritage sites is gaining recognition as a key component of sustainable urban development. This approach helps in preserving cultural and historical values while also driving local and regional economic growth. Repurposing these sites can bolster local traditions and culture, provide distinctive tourist experiences, and stimulate urban transformation and community engagement. Additionally, the renovation of old buildings is environmentally beneficial, as it reduces the need for new materials [37].

Globally, the creative repurposing of religious spaces is becoming a popular solution to meet the changing needs of urban communities, highlighting the importance of innovative urban planning and community development strategies that respect and integrate diverse religious and cultural traditions into the urban tapestry. For instance, in Europe, decommissioned churches have found new life as cultural centers, libraries, and even hotels, maintaining their historical and architectural essence while fulfilling new community roles [38]. Similarly, the transformation of a monastery into a university campus not only preserved a historical site but also rejuvenated a city area by attracting students [39]. However, studies on mosques' adaptive reuse are scarce, making this article's case study a novel contribution.

Previous research has pointed out financial hurdles in the adaptive reuse of cultural heritage [40]. In our example, the transformation of a mosque into a retirement home in one of Shanghai's upscale neighborhoods, where land values are high, benefits from substantial local government funding. This financial backing ensures steady support for the women's mosque, enabling the procurement of essential resources and upkeep of the facility.

5.3. Faith-Based Elderly Care in Megacities

Recent expansions in research on faith-based elderly services underscore the pivotal role of faith and religious communities in supporting the elderly. Investigations have delved into how faith-based principles intertwine with elderly care services, meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of aging populations [41]. Such studies highlight the holistic benefits of weaving faith into care practices, noting improvements in the mental, physical, and spiritual well-being of the elderly [42,43]. Additionally, research emphasizes the critical role of faith communities in offering social support, companionship, and a sense of belonging to older adults, vital for mitigating loneliness and isolation [44].

The redevelopment of urban ethnic enclaves can significantly impact older residents. Such changes can disrupt their social networks and cultural practices, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and a loss of identity. For Muslims, who view Islam not just as a religion but as a way of life, older adult care presents a multifaceted challenge. It is crucial for care plans and services to incorporate considerations of faith to ensure they effectively meet the needs of devout Muslims [45,46].

In large cities, elderly Muslim women commonly face health issues, the absence of nearby family, and widowhood, with neither family-based care nor community services meeting their spiritual needs. As traditional family structures evolve and the younger generation moves away, both geographically and in terms of lifestyle choices, older individuals, especially women, may find solace and companionship among their peers within religious communities. The women's mosque provides more than just caregiving; it offers diets and daily routines that align with the residents' religious and personal needs, enhancing their overall well-being. As a communal and spiritual refuge, the mosque is invaluable in later life, providing a space where daily rituals and shared cultural and religious identities foster a sense of belonging and purpose. This role of the mosque for Muslim women highlights broader issues related to urban development and the provision of adequate facilities for older adults, particularly among religious minorities. This case study underscores the necessity of providing essential emotional support to older adults, a crucial societal goal for ensuring a fulfilling retirement life. Specifically, older Muslim adults have unique needs that demand a specialized approach to their care.

In conclusion, the transformation of the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque into a retirement space is a proactive response to urban development challenges, providing essential emotional, spiritual, and cultural support to meet the distinct needs of older Muslim women in Shanghai.

6. Conclusions

This study delves into the adaptive reuse of religious sites amidst urban change, spotlighting the transformation of the Small Peach Garden Women's Mosque into a retirement home as a testament to resilience in the face of change. It argues for policies that recognize and bolster the unique cultural and social weave of Muslim neighborhoods in Shanghai, underlining the vital importance of preserving communal life alongside architectural heritage. Our findings illuminate the complex interplay between urban development, religious sites, and demographic shifts, advocating for inclusive urban planning that respects diverse cultural and religious identities.

The paper contends that the Small Peach Garden Mosque's case study stands as a significant example, showcasing the distinctive structural features of Muslim communities, traditionally centered around mosques. This cohesive framework is rendered susceptible to urban development pressures, jeopardizing the community's spatial and social coherence. The mosque's metamorphosis not only holds emblematic value but also echoes a broader challenge that Muslim communities face in urban landscapes amid modernization and urban sprawl.

In summary, the urban transformation unfolding in Shanghai’s Muslim quarters, particularly around the Small Peach Garden Mosque, epitomizes the intricate nexus of urban growth, religious observance, and community resilience. The initiative by elderly Muslim women to repurpose the mosque into a retirement facility highlights the pressing demand for culturally sensitive elder care solutions in fast-urbanizing environments. This case underlines the critical need to preserve community spaces that cater to both spiritual and social needs, offering insights into broader strategies for tackling the challenges that aging populations with religious ties encounter in urban contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, X.L. (Xunqian Liu); methodology, Y.Y.; data curation, X.L. (Xiaoqing Liu); writing—original draft preparation, Y.Y.; writing—review and editing, X.L. (Xunqian Liu). All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China (NSSF), grant number 22CZW060.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Human Science and Technology Ethics Review Committee of SJTU, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality of all participants.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, and further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Key Interview Questions for Muslim Women.

Background and Personal Experience	Can you share a bit about your life before moving to the Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque?
	What prompted your decision to live at the mosque rather than relocating to the suburbs or a different area?
Community and Religious Practices	Can you describe a typical day at the Small Peach Garden Women’s Mosque?
	How do you and the other women contribute to the mosque’s community and its upkeep?
	In what ways do you engage with Islamic teachings and practices here at the mosque?
Challenges and Adaptations	How has your daily routine and lifestyle changed since moving into the mosque?
	What are some of the biggest challenges you’ve faced since moving into the mosque?
	How do your family members, especially your children, relate to your decision to live at the mosque?
Emotional and Spiritual Fulfillment	In what ways does the community here at the mosque provide support and companionship, especially for those who might be widowed or living alone?
	How does living at the mosque influence your emotional and spiritual well-being?
Perspectives on Women’s Gatherings and Social Interaction	What is your opinion on the belief that gatherings of women might lead to gossip and potential discord, as mentioned by some in the Hui community?
	How do you perceive the role and significance of women’s mosques in the context of the Hui Muslim community and broader Islamic practices?

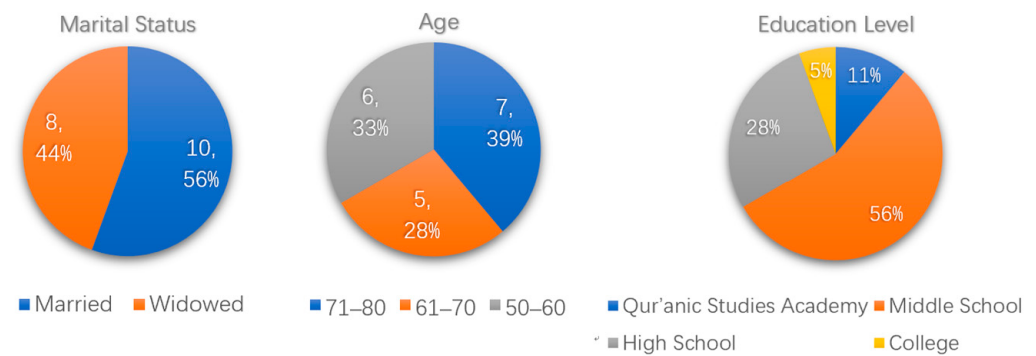


Figure A1. Demographics of Muslim women participants (N = 18).

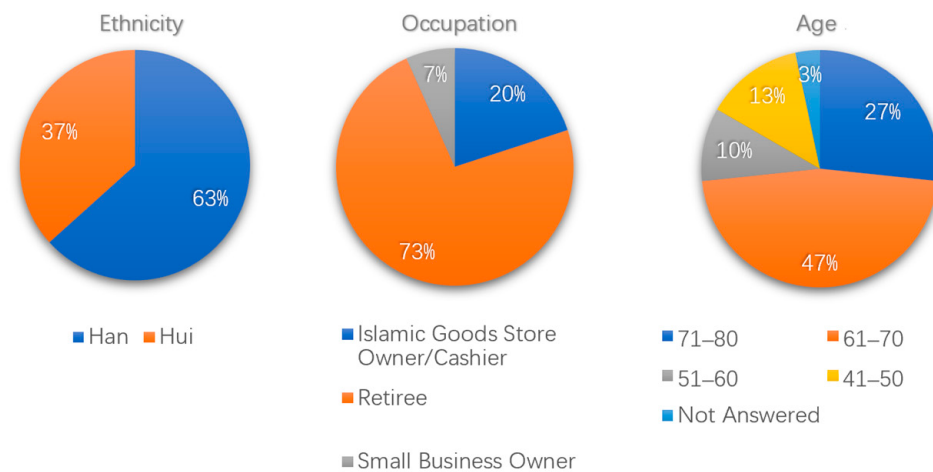


Figure A2. Demographics of local resident participants (N = 30).

Notes

- ¹ Shikumen architecture is a traditional style of housing in Shanghai, characterized by its high brick walls and narrow alleys. Shikumen houses are typically two or three stories tall, with the front door leading to a small courtyard, then to the main living area. Originating in the late 19th century, this architectural style represents a cultural fusion that arose from the urban conditions of Shanghai during that period and has become an iconic symbol of the city's historical urban fabric.
- ² In our study, we observed that temporary prayer spaces are often set up in the attics of suburban noodle shops, with banners inscribed with “Jamā‘at” hanging above, indicating a religious community centered around a mosque. Despite the rapid urban development that has disrupted the traditional mosque-centered living patterns, the concept of community life revolving around mosques remains deeply ingrained among Hui Muslims from the northwest. Even in the face of significant changes brought about by urban redevelopment, any space that can host the Jumu‘ah prayer, no matter how modest, is regarded by the Muslim community as a spiritual sanctuary. This phenomenon undoubtedly presents a new topic for discussion.

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