

Study on the Current Status and Development of Ancient City Sites in Jingzhou

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Abstract

Jingzhou, a typical region of the "stacked cities" phenomenon in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, is home to multiple ancient city sites such as Yinxiang City, Jinan City, Ying City, and Jingzhou Ancient City, carrying rich historical and cultural connotations. Based on field research and documentary analysis, this study combs the historical context and existing issues of each ancient city site. Combining the concepts of cultural and tourism integration and sustainable development, it proposes targeted protection and development strategies, providing theoretical references for the overall development of the Jingzhou ancient city site cluster.

Keywords

Jingzhou Ancient City Sites; Current Status Assessment; Cultural and Tourism Integration; Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Practical Significance

Jingzhou, a historic town in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, has witnessed the formation of a rare "stacked cities" phenomenon through four phases of urban sites: the Neolithic Yinxiang City, the Spring and Autumn Period–Warring States Period Jinan City, the Qin–Han Dynasty Ying City, and the Ming–Qing Dynasty Jingzhou Ancient City. Hailed as a "living fossil" of ancient urban changes in the Yangtze River Basin, these sites represent the complete evolutionary trajectory from prehistoric settlements to feudal prefectural cities. As the core birthplace of Chu culture and an important carrier of Three Kingdoms culture, the Jingzhou ancient city site cluster not only preserves the holistic evolution of urban development from prehistoric settlements to feudal prefectures but also embodies the deep historical logic of military defense, economic transformation, and cultural integration.

However, current research and development of Jingzhou's ancient cities are significantly fragmented: archaeologists focus on single-site excavations (e.g., the palace area of Jinan City, the city walls of Jingzhou Ancient City), while the tourism industry is confined to isolated scenic spots (e.g., Zhang Juzheng's Former Residence, Guandi Temple). There is a lack of systematic interpretation of the temporal and spatial connections among the four phases of urban sites, and even fewer interdisciplinary explorations have translated historical evolution laws into modern protection and development strategies.

Against this backdrop, this research, based on field investigations and documentary textual research, aims to decode the evolutionary path of Jingzhou from a military fortress to a composite city integrating "military, commercial, and cultural" functions. It provides theoretical support for site protection and cultural-tourism integration. This not only responds to the national policy orientation of "strengthening the protection and utilization of cultural heritage" (the "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Relic Protection and Scientific and Technological Innovation") but also has practical significance for enhancing Jingzhou's urban cultural

competitiveness and promoting the upgrading of cultural tourism industries in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

1.2. Research Scope and Methodological Approach

1.2.1. Definition of Research Objects

The core research objects are four typical urban sites in Jingzhou:

- ① Yinxiang City (Neolithic Age): A moated settlement from the Qujialing–Shijiahe cultural period in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, representing the embryonic form of early urban defense;
- ② Jinan City (Spring and Autumn–Warring States Periods): The capital of the Chu State and the largest metropolis in southern China, witnessing the urban planning of the peak bronze civilization;
- ③ Ying City (Qin–Han Dynasties): The administrative center of Nanjun Prefecture, representing the functional transformation of administrative hubs under centralized governance;
- ④ Jingzhou Ancient City (Ming–Qing Dynasties): The best-preserved prefectural defensive system in southern China, integrating military defense and commercial-culture functions.

1.2.2. Integration of Research Methods

- ① Documentary Textual Research: Sorting out local chronicles (e.g., Jingzhou Prefecture Annals) and archaeological reports (e.g., Reconstruction Research of Jinan City, Capital of Chu) to construct a textual basis for the evolution of urban sites;
- ② Field Research: Investigating the current status of the four phases of urban sites (e.g., rammed-earth foundations in Jinan City, brick-stone structures in Jingzhou Ancient City) and interviewing cultural relic management departments and cultural tourism enterprises;
- ③ Data Analysis: Quantitatively analyzing tourist satisfaction (6.2/10) and demand pain points (cultural experience needs accounting for 65%) based on 320 tourist questionnaires;
- ④ Case Comparison: Drawing on the experiences of Xi'an Ancient City (large-site protection) and Pingyao Ancient City (cultural-tourism integration) to explore differentiated development paths for Jingzhou.

1.3. Research Status at Home and Abroad and Breakthrough Points

Domestic research on ancient city sites shows a polarized trend: one category focuses on archaeological interpretation of single sites, and the other emphasizes practical explorations of tourism development (e.g., Cui Fengjun's image design for Pingyao Ancient City). Regarding the "stacked cities" phenomenon, cases such as Wuhan Panlong City and Nanjing Stone City provide regional experience in the overlapping development of urban sites, but a theoretical system for the linked protection of multi-phase urban sites in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River has not yet been formed. Internationally, concepts like "authenticity protection" and "immersive display" (e.g., site museums and digital navigation technologies) from sites such as Pompeii in Italy and Ephesus in Turkey offer valuable references, though their cultural contexts differ significantly from Jingzhou's and require localized adaptation.

Different from existing studies, this research focuses on the logical chain of "historical evolution-current status assessment-development strategies." It treats Jingzhou's four-phase urban sites as an organic whole for the first time, revealing the evolutionary law of "military defense driving functional transformation." By integrating tourist behavior data, it proposes an operational path of "hierarchical protection + scenario-based narration," bridging the gap between historical research and practical application. This fills a research void and provides a "Jingzhou Paradigm" for the linked development of multi-layered urban sites in similar historical and cultural cities (e.g., Luoyang, Kaifeng).

2. Historical Evolution and Current Layout of Jingzhou Ancient City Sites

2.1. Temporal and Spatial Evolution of the Four-Phase Urban Sites

2.1.1. Neolithic Age: Yinxiang City – The Embryonic Form of Early Urban Defense in the Middle Reaches of the Yangtze River (c. 5000–4000 BCE)

As the earliest urban site in Jingzhou, Yinxiang City was located on a terrace at the confluence of the Juzhang River and the Yangtze River, thriving due to water resources and constructed for defense. According to *Investigation and Exploration of Yinxiang City in Jiangling*, it had an irregular oval plan covering approximately 200,000 square meters. The city walls, built with clay, were 20 meters wide at the base, surrounded by a 15-meter-wide moat, forming an integrated "city-moat" defensive system. Excavations revealed red-baked earth architectural foundations, polished stone tools, and carbonized rice, indicating the initial division of labor between primitive agriculture and handicrafts. Its model of "terrace – functional zoning – moated defense" laid the foundation for the genetic makeup of Jingzhou's urban development. Despite thousands of years of weathering, the existing city walls stand 3–5 meters tall in ruins, with clear traces of the moat, making it a key sample for studying the transition from prehistoric settlements to cities in the middle Yangtze River region.

2.1.2. Spring and Autumn–Warring States Periods: Jinan City – A Model Capital in the Prime of Chu Culture (689–279 BCE)

After King Wen of Chu moved the capital to Jinan City, it became the "largest metropolis in southern China," covering 16 square kilometers with a city wall perimeter of 15.5 kilometers and a moat reaching up to 100 meters in width. The city featured a strict layout of palace areas, handicraft zones, and residential districts. Artifacts such as the Sword of Goujian and Mashan Chu embroidery unearthed here represent the peak of bronze smelting and silk-weaving technologies. Military defense was deeply integrated with urban functions: two of the seven city gates were water gates connecting internal and external water systems, ensuring both canal transport and defense; horse-faced towers and watchtowers on the city walls formed a three-dimensional defense system of "land gates for combat and water gates for transport." After Qin conquered Chu and abandoned Jinan City, its rammed-earth technology and water system planning were inherited by later generations. The remaining wall segments and the Longqiao River site still reflect the bustling scene described in historical records as "carriage hubs clashing, shoulders rubbing."

2.1.3. Qin–Han Dynasties: Ying City – The Transformation of an Administrative Hub During Imperial Southward Expansion (279 BCE–617 CE)

After Qin destroyed Chu, Ying City was built 2.5 kilometers southeast of Jinan City as the administrative center of Nanjun Prefecture, covering 4.5 square kilometers with an 8.8-kilometer city wall perimeter, embodying the characteristics of the prefecture-county system under centralized governance. The city had distinct zones for official offices, granaries, and residences. Unearthed artifacts like the "Nanjun Prefecture Seal" clay seals and bamboo slips of *Er Nian Lü Ling* (Laws of the Second Year) revealed the administrative operations and tax systems of the Han Dynasty. The military function shifted from hegemonic defense to regional control; the beacon tower sites outside the city and granary layouts inside highlighted its role as a military logistics hub in the middle Yangtze River. Although part of Ying City's city walls were damaged by agricultural activities, the rammed-earth layers and planar layout of the Qin–Han period still provide physical evidence for studying urban transformation during imperial southward expansion.

2.1.4. Ming–Qing Dynasties: Jingzhou Ancient City – A Defensive Stronghold and Commercial Metropolis in the Late Feudal Era (1372 CE–present)

Rebuilt on the foundation of the Southern Song old city in the early Ming Dynasty, Jingzhou Ancient City is the best-preserved Ming–Qing prefectural defensive system in southern China, with a city wall perimeter of 11.28 kilometers, seven city gates, and supporting structures like barbicans, watchtowers, and artillery platforms, forming a three-layered pattern of "brick city – moat – streets and alleys." Military defense technology reached its feudal peak: the wall base was 10–12 meters wide, with brick-and-stone exteriors and rammed-earth interiors; the moat, 10.8–14.3 meters wide, served both defensive and drainage functions. The urban layout featured "left culture, right military" (temples in the east, barracks in the west) and a "cross-street" commercial network, reflecting the integration of military, administrative, and commercial functions. In the Qing Dynasty, a "Manchu city" was added, creating a "two systems within one city" pattern. Existing structures such as the city walls, Zhang Juzheng's Former Residence, and Guandi Temple fully preserve the style of a Ming–Qing prefectural city. Listed as a national key cultural relic protection unit in 1996, it has become the core carrier for displaying Jingzhou's culture.

2.2. Current Status and Core Values of the Sites

2.2.1. Yinxiang City: Stratigraphic Protection and Ecological Challenges of a Prehistoric Site

The site is primarily covered by farmland and vegetation, with remnants of city walls and moats presented through surface markers, without large-scale excavation. Its core value lies in the intact stratigraphic overlay relationships, where cultural layers from the Neolithic to the Shang-Zhou periods are clearly distinguishable, providing continuous evidence for studying the origin of civilization in the middle Yangtze River. However, it faces potential threats from modern agricultural development and soil erosion, with partial collapses occurring at the edges of the moat, urgently requiring the establishment of an ecological protection buffer zone.

2.2.2. Jinan City: Archaeological Richness and Display Lag in the Chu Cultural Site Cluster

As a national-level major heritage site, Jinan City has identified functional zones such as palace areas and handicraft districts, with over 100,000 unearthed artifacts. However, its display methods are limited to site markers and partial reconstruction (e.g., the South Wall Water Gate Site). Existing issues include: the site area is fragmented by farmland, and the core zone lacks systematic display facilities; tourists can only experience history through archaeological excavation squares and residual walls, resulting in weak engagement. Its core value lies in the complete capital city planning system, serving as a material carrier to interpret the "pioneering spirit" of Chu culture.

2.2.3. Ying City: Administrative Codes of Qin–Han Cities and Protection Dilemmas

The Ying City site is mostly covered by modern villages and farmland, with only the northwestern official and warehouse districts revealed through partial excavation. The coexistence of Qin-style bronze ware and Chu-style lacquerware unearthed here witnesses the cultural integration of the Qin and Han dynasties, but surface relics are scarce, and public awareness is low. Protection dilemmas include: the site overlaps with urban and rural construction, lacking clear protection boundaries, and some Han Dynasty tombs are threatened by tomb raiding.

2.2.4. Jingzhou Ancient City: Integrity of Ming–Qing Defense and Commercialization Impact

The core area of Jingzhou Ancient City retains well-preserved city walls (11.28 km in total length), seven city gates, and partial official buildings (e.g., Jingzhou Prefecture Yamen).

However, it faces over-commercialization: dense commercial shops line the east-to-north gate area, with some historical buildings converted into modern commercial facilities; tourist traffic is concentrated on the city walls and museums, with insufficient interpretation of the "seven gates and nine prefectures" street texture and Ming–Qing folk houses. Meanwhile, issues such as weathering of brick and stone walls and water pollution in the moat urgently require targeted protection measures.

2.3. Regional Linkage Characteristics and Unique Values of the "Stacked Cities" Phenomenon

The four-phase urban sites exhibit a spatial trend of "southward shift and eastward expansion" (Yinxiang City → Jinan City → Ying City → Jingzhou Ancient City), with linear distances between each no exceeding 5 kilometers, forming a rare "multi-layered urban overlay" pattern. This overlay is not a simple geographical displacement but the result of combined influences from military strategies (e.g., Chu's hegemonic struggles, Qin's southward expansion, Ming–Qing river defense), economic needs (canal transport hubs, salt and grain distribution), and geographical environment (Yangtze River floods, fertile plains). From the moated defense of Yinxiang City to the rammed-earth walls of Jinan City, and then to the brick-stone defense system of Jingzhou Ancient City, this evolution clearly demonstrates the progression of city-building technologies from primitive piling to mature regulations. From tribal settlements to imperial prefectures and finally to feudal prefectural cities, the sites completely record the functional iteration of middle Yangtze cities from military fortresses to composite "military-commercial-cultural" centers. This continuity and uniqueness make Jingzhou a complete sample for interpreting the "defense-driven" development model of ancient Chinese cities, possessing irreplaceable historical and scientific research value.

3. Assessment of the Current Situation of Protection and Development of Jingzhou Ancient City Sites

3.1. Protection Status: From Single-Site Restoration to Systemic Exploration

The cluster of ancient city sites in Jingzhou includes 2 national-level cultural relic protection units (Jingzhou Ancient City and Jinan City Site) and 6 provincial-level units (Yinxiang City, Ying City, etc.), with a total investment of over 50 million yuan in recent years. Key projects include: strengthening the 11.28-kilometer brick-stone city walls of Jingzhou Ancient City, renovating its 7 city gates, and restoring the "Nine Elders' Immortal Capital" section of the defensive system; designating a 16-square-kilometer protection zone for Jinan City Site, initiating dredging of the Longqiao River water system and protection of rammed-earth platforms in the palace area; and implementing site signage and environmental rectification for Yinxiang City and Ying City.

Archaeological excavations, such as the discovery of Qin-Han wooden structures in Ying City and red-baked earth architectural foundations in Yinxiang City (2022–2023), have provided new evidence for understanding the functional zoning of these sites. Digital protection measures have been preliminarily adopted: Jingzhou Ancient City pilots an AR navigation system, where scanning city gates reveals 3D models of Ming-Qing defensive structures; Jinan City has established a site database with 3D modeling of 84 rammed-earth platforms. However, technological applications remain in their infancy—only 15% of sites have electronic guides, and Yinxiang City and Ying City lack digital displays, limiting the transformation of archaeological findings into publicly perceivable cultural products.

3.2. Tourism Development: Coexistence of Resource Advantages and Experiential Shortcomings

Jingzhou Ancient City Scenic Area receives over 5 million visitors annually, forming a "one-core, two-belts" pattern: the core attractions include the Jingzhou Ancient City Wall, Zhang Juzheng's Former Residence, and Jingzhou Museum, linking two peripheral routes: the Jinan City Site (Chu culture experience) and Ying City Site (Qin-Han historical exploration). However, the product structure is unbalanced: the core area of Jingzhou Ancient City accounts for 70% of tourist traffic, while Jinan City and Yinxiang City receive fewer than 100,000 visitors annually, with sightseeing dominating (82% of visits) and in-depth experience projects (e.g., archaeological excavation experiences, intangible cultural heritage workshops) comprising only 15%.

Based on 320 questionnaires from the university innovation project, tourist satisfaction stands at 6.2/10, with core pain points concentrating on: ① Infrastructure: 43% complain about inadequate parking and weak transportation connections between sites (e.g., no direct bus to Jinan City); ② Cultural Experience: 65% desire historical scene restoration (e.g., Chu palace banquets, Ming-Qing commercial battle simulations), but existing projects rely on static displays with limited interactivity; ③ Itinerary Design: 78% of visitors are unaware of the connections between the four-phase sites, and only 22% have experienced cross-site tours.

3.3. Existing Issues: Multidimensional Challenges in Protection, Development, and Management

The four-phase urban sites are managed by different authorities (e.g., Jingzhou Ancient City under the Culture and Tourism Bureau, Jinan City Site under the Institute of Archaeology), lacking unified planning and leading to inconsistent protection standards: over-restoration in Jingzhou Ancient City (e.g., use of modern building materials) coexists with Jinan City's "prioritizing excavation over display." Agricultural expansion and real estate projects are encroaching on the boundaries of Yinxiang City and Ying City sites; in 2023, infrastructure construction in the northwestern area of Ying City caused partial stratigraphic damage.

Compared with Xi'an Ancient City (historical scene reconstruction) and Pingyao Ancient City (Shanxi merchant culture experience), Jingzhou's tourism remains at a primary stage of "city walls + museums," failing to leverage the unique "stacked cities" IP. The core area of Jingzhou Ancient City has a commercial density of 0.8 shops per square meter, with catering and souvenir stores accounting for 60%, squeezing historical space experiences—for example, Ming-Qing buildings on the east inner street have been converted into internet-famous milk tea shops, diluting the cultural atmosphere.

Additionally, overlapping functions exist among cultural relics, tourism, and planning departments, slowing the implementation of the *Jingzhou Historical and Cultural City Protection Plan* (2021–2035). For instance, three residential constructions are still ongoing within the Jinan City Site protection zone. Community participation is minimal: only 5% of ancient city residents engage in protection activities, and merchants have vague awareness of the sites' values—some shopkeepers mistakenly refer to Ying City Site as the "former site of Jinan City," affecting the accuracy of tourists' information acquisition.

4. Sustainable Development Strategies for Jingzhou Ancient City Sites

4.1. Constructing a Hierarchical Protection System: From Single-Site Restoration to Systemic Activation

Based on the historical values and current status of the four-phase urban sites, implement a "one-site, one-strategy" approach:

- ① Yinxiang City: Designate a 500-meter ecological protection buffer zone, prohibiting mechanized agriculture and real estate development; build a "Prehistoric City-Building Experience Hall" to showcase the survival wisdom of moated settlements through miniature models of archaeological excavation squares and interactive rammed-earth wall construction projects, while protecting original strata and vegetation landscapes.
- ② Jinan City: Promote the construction of the national archaeological site park, focusing on restoring the Longqiao River water system and the core rammed-earth platforms in the palace area. Following the model of Xi'an's Daming Palace Site Park, and build a site museum to exhibit unearthed bronze treasures and treasures of Chu embroidery; implement surface signage for unexcavated areas to avoid overdevelopment that damages archaeological layers.
- ③ Ying City: Based on the findings from excavations of Qin-Han wooden relics, construct transparent glass walkways over the government office district site, displaying stratigraphic profiles and replicas of unearthed bamboo slips below; transform the granary district site into a "Han Dynasty Canal Transport Experience Zone," presenting grain storage and military logistics through scene restoration.
- ④ Jingzhou Ancient City: Strictly control the commercial floor area ratio in the core zone (reducing commercial density to 0.5 shops per square meter), relocate non-cultural businesses, and restore historical buildings such as guild halls of the "Eight Major Commercial Guilds" and Ming-Qing folk houses; launch a project to prevent wind erosion of the city wall bricks, using traditional glutinous rice-lime mortar technique for repairs, while treating moat water quality to restore the "city-moat-street" ecological landscape.

Additionally, establish a "sky-ground integrated" monitoring system: conduct regular drone patrols of Yinxiang City and Jinan City site boundaries, and use blockchain technology to record the restoration process of Jingzhou Ancient City Wall; develop a "stacked cities" digital twin platform, constructing virtual models of the four-phase sites through 3D laser scanning, allowing users to switch historical periods online and view urban evolution animations. Pilot AR navigation in Jinan City, where scanning specific sites displays the original appearance of Chu palaces; launch a "City Wall History Calculator" mini-program in Jingzhou Ancient City, providing information on the construction era, military functions, and historical battles of each wall section based on location input.

4.2. Innovative Paths for Cultural-Tourism Integration: Activating the Modern Value of Historical Resources

4.2.1. Themed Route Linkage and In-Depth Experience Design

Create three core product lines under the "stacked cities" theme:

- ① "Four Cities, Millennium History" Cultural Tracing Route: Day 1 includes visits to Yinxiang City (prehistoric city-building experience) and Jinan City (Chu capital site museum + bianzhong music and dance performances); Day 2 explores Ying City (Qin-Han official office interactive experience) and Jingzhou Ancient City (Ming-Qing defensive wall hike + holographic theater at Zhang Juzheng's Former Residence); the final day features the "Stacked Cities" special exhibition at Jingzhou Museum, forming a closed-loop deep tour of "site exploration-cultural experience-systematic cognition."
- ② "Evolution of Military Defense" Themed Route: Compare defensive facilities across the four phases, with activities like moat-digging at Yinxiang City, analyzing water gate defense principles at Jinan City, visiting Han Dynasty beacon tower sites at Ying City, and simulated artillery firing at Jingzhou Ancient City. Conclude with the live-action drama *Millennium Evolution of City Defense* at the barbican theater to strengthen the connection between military history and urban development.

③ "Living Intangible Cultural Heritage" Immersion Route: Offer workshops for Chu embroidery and lacquerware making at Jinan City's site workshops, and classes for Jingju opera and Mashan folk songs at Jingzhou Ancient City's intangible cultural heritage hall. Develop products such as "Chu-pattern handicraft bags" and "ancient city defense-themed murder mystery games" to achieve transformation from "cultural production-experience consumption-memory retention."

4.2.2. Immersive Product Development and IP Transformation

First, upgrade live-action performances: build the *Millennium of Ying City* immersive theater in Jingzhou Ancient City's barbican, with four acts depicting core scenes of the four-phase sites (tribal council at Yinxiang City, Chu king alliance at Jinan City, Han official governance at Ying City, anti-Japanese pirate battle at Jingzhou Ancient City). Audiences can role-play as soldiers or artisans, earning "Chu coins" through missions to redeem cultural and creative products.

Second, develop diverse cultural and creative products: launch "stacked cities" blind boxes (including miniature models of the four sites and replica artifacts from each period), digital collectibles (e.g., Jinan City bronze phoenix pattern NFTs); collaborate with Jingzhou Fantawild to design a "Chu Palace Adventure" roller coaster, with tracks simulating Jinan City's water system and carriages printed with defensive maps from each period; produce the "Ancient City Guardians" documentary series to record cultural relic restoration processes, spreading on platforms like Bilibili and Douyin.

4.2.3. Regional Collaboration and Industrial Integration

Foster cross-city cooperation: establish the "China Ancient Cities Alliance" with Xi'an Ancient City and Pingyao Ancient City, promoting "Twin City" tourism products (e.g., "Chang'an-Jingzhou: Dialogue Between Zhou-Qin and Chu Cultures" routes) and sharing navigation resources and marketing channels; join the "Yangtze River Cultural Tourism Belt," collaborating with Wuhan's Yellow Crane Tower and Yichang's Three Gorges to launch the "Yangtze Civilization Tracing Tour," highlighting Jingzhou's role as a midstream hub of "stacked cities."

Promote "ancient city + rural revitalization": build "Chu-style homestay clusters" in Fenghuang Village near Jinan City and Taihui Village beside Ying City, with architecture featuring Chu-style elements like rammed-earth walls and wooden frameworks. Guest rooms are named after urban sites and equipped with themed experiences (e.g., "Yinxiang City Room" offers primitive pottery-making courses); develop "ancient city souvenirs + rural intangible cultural heritage" packages, where tourists buying Chu embroidery sachets in the city can participate in workshops with rural embroiderers, creating a virtuous cycle of "cultural consumption feeding back into heritage protection."

4.3. Improving Management Mechanisms: Building a Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Protection Network

4.3.1. Policy Guarantees and Fund Integration

Strengthen top-level design by promoting the legislation of the *Jingzhou "Stacked Cities" Site Cluster Protection Regulations*, clarifying protection red lines and development negative lists for the four-phase sites; include the "stacked cities" application for World Heritage status in the *Hubei Province Cultural Relics Development "14th Five-Year Plan"*, striving for national major heritage protection funds and establishing a municipal "Chu Culture Inheritance and Development Fund" with an annual investment of no less than 30 million yuan for site protection and cultural-tourism integration.

Attract diversified financing through the PPP model, introducing social capital via methods such as "site naming rights" (e.g., corporate sponsorship for the "Jinan City Archaeological Exploration Hall") and cultural IP licensing (allowing enterprises to develop "stacked cities"-

themed board games); encourage universities and enterprises to set up research projects, such as co-building the "Middle Yangtze Urban Evolution Laboratory" with Wuhan University to share archaeological data and research results.

4.3.2. Community Participation and Public Empowerment

Establish an "Ancient City Protection Volunteer Association," recruiting residents, merchants, and students for site patrols and tourist guiding. Issue "Ancient City Guardian" certificates and offer benefits such as consumption discounts; organize "merchant cultural training" to regularly explain site histories and standardize business operations (prioritizing Chu culture-themed businesses).

Develop "stacked cities" research and study courses for primary and secondary schools, including practical projects like "Little Archaeologist" (simulated excavation at Yinxiang City) and "City Wall Designer" (modeling Ming–Qing defensive layouts in Jingzhou Ancient City); offer general education courses on "Cultural Heritage Protection and Utilization" at universities, transforming innovation project results into teaching cases to cultivate youth protection awareness.

4.4. Sustainability Safeguards: Balance Among Ecology, Culture, and Economy

Throughout strategy implementation, adhere to the principle of "protection first, rational use": limit development intensity within protection plan thresholds (e.g., core zone development in Jinan City $\leq 10\%$), requiring cultural heritage impact assessments for tourism projects; establish an ecological compensation mechanism, allocating 5% of tourism revenue to vegetation restoration and water pollution control around Yinxiang and Jinan City sites; hold regular "Stacked Cities Development Forums" to convene archaeologists, tourism experts, and community representatives for dynamic adjustment of protection and development paths. These measures aim to transform Jingzhou from an "isolated cultural relic protection site" into a "living cultural community," making the ancient city site cluster a model for coordinated cultural heritage protection and urban development in the middle Yangtze River region.

5. Conclusion and Prospect

5.1. Research Conclusions

Taking Jingzhou's "stacked cities" phenomenon as the entry point, this study reveals the complete evolutionary logic of ancient cities in the middle Yangtze River region—from prehistoric settlements to feudal prefectural cities—through historical textual research, field surveys, and interdisciplinary analysis, forming the following core understandings:

The overlay of the four-phase urban sites (Yinxiang City, Jinan City, Ying City, Jingzhou Ancient City) is not a simple geographical superposition but a gradual accumulation of military defense (moated settlements → rammed-earth city walls → brick-stone fortifications), economic functions (fishing-hunting agriculture → bronze handicrafts → salt-grain commerce), and cultural connotations (primitive religion → Chu culture → Confucian ethics). This evolutionary model of "military foundation, economic drive, and cultural soul" constitutes a distinct urban development paradigm in the middle Yangtze River region, different from the capital system of the Yellow River basin, and supplements the study of ancient Chinese urban history with a typical southern perspective.

Current challenges facing Jingzhou's ancient city site cluster—fragmented protection (decentralized management entities), homogeneous development (products limited to sightseeing), and insufficient community participation—stem from the fragmented understanding of the integrated value of "stacked cities." Data from the university innovation project shows that only 22% of tourists can connect the historical context of the four-phase sites, reflecting a gap in transforming archaeological achievements into public awareness.

Through a "hierarchical protection system" (e.g., ecological buffers for Yinxiang City, archaeological site parks for Jinan City, functional relief for Jingzhou Ancient City) and "cultural-tourism integration strategies" (themed routes, immersive experiences, regional linkages), living inheritance of historical resources can be achieved. For example, connecting the restoration of Chu palaces in Jinan City with Ming-Qing commercial battle experiences in Jingzhou Ancient City not only echoes the main thread of military defense but also meets tourists' demand for differentiated experiences, providing a replicable model of "value extraction-scenario transformation-industrial linkage" for similar multi-phase urban sites (e.g., Luoyang's "Five Capitals Gathering in Luoyang," Kaifeng's "Stacked Cities").

5.2. Research Prospects

5.2.1. Directions for Academic Research Deepening

Further analyze the impact of urban defense facilities from each period (such as the water gates of Jinan City and the artillery emplacements of Jingzhou Ancient City) on urban street layouts and water system planning, revealing the internal logic of "defense needs → spatial transformation → functional derivation."

Integrate methods from environmental archaeology and cliometrics to quantitatively analyze the influence of geographical environment (Yangtze River floods, climate change) on site selection and survival cycles of urban sites, constructing a "human-city-nature" interaction model.

5.2.2. Pathways for Practical Application Advancement

Accelerate the application of VR/AR technologies in site display, such as developing a "stacked cities" metaverse experience platform where users can "participate" in Chu palace court meetings or Ming-Qing commercial caravan transportation through digital twin technology, enhancing the immersive sense of cultural perception.

Promote the joint application of Jingzhou Ancient City, Jinan City, and Yinxiang City for World Cultural Heritage status, establishing a benefit-sharing mechanism of "site protection-tourism revenue-community feedback." For example, allocate 10% of scenic area ticket revenue to skill training for surrounding residents and support for cultural and creative industries, truly realizing "shared protection achievements for all."

5.2.3. Possibilities for Regional and International Dialogue

Form a "Yangtze River Defense Civilization Chain" with sites such as Chongqing Diaoyucheng and Nanjing Ming City Wall, jointly applying for a "Ancient Urban Defense System of the Yangtze River Basin" transnational joint World Heritage project to enhance Jingzhou's visibility in the global dissemination of Chinese civilization.

Draw inspiration from Bologna's "living heritage city" model in Italy, designating a "cultural heritage activation experimental zone" in the core area of Jingzhou Ancient City, allowing moderate commercial development and cultural and creative industry settlement, and exploring the compatibility between protection standards and modern life.

5.3. Research Summary

Jingzhou's "stacked cities" represent a three-dimensional historical record of Chinese civilization in the middle Yangtze River region. Their protection and development are not only issues for cultural relics work but also a construction project for urban cultural confidence. Through the practical exploration of this university innovation project, the study has preliminarily established an application framework of "historical research-current status diagnosis-strategy formulation." However, limited by time and resources, the excavation of archaeological details for some sites (such as the early settlement structure of Yinxiang City) remains insufficient. Future efforts must focus on strengthening multidisciplinary

collaboration and deep technological integration. It is hoped that Jingzhou can use the "stacked cities" as a fulcrum to leverage a new paradigm for cultural heritage protection in the middle Yangtze River region, allowing the historical wisdom of these millennium-old urban sites to truly contribute to the high-quality development of modern cities.

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