In world cultural heritage cities, it is important to preserve vernacular buildings in physically, culturally, socially and economically sustainable ways, which have to work together to retain “Comprehensive Authenticity” (instead of “Individual Authenticity”).

In reality, however, these aspects are often segregated due to lack of systematic integrity and consistency in policy making. This phenomenon could be seen in the case of 140 Protected Vernacular Buildings (PVB) in the Old town of Lijiang (China; UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site, 1997).

The economic factors concerning PVB can be categorized into three patterns – Fundamental, Extensive, and Intensive.

First, the Fundamental Pattern features “Local Social Authenticity”, in which a self-sufficient economy is formed, and the local community sense is retained. In this case, the local people do not need much funding support, but they may also lack of funds for necessary maintenance.

Second, the Extensive Pattern features “Individual Physical Authenticity” that emphasizes the buildings’ physical features and relies on public funds and subsidiary for maintenance, while could possibly lose the community interaction.

Third, the Intensive Pattern features “General Cultural Authenticity” as typically shown in the transformation of houses into tourism facilities, which satisfies mainly the tourism demands while possibly at the sacrifice of community benefit. Many tourism products are developed and satisfy tourists’ needs.

In this three-layer economic system, local social authenticity is the core element, individual physical authenticity is the media, and general cultural authenticity should be regarded as the final result to achieve. General authenticity can not be achieved without the consistence of local social authenticity. The life of the local people should find their way to persist.