



Courtyards for consumption: Tourist constructions of authenticity in the commodified Chinese courtyard buildings

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ABSTRACT

Background: The interior courtyard is the organising socio-spatial core of Chinese and Chinese-Indonesian (*Peranakan*) domestic architecture, yet in heritage-tourism districts it is increasingly repackaged as a consumable attraction. In Semarang's Chinatown (*Pecinan*), community-led tourism since 2006 and a municipal revitalisation programme launched in 2023 have accelerated the conversion of courtyard buildings into cafés, cultural venues, and visitor attractions. Drawing on the staged-authenticity debate and on recent studies of courtyard commodification in East Asian cities, this study examines how visitors construct, negotiate, and contest the authenticity of commodified courtyard spaces in Pecinan Semarang, and what their narratives imply for the district's brand. **Methods:** A netnographic design analyses publicly available Google Maps reviews of three courtyard-based heritage venues: Tay Kak Sie Grand Temple, the Rasa Dharma hall of Boen Hian Tong, and Dharma Boutique Roastery, coded deductively against a framework that crosses objective, constructive, and existential authenticity with spatial, social, and symbolic dimensions of place, complemented by inductive open coding. **Findings:** Preliminary coding of a purposive sample of 32 reviews indicates that objective (age-based) judgements and commodification signals co-dominate (41% each), existential encounters follow (34%), and the courtyard itself is explicitly named in only 6% of reviews, consumed as café seating and event space but absent from visitors' vocabulary. Commodification is narrated overwhelmingly as access rather than loss, except where consumption enters sacred space; an emergent code of everyday communal use marks the association hall as a living institution rather than an attraction. **Conclusion:** The study provisionally identifies the consumed but unnamed courtyard and everyday communal use as overlooked authenticity resources for heritage-district branding in island Southeast Asia. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study extends authenticity research by introducing the concept of the consumed but unnamed courtyard and demonstrating how everyday communal use functions as an overlooked authenticity resource that reshapes heritage branding in commodified courtyard spaces.

KEYWORDS: Chinatown; city branding; commodification; courtyard; urban authenticity.

1. Introduction

The courtyard is the generative element of the Chinese house. It is a void around which rooms, circulation, ritual, and family hierarchy are ordered, and it has long been read as the spatial expression of a quest for harmony between household, community, and cosmos (Zhang, 2017). In the classical siheyuan the courtyard mediates climate, admits light and air into deep urban plots, stages ancestral rites and seasonal festivals, and encodes

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generational and gender hierarchies in the disposition of its surrounding halls. Far from being a static inheritance, the courtyard has continuously folded new uses and meanings into its layered fabric: recent work on the compound courtyard houses of Nanjing's southern inner city traces how successive rounds of subdivision, densification, and micro-renovation have re-scripted the courtyard while retaining its organising role (Zhu & Yang, 2025). The courtyard, in other words, is not merely a building element but a social technology, and it is precisely this double nature, spatial and social at once, that makes its fate under tourism commodification an analytically rich question.

When Chinese migrants settled the ports of Java, this courtyard logic travelled with them and was adapted. Compressed into narrow shophouse plots, hybridised with Javanese and Dutch colonial elements, and negotiated against tropical rainfall, trade regulation, and colonial-era residential segregation, the courtyard re-emerged in distinctive local forms: the airwell of the shophouse, the walled forecourt of the temple, the garden court of the merchant house (Anggraini, 2012). Recent research on the Chinese houses of Kampung Ketandan in Yogyakarta demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of siheyuan spatial arrangement under such conditions of migration and constraint (Safitri et al., 2025). Studies of Chinese-Indonesian dwellings further show that these houses carry contested layers of identity and memory, shaped by centuries of assimilation pressure, discriminatory regulation, and selective cultural revival, so that their authenticity can never be reduced to material fabric alone (Februandari, 2020). The courtyard buildings of Indonesian Chinatowns thus arrive in the present already thick with negotiated meaning, before any tourist ever photographs them.

In the branding vocabulary this journal cultivates, the courtyard belongs to the deep identity, the DNA, of a Chinatown as a place. Façades can be repainted and lanterns rehung in a season, but the courtyard encodes the settlement logic of the district: the plot rhythm of the shophouse, the introversion of the dwelling against the street, the gradation from public lane through commercial front to familial court and ancestral hall. Precisely because it is the least visible layer, it is also the least imitable: a competitor district can copy a gate or a festival, but not a two-century accumulation of inhabited courts. Whether a district's branding capitalises on this depth or paves over it is therefore not a cosmetic question but a strategic one, and it cannot be answered without knowing how the courtyard actually figures, or fails to figure, in the experience of the district's visitors. That empirical question is the pivot of this study.

Authenticity itself is a layered judgement, and tourism scholarship has theorised it for five decades. MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity describes settings deliberately arranged for visitor consumption, in which back regions of everyday life are progressively converted into front regions for display. Cohen, (1988) complicates the pessimism of that account by showing that commoditisation can both erode and generate meaning: what begins as staged performance may acquire emergent authenticity over time, and visitors themselves vary in the depth of authenticity they demand. Wang (1999) gives the debate its most influential typology, distinguishing objective authenticity (the verifiable originality of toured objects), constructive authenticity (the symbolic, socially constructed projections that visitors and industries cast upon places), and existential authenticity (the embodied, self-referential sense of being one's true self activated by the touristic experience). Zukin, (2010), writing on the consumption-led regeneration of urban districts, warns that the pursuit of an authentic urban experience tends to displace the very everyday life, the residents, small trades, and unglamorous routines, that produced the feeling of authenticity in the first place. Together these four positions frame the central tension this study investigates: commodification simultaneously requires, produces, and threatens authenticity.

Recent empirical work keeps recalibrating these classics in urban heritage settings. In Shanghai's Tianzifang, symbolisation, commodification, and branding have been shown to compress the conditions under which existential authenticity can arise, as creative spaces give way to homogenised retail (Yang & Liu, 2025). Consumer-based authenticity modelling in the George Town historic district of Penang links perceived authenticity to place

attachment and revisit intention, demonstrating that authenticity judgements have measurable behavioural consequences (Zhao et al., 2024). Beyond the visual, soundscape research shows that the sonic environment of historic districts materially shapes perceived authenticity (Hu et al., 2024), while district-scale studies confirm that integrating historic context with living activities is what sustains attraction and vitality over time (Fang & Wu, 2025) (Fang & Wu, 2025). The authenticity of heritage districts, in short, is now understood as multi-sensory, behaviourally consequential, and fragile under consumption pressure.

Historic districts have meanwhile become central assets in city branding. Bibliometric analysis of 348 articles confirms that architecture, tourism, culture, and cultural identity now form one tightly interlinked research field around city branding (Gönüllüoğlu & Arslan Selçuk, 2024), extending the older insight that city branding succeeds only when it asserts an identity residents recognise as their own rather than performing a transitory marketing trick (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Vernacular architecture is increasingly mobilised as branding material in its own right, sustaining city identity from the scale of indigenous villages upward (Nursanty et al., 2024). Heritage quarters lend place brands credibility and distinctiveness, and revitalising heritage buildings can strengthen cultural identity and place attachment among users (Chan et al., 2024), but the same mobilisation exposes those quarters to the commodification dynamics sketched above, so that branding and authenticity stand in a relation of mutual dependence and mutual threat. This journal's founding premise, that branding and authenticity must be studied together, is nowhere more concrete than in a Chinatown whose courtyards are simultaneously heritage, home, and product.

Courtyard settlements are a paradigmatic arena of this tension, and the East Asian record is sobering. In Beijing, the commercial gentrification of the Guozijian historic area traded resident everyday life for a visitor-oriented image of authenticity, displacing the population whose presence had anchored the district's claim to be real (González Martínez, 2016). Nanjing's incremental, resident-retaining micro-renovation of compound courtyard houses offers a deliberate counter-model, folding new uses into the courtyard without evicting its life (Zhu & Yang, 2025). In mainland Southeast Asia, heritage-tourism development among the Cham community has been shown to commodify authentic culture in ways that the community experiences as rising tension rather than shared benefit (Quang et al., 2022). These cases establish both the stakes and the variance: commodification of courtyard heritage can hollow a district or renew it, depending on how the relationship between visitors, residents, and the built fabric is managed.

Pecinan Semarang is among the oldest and most intact Chinatowns in Java, formed after the 1740–41 upheavals when the colonial administration concentrated the Chinese population beside Kali Semarang, the river that still bounds the district. Its dense fabric of shophouses, courtyard dwellings, and temples has long been recognised as a physical marker of the city's multicultural identity, with the *klenteng* (Chinese shrine) identified as the district's defining physical characteristic (Widiastuti et al., 2015). The district anchors Semarang's broader heritage-tourism strategy alongside the adjacent Old City (Kota Lama), whose preservation-for-tourism trajectory is well documented (Yuliati et al., 2023). Community-led commodification began with the Waroeng Semawis night market, opened in 2006 by the tourism community Kopi Semawis to draw visitors into the district's lanes, and has intensified under the municipal revitalisation programme announced in 2023, which foregrounds Kali Semarang and the district's cultural assets (Kompas, 2024). Recent scholarship on Semarang's Chinatown has turned to how the district's spaces regulate the identities its inhabitants can perform (Februandari, 2026), and typological studies continue to document its domestic architecture (Lestari et al., 2021). Yet the courtyard, the most interior and intimate layer of these buildings, remains analytically invisible precisely as it is being opened to paying visitors as café seating, photo backdrop, and event space.

At the same time, user-generated content has matured into a serious evidence base for heritage and planning research. Netnography, the adaptation of ethnographic procedure to publicly available social-media and review data, provides the methodological frame (Kozinets, 2020), and applications now span the field: netnographic analysis of TripAdvisor

reviews reconstructs how visitors experience war-heritage sites in Vietnam (Quang et al., 2023); review mining extracts the drivers of memorable cultural experiences across Asian heritage venues (Saleem & Umar, 2023); machine-learning treatment of Google Maps reviews turns them into a participatory planning instrument (Akkaya et al., 2024); deep-learning analysis of social-media data decodes visitor perception of Asian historic districts at scale (Tao et al., 2025); and comparative work exposes the gap between promoted online images and on-site realities in heritage tourism (Xia et al., 2025). Reviews are naturally occurring accounts, produced without researcher prompting, and therefore record how authenticity is constructed in visitors' own vocabulary including what that vocabulary omits. Indonesian heritage-district research, by contrast, still relies mainly on expert assessment and resident interviews; its visitors' public, unprompted testimony remains largely unread.

The Indonesian setting adds a layer that the East Asian cases do not carry. Public expression of Chinese identity in Indonesia was suppressed for three decades under the New Order, when Chinese script, schools, and festivals were banned; only after 1998, and formally after the recognition of Imlek as a national holiday in 2003, could pecinan districts re-stage their Chineseness in public. The commodification of Semarang's Chinatown is therefore not simply the conversion of heritage into product: it is simultaneously the re-emergence of a long-censored identity into public space, staged partly for visitors and partly for the community itself (Februandari, 2026). The same hall that hosts tourists also hosts the weekly life of an association that survived the ban years; the same festival that draws photographers also re-enacts a right only recently regained. Authenticity judgements in such a district are thus never politically neutral, and visitor narratives whatever their nominal subject - participate in deciding which version of the district's Chineseness becomes its public face.

Two gaps follow from this review. First, while the commodification of Chinese courtyard districts is well documented for Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, and George Town, no study has asked how the courtyards of an Indonesian pecinan are received, judged, and narrated by their visitors; the island-Southeast-Asian case, with its distinctive Peranakan hybridity and its post-1998 revival of public Chinese identity, is missing from the debate. Second, the authenticity debate in Indonesian heritage studies has not yet been connected to the netnographic turn in heritage-tourism methods. This study therefore asks three questions: (1) how do visitors narrate the courtyard spaces of commodified heritage venues in Pecinan Semarang; (2) which registers of authenticity objective, constructive, or existential dominate these judgements; and (3) which commodification signals appear in visitor narratives, and how do they align with, or contradict, the district's branding as Semarang's Chinatown? The purpose of the study is to extend the courtyard-commodification debate to island Southeast Asia and to give Semarang's policymakers empirical evidence on how the district brand is being co-produced by its visitors. The paper proceeds from methods through results and discussion to conclusions.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

The study uses netnography, a qualitative approach that adapts ethnographic procedure to publicly available social-media and review data (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography is appropriate to the research questions for three reasons. First, visitor reviews are naturally occurring accounts, produced without researcher prompting, so they record the vocabulary visitors spontaneously reach for and, critically for this study, the vocabulary they do not reach for when judging a heritage venue. Second, review platforms archive these accounts over years, allowing the district to be observed across the period in which its commodification intensified. Third, comparable designs have proven productive in adjacent settings: war-heritage sites in Vietnam (Quang et al., 2023) and Asian heritage museums (Saleem & Umar, 2023). The design is interpretive rather than statistical: its

ontology treats authenticity not as a property of buildings but as a judgement performed in discourse, and its epistemology therefore privileges the close reading of visitor language over measurement of the buildings themselves.

Google Maps was selected as the single data platform for reasons of coverage and comparability. It is the review platform with by far the widest Indonesian user base, it hosts reviews of all three venue types studied here a temple, an association hall, and a café under one consistent interface, and it archives reviews with relative timestamps and reviewer profiles that allow the corpus to be described. TripAdvisor and Indonesian online travel agencies were considered and set aside: their coverage of non-commercial venues such as association halls is thin, which would have biased the comparison across commodification pathways. The unit of analysis is the individual review; the unit of interpretation is the coded segment within it. Because the study reads reviews as performances of judgement rather than as factual reports, low-content reviews are not noise to be corrected but data to be screened by explicit criteria.

2.2 Study area and period

The study area is the Pecinan heritage district of Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, bounded approximately by Kali Semarang and the historic gang (lane) network around Gang Pinggir, Gang Lombok, Gang Gambiran, and Gang Warung. The district was selected for three converging reasons: (a) it retains a surviving stock of Chinese-Indonesian courtyard buildings whose typology is documented (Widiastuti et al., 2015); (b) it is undergoing active commodification through the Waroeng Semawis night market and a spreading conversion of heritage buildings to visitor functions; and (c) it is the object of explicit municipal branding and revitalisation since 2023, making the branding-authenticity relation directly observable. Review data will be collected for the window January 2016 – June 2026, capturing the district before and after the revitalisation programme was announced.

2.3 Venue selection

Venues were included if they satisfied three criteria: (1) the building contains a documented interior courtyard or walled court, established from typological literature, heritage inventories, or verifiable imagery; (2) the venue is open to visitors in a commercial or quasi-commercial function temple, association hall, café, guesthouse, or market venue; and (3) the venue has a public review presence on Google Maps, the platform with by far the widest Indonesian user base. Three venues satisfied all criteria (Table 1; facades in Fig. 1).

Table 1. Selected courtyard venues in Pecinan Semarang and their Google Maps review base

Venue	Courtyard Evidence	Visitor Function	Reviews (n; mean rating)
Tay Kak Sie Grand Temple, Gang Lombok (est. 1746)	Documented temple forecourt (Widiastuti et al., 2015)	Worship + heritage tourism	255; 4.7
Rasa Dharma Hall/Vereeniging Boen Hian Tong, Gang Pinggir (est. 1876)	Association hall with interior court	Cultural events, community visits, rental	52; 4.4
Dharma Boutique Roastery (Margo Redjo), Jl. Wotgandul Barat (building c. 1850s)	Garden court of a Chinese-colonial roastery house (Good News From Indonesia, 2023)	Heritage café, roastery museum tours	399; 4.9

Tay Kak Sie Grand Temple in Gang Lombok, established in 1746, is the largest and most celebrated klenteng of the district, its main hall dedicated to Kwan Sie Im Po Sat and its

walled forecourt staging the district's major festivals. It represents the first commodification pathway: the working temple that has additionally become the district's flagship tourist attraction, adjoined by the famous lumpia stalls of Gang Lombok. The Rasa Dharma hall in Gang Pinggir houses Boen Hian Tong, founded in 1876 and regarded as the oldest surviving Peranakan social association in Indonesia. The hall combines an ancestral altar which since 2014 has also carried the memorial tablet (*sinci*) of Indonesia's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid, in recognition of his defence of Chinese-Indonesian civil rights (Murianews, 2022) with spaces used weekly by members for exercise, music, and communal meals. It represents the second pathway: the living institution that opens itself to cultural visitation and event rental.

Dharma Boutique Roastery on Jalan Wotgandul Barat continues the Margo Redjo coffee enterprise founded in 1915 by the Tan family, operating in a Chinese-colonial house estimated to date from the 1850s and inhabited by five generations of the same family (Good News From Indonesia, 2023). Its garden court now serves as café seating, and the roasting hall doubles as a small museum with scheduled tours. It represents the third pathway: the courtyard house converted to a heritage café in which the court itself is the consumed space. The venue photographs in Fig. 1 were taken by the authors from publicly accessible streets in July 2026; interior photography was not undertaken owing to ongoing community events at the venues during the study period.



Fig. 1. The three case-study venues: (a) Tay Kak Sie Grand Temple; (b) Rasa Dharma / Vereeniging Boen Hian Tong; (c) Dharma Boutique Roastery (Photographs by the authors, July 2026)

2.4 Data collection

Sampling is sequential and saturation-driven rather than exhaustive. Google Maps does not expose its full review archive to sustained retrieval: beyond an initial tranche the interface throttles further loading, so a census of all 706 posted reviews is not achievable by any legitimate means, and the Places API returns only five reviews per venue. A census is in any case not what a netnographic design requires. Reviews are therefore retrieved venue by venue in the order the platform serves them, screened, and coded as they accumulate, until thematic saturation is reached, operationalised, following standard qualitative practice, as two consecutive retrieval rounds yielding no new code and no new sub-theme. The corpus is thus defined by the point at which it stops teaching, not by the size of the population from which it is drawn. Because reviews without text carry no codable content, the effective population is the subset of reviews containing prose: for Rasa Dharma this subset comprises 18 of the 52 posted reviews and was retrieved in full, so that venue represents a complete census of its textual record. Reviews in Indonesian and English are retrieved manually, screened against the criteria in the following paragraph, and entered verbatim into a coding matrix with venue, relative date, reviewer type, star rating, and language recorded alongside. The reference audit conducted on 9 July 2026 established the population against which the corpus is reported: 255 posted reviews for Tay Kak Sie (mean rating 4.7), 52 for Rasa Dharma (4.4), and 399 for Dharma Boutique Roastery (4.9). Retrieval covers reviews posted between January 2016 and June 2026.

Screening applies four operational rules. First, language: reviews in Indonesian and English are retained; the handful of reviews in other languages are logged but excluded, and

no review is translated for coding each is coded in its original language by coders fluent in both. Second, content: a review must contain at least one clause about the building, its spaces, its atmosphere, its people, or its heritage character; star-ratings without text and reviews consisting solely of logistics are excluded and counted. Third, duplication: where a reviewer posts substantially identical text at more than one venue, only the first instance is retained. Fourth, integrity: obviously promotional or venue-authored reviews, identifiable by first-person ownership claims, are excluded and reported. Every excluded review remains in the audit trail with its exclusion reason, so that the screening itself is reproducible.

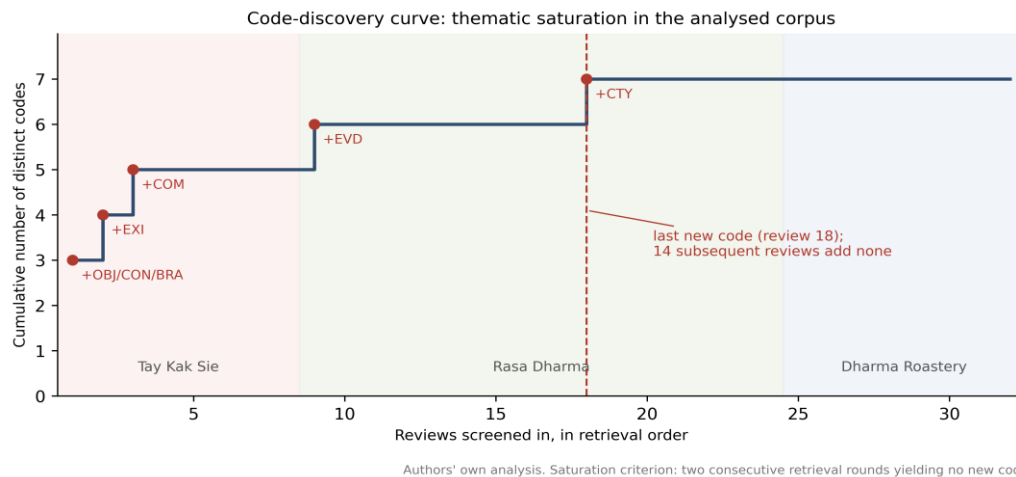


Fig. 2. Code-discovery curve: cumulative distinct codes against reviews in retrieval order, with the saturation point at review eighteen

Saturation was assessed by tracking the cumulative number of distinct codes against reviews in retrieval order (Fig. 2). The five deductive codes were all present by the third review; the first emergent code, everyday communal use, appeared at review nine, and the second, explicit courtyard mention, at review eighteen. No new code and no new sub-theme emerged in the fourteen reviews coded thereafter, a stretch that includes the entire textual record of the third venue. The saturation criterion was therefore met, and retrieval was stopped at a corpus of thirty-four reviews, of which thirty-two were screened in.

2.5 Coding framework and analysis

Analysis combines a deductive framework with inductive open coding, following the qualitative sequence of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The deductive matrix (Table 2) crosses Wang (1999) three authenticity registers with the spatial, social, and symbolic dimensions of place, and adds two further code families: commodification signals, operationalised from the commoditisation and commercial-gentrification literature (Cohen, 1988; González Martínez, 2016), and brand alignment, operationalised as any explicit connection drawn between the venue and the district or city brand (Gönüllüoğlu & Arslan Selçuk, 2024). During piloting, two emergent code families were added through open coding: everyday communal use, capturing reviews that narrate the venue as part of ordinary local life rather than as an attraction; and explicit courtyard mention, flagging any review that names the courtyard, garden, or interior spatial configuration as such. Coding proceeds in two stages.

In the first stage an initial pass is produced with the assistance of a generative AI tool, which applies the framework in Table 2 to each review and records, for every coded segment, the phrase on which the decision rests. In the second stage both authors review that initial coding in full: each coded review is read against its assigned codes and its supporting phrase, and a verdict of agreement or disagreement is recorded independently. Every disagreement is resolved by discussion between the authors, and the coding is

corrected accordingly before any analysis is run. The authors' agreement with the initial coding, and the number of corrections made, are reported. Coding is managed in a structured Microsoft Excel matrix, with one row per review and one column per code family, preserving the supporting phrase and the authors' verdict alongside each decision. Because the initial pass is machine-assisted, the matrix functions as a complete audit trail: every code in the reported results can be traced to a specific review, a specific phrase, and an author's explicit verification. The authors take full responsibility for all coding decisions presented in this paper. One review may carry several codes; percentages are calculated against the number of included reviews.

Table 2. Coding framework

Code family	Definition	Example indicators in reviews
Objective authenticity	Judgements of original material fabric and age value (Wang, 1999)	original building, still authentic, remarks on age, patina, ornament, altars, roof structure
Constructive authenticity	Atmosphere and imagery projected onto the place	feels like old China, like being in a film, photogenic framing of the courtyard
Existential authenticity	Embodied, self-referential experience	participation in ritual or festivals, food memories, encounters with residents or caretakers
Commodification signals	Markers of consumption-oriented staging (Cohen, 1988; González Martínez, 2016)	price/admission talk, souvenir and menu framing, crowding, props and photo staging, tours
Brand alignment	Explicit connection of the venue to the district or city brand	Pecinan, Chinatown of Semarang, comparisons with other Chinatowns, district recommendations
Everyday communal use (emergent)	The venue narrated as part of ordinary local life	gym, taichi, free communal meals, member events
Explicit courtyard mention (emergent)	The courtyard/garden/interior configuration named as such	garden, courtyard, halaman, remarks on interior spatial layout

2.6 Trustworthiness

Four provisions support the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility is pursued through a machine-assisted initial pass followed by full author verification, and through the preservation of the entire review corpus together with the supporting phrase for every coded segment, allowing each interpretive claim to be traced to verbatim evidence. Dependability is supported by a fixed coding protocol (Table 2) piloted before full application, and by the disclosure of the AI tool used and the task it performed. Confirmability rests on the audit trail linking each code to its review, its supporting phrase, and an author's recorded verdict. Transferability is addressed by thick description of the district and venues, enabling readers to judge the fit of the findings to other pecinan and courtyard districts. The principal limitations, platform demographics, the language filter, and the preliminary sample, are stated openly.

2.7 Research ethics

The corpus consists exclusively of reviews that users published on open platforms; no interaction with reviewers occurs and no private data are collected. Following netnographic practice (Kozinets, 2020), usernames are not reported, quotations are paraphrased or lightly disguised to prevent back-searching, and venues are identified only because they are public establishments. The study therefore processes no personal data requiring ethics-board review, consistent with the institutional policy of the authors' university.

3. Results and Discussion

Of the 34 reviews retrieved across the three venues before saturation was reached, 32 met the inclusion criteria; two were excluded for carrying no spatial or experiential content. Table 3 summarises the distribution of codes across the included reviews, and Fig. 3 visualises it. All proportions reported below describe the analysed corpus itself; because reviews were retrieved in the order the platform served them rather than at random, these proportions are not offered as estimates of the prevalence of each code across the full population of posted reviews.

Table 3. Preliminary code distribution (n = 32 included reviews; one review may carry several codes)

Code family	Count	Share	Most frequent venue
Objective authenticity	13	41%	All three venues
Commodification signals	13	41%	Dharma Roastery
Existential authenticity	11	34%	Tay Kak Sie / Rasa Dharma
Everyday communal use (emergent)	8	25%	Rasa Dharma
Constructive authenticity	6	19%	Dharma Roastery
Brand alignment	3	9%	Tay Kak Sie
Explicit courtyard mention (emergent)	2	6%	Roastery / Rasa Dharma

Read as a whole, the distribution displays two patterns that organise the four subsections that follow: judgements of objective authenticity and signals of commodification occur in exactly equal measure, each appearing in two-fifths of the included reviews; and the courtyard itself the spatial device this study set out to trace is almost never named. The discussion moves from the general shape of the corpus to venue-specific dynamics, and finally to the district-scale implications for branding.

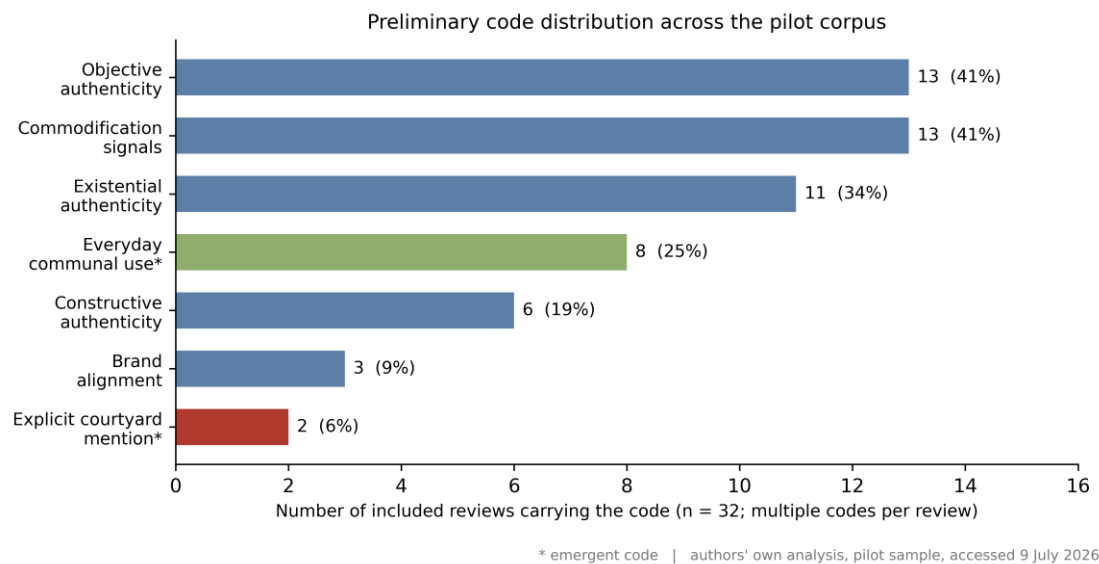


Fig. 3. Preliminary distribution of codes across the pilot corpus (n = 32 included reviews; one review may carry several codes)

3.1 How visitors narrate the courtyard: Consumed but unnamed

Only two of thirty-two reviews refer explicitly to the interior spatial configuration of the buildings they praise. One English-language review of Dharma Boutique Roastery observes that the shop is indoor but the café is outdoor, describing coffee drunk in the garden, the clearest account in the sample of a courtyard being used, and consumed, as café seating. The second is a critical Indonesian review of Rasa Dharma that registers the hall's

interior heat and its function as a repository of ancestral ashes. Everywhere else, buildings are narrated through their function (temple, café, association), their age, their artefacts, and their surroundings: visitors describe altars, ornament, roof profiles, incense, coffee aroma, and the culinary lane outside, but not the void around which all of these are organised. Visitors thus consume the courtyard, sitting in it, photographing it, passing through it, without possessing a vocabulary for it.

This preliminary finding sharpens the study's premise in an unexpected way. The analytical invisibility of the courtyard in Indonesian scholarship, where façade character and building typology dominate (Lestari et al., 2021), is mirrored by an experiential invisibility in visitor narratives. The contrast with the Chinese cases is instructive: in Beijing and Nanjing the courtyard is the explicit object of both policy and nostalgia (González Martínez, 2016; Zhu & Yang, 2025), whereas in Semarang it operates below the threshold of naming, present in photographs and seating choices, absent from language. If confirmed against the saturated corpus, this suggests that the commodification of the pecinan courtyard proceeds without triggering the defensive discourse that accompanied hutong commercialisation, precisely because visitors lack the category through which loss could be articulated. A systematic inventory of spatial vocabulary, including the Indonesian terms halaman, taman, ruang dalam, and pendopo, would refine this observation.

The pilot sample also hints at where the courtyard survives when language fails it: in images. Reviews of all three venues are densely illustrated, forecourt photographs at the temple, hall interiors at the association, garden tables and roasting machines at the roastery, and the platform's own topic index for the roastery lists seating as its most tagged theme, with thirty-seven mentions. The spatial experience of the court is thus being recorded and transmitted, but through the camera rather than the sentence. An analysis of the saturated corpus should therefore treat attached photographs as a parallel data stream: if the courtyard dominates the visual record while remaining absent from the verbal one, the case for interpretive intervention, giving visitors the words for what they already photograph, becomes conclusive. Photo-content analysis of the attached images is a natural extension of this design.

3.2 Registers of authenticity: Age first, experience second, image third

Objective authenticity is the most frequent register in the corpus (41% of included reviews). Its vocabulary is insistently chronological: one of the oldest klenteng, foundation years recited with precision (1746, 1876, since the Dutch era), epigraphy dated to the Kangxi reign, incredibly well-preserved. Visitors act, in effect, as amateur conservators, verifying age and integrity and awarding authenticity on that basis. Existential authenticity follows at 34%: prayer and contemplation at Tay Kak Sie; caretakers who explain every spot in detail to visitors who came without any intention to worship; conversation with the roastery's owner; ancestral rites; food memories attached to communal meals. Constructive authenticity is comparatively thin (19%) and concentrated at the roastery, whose all-vintage, classic interior, is read as a curated aesthetic, the only venue where visitors describe atmosphere as something composed for them rather than simply encountered.

In Wang, (1999) terms, visitors to Pecinan Semarang judge the real primarily through material age and embodied encounter rather than through projected imagery. This profile differs sharply from consumption-led districts such as Tianzifang, where staged imagery compresses existential experience (Yang & Liu, 2025), and it complicates the assumption, inherited from MacCannell (1973), that commodified settings inevitably shift judgement toward the constructive register. It also echoes Februandari's (2020) argument that the authenticity of Chinese-Indonesian houses exceeds their material fabric: the existential register in this sample is carried almost entirely by people, caretakers, owners, elders, rather than by objects. The behavioural stakes indicated by the George Town model, where authenticity feeds place attachment and revisit intention (Zhao et al., 2024), suggest that this people-borne authenticity is also the district's most fragile asset: it retires when its bearers do.

A tentative language pattern within the pilot sample deserves flagging for the full analysis. The English-language reviews in the sample lean toward atmosphere and self-description, deeply moving, profound and solemn tranquility, a magnificent spiritual and historical anchor, while the Indonesian-language reviews carry the chronological register, reciting foundation dates, superlatives of age (*tertua*), and maintenance judgements (*masih bagus, bersih, terawat*). If the pattern holds across the saturated corpus, it would suggest that domestic and international visitors are constructing two different districts from the same buildings: an Indonesian district of verified age and care, and an international district of mood and encounter. Both are assets, but they answer to different branding registers, and a district communication strategy would need to speak to each without letting either overwrite the other. Reporting by language cohort in a larger corpus would test this pattern directly.

3.3 Commodification narrated as access, with one contested boundary

Commodification signals appear in 41% of the corpus, but their valence is striking: they are overwhelmingly narrated as access rather than loss. Guided tours make the roastery's heritage legible on Fridays and Saturdays; organised heritage trips bring visitors to the temple; the culinary strip beside Gang Lombok extends the visit; even seat scarcity in the roastery's garden is reported as evidence of deserved popularity rather than of crowding. Menu variety, affordable prices, and knowledgeable staff are folded into the heritage experience as amenities that enable rather than dilute it. In Cohen's, (1988) terms, commoditisation in this sample generates meaning far more than it destroys it: the tour, the café table, and the lumpia stall are the very instruments through which the district's past becomes consumable as experience.

The single sharp critique in the sample marks the boundary of this permissiveness. A reviewer of Rasa Dharma registers dismay that the hall, a repository of ancestral ashes, is still rented out for weddings. Where consumption crosses into sacred space, the language of access flips abruptly into the language of violation. This one datum aligns with the tensions documented for the Cham community, where heritage-tourism development commodified ritual culture against community sensibilities (Quang et al., 2022), and with Beijing's Guozijian, where commerce displaced the sacred-everyday texture of the district (González Martínez, 2016). The preliminary lesson is that visitors police a distinction the branding literature rarely draws: between commodifying access to heritage and commodifying the heritage's inner sanctum. Quantifying positive against negative commodification narrations in a larger corpus is the obvious next step.

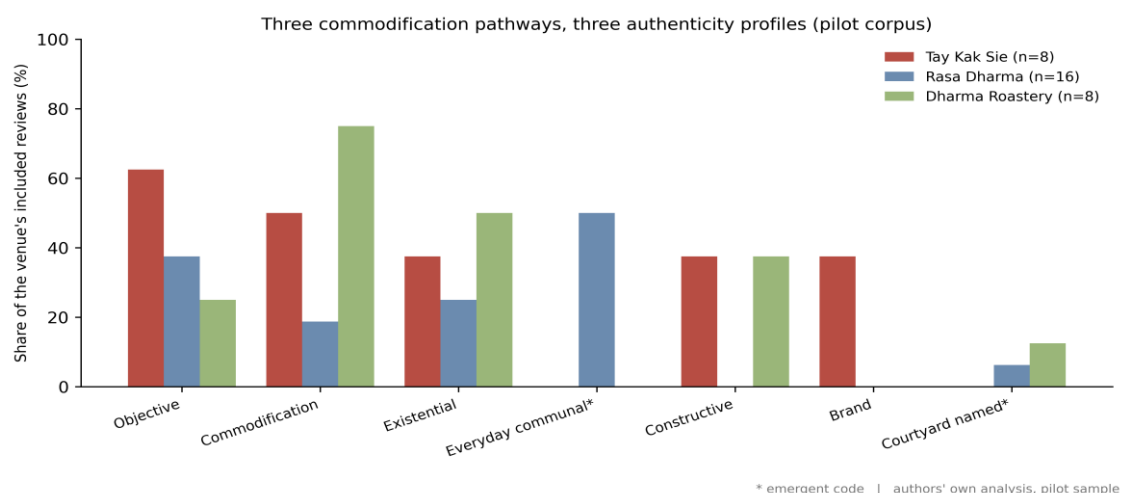


Fig. 4. Venue-level code profiles in the pilot corpus: three commodification pathways, three authenticity profiles

Beneath the shared valence, each venue displays a distinct commodification profile that matches its pathway (Fig. 4). At the temple, commodification is adjacent rather than internal: it appears as organised trips, parking, and the culinary strip at its gate, while the sacred core remains untouched in the narratives, visitors who came not to worship report being welcomed and guided, not sold to. At the association hall, commodification takes the form of venue rental, and it is here, where consumption enters the building's ritual interior, that the sample's only protest occurs. At the roastery, commodification is the venue: products, menus, tours, and seat scarcity are the experience itself, and reviewers embrace it without reservation because the commerce is continuous with the building's own history, a coffee house reviewed as a coffee house. Provisionally, then, visitor tolerance of commodification appears to depend less on its intensity than on its congruence with the building's inherited function.

3.4 The district brand and the living institution

Explicit brand alignment is rare in the corpus (9%) but potent where it occurs: Tay Kak Sie is twice positioned as the district's anchor, titik nol pecinan Semarang (the zero-point of Semarang's Chinatown), and once folded into the city's religious-tourism framing as its oldest and largest temple quarter. Venue-level experiences thus aggregate into district-level meaning chiefly through the temple, whose forecourt festivals and adjacency to the Gang Lombok culinary strip make it the district's condensed image. The other two venues contribute to the brand not by naming it but by thickening it: the roastery supplies the living heritage enterprise narrative, the association hall the oldest community narrative.

The emergent finding, however, is the code family the deductive framework did not anticipate: everyday communal use (25% of the corpus, concentrated at Rasa Dharma). Reviewers write about an affordable gym, taichi classes, free Tuesday lunches that teach children to queue, and community festivals, the building reviewed as a living institution rather than an attraction, by reviewers who position themselves as participants rather than tourists. In Zukin (2010) terms, this everyday life is precisely the resource that consumption-led branding tends to displace; in Pecinan Semarang it is still present, publicly narrated, and, crucially, already visible to the same platform audience that reads the tourist reviews. A district brand able to hold both narratives at once (Gönüllüoğlu & Arslan Selçuk, 2024; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) would be documenting its authenticity weekly, in its users' own words.

The district-scale frame for these venue narratives is the night market. Waroeng Semawis, run by the community organisation Kopi Semawis since 2006, periodically converts the district's lanes into a destination, and the 2023 municipal revitalisation extends that logic to Kali Semarang and the public realm (Kompas, 2024). Within the pilot sample the night market appears only obliquely, as the bustle around the temple and the food vocabulary that saturates reviews, but its role in the brand architecture is structural: it is the recruitment device that brings first-time visitors into the district, from which a minority then discover the temple's forecourt, the hall's events, and the roastery's garden. The saturated-corpus analysis should therefore test whether reviews written in market season differ in register from off-season reviews, since the answer would show whether the district's loudest commodification instrument amplifies or drowns the quieter authenticity resources documented here. Testing for seasonality against market dates would settle this question.

3.5 Implications for branding practice and theory

The relations documented are synthesised in a provisional model (Fig. 5): three commodification pathways converge on a courtyard that visitors consume without naming; visitor narratives split into three registers of authenticity dominated by age and encounter; commodification is absorbed as access under a congruence rule until it crosses the sacred threshold; and the district brand is fed both by the temple's anchor role and, unexpectedly,

by the weekly self-narration of living institutions. From this model, three implications follow for the post-2023 revitalisation of Pecinan Semarang, offered provisionally pending saturated-corpus confirmation. First, because the courtyard is consumed but unnamed, interpretation, signage, tour scripts, digital storytelling, should give visitors the vocabulary of the courtyard: naming the airwell, the forecourt, and the garden court would convert an unnoticed amenity into a distinctive brand asset unavailable to competitor districts, and would create the discursive category through which any future loss could be contested. Second, because the district's existential authenticity is people-borne, the revitalisation should invest in its bearers, temple caretakers, association elders, the roastery's owner-guides, as deliberately as it invests in facades; the review evidence indicates that a fifteen-minute conversation does more authenticity work than any restoration. Third, because visitors police the boundary of the sacred, venue-level commodification guidelines, distinguishing spaces open to consumption from spaces of ritual reserve, would protect both the community and the brand from the single failure mode the sample reveals. More broadly, the case suggests a refinement of the staged-authenticity debate for Southeast Asian districts: where commodification arrives through community institutions rather than external capital, the front-region/back-region boundary is negotiated internally, and visitor discourse rewards that negotiation with the language of access rather than loss. These implications should be revisited in dialogue with the online-image/reality gap literature (Xia et al., 2025) and with place-attachment outcomes (Chan et al., 2024).

A provisional model of authenticity co-production in a commodified pecinan (pilot findings)

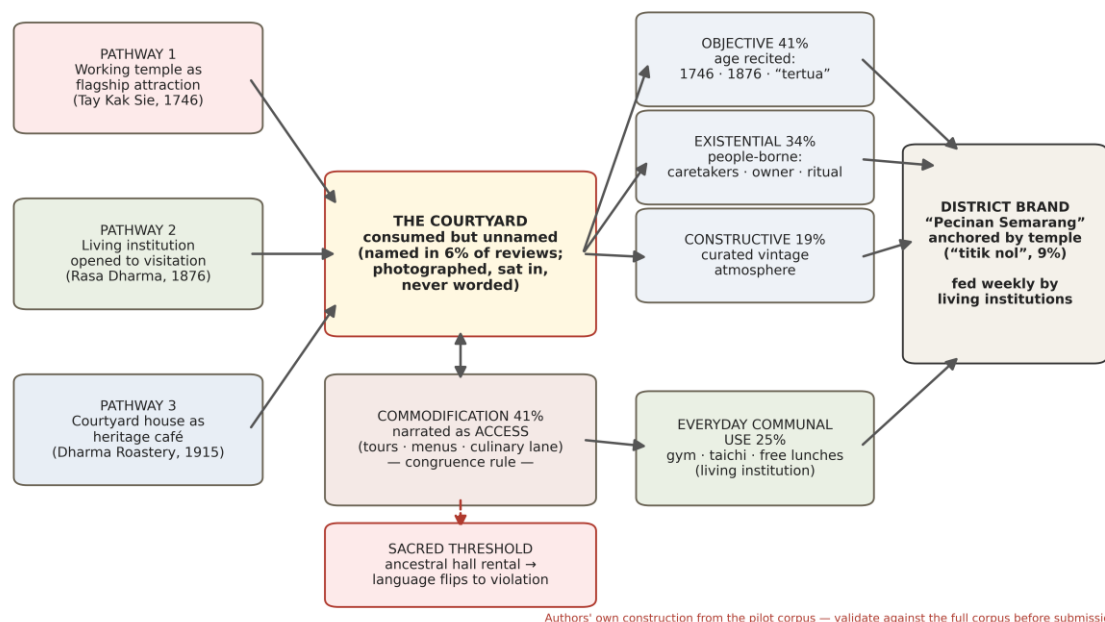


Fig. 5. A provisional model of authenticity co-production in a commodified Pecinan, synthesising the pilot findings

Finally, the findings position Pecinan Semarang within the comparative geography of courtyard commodification sketched in the introduction. The district currently sits closer to Nanjing's resident-retaining model than to the Guozijian trajectory of displacement (González Martínez, 2016; Zhu & Yang, 2025): its commodification is largely community-operated, its living institutions still narrate themselves in public, and its visitors reward congruent commerce while punishing sacral transgression. But the comparison also identifies the risk horizon. The revitalisation programme injects municipal capital and attention into exactly the mechanisms, public-realm upgrading, event programming, visitation growth, that in the Chinese cases preceded rent escalation and functional conversion. The window in which interpretation, people-investment, and commodification guidelines can be institutionalised at low cost is the present one, while the district's

everyday life is still intact enough to be protected rather than reconstructed. Longitudinal review data would allow this risk horizon to be tested directly.

4. Conclusions

This study set out to trace how the courtyards of an Indonesian Chinatown fare under commodification, and found, provisionally, a paradox: the courtyard is consumed but unnamed. Visitors sit in courtyard gardens, attend events in courtyard halls, and photograph courtyard temples, yet their narratives assign these spaces no vocabulary of their own, an experiential invisibility that mirrors the courtyard's analytical invisibility in Indonesian heritage scholarship. Against the trajectory documented for Beijing and Shanghai, commodification in Pecinan Semarang is narrated predominantly as access: tours, cafés, and culinary adjacency make heritage legible rather than hollow, with the boundary drawn sharply only where consumption enters sacred space, as in the contested wedding rental of an ancestral hall.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates that netnography scales down as well as up: even a pilot corpus, honestly bounded, can discipline a theoretical debate by revealing which categories visitors actually use, and which they lack. The absence of a word is as much a datum as its presence, and review platforms, read closely, archive both. For Indonesian heritage research in particular, the approach opens a large, continuously self-updating evidence base that costs nothing to consult and reaches visitor populations that questionnaire studies systematically miss.

For city branding and authenticity studies, the preliminary contribution is twofold. First, the study offers evidence that in a Southeast Asian Chinatown the dominant registers of visitor authenticity are chronological and existential rather than image-based, inverting the staged-authenticity profile of consumption-led districts and locating the district's most valuable, and most fragile, asset in its people rather than its fabric. Second, it identifies everyday communal use as an unanticipated, publicly narrated authenticity resource: the district's living institutions perform their authenticity weekly, in their users' own words, offering Semarang's post-2023 revitalisation a brand foundation that no staging could replicate and that insensitive commodification would destroy. The study is limited by its single district, its review-platform demographics, and its language filter. Two further limitations deserve emphasis. Because reviews were retrieved in the order the platform served them, the corpus is purposive rather than random, so the proportions reported describe the analysed corpus and should not be read as prevalence estimates for all posted reviews. And because retrieval stopped at thematic saturation, the corpus establishes which meanings are present in visitor discourse, not how common each is across the population; the saturated-corpus analysis with dual coding, the integration of resident perspectives, and comparison with other pecinan such as Lasem and Ketandan remain for the completed study and for future research.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, W.D. and D.R.; Methodology, W.D. and D.R.; Validation, W.D. and D.R.; Formal Analysis, W.D. and D.R.; Investigation, W.D. and D.R.; Resources, W.D. and D.R.; Data Curation, W.D. and D.R.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, W.D. and D.R.; Writing – Review & Editing, W.D. and D.R.; Visualization, W.D. and D.R.; Project Administration, W.D. and D.R. Both authors contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it analyses only publicly available, non-interactive review data and processes no personal data, in accordance with the institutional policy of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Semarang.

Informed Consent Statement

Not available.

Data Availability Statement

The coded review corpus (paraphrased and anonymised) is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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