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Cultural Heritage Management in China

Current Practices and Problems

CHEN SHEN AND HONG CHEN

Cultural heritage management in China has undergone several decades of intensive development, with many key events taking place in 2006. In April of that year, the Wuxi Proposal detailing the preservation of industrial heritage was adopted at the first forum for the preservation of industrial heritage in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. In May, the State Council of the Government of China announced the Sixth List of National Major Cultural Heritage Protection Units, which named 1,080 new cultural heritage sites. On June 10, China celebrated its first Cultural Heritage Day. In July, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Yin Xu, the 3,000-year old archaeological ruin of the Bronze Age Shang Dynasty as a World Heritage site. In October, the international scientific symposium hosted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, commemorated the first anniversary of the Xi'an Declaration. In November, the Ministry of Culture executed the Acts of World Heritage Site Protection and Management, which provides the first ever guidelines and regulations for managing the 38 World Heritage sites in China (as of 2009), along with those being considered for future application for World Heritage designation. At the end of 2006, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), the top agency of central government authority, announced plans to carry out the Third National Cultural Heritage Survey and Registration as part of its next strategic five-year plan.

China has a rich and diverse cultural heritage representing the foundation of Chinese civilizations and cultural traditions. In addition, through thousands of years of historic interactions and cultural exchanges with other areas, China is now recognized as having played an important part in the cultural heritage of other parts of the world. In the past two decades, China has demonstrated stunning economic development, providing unprecedented opportunities for implementing managerial measures for cultural heritage conservation. At the

same time, it has produced unforeseen preservation challenges that management authorities and professionals share.

While it is impossible to fully address the magnitude of cultural heritage management (CHM) in China within these limited pages, we will discuss the practices of CHM in relation to current economic development in the nation, and the problems arising from the challenges commonly seen during the development stage. We focus on the existing system of CHM in China, evaluating common policies and practices, and then on problems of CHM for the ongoing South-to-North Water Transfer Project that exemplifies the current problems of CHM practices in China.

The Establishment of the Yin Xu Museum

We begin by sharing an example that illustrates the excitement, as well as the problems, of CHM in China. In the summer of 2005, Chen Shen, the senior author of this essay, received an urgent call from Dr. Tang Jigen, the director of the Anyang Archaeological Station of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who had been asked by the local government to design and install a permanent gallery of Shang civilization in the new Yin Xu Museum in the city of Anyang (population 700,000) in northern Henan Province. The government gave just two months to finish the task, from concept designs to complete installation of about 500 artifacts in 2,400 square meters of exhibition space. The mission was straightforward and nonnegotiable because, at the time of the museum's construction, Yin Xu was being considered as one of the candidates in the competition of 2006 for World Heritage designation. The museum had to be completed, with the gallery in place, by the time the representative from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee visited Anyang to inspect the site.

Shen spent the first week of July at Anyang with Tang's team working on the concept design. He left with strong misgivings as to how they could finish the task for the targeted opening date in September, particularly as construction of the building was still in progress.

The opening of the Yin Xu museum to the public in October 2005 was as amazing as any other recent economic development event in China. The speed with which the museum was established, and the beauty and quality of the spectacular Shang gallery, probably set a new record for any country in today's world of museum development. During the museum's first ten days of operation, the attendance reached approximately 2,000 to 3,000 per day. When Yin Xu was designated as a World Heritage site in July 2006, attendance reached its peak with 63,000 visitors in the first month (Tang, personal communication, 2006).

This event has multiple implications. First, direct involvement and support of local government are effective driving forces for quickly establishing and organizing cultural heritage preservation projects. Second, the benefits from championing local cultural heritage for national or international titles are recognized by local authorities who are aware of the potential value of cultural heritage to the local economy through the tourism business. Third, public engagement in cultural appreciation through museum collections and visiting archaeological sites has raised public awareness for the preservation of cultural heritage at large. The case of the Yin Xu Museum is only one of hundreds, or maybe thousands, of similar establishments in the cultural sector today in China, which are the direct result of the growth of local economic development. At the same time, these same factors of economic development and public awareness are also contributing to the destruction of archaeological and historic sites by bulldozers and the loss of cultural relics through looting and smuggling at an unprecedented rate.

Cultural Heritage in China: Ongoing Surveys

It is difficult to have accurate numbers of heritage sites and collections in China, although endless efforts have been made over two or three generations to survey cultural relics in this vast land. In a press conference at the Ministry of Culture held on May 25, 2006 in association with the opening event of the first national Cultural Heritage Day in China, Shan Jixiang, the general director of the SACH, announced to the media that the nation has about 400,000 immovable heritage sites, and 20 million objects in museums and research institutes (the State Council Information Office 2006). Although these figures are probably drawn from the information registered at the SACH's database, it is unlikely that they represent the real quantity of Chinese heritage; the actual numbers are certainly much higher.

Chinese cultural heritage is managed in two general categories: immovable and movable cultural relics. The immovable cultural relics are divided into six classes: (1) ancient cultural/archaeological sites, (2) ancient tombs, (3) ancient architectural structures, (4) cave temples, (5) stone carvings and murals, and (6) important modern and contemporary historic sites and memorable buildings. In general, these immovable sites are preserved by local governments; some important relics are selected as national or provincial preservation sites. Since 1961, the state has established a sophisticated system of evaluating heritage sites for the three levels of managerial responsibility—national, provincial, and municipal or county.

By 2006, a total of 2,351 sites were listed as National Major Heritage Protection Units (for the complete list of these sites, see State Administration of Cultural Heritage [SACH] 2007a), 9,300 sites were named as Provincial Major

Heritage Protection Units, and over 58,000 sites were designated as Municipal/County Major Heritage Presentation Units. Together, these sites, accounting for a small percentage (17.5 percent) of the registered immovable sites, are the true beneficiaries of preservation supported by three levels of governments, while most of the unlisted ones are simply ignored if they are not in immediate danger. Compared to other heritage-rich nations like Egypt and India, the number of heritage sites under the watch list of the central government is considerably lower in China (2,351) than in Egypt (more than 20,000) and in India (more than 5,000). Even in Vietnam, heritage sites under central government management are about 500 more than in China (Cai 2006; also see Ota, this volume).

In the category of movable cultural relics, artifacts are classified into four grades: Grade 1 (the most rare and valuable), Grade 2, Grade 3, and Ordinary. It is our understanding that the nationwide inventorying of collections, in association with class evaluations, was carried out at museums and research institutes recently, and a sophisticated database system cataloging the roughly 20 million museum artifacts is being established. The disorderly nature of collection management practices and ignorance of the value of cultural treasures inherent at most state-owned museums has become a thing of the past, although there are still many areas to be improved.

In 1982, as a preservation measure to control speedy expansion and development in urban areas, the state authority designated a new category of immovable cultural heritage: "cultural city/town/village with important historic and cultural values." By 2006, the State Council had verified a total of 96 such cultural heritage cities, 44 heritage towns, and 36 heritage villages (see the SACH website for the complete list: SACH 2007b). Heritage preservation measures for the places on the list are now being implemented in conjunction with the new regulations from the Ministry of Construction of the Central Government in dealing with rapid urbanization in these places.

The current understanding of cultural properties in China is based on the second National Cultural Heritage Survey and Registration that was carried out in the 1980s (the first was done in the 1950s). The survey included identification and registration of archaeological and cultural sites and inventories of museum collections all over the nation. However, due to some difficulties and conditions, the survey could not be conducted in 320 (or 12.1 percent) of the 2,650 county establishments of the nation at that time (Shan 2006). Moreover, during the past two decades, with an annual double-digit rate increase in the GDP, the scale of construction, land development, highway building, and urbanization has reached an unprecedented level, which in turn has generated a large number of new discoveries of previously unknown cultural remains. For example, a new wave of CHM investigations in the 1990s in the middle of the Yangtze River, triggered by the construction of the controversial Three Gorges Dam, discovered 465 archaeological and historic sites not documented in the

heritage census of the 1980s in this relatively isolated region, about 632 square kilometers in reservoir area (Shen 2003, 2010). In the Inner-Mongol Autonomous Region, 64 of the 2,068 immovable heritage objects listed in the census list of the 1980s have been lost due to development. Therefore, the need for reinvestigation of cultural property is being cited, and a state-backed Third National Cultural Heritage Survey and Registration began in 2007. The results of this survey and registration of cultural properties will provide data for more feasible and durable policies and practices for long-term CHM activities in China.

Organizations, Policies, and Practices

The principal policy of cultural heritage management, stated in article 4 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics, is that, "in the work concerning cultural relics, the principle of giving priority to the protection of cultural relics, attaching primary importance to their rescue, making rational use of them, and tightening control over them shall be carried out" (SACH 2007c). Today, all aspects of cultural heritage management are governed; and related activities, including archaeological excavation, foreign collaboration, traveling exhibition, and conservation, are regulated, under this single law in China. The first version of the law was inaugurated in 1982, with partial revision in 1991. A completely revised new edition was approved in 2002. It took just 20 years for China to start implementing scientific measures and professional management in CHM. It is fair to say that Chinese CHM has undergone a painstaking process to reach a point close to the expectations of international CHM communities, but at the expense of the loss of many national treasures and the grief of a whole generation of CHM professionals.

For half a century, the establishment of a hierarchical administrative system has been effective for managing state affairs of heritage management, especially in regard to enforcing the implementation of acts and bylaws derived from the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics after 1982. At the top of the administrative pyramid is the SACH, a powerful and independent bureau under the Ministry of Culture. This bureau also owns a research institute (the Institute of Cultural Relics Research), a cultural heritage information center, a newspaper, a magazine company, and a giant publishing house. This multilayered and comprehensive structure suggests a highly centralized organization of management, from policymaking to research dissemination, all under one roof.

The SACH directly administers 31 provincial-level bureaus of cultural heritage, one in each province, autonomous region, or municipality directly under the central government (like Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjing, and Chongqing). The provincial bureaus act with similar functions on behalf of the provincial governments on affairs of cultural heritage preservation. In particular, each provincial bureau governs a provincial museum and a research institute of archaeology

and/or cultural relics; the latter operate all of the salvage archaeological projects within its province. Archaeologists from these institutions, as government employees, work in the field just like most contract archaeologists in North America on CHM field projects. Under the provincial bureaus, authorities in the cultural division of local government at the county and municipal levels are responsible for reporting and assisting CHM activities in their respective administrative districts. At the bottom of this hierarchical system are the offices of representatives in villages where heritage sites were given priority.

Undoubtedly this type of administration, typical within political systems in countries like China, is the most effective means for setting priorities for needed CHM projects and to best coordinate their implementation from top to bottom. State funding for preservation projects alone, not including operating budgets, was 534 million renminbi (RMB, U.S.\$68.4 million) in 2005. These funds are allocated to provinces by the SACH based on the reports and budget proposals from the provincial bureaus, which in turn give the SACH bureaucratic power.

However, bureaucratic problems with preservation increase when local governments set their own standards and priorities for the best interests of the region. For example, in some regions, including the city of Shanghai and Guangdong Province, where economic growth is well established and where heritage sites are relatively fewer, the support for CHM is substantial and consistent. In other areas, such as Henan and Shanxi provinces, where local economies are underdeveloped and where cultural heritage sites are numerous, the works of CHM are merely at a satisfactory level.

When the first version of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics was adopted in 1982, the lawmakers did not expect that complicated scales of CHM were soon to come. With the reform and open-door policy of the post-Mao era, the country stepped quickly into a period of socioeconomic transformation. Resumption of private ownership, market exchange, urban development, labor mobilization, and booming tourism all became new human threats that endangered sites and objects; there was no time to implement preservative plans before many were lost to these forces. Facing this new challenge, cultural authorities turned to international communities for help, with great success. In 1985, China became a signatory to UNESCO's Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Two years later, China's first six heritage sites—the Peking hominid site at Zhoukoudian, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, the Mogao Caves, and Mount Taishan—were designated as World Heritage sites (see Thapa, this volume). In 1997, UNESCO and the SACH jointly held China's first training session on the management of world heritage preservations. In 2005, the Fifteenth General Assembly and Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS was held in Xi'an, China, where the Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting

of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas was adopted (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS] 2005).

In the 20-year period between 1982 and 2002, painful lessons were learned from preservation projects such as the Three Gorges Dam project, before China reached the international standards of preservation for cultural heritage practiced elsewhere in the world. The proactive role assumed by the Chinese government led to the production of a new edition of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics in 2002. The revised policy and regulations are set to close many of the loopholes identified during the practice of the previous version of the law. For example, Dinghai, an ancient city with over 1,000 years of history, is filled with hundreds of traditional architectural buildings and streets belonging to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties (1271–1911). The province of Zhejiang listed the city as a Historic and Culture City in 1991, and had preservation plans for the old downtown, an area famous for its ancient street layout. In June 2000, the newly amalgamated city, Zhoushan municipality, decided to revive its city by tearing down ancient architectural buildings in the old town, and turning this area into a modern landmark plaza. Within weeks, a heritage town that had survived more than a thousand years disappeared from the earth, but the officials who were responsible for such destruction walked away from the court because there was no clear bylaw for how to punish the officials working on the government projects (Qu 2000). With the new law in place, similar incidents will result in charges against the chief administrators of the municipality for misconduct and may even result in their prosecution according to the law (see Appendix 5.1).

Problems in Cultural Heritage Management Related to Economic Development

Like many other countries with a rich heritage, China also experiences the inevitable loss of heritage by human looting and natural weathering. Such loss can be minimized as long as law enforcement is strengthened and conservation technology is advanced. However, today in China, the biggest loss of cultural heritage is due to economic development, which often occurs before adequate documentation of the loss can take place. This is the case for the largest hydraulic project in history—the Three Gorges Dam. According to Shen, the CHM work in association with the dam project was a “mission impossible” (Shen 2003, 2010). Unfortunately, another even greater loss of heritage is occurring because of the ongoing South-to-North Water Transfer Project.

Over the past five decades, the Chinese government had investigated the possibility of moving millions of tons of water from the frequently flooded regions of the Yangtze River network to the water-starved northern areas centered around Beijing. In 2002, the central government gave the go-ahead for the offi-

cial launch of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project. The project will have three routes (east route, middle route, and west route) of interconnected canals and reservoirs. The planning of this project had, in part, an obvious political mandate: that water would reach Beijing by 2008 before the Olympic Games began, with the areas beyond receiving water by 2010.

The debates on the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of this project repeat exactly what was stated for the Three Gorges Dam project (Li 2005). And again, CHM was the weakest voice in the discussion. But the danger to cultural heritage is greater because a larger number of sites will be lost, and that cannot be ignored (Liu et al. 2005; Shan and Wang 2004). The construction will occur in five provinces (Hubei, Henan, Shandong, Hebei, and Jiangsu) and two municipalities (Beijing and Tianjin), which comprise the heartland of Chinese civilization. In 2005, the SACH reported in a news conference, "Cultural departments investigated the construction area of the east route and middle route and determined that nearly 800 cultural heritage sites will be affected, including some with the most important historic and cultural value, like the Yuzhengong Palace World Heritage site, Xing Kiln site, and a cemetery site of the North Dynasty" (Gui et al. 2005). Cultural authorities also predicted that many more would be identified once the salvage work started, but the scale of archaeological sites would not be known until then.

The real problem with the CHM work in infrastructure projects is the failure of the CHM strategic planning at the beginning of the projects. This leads to the loss of hundreds of immovable heritage sites, hundreds of thousands of movable cultural relics, and, especially, scientific information of the human past. This failure cannot be blamed on the CHM authorities and professionals; it is because engineering departments consciously or unconsciously fail to include the CHM process at the planning stage, or in some cases to consider the needs of the CHM process at all. For example, the engineering departments did not establish a mediation committee to coordinate with CHM representatives to discuss the preservation plan until two years after the launch of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project. In September 2005, when a high-level discussion panel was held to evaluate the feasibility of the final construction plan, no CHM representatives were invited to participate except a low-ranking SACH official who attended the meeting as a nonvoting member.

Unacceptable ignorance on the importance of CHM by engineering departments, which are probably under pressure from politically driven deadlines, resulted in a radical change of the CHM plan and reduction of funding for the benefit of the construction of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project. The philosophy is clear; the project cannot be held up for preservation works. The cultural authorities proposed 1.3 billion RMB (U.S.\$180 million) for CHM preservation activities, but the engineering departments only agreed to 300 million RMB (U.S.\$37 million) as they excluded many preservation projects in favor of

their construction schedules. For example, in November 2004, the Hubei provincial bureau submitted a report on the preservation plan for the inundated areas of the Danjiangkou Reservoir under construction, proposing 241 preservation projects for a total of 560,000 square meters of excavation area. In April 2005, the engineering department approved only 192 preservation projects for a total of 340,000 square meters of excavation area. Engineering bureaucrats suspected that cultural authorities had overestimated the expense for the benefit of the cultural sector, while cultural administrators argued that they had not even considered the follow-up financial impacts after the salvage excavations. The truth is that there is no governing law to justify the arguments between the two sides, so that even officials from the engineering side suggest that the current law on heritage preservation is vague. “Yes, maybe our plan is not making sense [to CHM], but we did not break the Law” (Li 2005:25).

As with the Three Gorges Dam Project, CHM works in the South-to-North Water Transfer Project have the same shortage of money and time to complete the mission. Archaeologists had to start working in the field while their administrators were still negotiating the preservation plans. For example, the 461 km long Hebei section of the middle route cuts across the area whose sites represent 7,000 years of history on the central plain. Starting in July 2002, the Hebei Provincial Institute of Archaeology sent out five teams for reconnaissance surveys, and it repeated the process again in 2003. Their well-researched report proposed 155 preservation projects, including excavation of 23,000 square meters. However, the construction in the Hebei Province section was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2006. With no available time and money, this CHM work became another “mission impossible.”

The Future of Yin Xu: Conclusion

In some of the public debates on cultural heritage preservation, people ask, “What is the big deal if we lose a few sites here or there, given that our country has so many of such treasures?” And, “Why is this issue given priority over improving the subsistence needs of people in economically underdeveloped areas?” Unfortunately, many people share this mind-set, and worse is that many of these people are in administrative positions. It is because of this questioning of priorities that similar incidents involving the loss of cultural heritage happen repeatedly. The CHM works in China are not concerned solely with the problem of a lack of preservation professionals and managers, nor with the lack of policies and regulated procedures, but are also concerned with the problem of public awareness in this nation of 1.3 billion people.

Although it took two decades to systemize CHM, it is a sign that today Chinese cultural authorities can play an important role with international communities in this field. Until recently, international exchanges were limited to high-

level administrations. Holding the ICOMOS general assembly and symposium in China in 2005 was a good start to having international scholars participate directly in the front-line practice of Chinese heritage preservation. We also anticipate that international policymaking on CHM would benefit from a greater understanding of the Chinese experience, which offers widely diversified case studies. We welcome every opportunity to discuss Chinese CHM from a global perspective.

As we finish this chapter, our colleagues in China are still celebrating the designation of Yin Xu as a World Heritage site in China. Yin Xu was identified as the capital of the Late Shang Dynasty (1300–1046 B.C.) in 1899 when a Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) scholar recognized the inscriptions from oracle bones. The ruin, first excavated in 1929 and still being investigated today, represents a complex ancient urban society that produced masterpieces of exquisite bronze and jade artwork (Li 1977; Shen 2002). Treasures from Yin Xu are appreciated by millions of people outside China at museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the British Museum, and the Royal Ontario Museum. Cultural management at Yin Xu over nearly a century has been a successful example of Chinese CHM. Over these years, archaeologists and conservators from the Institute of Archaeology, at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, have been working very closely with the city authorities who gave a higher priority to heritage management than the recent economic development and business expansion. They successfully persuaded the commissioner of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project to change the middle route around the site; of course, Yin Xu's application for World Heritage designation was the political pressure used by the Anyang authorities for this detour. Consequently, we now have faith that this heritage site will receive better preservation management than any other heritage site in China, particularly in light of the diligence of archaeologists and cultural heritage managers and the substantial efforts made by both the state and local governments to preserve Yin Xu for future generations.

Appendix 5.1. A Case Study: Who Pays for the Renovation?

One day in 2003, in Zhangguying, a remote village in Hunan Province with approximately 2,000 people, an ordinary farmer, Zhang Zaifa, repaired a wall in his courtyard because he saw it was in danger of collapse. But doing such a do-it-yourself home repair resulted in his being sent to jail.

The village of Zhangguying retained the integrity of its entire ancient formation, including 62 lanes and 206 courtyard complexes, for 500 years, and is so far the most complete village complex built in the traditional southern Chinese architectural style. In 2001, the village was listed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) as one of the National Major Cultural Heritage Pro-

tection Units, and in 2003, it was listed by the SACH as one of the Famous Villages with Important Historic and Cultural Value. Therefore, all of the houses in the village, including Zhang's, have become immovable cultural relics. That also means that after June 2001 Zhang had lost his right to do any renovations by himself at his own house.

According to article 26 of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics: "The principle of keeping the immovable cultural relics in their original state shall be adhered to in their use, and the users shall be responsible for the safety of the structures and the cultural relics attached to them, see to it that the immovable cultural relics are not damaged, rebuilt, or dismantled and that no additional structures are built on the site."

Village administrators warned Zhang that if he needed to repair the home, he had to talk to the representatives of the local cultural authority about obtaining permission, and he would need to hire certified designers and contactors—an option that he could not afford.

Wishing to comply with the law, he initially asked for financial assistance from the local cultural department, to which he thought he was entitled, according to article 21 of the law. But Zhang's request for a financial subsidy was turned down because no one could identify which departments of the local government should be responsible: either the village council, which has revenues generated from tourism of the heritage village, to which Zhang made his contribution, or the cultural offices that received annual conservation budgets. But both bureaus refused Zhang simply because they believed that Zhang, as the owner, should pay for his own repairs. The real problem here was that the individuals in the administrative positions were not willing to use their budget funds on Zhang's repairs, even though helping with conservation and heritage preservation was a perfectly justifiable expense. Many bureaucrats in the front line have little sense of the importance of cultural heritage management (CHM) works. Moreover, their misconduct in these matters is sometimes well protected for the best interests of the local bureaucracy.

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