China: toward an integrated approach to cultural heritage preservation and economic development

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Over the past three to four decades, China has gone through a dramatic transition from a centrally planned economy of little global importance to one of the world’s leading economic powers. As result of imbalanced regional development, quick industrialisation and high-speed urbanisation, the country is now facing socioeconomic and environmental challenges of unprecedented scale. Although it is currently home to 45 World Heritage sites, over 4,000 key areas under protection, almost 800,000 registered cultural relics and 2,500 museums, China has lost some 70 per cent of its historic cities and an estimated 44,000 ancient ruins, temples and other cultural sites over the last twenty years. The speed and scale of current economic growth and human-centred development – in China and elsewhere – make it increasingly difficult for people and their environments to co-adapt. Despite the Central Government’s efforts to protect and preserve the nation’s rich cultural heritage, local interest in the implementation of cultural heritage is limited; more importantly, financial and human resources are scarce. This brief contribution explores the concept and implementation of cultural heritage preservation in China and how it is interlinked with wider issues of culture and development.

What is cultural heritage?

In short, and at the risk of oversimplifying complex relationships, cultural heritage includes those ideas, skills, practices and objects that are passed on from generation to generation, allowing the members of a community to identify and create a sense of unity and belonging.

We can distinguish between tangible and intangible cultural heritage: tangible cultural heritage includes the built environment (buildings, townscapes, etc.), natural environment (rural landscapes, coasts and shorelines, agricultural heritage, etc.) and artefacts (books, documents, objects, etc.). Established approaches to the protection of (tangible) cultural heritage include conservation, preservation, restoration and adaptive reuse. Conservation refers to measures which aim at the protection of tangible cultural heritage, including efforts to make it accessible to current and future generations; preservation is the process of protecting cultural heritage from further deterioration; restoration refers to reconstruction works aiming to restore the original condition; and adaptive reuse refers to the adaptation of cultural heritage to contemporary use. Intangible cultural heritage refers to the customs, practices, artistic expressions and values of a community. Measures to protect intangible cultural heritage are directed toward ensuring its viability (e.g., identification, documentation, promotion), transmission (through formal and informal education) and revitalisation. Clearly, tangible and intangible heritage are closely linked to and derived from one another.

Approaches to preservation often differ according to their cultural context. In the West, for instance, the common ‘freeze-frame’ methodology seeks to preserve tangible cultural heritage in maintaining a particular status quo and preventing adaptive reuse by current and future generations. Elsewhere, tangible heritage is often handed to society for adaptation and reuse, so that it becomes part of the everyday and is continuously adjusted and mended to suit current needs.
FACING PAGE: Kashgar, old city
ABOVE: Chongming Island
BELOW: Xintiandi, Shanghai
Reconciling Cultural Preservation and Economic Development

In China, public opinion about the preservation of cultural heritage has changed dramatically over the past decades. Only ten years ago, cultural heritage was assigned such a marginal role that its preservation could easily be compromised if it stood in the way of the ‘natural’ path of development – toward a modern and predominantly urban China. The speed of development, lack of knowledge at all levels of governance and a lack of appropriate skills for the implementation of cultural heritage have led to a number of disasters with local, regional, national and even global consequences. For instance, high density urbanisation and the rise in land value have resulted in the demolition of historic parts of cities and traditional villages in rural areas; heritage sites are in continuous danger of destruction or disrepair because heritage agencies lack the human and financial resources to protect these sites from dilapidation; sometimes, interventions intended to preserve ecological and cultural heritage or even to construct model cities of ecological sustainability fail miserably.

An instance of centrally planned development gone astray can be found in the city of Kashgar (Xinjiang), which features 2,000 years of history preserved in local architecture and customs. Traditionally, imperial China as it existed prior to 1949 was an agricultural country with a large and poor rural population. Over the past sixty years, the Central and local governments have sought to increase financial flows toward minority areas which are concentrated in middle and western China. Highways were extended into the poorer areas in order to facilitate economic development. In Kashgar, cultural heritage is not only at risk from increased annual rainfall and the lack of solid foundations, but also from the Central Government’s
ambitious redevelopment program. In 2010, the city was designated as a Special Economic Zone, similar to Shenzhen and Shanghai. Millions were invested to turn Old Kashgar, once the most important trade centre along the ancient Silk Road, into a new regional hub. Concomitantly, up to 85 per cent of Old Kashgar was slated for demolition, and 50,000 people are said to have already been relocated. Locals claim that a large part of their culture has already been lost forever.

One well-known example of loss of authenticity is the redevelopment of Xintiandi in the centre of Shanghai, where local residents were displaced, the majority of original buildings demolished and only a limited number of original facades preserved, often away from their original location, at the beginning of the new millennium. The majority of buildings in the quarter were newly constructed to resemble traditional Shanghai architecture and local character and house expensive boutiques, restaurants and coffee shops. Xintiandi is now a favourite destination for visitors to Shanghai who are led to believe that they encounter traditional Shanghai architecture and lifestyles. Meanwhile, cities throughout China have commissioned the construction of their own Tiandis (e.g., Xihu Tiandi; Wuhan Tiandi; Lingnan Tiandi; Chongqing Tiandi).

The Great Revival of the Chinese Nation

As can be seen from these instances, the principles and aims of cultural heritage preservation are closely related to the preservation of natural and socioeconomic resources and therefore cannot be regarded as stand-alone areas of intervention. China’s current Leadership acknowledges this condition and deems cultural heritage preservation and the five principles of economic development (globalisation, localisation, diversity, sustainability and responsibility) entirely compatible. Safeguarding China’s cultural heritage has now been made a national priority and a new long-term and nationwide preservation plan is about to be rolled out. The country’s president, Xi Jinping, proclaimed very recently that ‘the great revival of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of all Chinese people’.

One area of particular interest in this context is the tourism industry – a strategic pillar of the national economy. A partnership between China and the World Bank has been instrumental in the development of cultural tourism and stronger links between cultural heritage preservation and local economic development. In creating new jobs, making job training available and contributing to self-sufficiency of the local economy by substituting imported with locally produced goods, cultural heritage preservation can create sustainable and resilient economic opportunities and to appropriate modernisation. The identification and exploitation of local character can help communities to differentiate themselves from others, thus providing them with a competitive advantage. This process of ‘branding’ local communities can generate and amplify opportunities for cultural tourism. However, the state is a major stakeholder in the operation of tourism in China and owns or operates hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops and transport infrastructure. Although privatisation in this area seems to have in common is that they are rooted in a thorough understanding of local specificities. They take into account the characteristics and long-term needs of local residents and how they inhabit their local environment. In order to assure the success of cultural heritage preservation schemes, policy makers should build links with potentially existing non-governmental organisations; involve and utilize the competence of academic experts from a range of disciplinary backgrounds at home and abroad; and favour schemes which build on careful, minimal interventions and gradual change.

Towards an Integrated Approach

Internationally established models of cultural heritage preservation can be out of scale in terms of infrastructure, resources and management when applied in the context of ‘developing’ countries. Issues arise where an international (or internationally educated) heritage management elite is allowed to take decisions based on values which are not necessarily aligned with those of the communities they govern and which, therefore, are not readily accepted and implemented on the ground. Cultural heritage is often lost precisely because of the imposition of ‘modern’ (Western) lifestyles and their association with notions of development. Keeping in touch with local conditions and priorities is therefore imperative.

One instance of culturally sensitive development can be found in the proposal for Lianping Tourist Resort in China’s Guangdong Province, which facilitates the cultural and social transformation from Hakka farming village to high-end tourist resort. Remaining open to the general public (and including the former village population) the heart of the Resort serves to collect and make accessible moments of traditional everyday life. In a remote rural area with tourism as its major economic prospect and with a famous cultural heritage but no remaining original architectural structures, the principal aim of this project was to lend the new resort a sense of specific locality by means of aesthetic transformation, cultural derivation and social participation.

What success stories of cultural heritage preservation in China and elsewhere seem to have in common is that they are rooted in a thorough understanding of local specificities. They take into account the characteristics and long-term needs of local residents and how they inhabit their local environment. In order to assure the success of cultural heritage preservation schemes, policy makers should build links with potentially existing non-governmental organisations; involve and utilize the competence of academic experts from a range of disciplinary backgrounds at home and abroad; and favour schemes which build on careful, minimal interventions and gradual change.