

The conservation of intangible cultural heritage in historic areas

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Abstract: Having developed gradually over time, historic areas embody the values of traditional culture both tangible and intangible. However, the built environment and material culture in historic areas, such as historic buildings, are the absolute center in the protection process in present China, while the conservation of intangible cultural heritage has seldom been carried out consciously. In recent years, with a growing world-wide attention to intangible heritage and the successive publication of *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, *Kimberley Declaration* and *Teemaneng Declaration*, conservation for the intangible heritage of historic areas has become a more and more conscious topic in China gradually. With a case study, this paper illustrates the progress in the conservation of historic areas in China, and how the conservation of tangible heritage can also be enhanced through the conservation of intangible heritage, especially with conserving the spirit of historic areas.

The development of international cultural heritage conservation contributes to the conservation of historic areas. In the early stage, the historic architecture dominated the absolute center. As the protective movement pushed forward and with the development of intangible heritage conservation, the intangible heritage in historic area gradually attracted people's attention

1.The International Conservation Movement

1.1 The protection of historic areas

The Athens Charter, adopted at the first international congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in 1933 has

established the protective foundation of historic areas. But at the end of the Second World War, when the economic recovery and urban rebuilding were ongoing all over the world, many historic buildings were destroyed. In this context, *The Venice Charter*, as the first international charter about protecting the historic buildings adopted by ICOMOS in 1965, emerged as the times required. In this charter, the concept of historic monument was “not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting”. Meanwhile many western countries have legislated their own laws to conserve their historic areas (Wang Jinghui, Ruan Yisan and Wang Lin 1999). In 1976, *The Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas* was adopted by UNESCO in Nairobi. The Recommendation pointed out the universal value of historic areas and defined the concept of historic areas. In 1987 *the Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas*, adopted by ICOMOS in Washington D.C., confirmed the meaning, methods and principles of conservation. By then, the conservation of historic areas has formed its own system. But what to be conserved was just limited to the appearances of historic buildings, the network of the streets and other tangible factors. Although it claimed “qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements”, the concept of intangible heritage was still unclear. Until 2005, when *Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas* was adopted, it definitely pointed out “intangible cultural heritage” “created and form the space as well as the current and dynamic cultural, social and economic context” and we “should take into account the tangible and intangible dimensions of settings when making decision.” The conservation concept evolved because during last twenty years, another kind of heritage conservation, the conservation of intangible heritage, has been developed.

1.2 The protection of intangible heritage

The General Conference of UNESCO, at its thirty-first session, aware of the importance of intangible cultural heritage and the urgency of its protection, adopted *the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. In fact UNESCO has traveled a long road to achieve this. The first document, entitled “*Possibility of Establishing an International Instrument for the Protection of Folklore*”, drafted by UNESCO

aimed at establishing an international instrument related to intangible cultural heritage goes as far back as 1971. In 1989, UNESCO established the first international normative instrument: *the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*. Another important factor contributing to recognition of the significance of intangible heritage was the 1992 United Nations *Convention on Biological Diversity*, which refers to the significance of the respect and preservation of traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous and local communities which have relevance for the conservation and sustained use of biodiversity (Noriko Aikawa 2004). In 1992, a new program named Intangible Cultural Heritage was created in UNESCO and in 1997, the Intangible Cultural Heritage program was given one of the highest priorities in the cultural field and a new project entitled as Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was established which was conceived as a means to fill the gap in the concept of “world heritage” which refers only to natural and tangible cultural heritage. Nineteen and twenty-eight masterpieces were proclaimed respectively in 2001 and 2003. After several sessions of discussion, *the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage* was adopted in 2003. In the Convention the interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural heritage and natural heritage was emphasized. In the ensuing *Kimberley Declaration*, ICOMOS committed to protecting and preserving the intangible elements of heritage. From the *Kimberley Declaration*, the *Teemaneng Declaration* on the Intangible Heritage of Cultural Spaces was developed by the ICOMOS International Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is significant to preserve all forms of heritage on equal terms so as to maintain and promote cultural diversity which is as necessary as biodiversity and is the common heritage of humanity.

Conservation of historic areas and intangible cultural heritage are interacted each other closely. The intangible heritage in historic areas should be paid enough attention to - if not more than, at least equal to tangible heritage. Only when both of the intangible and tangible are conserved well, can the objective of conservation be achieved.

2. The Condition in China

The use of modern concepts and methods of conservation for the preservation of China’s heritage sites began in the 1930s when under

the guidance of professional architects, a number of heritage buildings underwent restoration. The conservation scales began from cultural relics and individual build heritage, then groups of buildings/sites, and gradually developed into historic cities and areas. In 1982, when *the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics* was adopted, the conservation system of cultural relics of China was established. In this Law, the concept of "famous cities of historical and cultural value" was defined. However, intangible heritage and historic areas were not mentioned here. In 1986 when the list of second group of national famous cities of historical and cultural value was announced, the concept of conserving historic areas was brought forward. While the conservation of historic areas didn't become a part of the conservation of historic cultural heritage until the "meeting of Huangshan" was held in 1996 (Ye Rutang 1996). Next year *The Temporary Measure on the Conservation and Management of Tunxi Old Street in Huangshan* was transmitted by Ministry of Construction of China. What was defined in the Measure to be conserved of Tunxi old street was just tangible heritage.

In recent years, China's cultural heritage protection has made progress. With the formation of China ICOMOS and the establishment of links to international professional organizations, *the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* was promulgated in Chinese in late 2000 by China ICOMOS which was undertaken in cooperation with the Getty Conservation Institute and the Australian Heritage Commission. The Principle provides an integrated and methodological approach to the conservation and management of sites. In 2002, *the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics* was revised which defines the historic areas as "small towns, neighborhoods with an unusual wealth of cultural relics of important historical value or high revolutionary memorial significance". In 2003, UNESCO adopted the *International Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, and as a signatory to the Convention, China performed a series of actions. In 2005 General Office of the State Council issued *the Circular on Strengthening the Conservation of National Intangible Heritage* which regulated the principles and guidelines of conservation and attached the temporary method to assess national intangible cultural heritage. At the end of 2005 State Council issued *the Circular on Strengthening the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*

which confirmed that cultural heritage is composed of two parts: tangible heritage and intangible heritage for the first time and set the second Saturday of every June as Chinese Cultural Heritage Day from 2006. In 2006 and 2008 the first and second groups of national intangible cultural heritage lists were published respectively. In 2006, *The Administrative Measures for the Protection of World Cultural Heritages* was promulgated by Ministry of Culture. Last year Chinese government adjusted the arrangement of holiday: canceling the May Day Golden holiday, adding three Chinese traditional holidays- Tomb-sweeping Day, Dragon boat Day and Mid-autumn Day-as public holidays, and the New Year's Eve is included into the holiday of Spring Festival. In order to adapt to the new arrangement, on Jan 30, 2008 General Office of Ministry of Culture issued circular requesting each local office to carry through the *Circular on Taking Advantage of Traditional Festivals to Develop Excellent Traditions of National Culture*.

In 2004 *the Conservation and Management Method on Historic Cultural Areas of Tunxi Old Street in Huangshan* was adopted, replacing *The Temporary Measure on the Conservation and Management of Tunxi Old Street in Huangshan*. In the new edition the conservation of intangible heritage was emphasize and some policies were adopted to support it. Much more attention was given to the conservation of intangible heritage in historic areas.

During last decades, great achievement has been obtained in the conservation of historic areas, for exemple Pingyao old city was inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List in 1997.

However, many problems still exist. The most obvious one arises from the development of tourism in historic areas. Different kinds of hotels, restaurants, shops emerged



Figure1. The appearance of Pingyao Old City



Figure2. The street of Pingyao old city

mostly by using historic buildings, and original inhabitants moved out. As a result the intangible cultural heritage was neglected or even disappeared. In this way, historic areas are much more like stages, what to be conserved was just limited to the appearance but not the soul. The imbalance in fact reflects the weakness in our system, which, being exclusively concerned with protecting the tangible heritage overlooks the intangible heritage and thus leaves out a great many cultural features that are essentially fundamental. There is no national specific law on the conservation of historic areas, but fortunately some local governments have issued their own guidelines on conservation such as Jiangsu province which has adopted *the Guideline of Constituting the Protective Planning for Historic Areas in Jiangsu Province* this year. In this guideline, the demand to conserve the intangible heritage in historic areas is definitely pointed out.

3. The Conservation of Intangible Heritage in Historic Areas

3.1 Intangible heritage in historic areas

Intangible culture is to historic areas what the soul is to human being. The determinant character of a historic area can assert itself only its intangible value. The spirit constructs a sense of historic area while at the same time, historic area nourishes the spirit. This paper brings forward that the intangible cultural heritage of historic areas consists of three aspects: firstly, the whole pattern of the area which is what makes the area to be itself; secondly, the life of inhabitants, which makes the area living; thirdly, traditional handicrafts, folklore, drama and the like, which derived from the historic area. “The distinction between physical heritage and intangible heritage is now seen as artificial, physical heritage only attains its true significance when it sheds light on its underlying valued conversely, intangible heritage must be made incarnate in tangible manifestation, in visible signs, if it is to be conserved”(Jean-Louis LUXEN 2003).

3.2 The principle of conservation

Principles direct performance of conservation. Some principles for tangible heritage such as: authenticity and integrality are also suitable for intangible heritage. According to the character of the intangible and historic area, some special principles should be mentioned. First is human-oriented principle. A historic area is a historic area only if it is inhabited, if its inhabitants are an organic, permanent part of it.

Take Japan for example, the direction of conserving Imai in Nara was to conserve the traditional life style in Japanese towns. Thus in the restoration, they often “repair the old buildings like the new one” and their methods are flexible (Wang Lin and Wang Jun1998) .Second is the dynamic conservation principle. Some research has been done in this principles, but mainly concentrates on tangible aspect such as the renovation of the establishment and equipment.(Zheng Lijun2004). The leading character of the intangible heritage is living, so the method of protection should be dynamic. Only keeping pace with the changing world constantly can the intangible have a long life.

3.3 A case study

Here Dongguan historic area of Yangzhou in Jiangsu province would be taken as a case study.

The history of Dongguan street can date back to Tang Dynasty. At that time, Yang zhou was the economic center of China, while Dongguan street was the economic center of Yang zhou. The Grand Canal passed through here and the wharf for disembarking was just located at the beginning of the street. Until the end of Qing Dynasty, it had always been flourishing except for being deserted for a short period. Such long history makes Dongguan street embody so many cultural heritages. The



Figure3. The overlook of Dongguan historic area



Figure4. Dongguan street

material features are not in fact our main concern on this occasion, but rather the intangible characteristics of the historic area.

The determinant character of a historic area can assert itself is its intangible value which is the spirit of it. Any tangible culture must be supported by intangible value and any intangible culture must rely on the tangible to be visualized. Jienan Study is a case in point. In history, Jienan Study was famous for its academia and attracted many literators gathering there. The owners of the study were two brothers named Ma Yuelu and Ma Yueguan who were the salt businessmen during Qing Dynasty. At that time, the street was enveloped by dense cultural atmosphere and its unique character was formed. However, the Study only left a corner currently. In order to last the character of the area and conserve the intangible heritage it is necessary to rebuild a cultural center there. According to the records and archeological excavation the form of the new buildings can be decided. These new buildings should also be the cultural centre of the area. As time passes, Dongguan street may become the cultural center again. In virtue of the intangible heritage, the historic area will be full of energy. While on the other hand, when intangible cultural heritage is carefully conserved, accordingly the tangible culture is conserved.

Secondly a historic area is a historic area only if it is inhabited. As mentioned above, without inhabitants there, the historic area is nothing but a museum or a stage. Historic area is gradually formed because of inhabitant's life. So only keeping and improving the living of the habitants there can the historic areas be conserved effectively. We once did a mass observation about the will of the inhabitants to move out. The result showed that 68% of the participants would like to live in this area, 67% of the participants were satisfied with current living condition and only 24% inhabitants would like to move out. According the data provided by Dongguan police station, there are 20,354 residents in the historic area, while the area for living is 39 ha. Thus the density of living population is a little high. In order to improve the living condition and keep the development of the area sustainable, it is necessary to move some inhabitants to other places. The life of inhabitants in the historic area is to keep the historic area alive, while the moving of some inhabitants is for the people live in it living better.

Thirdly, the intangible culture constructs a sense of historic area while at the same time historic area nourishes the intangible

culture. The intangible culture is living in specific groups and specific places, thus we should put them into the specific place where they derived from to conserve them. So, historic areas are the most suitable place to conserve the intangible.

Dongguan street was famous for its commerce, and in its history appeared many old famous brands. Among them, there're two old famous brands still exist today: Sanhe and Simei pickles factory and Xie Fuchun cosmetic powder factory, both of whom were set up in Qing Dynasty. A specific place could be designed to show the traditional techniques of the pickles factory. As for Xie fuchun, who was one of the earliest cosmetic brands in China, it contributed much to the beauty of Yangzhou women. There appeared many famous female, such as Panchang Yuliang, Guo Jianren. Thus, the conservation of the power factory should be related to female culture. So we design a specific place to show the history of the powder and sell them. We hope the female culture there will continue. As for the disappeared old famous brands, we chose some that still have inheritors to reestablish.

Besides these old famous brands, the street still has much traditional folk. One character of the intangible heritage is living, so protection method should be dynamic. Intangible cultural heritage is frail and intangible, so transferring is the only way to conserve them. Our ancestors created so much splendid culture and last till today what depended on is descending one generation by one generation. In other words transferring itself is protection. While through the transferring process, amendment and innovation were allowed.

Above all, the intangible heritage places a very important role in the historic areas. Intangible culture is to historic areas what the soul is to human being. We must conserve and promote the intangible heritage and explore better methods to conserve them efficiently.

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