

THE WEST LAKE OF HANGZHOU
A National Cultural Icon of China and the Spirit of Place

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ABSTRACT. The ancient city Hangzhou with the essence of the West Lake is known as “the Heaven on Earth”. Today successfully inherited its grand historic fame and respect, the West Lake is a national cultural icon and a representative of living cultural landscape of true life underpinned by Chinese philosophy and aesthetics on the relationship between human beings and nature. This paper illustrates the procedure of the West Lake from a natural lagoon to a symbolic landscape and examines the physical and spiritual interaction between the society and the lake. This paper argues that the spirit of the West Lake is socially and culturally constructed through history. The lessons and debates of inheriting and re-thinking the spirit of the West Lake as evolving and continuing landscape is also a focus of this paper.

1. Introduction

West Lake _____, the essence of the ancient city Hangzhou _____ with a history of 2,100 years, is known as “the Heaven on Earth” by the Chinese for a thousand years because of its sophisticated culture, exquisite beauty of landscape, romantic and enjoyable life. This heaven is also known to many foreigners through *The Travels of Marco Polo* where Hangzhou was described as City of Quinsai or Quinsay, the most enchanting city in the world. Through two thousand years the Chinese have been devoting enormous energy and emotion to continually constructing this cultural landscape from structure to forms until every detail is extremely fine and is in perfect harmony for an ideal life with nature. As a national cultural icon through history, the lake and its surroundings carry the Chinese subtle, romantic, and elegant ideas of nature. It is the most distinguished living cultural landscape in China which

perfectly represents the Chinese philosophies of “oneness with nature”. Cultural identities and the sense of the place have been successfully enhanced by passing on its traditional spirit through history to the point where the West Lake has become an exemplary living cultural landscape in China.

The evolving history of the West Lake from a natural seashore bay to a lagoon then to a symbolic landscape presents a unique spiritual and physical interaction between Chinese society and the lake. This process demonstrates that the West Lake is a representative cultural landscape which is socially and culturally constructed through history. Also the history of identifying the heritage values of the West Lake and its conservation regarding its submission to the World Heritage Tentative List manifests the significant contribution of World Heritage Cultural Landscapes and its holistic methodology of conservation. However, the evolving nature of the West Lake cultural landscape also challenges the frontier of the conservation of cultural landscapes, such as the management and evaluation of authenticity and integrity. The lessons and experiences from the conservation of the West Lake are inspiring for how to keep the spirit of heritage site.

2. Physical function of the West Lake as water source for the City Hangzhou

Today’s West Lake covers 59.04 square kilometers, of which, the area of the water body is 6.5 square kilometers. It was originally a shallow sea inlet near Quantang River _____ at the mouth of Hangzhou Bay (___) and the east was connected with the sea in the middle of China’s eastern coastal line. Normally as a lagoon_siltation is an inevitable process and will eventually form cultivated land. However, unlike the other lagoons in China, the West Lake has always been a lake of green water ever since its formation into a lake because the process of siltation has been artificially constrained. Although human settlements in this area can be traced back to four thousand years ago, the first human interference with this water body occurred 2000 years ago when a seawall was built in Guang Wu Period of the Eastern Han Dynasty (_____6-57 BCE) which made this lake a fresh water supply for the growing County Qiantang (___), the later City of Hangzhou. In Sui Dynasty (___581-618 CE), located in the fertile south of the Yangzi River (__) and at the end of the Grand Canal (___) connecting the central capital cities, Hangzhou was growing rapidly into a commercial city near the coast. At the end of Xian Chun Period of Southern Song Dynasty (_____1265-1274

CE, a bit earlier than Marco Polo's travel), the population of Hangzhou had reached more than one million as a prosperous capital city. Located in the west of the city, the West Lake had been the only fresh water source for the city so that the work of dredging the overgrown weeds and piling up the mud from the lake had been continuing dynasty after dynasty. Meanwhile, numerous constructions had been done during that time to supply water to the city for domestic use and also for irrigation the surrounding farmland. This was the initial imperative of the society and therefore a response to the environmental conditions of the time, determining the original layout of the landscape. Thus, a lake and a city became interwoven over 2000 years.

3. From natural towards cultural: underpinned by Chinese philosophies

Without manpower the West Lake would have become farmlands as in many other places in China. However, with only manpower and without Chinese culture, the West Lake would be no more than a reservoir. The West Lake became the present cultural landscape because of its enchanting encounters with these most famous ancient Chinese scholars, which are recognized as the most romantic encounters between the Chinese culture and nature.

3.1. PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHINESE LANDSCAPES

However, these encounters were not coincidences. They were predestined because they were deeply underpinned by the Chinese philosophical views of nature which were the origin of Chinese landscape cultures. Centered on the relationship between nature and humans, humanity and “oneness with nature” is the essential spirit of traditional Chinese philosophies (Zhang 1986; Wang 1990; Xu 1996). The discovery of the values of the West Lake was strongly driven by this spirit of philosophies.

In Chinese traditional philosophies, Confucianism (____) and Daoism (____) are two most important schools. Orthodox Confucianism supplemented by Daoism, is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Chinese culture. While Confucianism took responsibility for politics and ethics for the country, because of its social involvement, positive and morally cultivated attitudes, Daoism prevailed due to its negative outlook on human society and its romantic retreat in nature. Importantly, the humanistic pursuit to be “harmonious with nature” and to be “oneness with nature” is

their common principle.

From perspective of the Confucianism, “The wise man delights in water, the good man delights in mountains” (_____) (The Analects, Book Six, 21). Represented by water and mountains, nature was greatly valued for their humanized moral qualities. Humans, earth and heaven are oneness. Daoism, from thorough scepticism of human, it chooses an escape from the society and a return to nature. Associated with the recluse, retirement to the mountain, the worship of rural life, the pursuit of spiritual freedom and the romantic personality, and the banishment of all worldly cares and worries, we derive the most characteristic charm of Chinese culture, the rural ideal of life, art and literature. Nature was an independent aesthetic object for Daoism. Importantly, what Daoism escapes is the human society, not the life itself. Both of them are philosophies about life; believe the earth is the only heaven.

However, no one could truly escape from the society. The Chinese applied Doctrine of the Golden Mean (____) (half and half, moderate) of Confucianism to harmoniously reconcile this conflict. We are all born half Confucianist and half Daoist. Confucianism is the working mood of the Chinese, as Daoism is their playing mood. Confucianism is urban and Daoism is rural. “Every Chinese is Confucianists when successful and Daoists when they are failures. The romantic spirit of Daoism relieves the pain of practical society. “It provides a safe retreat for the Chinese human heart and the balm to their wounded soul” (Lin 2002, 55). “When a Chinese scholar is in office he moralises, and when he is out of office he versifies, and usually it is good Daoistic poetry”. This was the standard for a perfect Chinese scholar.

Here we see, from these fountain springs of thought, harmonizing them into a whole, and using the abstract outlines of their wisdom, the art of living in the flesh, visible, palpable and understandable world by the common man had been created. It is the philosophy of the Chinese art of living, “a wise disenchantment and a hearty enjoyment of life, the most constant, most characteristic and most persistent refrain of Chinese thought” (p15). The highest ideal of the Chinese then is to create a worldly paradise for artistic and human life, enjoyment, being with nature forever. They were looking for a place which carried all the expectations of moral, aesthetic, in and out the worldly society, between Confucianism and Daoism. The West Lake became such a place of the heaven on the earth.

3.2. ENCHANTING ENCOUNTERS OF THE CHINESE CULTURE AND THE WEST LAKE

Traditional Chinese culture was represented and centered by the unique social class of the scholar. This class created splendid traditional Chinese cultural artifacts including Chinese landscapes. Generally, official positions could only be achieved through selection and examination according to personal qualities and knowledge instead of family blood. These opportunities were offered to every scholar. It was this class that communicated to the upper class and the lower class and moved between success and failure. This class represented the oneness of Confucianism and Daoism. Two of the representatives of this class, Bai Juyi (白居易) and Sushi (苏轼) happened to be the governors of Hangzhou in two great dynasties: Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) and Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE).

In Chinese landscape cultures, landscape poems emerged first, landscape paintings followed and then landscape gardens. The celebrated poet Bai Juyi came to be the governor of Hangzhou in middle of the Tang Dynasty (822 CE) when landscape poems reached their great importance. At that time, composing poems was a must-do for every scholar and there was no poem without landscape description. Nature was sensed subjectively and aesthetically. Emotions were expressed freely and skillfully in landscape poems that they were in perfect harmony with scenery. In his twenty-month stay in Hangzhou, his deeds were not only his contribution to manage the water to serve his people and country but also his aesthetic discoveries and constructions of the West Lake. The artistic construction of a dyke with a dam to control the flow of water had eventually turned the West Lake from a natural to an artificial lake and from an irrigation lake to a spiritual aesthetic lake (Chen 2007). A causeway constructed to connect isolated landscapes was later named Bai Di (白堤) in his honor. Peach trees and willows trees symbolizing spring and charm were planted along the causeway, making it a beautiful landmark of the West Lake. As an accomplished poet, he left more than two hundreds landscape poems of the West Lake which were influentially spread and popularly recited in ancient China. Bai Juyi laid the aesthetic and literary foundation for the West Lake and was recognized as the first one who discovered the beauty of the West Lake.

Two hundred years later, the West Lake encountered another soul mate Su Shi (苏轼), a versatile genius of a writer, poet, painter, calligrapher, pharmacologist, and statesman. Song Dynasty was a period of great maturity for Chinese culture and art, especially for landscape painting and calligraphy (Wang 1990). Nature could be painted with high proficiency

from any point of view and from any time, in its entirety or in detail. Paintings could express all emotions of poems maturely. Gardens, as subjectively ideal staged nature, were rapidly prevailing. It was the initial time for landscape poems, paintings and gardens to be integrated into one, to make something with the material landscape that was between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, ‘heaven and earth’. Symbolic and metaphorical meanings of traditional Chinese philosophies and cultures were attached to the material landscapes.

With this blueprint in his heart and as an artist of living, Su Shi had endless enthusiasm to explore the poetic charm and shape the beauty of the West Lake. While managing the water, he composed nearly 500 poems to enchant the West Lake during his five-year in Hangzhou (he had been officer of Hangzhou for twice), constructed the most artistic causeway across the West Lake to explore the lake in depth which still bears his name: Su Di (苏堤); and created the most poetic scenery in the lake to reflect the moon. In his most famous poem he likened West Lake to Xi Zi (西子), the most beautiful woman in ancient China, for its allure. After that, Xi Zi Lake became the favorite name of the lake by the Chinese. The symbolic meaning of humanized softness, female beauty and elegance had been attached to the West Lake.

The fame of the West Lake had been spread widely and can be accredited to these two influential scholars. Since then, numerous West Lakes in Chinese emerged, but the best was always the one in Hangzhou. West Lake became an allure for all scholars, including the emperors. In the Southern Song Dynasty, Hangzhou was selected as a capital city from 1138-1276 CE. This pushed Hangzhou towards becoming a cultural, commercial and political center. Numerous scholars were gathering here and left more than 20,000 poems recorded. Mature culture, luxury elegant life, artistic beauty, and ideal life with nature, had made Hangzhou the most enchanting city in the world, as Marco Polo later wrote. A heaven on the earth was born.

4. A Product of Culture and a National Cultural Icon: the Spirit of the West Lake

Cultivated by the Chinese culture for more than one thousand years, the West Lake has become a classical master piece and a national cultural icon. It presents the Chinese philosophy of the art of living, “in art, aim at being exquisite, and in life at being reasonable.” () It has achieved the most

romantic and aesthetic objective of the Chinese: to create a worldly heaven for their life, for harmony, enjoyment, being with nature forever.

The West Lake was an open garden where emperors, scholars, citizens, officials, the successful, the failures and the religious, were gathering. It had fundamental characteristics of high culture but its language was shared by all Chinese. It was a collective work by multiple social groups. It was this tolerance and openness of the West Lake that created such unlimited values in poetry, novels, paintings, legends, operas, gardens and architecture that influenced the whole country. While local people were celebrating worldly weddings, the Buddhist temples were hidden in quiet rolling mountains. When Su Shi was serving his country and people were enjoying the natural beauty, the failures came here to rest in the soft beauty to heal their wounded hearts. The most important characteristic of the West Lake was that every school of thinking found its own space here and made it a place of its own while sharing the poetic beauty of the West Lake without escaping human life. It was such a mixed place that all people encountered each other but lived in a most harmonious way. It was a homeland and a paradise for everyone in the real world. Worldly social life and retreat in nature could be artistically and enjoyably interchanged when the City of Hangzhou had the West Lake.

Essentially, the West Lake is a human-made landscape which has influential aesthetic achievement in Chinese landscape gardens. Hills embrace the lake on three sides; the city proper lies to the east. The West Lake appears natural with cultural construction harmoniously decorated around it. However, this intoxicating 'natural' landscape is not natural; rather, it is culturally constructed according to the Chinese philosophical and landscape aesthetic principles. The islands in the lake are composed according to the Chinese traditional model for the landscape — “one lake, three islands” (一湖三岛). The essential elements of Chinese landscape: mountain and water are sophisticatedly organized and orientated. The water body is not large but seems endless by dividing it into connected spaces. Mountains are not strikingly high but modest, rolling and waving. These principles reflect the Chinese moderate philosophical attitude and the wise use of open space, which later became the model principles of Chinese gardens. Also, the vegetations around the lake in the mountains were carefully selected for their aesthetic and moral personality and were almost all re-planted through history. The humanity spirit infiltrates every corner of the mountains and waters and all natural elements have been symbolically humanized through historical construction.

The spirit of the West Lake can be characterized as romantic, elegant,

exquisite and enjoyable. Walking along the West Lake, the sophisticated culture is everywhere. The West Lake is a proud heritage of all Chinese, especially for those people living in this heaven. The spirit of tradition of loving nature and life has been deeply understood by the locals and spirit of the heritage has been perfectly inherited. Today, although Hangzhou is one of the most developed cities in China, it refuses to hurry pace of life. The locals consciously slow down their daily rhythm and enjoy their leisure life along the lake just like ancestors. They deeply understand that ‘culture is essentially a product of leisure’.

The heritage spirit is amazingly maintained and inherited in the West Lake. The story of this heaven is continuing and is almost known by all Chinese. In the ancient, it was a heaven that “one dreamed for thousands of time” and where “one should travel to and be getting old”. Today travelling to the West Lake in Hangzhou is still something that one must do in his life as a Chinese person. To sense the West Lake is to sense the quintessence of Chinese culture.

5. The conservation and sustainable development of the West Lake: Contributions to World Heritage Cultural Landscapes

After being silent for ten years in 1990s, recently the West Lake has become a new star of sustainable heritage conservation in China. However, it has experienced a very painful period in conservation. It encountered two most difficult issues in conservation. One was the methodology and another one was the attitude to history.

During the conservation history of the West Lake, it was firstly listed under the protection of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 1982. It was always in the consideration of nomination to World Heritage. But interestingly, it was hard for the government to decide in which category it should be nominated. In the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list, we could find the West Lake was firstly submitted as a natural heritage site in 1996. Obviously, this category was inappropriate for the West Lake and misled the conservation of the West Lake. Further, the West Lake was considered as a static heritage of the past instead of a dynamic evolving landscape. Natural settings, historic cultural relics were separately preserved from human beings and become the opposite of people. Local were removed from the site. Landscapes became discrete and contested each other. Social conflicts occurred. The most difficult thing of heritage conservation was ‘fighting with people’. In the 1990s, while the other cities in China were experiencing great changes in development, Hangzhou and the West Lake

were very quiet and stagnated.

It was not until 2001 that it was proposed that the values of West Lake should be considered as a cultural landscape (Chen 2007). In 2008 it was formally submitted and changed as a cultural heritage in the tentative list. Since then cultural landscape provided a holistic conservation methodology for the West Lake. As a cultural landscape, the interactions of nature and culture become one. Today local people are embraced in the West Lake and become powerful partners of conservation. The government provides master planning to guide the development and conservation for this area. The landscapes once again begin to evolve with vibrancy. This was a milestone for the conservation of the West Lake.

The spirit of the site links today and yesterday and is guiding the path of tomorrow. With intensive understanding of nature as the Chinese spiritual homeland, the Lake has come to the public in a non-commercial way. It provides maximum opportunity for the public to access the lake and its surroundings. Constructions are being continued and new scenic spots are being added. But the golden principles of harmonious relationship between nature and human beings have been applied in new construction work. The characteristics and the sense of the place are being intensively enhanced. Even the new constructed Western 'Starbucks Coffee' is poetically located in beautiful tree shadows and shows of special elegance. The West Lake is attaching heritage Chinese cultural spirit to contemporary life and creating future heritage.

The successful conservation of the West Lake as a living cultural landscape has greatly demonstrated the importance of the holistic conservation methodology of cultural landscapes provided by World Heritage. Its excellent achievement of sustainable conservation is also a great example of heritage community-based management and a great contribution to the World Heritage.

6. Conclusion

The symbolic meaning of the West Lake can only be decoded through historic contexts of Chinese philosophies and culture. The evolving procedure of the West Lake from a lagoon to China's national cultural icon presents the physical and spiritual interaction between the Chinese society and the lake. The spirit of the West Lake is socially and culturally constructed through history and to identify and safeguard this spirit is the essential task of heritage conservation. World Heritage Cultural Landscapes provide a new methodology for heritage conservation according to its

holistic and dynamic perspective, an integration of nature and culture, and an interaction between tangible and intangible features. The West Lake is exemplary case of living cultural landscape conservation.

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