

## CHINA

### Heritage in the Aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake



The earthquake that struck Sichuan Province on May 12, 2008 was by far the most destructive seismic event in China since the Tangshan earthquake in 1976. The province of Sichuan is one of the most agriculturally rich areas in western China and has been historically known as the “Land of Abundance”. The epicentre of the earthquake was in Wenchuan, a mountainous area. Around 603,000 people lived in the region most violently affected by the earthquake and where the shaking was estimated as Modified Mercalli Intensity of X: Disastrous, meaning that most masonry and frame structures were destroyed with their foundations. The magnitude of the earthquake was measured between 7.9 and 8.3. The earthquake was felt as far away as in Beijing (some 1,500 kilometres away) and in Shanghai (1,700 kilometres away), as well as in nearby countries. In July 2008, about 70,000 people were confirmed dead and more than 370,000 injured. The earthquake also left about 4.8 million people homeless. The complex topography of the region added to the difficulties of rescue and still presents considerable challenges to the reconstruction effort.

In the months after the earthquake numerous international cultural organisations joined the heritage workers of the Chinese gov-

ernment in surveying the damage to cultural property and in developing plans for recovery and reconstruction.

#### *Interview with Guo Zhan in News in Conservation 2008*

Shortly after the earthquake IIC’s *News in Conservation* asked Guo Zhan, vice president of ICOMOS and of ICOMOS/China, about the efforts to recover from such a disaster and how the earthquake affected the cultural heritage of the region and China as a whole.

**Guo Zhan:** *Since the earthquake in Wenchuan, Sichuan and related areas, all levels of Chinese authorities for the administration of cultural heritage have been working against the clock, enacting a full range of relief activities. The destructive power of the earthquake has gone far beyond Sichuan Province to Gansu, Shaanxi, Chongqing, Yunnan and even farther. By early June the State Administration of Cultural Heritage had received reports on damage of cultural relics from seven municipalities: Sichuan, Gansu, Shaanxi, Chongqing, Yunnan, Shanxi and Hubei. According to the reports, 169 state priority protected sites (two inscribed on the World Heritage List) and 250 province protected historic sites have suffered damage. A total of 2,766 collected cultural relics have been damaged, of which 292 are precious ones. In the cultural relic administration sector, one worker lost his life and many have relatives who were killed.*

*It has been estimated that it will take up to five years for the objectives of post-quake cultural relic rescue and repair to be achieved and that this effort will cost nearly 6 billion yuan.*

*Cultural heritage administrators and experts, mostly ICOMOS members, have been highly influential in the efforts all over the quake-stricken areas. Living in tents under extremely challenging conditions, all of them have committed themselves to the rigors of relief work. And in a very short time, they have managed to make remarkable achievements, which include the completion of preliminary plans for major initiatives. For instance, the Dujiangyan Dam has been listed in the bill for provisional legislation and on June 30, a key repair project was launched for the Erwang Temple (the building in memory of Li Bing and his son who supervised the construction of Dujiangyan Dam). Of course, this is not a “repair” project in the true sense, but a project involving inspection, cleaning and clearing, surveying and mapping as well as damage evaluation at the quake-stricken site. Direct repair work will be carried out when the project plan has been approved by China’s legal and professional inspectors and reported to the World Heritage Committee for coordination. The rescue and repair project for “Tibetan and Qiang Diaolou and Villages”, a tentative property to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, had its opening ceremony on July 15, 2008. The nature, content, and procedures to be followed for this project are basically the same as those of Dujiangyan Dam, only with more concern for relevant intangible cultural heritage, since the rescue and preservation of the rare and now vulnerable Qiang and Jiarong Tibetan cultures are a necessary focus.*

*While Chinese colleagues have tried their best, it will take at least 3–5 years after this earthquake to rescue, stabilise and repair the objects of cultural heritage so dramatically affected. The large number of damaged sites, their remote locations, and the difficulty of transportation to these areas due to complicated terrain all challenge the efforts of those struggling to address the effects of the earthquake. The international community’s moral, financial and technical support are badly needed and welcomed. Even though many conservation organisations have been called in, the resourc-*

es at hand are still not enough. One must remember that millions of people in the quake-stricken areas are yet to have some semblance of their normal everyday lives restored. Despite the great need for paying attention to cultural properties it remains a priority to meet the daily needs of the people and prepare them for and protect them from secondary disasters. It is not hard to imagine the difficulties and hardships that will confront them in the coming years.

Although the Chinese Government has not submitted to the 32nd session of the World Heritage Committee an emergency nomination of “Tibetan and Qiang Diaolou Villages” (suggested by ICOMOS/China) for the World Heritage in Danger List, this temporary postponement does not mean an abandonment, but rather that more time is needed to fine-tune the nomination. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) is greatly impressed by the constant feedback from international colleagues and the plan is to formally submit the emergency nomination of “Tibetan and Qiang Diaolou and Villages” to the 33rd session of the World Heritage Committee. ICOMOS China will continue to promote and support this highly influential project, which serves as a typical case of implementation of the World Heritage Convention. The significance of the project includes the extensive and far-reaching influence and value of lessons to be learned during its implementation.

On July 25, 2008 the United Nations launched a 33.5-million US-dollar appeal for early recovery support to assist victims of the quake-stricken areas in and around Wenchuan, China. Following the 17 million US dollars of urgent relief assistance, this sum will mainly be spent on early recovery tasks in the next six months and focus on livelihood, shelter, water, sanitation, health, education, protection of vulnerable groups, environment, and ethnic minorities. While such initiatives are important and clearly needed, it is obvious that the urgent need for rescue conservation of Tibetan and Qiang Diaolou Villages and other aspects of cultural heritage have not been included. This highlights the necessity and urgency for launching joint international actions in the framework of UNESCO and its World Heritage Convention.

Perhaps unique to this disaster and a potentially challenging decision for the preservation community is the recent decision by the Chinese government to select and permanently conserve several devastated towns and settlements as quake sites, as products of interaction between humankind and nature under extremely special circumstances. Some colleagues have proposed that these sites be nominated for the status of World Heritage sites. Such an action calls for in-depth exploration and a relatively unified understanding within the international community as to the definition of the values, nature and genre of these sites as well as to their meaning, the emotional responses they elicit. Challenges will include how to convey and retain authenticity and integrity, as well as how to conserve and manage those values into the future.

Such ideas have been reflected in recent proposals such as the Regulations on Post-quake Reconstruction, which the State Council has drafted and will bring into effect in the near future. On May 22, 2008 at a meeting in Beichuan County, Mr. Wen Jiabao, Prime Minister of the State Council of China, said:

“I suggest that the ruins of this county be conserved and transformed into a museum of the earthquake. Beichuan is the only autonomous county of Qiang nationality in China. The unique cultural heritages of the Qiang people should be properly conserved, even after the county proper is relocated.”

**NiC:** How are collections being protected that were housed in buildings now made unsafe by the earthquake? Have they been moved to temporary quarters or other museums or sites?



Taoping, Sichuan, one of the ancient Qiang Diaolou villages affected by the earthquake of 2008

Yes. Some collections of county-level (e.g. Beichuan County) museums are completely buried under the ruins. Some museums (e.g. that in Mianyang City) are in danger of secondary disasters (e.g. potential flood from barrier lakes). Rescued movable cultural rel-

ics and those under the threat of secondary disasters have been urgently transferred to safe places.

**NiC:** How have the plans developed for the reconstruction and repair of heritage sites? What overarching guidelines will be followed?

*Priority should be given to accurate inspection, investigation, registration, evaluation and analysis on their present status, followed by precedence and deadline of plans determined by urgency and value. All repair or restoration plans must be based on adequate historical basis (evidence), must focus on their authenticity, integrity, disaster-proof functions and sustainability, and comply with relevant Chinese laws, procedures and international conventions.*

**NiC:** Have volunteers been an important part of the recovery and protection of cultural property after the earthquake?

*SACH has organised professional groups from many provinces to undertake key rescuing projects in different regions. Martine "Frederique" Darragon, a friend from France, has been working on Diaolou of Tibetan and Qiang nationalities for many years and now is working in earthquake-stricken areas. However, policy and professional knowledge play a significant role in such work, and strict scientific rules and legal procedures are required, which make it impossible for volunteers to carry out completely independent protection measures. Instead, volunteers are mainly found in coordinative activities, such as services for everyday living and rescue.*

**NiC:** As recovery goes on, have plans for the protection of cultural heritage sites and collections against future earthquakes been discussed?

*Some rescue and restoration plans (e.g. for Erwang Temple in Dujiangyan) have been drafted and are being discussed. We are also further discussing the plan to transfer valuable cultural relics from cultural relics administrative offices or museums at lower levels and in poorer protection conditions to the central museums with more adequate safety conditions for centralised preservation.*

**NiC:** What have been the most valuable asset and resource during the rescue and recovery period?

*It has become evident that what is urgently needed are dedicated professionals in good health, followed by local trainings and effective organisation. In terms of material, apart from funds we need vehicles to be used in the field, everyday appliances, equipment and instruments for investigation, design, and scientific research. This has been provided.*

**NiC:** During this period of recovery what would you say is the most vulnerable aspect of cultural heritage in the affected regions? What is at greatest risk of loss and why?

*The most important aspects in the earthquake-stricken areas are disaster prevention at Dujiangyan, the World Heritage site and restoration of its auxiliary buildings, as well as saving the Qiang culture. The former concerns the integrity of the World Heritage site and recovery of social life in its populated areas, while the latter concerns the rescue of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Qiang, one of the oldest nationalities in the world with a population of only 300,000. We have many Qiang villages, and Diaolou as well as the uniquely charming landscapes created by them in nature are waiting for urgent reinforcement and restoration. The earthquake sadly took away one tenth of Qiang's population, which unfortunately included many who looked after the intangible cultural heritage.*

## Kashgar, Heritage at Risk

The historic city of Kashgar in the far northwestern province of Xinjiang is located within the Tarim Basin at the edge of the formidable environment of the Taklamakan Desert. The earliest historic reference to the city dates back some 2000 years to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), during which period Kashgar was established as a thriving economic and cultural center along the northern route of the Silk Road, the famed conduit of exchange extending from Xi'an to Rome. Throughout its history, Kashgar served as a crossroads through which passed Buddhist populations, conquering Muslims, and notable figures from Genghis Khan and Marco Polo to Timur, as well as the numerous Chinese dynasties that repeatedly conquered and lost the city.

The Old City of Kashgar has been called one of the best preserved traditional Islamic and earthen urban settlements in all of Asia. Particularly significant is its status as a living city, inhabited principally by ethnic Uighurs, a Muslim Turkic-speaking people who represent the majority of Kashgar and of the entire Xinjiang Province. Despite the substantial amount of extant historic fabric and ongoing traditions within the urban settlement of the Old City, recent efforts by local Chinese authorities to modernize the settlement and address concerns for seismic vulnerability and risk preparedness access have resulted in large-scale loss. With only a fraction of the Old City still intact and threatened by further destruction, the entire historic core of this unique earthen settlement is at risk of forever being lost. Plans to designate Kashgar and the surrounding area a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) will further result in massive inflow of investment, infrastructural development, increased visitation, and unforeseen pressures on the historic fabric of the city.

In response to the destruction and eager to raise awareness and provide alternative approaches to Chinese local authorities, the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Earthen Architectural Heritage drafted the following open letter in June 2009:

*Open Letter to the Government of the People's Republic of China*

*From: ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Earthen Architectural Heritage (ISCEAH)*

*Recognizing the commitment of the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the protection and preservation of its diverse and unique cultural heritage, the members of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Earthen Architectural Heritage (ISCEAH) are surprised and concerned by news related to the ongoing demolition and planned reconstruction of the historic center, often called the Old Town of Kashgar, Xinjiang Province, PRC. We understand that the main reasons for the proposed redevelopment of the Old Town are*

- Reduction in seismic vulnerability;
- Improvement of living conditions.

*We applaud both of these vital aims, and understand that a number of important buildings within the Old Town are to be retained. We feel that the best solution may not be the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of large parts of the Old Town, and that such rebuilding would effectively destroy the intangible heritage of the area.*

*The historic city of Kashgar represents an important point along the historic Silk Route and holds unquestionable universal value as:*

- An interesting example of Islamic town planning: the Old City surrounds and fans out from the historic Id Kah Mosque. The mosque was built around 1442, but established as early as the 10th century, and is the largest mosque in all of China. It is intrinsically tied to the cultural, religious, and ethnic identity of the Uighur community in Kashgar and serves as the physical and religious hub of the Old City;
  - An extensive living urban settlement and architectural landscape that reflects the cultural expression, social interactions, and technical innovation of the local minority Uighur community;
  - One of the largest groupings of historic mudbrick vernacular architecture in Central and East Asia, and probably the world;
  - An important point of cultural, social, economic, and commercial exchange along the Silk Road for centuries.
- For these reasons, the members of ISCEAH strongly feel that every effort should be made by local, provincial, and national authorities to preserve this urban center composed largely of mudbrick architecture.

We appreciate the very real concerns of seismic vulnerability, and applaud the motivation to avoid widespread damage and loss of life. ISCEAH is an international professional body dedicated to the preservation of earthen architecture, and is able to provide the most up to date and highest quality methods for seismic analysis and retrofitting of earthen structures. Such work will allow the historic center of Kashgar to better withstand earthquakes, minimize damage, and prevent loss of life, preserving the architecture of Kashgar's historic center and making it safe for residents and visitors alike.

ISCEAH further recognizes the need for improved living conditions for the residents of Kashgar. We feel that it is possible both to preserve the heritage and improve living conditions without resorting to complete rebuilding. An example of an earthen settlement

where this has been successfully implemented is the city of Shibam, Yemen, a World Heritage Site where efforts to provide economic opportunities for the inhabitants were integrated with architectural upgrades and conservation efforts.

We, the members of ISCEAH, implore the Chinese national and local authorities to undertake the following steps prior to any further demolition:

- Consideration of tried and proven methods of seismic retrofitting for mudbrick structures to allow a reappraisal of current plans and preserve as much as possible of the Old City intact;
- Review of current plans for inhabitant relocation and redevelopment of the area in light of seismic retrofitting and continued sustainable use of the historic city;
- Development of a Conservation Management Plan. This would delimit the site and design appropriate mechanisms for the protection and conservation of the buildings. Such a plan would include the documentation of the extant structures, including recording and analysis of building types, use, and circulation patterns within the Old City. Such a plan would integrate the preservation of the historic fabric, related intangible heritage, and encourage continued safe and economically viable habitation of the historic urban settlement.

In so doing, local and national authorities will be contributing to the preservation of a unique heritage site that reflects the expression, ingenuity, and accomplishments of the Uighur people, the People's Republic of China, and all humanity.

ISCEAH looks forward to further discussions and the opportunity for its members to become involved and provide their expertise on the protection of the Old City of Kashgar. Above all, we sincerely hope to avert the irreversible loss of this universally significant cultural heritage site.

Partially destroyed buildings in the Old City





View of Old City of Kashgar (source: www.architecture.org)



Partially destroyed buildings in the Old City



Bulldozer razing part of Old City and resulting debris (source: www.chinadigitaltimes.net)



Partially destroyed building in the Old City (source: www.rferl.org)

As a result of this open letter, the authorities are currently considering methods to preserve what remains of the Old City. ISCEAH are now working with Chinese NGOs and local stakeholders to advise

technical interventions and provide guidance for the conservation and improvement of earthen buildings therein. Through active participation and advocacy for proven conservation and management approaches, we hope to encourage solutions that retain the historic fabric, while providing for increased safety and comfort to the inhabitants of the Old City.

ICOMOS-ISCEAH

See also the correspondence on this matter between the President of ICOMOS, Gustavo Araoz, and the President of ICOMOS China, Tong Mingkang:

Paris, 12 June 2009

Dear Mr Tong,

ICOMOS has been reading with great concern recent international press articles which report that the demolition of the majority of the old city of Kashgar (Xinjiang Province) is underway.

The press reports indicate that the setting of the place has already begun to be compromised by the destruction of the city walls and moat, an action that is in contradiction to the Xi'an Declaration of 2005. Now it appears that the historic houses, shops, and mosques – in short, the entirety of the place – are also facing imminent demolition, and that there are plans to reconstruct only a very small portion of the Old City in traditional style for tourism purposes, with other parts receiving modern redevelopment. The reports further suggest that the main reasons for this demolition are issues of fire and earthquake safety, for which various solutions have been effectively implemented in other historic settings throughout the world.

News of the demolition of the old city of Kashgar is in and of itself highly worrisome. However, the issue becomes far more worrisome and alarming in the context of the international effort underway to develop a serial nomination of Silk Roads sites to the World Heritage list. Taking into account its strategic position as a trade centre on the ancient Silk Roads, the alleged authenticity and integrity of the extant cultural resources in the place, its 2000-year history, and the connections of its vibrant living culture and intangible heritage

with its ancestral past, Kashgar's inclusion in the proposed nomination would seem to merit serious consideration. Furthermore, its destruction could be seen as a contradiction or even a major stain in the extraordinarily positive record of China in conserving and protecting the vastness of its cultural heritage.

I want to ensure that you know that ICOMOS is at the full disposal of the Chinese authorities to discuss their concerns over fire and earthquake safety, and improving the urban infrastructure and living conditions of the traditional population without destroying the historic values of their outstanding vernacular urban expression. I reiterate, there are valuable international experiences available on how solutions can be found to these questions that would avoid the large-scale demolition of the historic fabric, landscape and setting of Kashgar, and the irreversible weakening of its link with the Silk Roads as a cultural route.

The proposed destruction of Kashgar stands in strong contrast with China's growing and respected role in the international heritage arena, as manifested by its hosting of the 15th ICOMOS General Assembly, the issuing of the Xi'an Declaration, and the creation of the ICOMOS International Conservation Centre in Xi'an – one of whose main purposes is, ironically, the conservation of the cultural heritage of the Silk Roads in China.

For all these reasons, I would be grateful to be kept abreast of the current situation and of any changes in the demolition plans for the historic fabric of Kashgar. I would also treasure your candid advice regarding how ICOMOS could be instrumental in preventing any further destruction in what we perceive to be a tragic event.

Yours sincerely  
Gustavo Araoz  
President of ICOMOS

18 August 2009

Dear Mr. Gustavo Araoz,

Thank you for your letter dated June 12, in which you showed great interest in China's cultural heritage and put forward important recommendations on the protection of the old town of Kashgar. With great pleasure, I would like to take this opportunity to brief you and your colleagues from ICOMOS on details about the protection of Kashgar's historic quarters.

Kashgar is a transportation hub on the Silk Roads linking China and Central Asia and a famous city of historical and cultural value proclaimed by the State Council of China. Located in an earthquake-prone zone, the present old town of Kashgar was rebuilt on the ruins caused by the major earthquake occurring in 1902. Today, it is still subject to earthquake disasters as its population intensity remains high and its buildings are at fairly low quake-resistant level.

In order to guarantee the safety of lives and properties of residents in the old town of Kashgar and improve their living conditions and livelihood, the local government plans to restore old and dilapidated houses in historic neighborhoods of Kashgar, based on residents' opinions and experts' studies. The restoration project will be conducted in accordance with the following principles:

- Properly handle the relationship between the restoration of old and dilapidated houses on one hand and the protection for

famous cities of historical and cultural value and cultural heritage on the other;

- Retain the original layouts, historic neighborhoods and traditional appearance of the old town of Kashgar;
- Establish an expert panel to guide and supervise the protection of cultural property during the implementation of the restoration project;
- Carry out relocation on a voluntary and reasonable manner;
- Encourage local residents' involvement in the protection of historic neighborhoods;
- Restore local houses in traditional approaches and utilize restored houses in a reasonable manner.

The restoration project has gained general support of local residents. In early June 2009, Ms Beatrice Kaldun from the UNESCO Beijing Office made a study tour for the restored old town of Kashgar and gave recognition of the restoration project.

I am highly appreciative of your recommendations on launching discussions between ICOMOS experts and their Chinese counterparts about such issues as earthquake prevention and disaster relief, infrastructure upgrading and improvement of people's livelihoods pertaining to the old town of Kashgar. I am convinced that after your visit to the earthquake site in Sichuan Province, you must have a deeper understanding of the vital importance that the Chinese Government and the Chinese people have attached to earthquake prevention and disaster relief and the protection of people's lives and properties. ICOMOS/China has reported your recommendations to the Bureau of Cultural Heritage of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development which oversees the protection for famous cities of historical and cultural value and will actively assist the People's Government of Kashgar and departments concerned in their endeavors to protect the old town of Kashgar.

Concerning the inclusion of the old town into the World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads, I am highly appreciative of the great attention you have paid to the nomination project and IICC-X. During your visit to China in late July, we had conducted full and frank exchange of views with each other about IICC-X's involvement in the nomination of the Silk Roads. In fact, ICOMOS/China and IICC-X have been actively involved in the transnational nomination of the Silk Roads as a World heritage site and played an important role in this process.

Strict criteria and conditions are set for World Heritage nomination in accordance with the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines. As numerous historic sites and monuments have been left over along the Silk Roads, the study, protection and nomination work pertaining to the Silk Roads will be a long and arduous task. According to the decision coordinated by UNESCO, nominated sites of the Silk Roads will be determined through consultations by countries involved. This work is now still underway. In light of relevant criteria and conditions, the neighborhoods of the old town of Kashgar rebuilt in the early 20th century has yet to be included in the tentative list of the China section for the nomination of the Silk Roads as a World Heritage site. (...)

Yours sincerely,  
Tong Mingkang  
President of ICOMOS China