

## CHINA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The People's Republic of China is right to be proud of its ancient culture and has made considerable efforts in past years to preserve its unique cultural heritage. In view of the immense dimensions of some monuments and sites, considerable problems arise – for instance concerning the protection and maintenance of the Great Wall (on the World Heritage List since 1987), which is thousands of kilometres long. Let us also think of the mausoleum of the Emperor Qin Shihuang (on the World Heritage List since 1987), a huge site with the famous Terracotta Army, which is one of the most sensational archaeological discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, there are the natural catastrophes endangering Chinese heritage, mainly during the flood season along the Yangtze valley. Then, in 1998 floods affected the Ancient Building Complex in the Wudang Mountains, Mount Lushan in Jiangxi Province, Mount Huangshan in Anhui Province and the Wulingyuan Scenic Area, all of them on the World Heritage List.

On the other hand, Chinese civilisation is in the process of drastic changes, which are connected with rapid economic development and for which the immense building boom in the cities is characteristic. Traditional quarters have had to give way to modern apartment towers, for instance, in the city of Shanghai with its 14 million inhabitants a new “Manhattan” has emerged within the last few years with hundreds of skyscrapers. Like in so many countries different kinds of vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes, which belong to heritage as well, are threatened by this unstoppable development. How to reach a certain continuity in safeguarding the immeasurable amount of historic evidence and to conserve local and regional traditions (such as the historic dwelling quarters in Lhasa where, according to recent news, the Tibet Heritage Fund had to end its conservation work), is a question that could be answered by a future H @ R report of ICOMOS China.

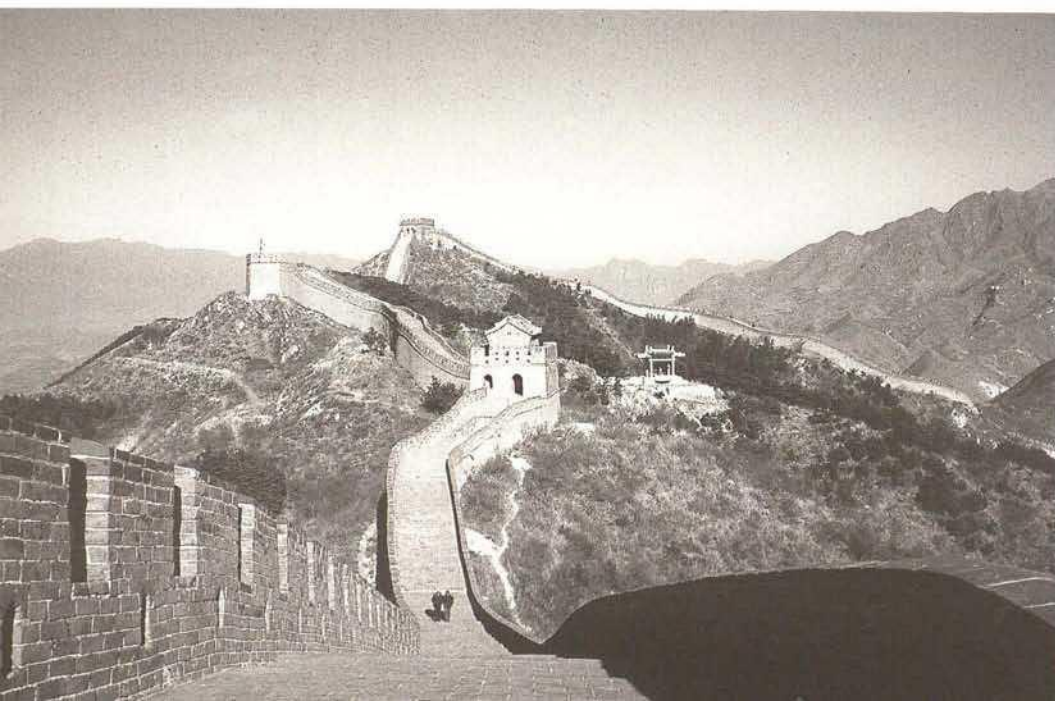
Here is a very instructive report from Cao Bingwu (National Administration of Cultural Heritage China) on concepts for the registration of the huge amount of cultural heritage, a report that also deals with questions of illicit pillage and trafficking of antiques:

*According to the Laws of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, both immovable and movable heritage should be protected properly. Immovable heritage includes memorial buildings, sites of ancient culture, ancient tombs, ancient architectural structures, cave temples, sites related to revolutionary history and stone carvings rooted at the field etc. Moveable heritage includes cultural relics such as memorial objects, works of art, handicraft articles, revolutionary documents, manuscripts, ancient or old books and materials, typical objects, etc.*

*According to the same law and to common practice, evaluation and grading of the heritage are the most important measures for protection. Immovable heritage should be classified into three different levels according to the historical and cultural value – major sites to be protected at national level, sites to be protected at the level of provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the Central Government and sites to be protected at the level of counties, autonomous counties and cities. After the classification, the governments of different levels release the list of the heritage and declare the scope and method of protection.*

*Movable heritage – only that which is kept in the museums – was classified into two large categories: valuable cultural relics and ordinary cultural relics. Valuable cultural relics were further classified into Grades One, Two and Three (each grade was protected and coped with a different rule).*

*All of these evaluation and classification works were only applied to heritage under the direct control of the governmental*



The Great Wall

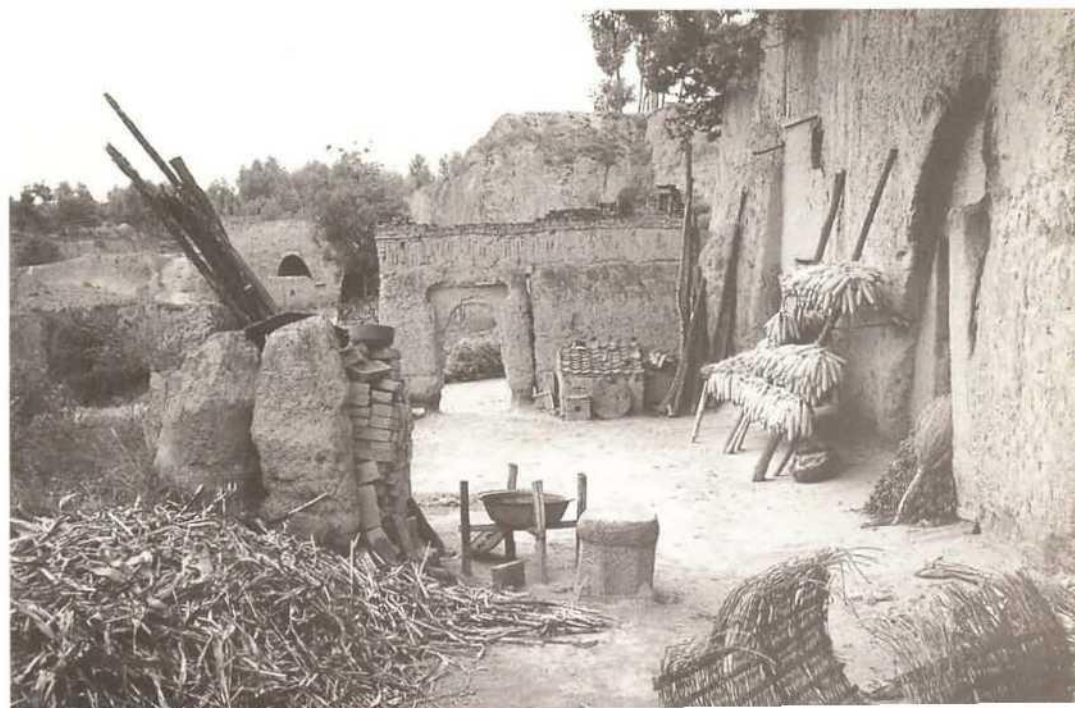


administrations. Before the classification, the administrations had to make a great effort to survey what kind of immovable heritage there is in their region and to prepare the data. The data on movable heritage were prepared by the museums and registered to the administrations. So far, the number of immovable heritage places is about 350,000, of which, only nearly 70,000 are enrolled in the lists of the three-level protection. The others are just recorded but there are no concrete measures of protection. Even of the registered heritage places, some are not under the direct control of the governments, but occupied or used by some institutions or persons outside the heritage departments.

About 10 million items of movable heritage belong to the state-owned cultural institutions, most of which are museums affiliated with different levels of government, and nearly the same amount is under the control of the antiquaries. Because of the circulation, the latter number is changing very quickly. Some were even taken out of China legally or illicitly, so the administering is difficult to be carried out and their condition is difficult to be traced. Even worse, this kind of uncontrolled circulation and its high profit is always the major inducement to illicit pillage and trade of relics as part of immovable sites and scenes and has caused many disastrous damages.



Village street (Shaanxi Province)



Earthen architecture of a village (Shaanxi Province)



After several years of discussion, quite a lot of the people concerned with the possession, usage, trade and administration of the cultural heritage in China, have achieved a common opinion that a well-designed system of register and evaluation of heritage is a very important means for protection.

In our opinion, just using surveys to trace the condition of our heritage is not enough, and the existing proclamation system is only a unilateral activity of the government and can only put very small proportions of immovable heritage under governmental protection. What we need is a well designed register system which can include all immovable heritage and concerned institutions and persons in the protection work. Furthermore, if the system is expanded to the exchangeable antiques in the hands of antiquaries, a good social and cultural environment to protect immovable heritage will be created.

In our view, the register should be carried out by the administrations and presented to the users, holders and owners of heritage. A register is the premise of any kind of legal possession and usage of the cultural heritage.

During the register, the heritage place should be checked and evaluated correctly. Grading of the heritage makes the difference between them so the administrators and concerned persons can cope with the heritage of different importance with different and proper attention, this is very valuable when the personal and financial power are not sufficient in such a very large developing country with rich and colourful resources of cultural heritage as China.

By grading the different levels of immovable sites should be decided, by register, the scope, personnel, techniques and financial support concerned with the protection, the preparing and use of data of the heritage should get a consensus under the frameworks of laws. So that the protection of the heritage, especially the one outside the list released by three levels of government, a contract can be reached between the administrators and the concerned people such as the users and possessors, make the users or possessors of the heritage understand the laws and the other necessary information concerning the proper protection. In the meantime, the governmental administrations should improve the laws systematically, make it clear whether the condition of the heritage with different importance can be changed or moved, how it should be protected, used, exhibited, explored or exchanged correctly and legally.

Registering and grading of movable heritage owned by antiquaries is a new idea in this proposal. After the grading and registering, a certification file should be signed by the owner of the antiques and it should circulate with the associated antique object as an ID card. Thus, the administrators in the department of politics, commerce, business and custom can join in the supervision of the exchange of antiques easily, the legit exchange being protected, the illicit trade and smuggle will be put into a disadvantage position, and the trace of the movement of the antiques will become easier. As a result, we hope this will help to eliminate or even stop the pillage of ancient sites and tombs.

Surely this register system is at first convenient to the administration of cultural heritage, but it is also beneficial to everyone concerned with the legit possession, use and enjoy of heritage and, as a whole, beneficial to the protection of cultural heritage.

After the information-contract-oriented register, a systematic database should be established and, finally, be bedded onto the Geographical Information System of China, and should be

accessed by many users with different openness and limitation. With this mother database, several sub-databases with special purposes could be derived and be popularly used by different departments and users. Any change of the condition of the heritage including the exchange of proprietorship of the exchangeable antiques should be added to the record in the database. This will provide a powerful web for the monitors of the condition of the heritage and can let the concerned personnel carry out the quickest responds when heritage faces danger.

With the systematic data in the register, the governmental administrations will easily make decisions on a precise basis of information, and design comprehensive long-term plans to protect or to improve the conditions of cultural heritage, carry out systematic academic research and make efficient public usage. In the meantime, the system will help that more people can share the data and even the heritage itself conveniently, provides a protective umbrella to the legit proprietors of the heritage, both movable and immovable. Most important is that it can provide important clues for the rediscovery when the antiques are lost or stolen, so to eliminate smuggling and illegal trading of the moveable cultural heritage. Even if heritage is damaged by some unavoidable natural or man-made factors, the register system should still have some valuable data of the heritage, both for research and restoration.

We believe that a well designed register and evaluation system is the best way to get a comprehensive mastery of the conditions and information of cultural heritage, then draw all the concerned powers into the heritage protection web, according to the laws and the situation in current China. We think to share information of cultural heritage comprehensively and freely between all concerned departments and personnel who need it or like it, is very important for eliminating the motives to move heritage out of its context and can help to leave it in the local scenes of society – this will make the heritage more valuable and enjoyable. We are sure that by introducing the state-of-art techniques of computer and informational industry, this system can be developed and run at a very precise and efficient level.

As in many other countries, in China dangers to cultural heritage result from the improvement of infrastructure connected with a dynamic economic development. This leads to large projects of road construction like the new motorways, which in particular confront archaeologists with tremendous problems concerning the protection and rescue of below-ground evidence. In this context, the greatest challenge is, of course, the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam in the world, which will dam the Yangtse River up to a length of 500 km. In coming years, the rising waters will cover not only many cities and villages but numerous artistic artefacts and archaeological sites.

The following is an interview which gives an idea of the range of tasks for conservationists:

*While construction workers put their unstinting efforts into the giant Three Gorges Dam project for the benefit of future generations, relics experts are working flat out to preserve the treasure left to us by our ancestors.*

*“The excavation is a constant source of delights for the experts, as many important archaeological discoveries have been made over the past two years,” said Wang Chuanping, deputy director of the Chongqing Cultural Bureau in a telephone interview with China Daily. Accordingly to Wang, 845 out of the*



1,238 relics sites that need excavation or protection in the reservoir area are located in Chongqing Municipality. These include more than 550 sites buried deeply underground. The other sites are located in neighbouring Hubei Province. Cultural experts have explored more than 70% of reservoir areas since September 1997 and drawn up detailed protection schemes for 62 relics sites.

Discoveries of relics sites from the Paleolithic period, graves from the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), and farm land sites from the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties provide solid evidence of the origin and development of local cultures seldom found in historical records. Wang said most of the cultural relics sites will not be lost to the waters after the dam is erected and the water level rises to 173 metres in 2009.

"We are making plans to ensure that all relics that would disappear with the rising of the water level are moved in good time to higher ground," he said. Experts are looking for a new site for the Temple of Zhang Fei, a fiery-tempered and valiant general during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280), which will go under water in 2003 when the water level rises to 135 metres. In the reservoir area in Hubei Province, another treasure house of cultural relics, rescue efforts started some 10 years earlier than in Chongqing, said Hu Meizhou, director of the Hubei Cultural Relics Bureau, in a telephone interview.

During excavations, more than 20 relics sites have been found dating back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. These may shed light on how cultures and economies developed in primitive society in this area. All the archaeological findings have now been placed in local museums. To Hu's great relief, relics smuggling and uncontrolled excavation are very rare in the reservoir areas. However, both officials are far from satisfied with their achievements.

"If we had been provided with sufficient funds, the rescue project would have proceeded much more smoothly," Wang said.

Shortage of funds means they have not yet been able to build museums at major relics sites to repair damaged relics and keep the rest in good condition.

(Article by Su Dan in "China Daily" of March 23, 1999)

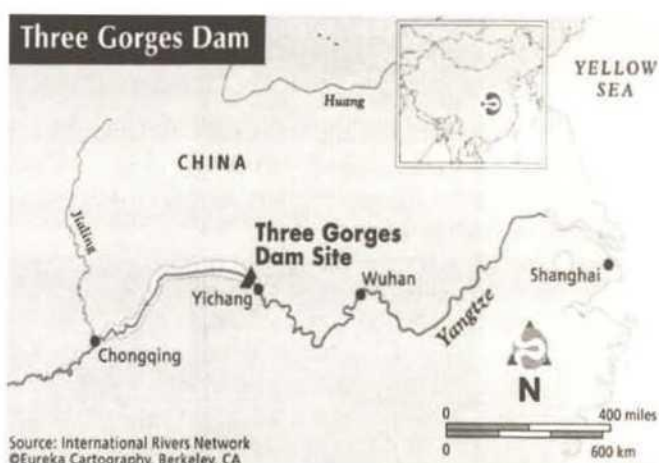
## Case Study – Lijiang

Lijiang Ancient Town is in the middle of Lijiang basin, Naxi autonomy, Yunnan, China. Since it was included in the World Heritage List in 1997, the historic settlement of Lijiang has experienced a rapid social transformation. The emerging tourist market in the rapid economic development of China has caused gentrification. From 1987 to 1999, the original residents of Lijiang ancient town decreased by 5000 persons or 1500 households, which is about 35% of all households. The population is replaced by merchants from elsewhere because the native Naxi people cannot compete with them. The successful historic preservation of built items needs the support of sensitive social and cultural policies. Otherwise, Lijiang, the ancient town and the local ethnic minority – Dayen old town, Naxi society, and Dongba culture, will soon be changed and consumed by the tourist market. There are some urgent problems that specifically worry the local community:

- The central square of the ancient town, Sifang Jie, has changed from a local market that is part of daily life to a tourist souvenir market.

- Contradictions between everyday life of ordinary people, including transportation services, sanitation systems, etc, and heritage conservation.
- Traditional interior fireplaces have been prohibited for use for the sake of conservation, however, problems with borers increase the difficulties of maintenance.

All of these issues challenge the urban conservation project. The role of Lijiang ancient town has been transformed from a market town trading between the people of Zang (Tibetan), Yi, Bai and Han, to a global tourist market. The local community is aware of the crisis and the local government is willing to support any suggestions to improve the situation (see also p. 212).



The location of the Three Gorges Dam

The Yangtze River, Xiling Gorge

