

INTEGRITY IN FOCUS: A NEW MEDIA STRATEGY FOR VANISHING CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION

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Abstract

Southwestern China is home to more than 30 ethnic minority peoples and the amazing cultural diversity in this region is endangered by lack of recognition and destructive development. In this paper we describe our pilot project aiming at the recording, presentation and monitoring of the vanishing cultural heritage (VCH) in Southwestern China. We examined the Feng Shui theory in traditional Chinese culture and deduced from it a comprehensive definition of “integrity” of a culture heritage property. Guided by this definition, we propose a pilot project in which the audio/visual data about our target VCH property, the maternity practice, will be digitally recorded, converted to appropriate formats, and presented on our theme website in the framework of a geographical information system. The application of these new media and database technologies will enable the recording and presentation of the VCH property in its spatial and temporal context, and make the data accessible to a wide audience. In addition, we will establish an online feedback system to collect and publish the information about the current status of the target VCH property, which will increase the transparency of its condition and contribute positively to its conservation.

1. Current situation of culture heritage in Southwestern China

Southwestern China is home to more than 30 (out of 55) ethnic minority peoples. The abundance and diversity of indigenous cultures in this region is exceptional compared to other parts of China, but the recognition and conservation effort for the culture heritage properties in this region is far from being satisfactory. These ethnic minorities, treated as “barbarians”, have suffered as the “traditional” target of discrimination, oppression and exploitation by the dominant Han Nationality who represents 91.59% of the Chinese population (2001) until the founding of modern China. The “inferiority” of their cultures explains its long-time isolation from the main scene of the Chinese civilization, and this isolation has resulted in, on one hand, the ignorance of the value and situation of these cultures, and on another hand, a passive “conservational effect” on their nascent status. (Zhenyu, Pan, 2003)

However, the recently-launched modernization campaign, which aims at boosting the local economy and improving the quality of life (defined, certainly, by the dominant Han culture), has drawn a period mark to this fragile equilibrium. Change of life style, which deprives the indigenous cultures of their basis of existence, is well under its way. For example, young ethnic people receive Han culture-oriented national education and most of them later go to the developed region for work opportunities and are “brainwashed” by the Han culture there. The local market for indigenous household utensils, clothing, and ornaments is shrinking because people are trying to (or forced to) change to the “civilized” life style. (Chunhua, Ying and Xianling, Meng, and Yanlong WANG, 2004) In fact, after the start of the modernization process in China, Han culture is also being transformed (or “modernized”) by the dominant western culture; and it is natural for the Han culture to “relay” this transforming pressure to the cultures that are even less “advanced”. Therefore, the siege of ethnic minority culture by the predominant Han culture is just a regional “warfare” in

the vast battlefield of globalization.

Even in the cases where the value of a culture heritage property does receive recognition from local and central government, the issue of destructive development comes in. The main target of most culture heritage development plans is its tourism potential, not its conservation, and certainly the tourists in this case are mostly of Han Nationality (Wei, Lin, 2004). This kind of development often results in the artificialization, commercialization, and urbanization of the heritage property, and in turn caused serious damage to the natural or cultural eco-systems around the cultural heritage property and substantial devaluation of its natural, aesthetic, and spiritual values. For example, the integrated scenery of Lijiang's old town, a world heritage in Southwestern China, is jeopardized by commercial development. The nascent geographical surroundings are contaminated by modern buildings, and many "indigenous" art performances on stage are actually imported from other provinces. (Chun, Dan.2005)

2. Vanishing Culture Heritage Project: Preview

Vanishing culture heritage (VCH) refers to the cultural heritage properties whose existence is threatened by lack of recognition or destructive development. Facing with the problems discussed above, we launched a pilot project to address the conservation of the VCH properties in Southwestern China, which may later be expanded to the tangible ones (such as aboriginal building complexes) and the intangible ones (such as indigenous technology and craftwork, art, ritual and ceremony, and medicine) created and inherited by the ethnic minorities in that region. (Jueming Hua, 2005)

Apart from the practical impact this project is expect to achieve, it is also an academic attempt to demonstrate a Chinese model for heritage perception and conservation. Considering the significance of this theoretical model in guiding the design and execution of the project and in general thinking about culture heritage and its conservation, we would like to, before going into details about the project, discuss the background and content of this model.

3. Vanishing Culture Heritage Project: Theoretical model

Apparently no heritage can keep absolute nascent status due to the historical intervention of human activities. According to the Heritage Convention, efforts should be made to preserve the remaining nascent status of the heritage. In the conservation projects of many Chinese cultural heritage properties, emphasis has been given to the heritage property itself, while the surrounding spatial environment and the overall eco-system were largely ignored. As a consequence of this practice, damage, inauthenticity, and counterfeiting are very common phenomena in Chinese cultural heritage management, which is exactly the most tough challenge faced by the Heritage Committee of UNESCO.

We propose that, the "integrity" of a culture heritage property should have two inseparable components: the spatial integrity that include the heritage property and its environment, and the temporal integrity that include the past, present, and future of the heritage property. In addition, we have developed a model about the heritage integrity that is based on the traditional Chinese culture and relevant to the characteristics of the Chinese cultural heritage properties.

3.1. FENG SHUI MODEL AND SPATIAL INTEGRITY

One of the key themes of Chinese tradition culture is its theoretical and practical thoughts about how to choose the location and the environment for residential and social-political life. (Peilin, Liu, 1995) Feng Shui model, the nucleus of these thoughts, has always been used as the guide for architectural site selection, design and construction. (Bennuan, Zheng and Mingshi, Chen, 2005)

In order to explain the philosophy of Feng Shui, one must first understand “Qi”, one of the central concepts in Chinese philosophy. Qi can be considered as the Chinese counterpart of the “ether” in Western philosophy and physics. Qi is the direct origin of matter, and it is in everlasting motion. The movement of Qi through space gives rise to “Feng”, whose literal meaning is “wind”.

Feng Shui theory traces its origin back to 1-3rd century A.D., with its earliest version being proposed by Guo Pu (276-324 A.D.). In Guo Pu’s view, Feng, which contains the life-supporting Qi within it, is also in restless motion. However, it will slow down and wonder around where there is “Shui” (water). Therefore, in order to retain the life-supporting “Qi”, environment having both Feng and Shui should be chosen as the physical basis for human community. The first systematic description of the Feng Shui spatial model was developed by Feng Shui master Yang Yun Song (9th century A.D.). Assimilating the ideal environment to a ‘Long’ (dragon), the model considers mountain as its backbone and the “Shui” (water) as its blood vessels .

A typical Feng Shui model can be described as following: A building is located at the north of the region and faces the south. There are mountains behind the building, two small hills guarding the two sides of the building, a river in front of the gate, another small hill in the near south of the building, and mountains in the far south. The deities of the four directions, which are defined in ancient Chinese astronomy, are used to name the mountains/hills in the aforementioned four directions. Surrounded by the “four deities” is a life-supporting ecological space, which is imbued with the vivid Qi and therefore can also be considered as a field of “Qi”(Xunzi, Chunqiu Zhanguo Dynasty, 1988)

In order to maintain the intactness of a Feng Shui space and its visual aesthetics, the structural integrity of the mountains, peaks and rivers, including the accompanying animals and vegetation, need to be protected from deliberate damage. Accordingly, the establishment of a man-made architecture should not damage, structurally and visually, the natural beauty of the Shan and Shui (mountains and waters), but achieve a harmony between human and nature, among human beings, and within the society composed of many cities and rural communities. This is the primitive concept of “environmental conservation” in traditional Chinese culture. (Chuen-Yan and David Lai, 1974)

This model can be extended to describe the ecological environment of a village, a town and a city. Being the guiding model for the localization, design and construction of human communities in ancient China, Feng Shui is therefore also the common scenery model for almost all the Chinese tangible heritage properties.

Feng Shui model also implies the importance of environment for the activities and institutions of human society. From the heritage point of view, this means that the concept of Feng Shui space is also important for the intangible culture heritage properties, such as traditional art forms, customs, and social structures. As discussed before, the nucleus of a Feng Shui space is Qi, which is constantly moving and changing. Therefore, everything that is moving and changing within the space, such as water flow, climate, or human activities, is driven by Qi and is the demonstration of its existence. The confinement of each space ensures the relative independence and stability of its Qi. In this sense the characteristics of Qi in each space is influenced by the environment that contain it, so the Qi in different Feng Shui spaces will have different features. When we consider the motion and evolution of human communities as one of the demonstrations of Qi, the different characteristics of Qi is actually equivalent to “culture diversity”. Therefore, in order to correctly understand and

conserve the culture diversity among different Feng Shui spaces, it is essential to take into account the different environments that have nurtured their respective cultures.

It is interesting to note that, the word Feng has been used to refer to “social customs” in the Li Ji, one of the ancient classical texts of Confucianism, and in modern Chinese language, the word for “customs, vogue” is still “Feng (wind) Qi (ether)”. This clearly indicates the existence of a philosophical thinking that relates the visible human activities to the invisible entities of Feng and Qi.

3.2. FENG SHUI MODEL AND TEMPORAL INTEGRITY

When viewed superficially, Feng Shui Model only deals with the spatial relationship between a cultural entity (architecture or human activities) and its physical environment. However, the fact that it acknowledges the existence of Qi in a Feng Shui space has already implied the inclusion of temporal dimension. Since Qi is constantly moving and changing, it has to do that through a time axis that originates from past, pierces through the present, and points to the future. Therefore, the apparently three-dimensional Feng Shui model is in fact a four-dimensional space-time model. Through the axis of history, the heritage property and its spatial environment interact with each other and evolve together as an organic complex.

3.3. SUMMARY OF THE MODEL

The central point that the Feng Shui model brings to heritage perception and conservation is the appreciation of the spatial and temporal integrity of the heritage property. The heritage property can not be separated from its Feng Shui space and can not be stopped during its dynamics through time. Therefore, any comprehensive perception, presentation, and conservation of a heritage property has to treat the property in its spatial and temporal context, which inevitably call for the application of new media technologies.

4. The Vanishing Culture Heritage Project: Content Description

4.1. MATERNITY PRACTICE: THE TARGET VCH PROPERTY

Maternity practice originally refers to the procedures and beliefs observed and practiced during pregnancy and the post-delivery period. Chinese maternity practices can trace their origin to ancient times and are still widely observed among different ethnic groups in Southwestern China. The maternity practice in this region has many unique characteristics that are not found in other world cultures, which make it a very attractive candidate. In addition, it is chosen because it is a typical VCH property, whose future is not optimistic considering the dramatic change of local life style that is currently happening in Southwestern China.

In this project, however, maternity practice is treated not as an isolated piece of cultural heritage but as is a general topic that includes a variety of heritage properties. At its center is certainly the practice *per se*, that is, the hygienic procedures, medicine, rituals, customs, taboos and the local belief system that justify all these cultural behaviors. Starting from these we will explore the related art forms, utensils, and personal stories. (–2005) In

addition, we will compare the maternity practices in different ethnic groups and relate them to their respective local environments. Finally, we will also investigate the historical dimension of the maternity practice phenomenon and the formation of its diversity.

4.2. AUDIO/VISUAL DATA COLLECTION

As said before, one particular problem about VCH in Southwestern China is the ignorance of its value, which stems from the ignorance of its content, history and current situation. In order to reveal its value, one must begin with the recording and archiving of the information about the VCH property. Considering the close association of these VCH properties with the local ethnography, the classical topic in anthropology, we plan to collect audio/visual data about the VCH property using the methodology of visual anthropology, which is a branch in anthropological studies featuring the intense use visual approaches in data recording and analysis. In this project, all the new documentaries and images will be produced using digital devices.

The emphasis on the spatial and temporal integrity of the VCH property is the underlying reason for choosing such an approach. For the spatial integrity, we can record the heritage property and its natural and social environment and incorporating them into one documentary so that one can make direction connection between the heritage property and its physical and cultural basis. For the temporal integrity, we can (1) interview the members of the group and letting them tell the historical background of the rituals and customs, (2) collect pictures and films that record the previous status of the maternity practice (such as the duplication of old pictures, music and patterns in old embroidery, batik, carving and other crafts) in addition to the visual data that record the present, (3) produce animated “virtual” documentaries to reconstitute the past of the maternity practice which can not be captured by real documentaries.

The collected audio/visual data can serve multiple purposes. First of all, the raw images and documentaries, which are produced according to the academic standards of visual anthropology and aiming at recording as much information as possible, are the digital archive of the VCH property. It will become the primary source for subsequent academic research on the property, and in the most unfortunate situation where the degradation of the heritage property is irreversible; this body of data preserves an authentic, vivid memory of a fragment of the indigenous culture which we used to have in this area of the world. Certainly we do not want this to happen and therefore, we will use the edited version of these data to present the VCH property to a wide audience. By doing this we will raise the awareness and interest of the government and the general public toward the VCH in Southwestern China, which is the preliminary step before any subsequent conservation effort can be considered.

4.3. PRESENTATION OF AUDIO/VISUAL DATA IN A GEOGROHICAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

As said in the previous section, we would like to attract government officials, academic experts and common people who are interested in the culture heritage of ethnic minorities, and internet is the best option to achieve this aim. The internet in China has undergone substantial development in recent years. There are currently around 103 million internet users in China and among them 53 million have access to broadband service. In addition, internet users represent the fraction of the whole population who are better educated and

adjusted to the Information Age, and these are also the characteristics of the aforementioned target audience (CNNIC, 2005).

According to this goal, the documentaries and still images will be converted to formats that are suitable for online viewing, such as streaming media clips. Then we will construct a multi-lingual theme website about our initiative and present our data in a way that is accessible for internet users not only in China but also around the world. In order to present the VCH properties in their natural and cultural environment, we plan to adopt the geographical information system (GIS) and use it as the framework to organize our visual/audio data.

GIS is a database technology designed for the storage, management and integration of large amounts of spatially referenced data and for the display of these data on map formats of high quality. (Denis E. Cosgrove.1984)(Marion J.C. de Lepper, Henk J. Scholten and Richard M. Stern. 1995) Rather than presenting the VCH documentaries/images and the related natural/cultural geographical information separately, we will integrate them all into one GIS database. Compared to normal webpages with a flatten structure, the data structure and display on the GIS platform is much more logical, visual and straightforward. More importantly, the relationship between the VCH property and its environment, and the variations of the same property in different environments, will be perceived in their full flavor. From the viewpoint of Feng Shui model, if the individual documentary captures the Feng Shui space around each VCH property, the whole GIS database then reconstitutes a virtual Feng Shui landscape where all the individual Feng Shui spaces reside and interact with each other.

In addition, the temporal element enclosed in interviews, in comparative presentation of the “past” and “present” visual data, and in the visual reconstitution of the historical background, will transform this 3-dimensional “visual landscape” into a 4-dimensional “visual chronicle”. In this chronicle, one will not only see the deep historical root and the past glory of the VCH property, but also realize its decline and fall during the recent years, and all these experiences were achieved in a direct and vivid way. We believe, such a visual chronicle will have a very strong emotional and educational impact on the audience, and will stimulate much more sympathy and reflections than a simple webpage with figures and explanatory texts.

4.4. ONLINE FEEDBACK SYSTEM TO MONITOR THE STATUS OF THE VCH PROPERTY

One major issue in the conservation of cultural heritage in China is the lack of an effective monitoring and feedback mechanism. Considering the fragileness of most heritage properties, irreversible damage can happen in a relatively short timeframe, and the short-sighted behaviors in the economic boom of China further increase the necessity of a monitoring mechanism that is neutral, open, and fast-reacting. These are exactly the advantages of internet and therefore we will establish an online forum where information about the target VCH property and cultural conservation are collected from local news, government and international organization announcements, forum comments by website visitors and is updated on a regular basis in Chinese and English.

Another function of this online forum is to present the local opinion about the VCH property and its conservation. We will interview local people and ask them questions such as how important the VCH property is for their everyday life, or in what way our conservation or development activities affect their interests. We will then put the results of these interviews on this online form. It is very important to hear the voice of local people, because they are the creator and carrier of the culture heritage and what they believe and what they do will greatly influence the fate of the VCH property.

This interactive platform will greatly facilitate the communication between different parties such as UNESCO, the central and local government, academic institutions, local people and the general public. Since the culture heritage conservation is one of the politically less “sensitive” areas, this feedback system, if administrated properly, could become a communication channel between the Chinese government and common people, and also a mild trial of democracy in China.

5. Concluding Marks

Targeting maternity practice, one of the VCH properties in Southwestern China, the Vanishing Culture Heritage Project is more of an attempt to set up and test-run a online new media platform which, if proven to be effective, can be applied to the research and monitoring of other endangered culture heritage properties, whose critical situation requires immediate and intensive attention and conservation effort. Apart from its significance for the conservation of VCH in Southwestern China, the experience and results obtained from this project may also contribute to the UNESCO’s effort to promote the protection of the heritage properties in its World Heritage in Danger List.

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