Contestations of Cultural Heritage in China: New Theoretical and Empirical Insights

Chinese cultural heritage policy and practice takes place in a quite unique context: an authoritarian/Communist market economy with global aspirations. Research about how heritage and place-makings are conceived in such a rapidly transforming society is still in its infancy, yet recent studies about the meaning of heritage in specific localities in China have thrown up huge tensions between central, provincial and local practices. On the one hand, UNESCO-inspired state heritage policy widely promotes a monumental version of heritage as a core element of regional, provincial and local development strategies, ignoring grassroots identifications of cultural value and offering a notion of ‘authenticity’ as a process of removing evidence of decay and returning relics to original states in ‘modern’ ways. On the other hand, local and private heritage initiatives rooted in community memories and cultural knowledge offer an understanding of heritage value as the shared ownership of a cultural past for the public good, and as the repository and transmitter of historical truth. Local understandings of what constitutes collective cultural survival may thus imply an ethical demand for recognition, raising crucial questions about the meaning of preservation and challenging the universalistic assumptions of the European conservation tradition’s aesthetic of the sublime.

Policy and academic debates about heritage in China overwhelmingly emphasize management and funding issues, overlooking local notions of heritage value and preservation. In contrast, recent research has identified an urgent need to explore the theoretical and methodological dimensions of heritage practice in China in order to address the local tensions caused by top-down state and UNESCO-inspired heritage policies, and support local responses to state heritage policy. At a time when local heritage initiatives in China are raising pressing questions about the limitations of mainstream heritage practice, studies on the processes, interests and narratives involved in cultural heritage work in China yield rich theoretical and empirical insights to the body of critical international heritage studies.

The panel explores cultural heritage debates, policies and practices across different types of heritage sites, including local and private initiatives, ancestral halls, temples and national museums, and involving diverse stakeholders representing state and private interests and ordinary residents of urban neighbourhoods and village communities. Largely based on an ethnographic methodology, the papers draw on insights from different fields and disciplines, including heritage studies, anthropology, history and political science, and explore heritage as an ethics of retribution for past injustices, identity and representation, and discourse and performance. The conceptual, theoretical and methodological emphases of this study will broaden critical debate about cultural
preservation in China at a time when the transformative zeal of urban planners and rural developers threatens to destroy the cultural livelihoods of vast numbers of local communities, begging crucial questions about what heritage means.

Collecting Chinese Culture
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This paper presents findings from on-going fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation focusing on collectors in mainland China and their role in defining Chinese "cultural heritage" (Zhongguo wenhua yichan). In contrast to immoveable heritage sites, that are frequently appropriated by property developers or the government, and the objects exhibited in state-run museums, the act of collecting affords ordinary Chinese people agency and influence. Tangible immoveable objects are something that people can affect greatly and make many choices about like which items are important, which to collect and which to discard, what kind of value they hold, and what will become of them, thus imbuing them with their own meanings, which may or may not coincide with macro perspectives on cultural heritage. In addition, over the past decade more and more collectors have opened privately owned museums to showcase their collections to the public. Collectors are therefore significant actors in producing and perpetuating Chinese cultural heritage.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on one theme that has repeatedly emerged in the course of interviews with different collectors in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, the collector as what I like to term the ‘guardian’ of Chinese culture. The paper gives a comparative, ethnographic account of the stories of two collectors and their collections that are particularly illustrative of this theme. The case study will give insight into the expediency of the concept of cultural heritage to a certain group of stakeholders. It will also draw attention to particularities in the Chinese concept of cultural heritage concerning issues of authenticity, commercialism, as well as the constraints on local constructions of cultural heritage in mainland China today.

“What is the heritage old Beijing”? An oral history of urban transformation in Beijing’s “south city”

Harriet Evans, University of Westminster
A recurring theme in academic and media narratives about the transformation of Beijing links the destruction of local neighbourhoods with the destruction of a cultural heritage represented by nostalgic descriptions of picturesque courtyards and winding lanes (hutong). Accompanying this is a polarized conceptualization of heritage in which heritage emerges as a political battleground; between, on the one hand, national and local governments, urban planners and property speculators backed by global capital, implementing ‘cultural heritage protection’ programmes in the pursuit of economic gain, and on the other, doomed community attempts to preserve local traditions to transmit to the future.

Based on long-term fieldwork gathering personal histories in a neighbourhood in central Beijing’s ‘south city’, this paper argues that local responses to the plans and practices of urban transformation disturb such a view. Local people’s memories and accounts of the transformation of their neighbourhood voice an attachment to it as the spatialised centre of a sense of being and belonging, yet at the same time, many of them would happily move out of the crowded and dilapidated conditions in which they live if they had the resources to do so. This paper reflects on long-term local residents’ sense of the cultural value of their neighbourhood, past and present, not as a desire to preserve cultural tradition fixed in place or to claim ownership of local authenticity to transmit to the future, but as a desire, even need, for an ethical recognition of lives, experiences, and longings molded by, embedded in and yet now denied access to the spatial and material history of their neighbourhood. It is this recognition that my informants’ narratives suggest has been withheld from them throughout the Mao era decades of urban transformation, and more recently, in the last phase of the neighbourhood’s reconstruction. Conceptualising heritage as recognition of local articulations of belonging to a spatialised and material past and present opens up discussion about the place of local—and private—interests in negotiating alternatives to the current politics and economics of China’s heritage protection programmes.
War as Heritage in Mainland China: The Guangdong Memorial Hall of the East River Column

Karl Gustafsson, Lund University

In studies dealing with representations of wars different types of narratives, for example victim, victor, aggressor narratives are often mentioned. However, it is often unclear in the existing scholarship how the analyst recognizes a certain type of narrative when s/he sees one. The paper aims to fill this theoretical gap by presenting a typology and method for the study of narratives about war, which draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The method focuses on the way in which participants are depicted, in textual as well as other material, in the material studied. The typology consists of three main types of narrative tropes, which each emphasize the role and agency (or lack thereof) of one type of participant—hero, victim and perpetrator tropes. To illustrate the approach a case study of the exhibition at the Guangdong Memorial Hall of the East River Column in Dongguan.

In previous research on Chinese remembrance of the War of Resistance against Japan, it has been claimed that narratives that emphasize Chinese victimhood and Japanese aggression have, to a large extent, replaced those stressing Chinese heroism. The framework used makes it possible to better understand whether this is indeed the case. As a newly constructed museum (2005) dealing with China’s War of Resistance the Guangdong Memorial Hall of the East River Column can be expected to illustrate the larger phenomenon of what has been called China’s “new remembering” of the war. If it is correct that Japanese aggression and Chinese victimhood have come to replace heroism it seems reasonable to believe that this should be reflected in the exhibition. However, the analysis reveals that even though there are elements of Japanese aggression and Chinese victimhood in the exhibition’s narrative, Chinese heroism, in fact, dominates in this particular exhibition. Even though the analysis is limited to one exhibition, it still indicates that heroism is still an important element in narratives about the War of Resistance. More importantly, for the methodological purposes of the paper, the case study illustrates how war heritage in museum displays can be analyzed in a systematic and transparent fashion and anchors interpretations firmly in the material studied.

The Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Rights in Development Projects: A Case Study of the Lijiang Lion Mountain Project

Liu Zhaohui, Institute of Anthropology, Zhejiang University
Since the early 1990s, the China-World Bank partnership for conservation has resulted in 12 projects and used approximately US$1.3 billion in loans. These loans included nearly US$260 million for cultural heritage conservation, making it the largest single-country program supporting the conservation of cultural heritage for the World Bank (Katrinka Ebbe, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, all of these development projects just targeted the tangible cultural heritage, and little attention was paid to the intangible cultural heritage. Why have this been the case?

As an anthropologist, I participated in a Social Impact Assessment & Resettlement Action Plan (SIA & RAP) of the Lijiang Lion Mountain Project, one of the 12 development projects, and focused on the social and cultural impact on the local community, in particular with respect to the intangible cultural heritage. I observed that all stakeholders realized the importance of the tangible cultural heritage conservation, and many of the protective actions and plans have actually been put into practice, but as for the intangible cultural heritage, few of the stakeholders, including the primary stakeholder (community residents) know very little about what is the intangible cultural heritage and how it is related to them!

Based on five years of participatory action research in the Lijiang Lion mountain project, the paper attempts to discuss three themes as follows: (1) what and how do polices and practices related to the protection of intangible cultural heritage have on the migration community? (2) how to protect the living cultural heritage, especially grassroots cultures excluded by "heritage concept/definition"? and (3) how to understand the cultural rights for migrants and migration community from the intangible heritage perspective?

The paper will present the cultural contestations of community people in the resettlement process, and criticize and re-theoretise the classification and protection framework of the intangible cultural heritage based on "Cultural Ecology Protection Experiment Zone". Also, the paper puts forward and discusses the feasibility and desirability of "community value management" in the context of China. The community model takes the protection of the intangible cultural heritage as the basis and it also includes those cultural practices that haven’t yet been listed as cultural heritage. In other words, the issue of whether something is considered as “heritage or not” is not a pre-requisite for whether it is “to be protected or not.” This kind of approach strengthens the protection of the intangible heritage and the totality of culture, and also redresses and challenges the concept of “cultural heritage” from the perspective of the original inhabitants.
‘Memory, history and heritage passions: three case studies from Yunnan and Sichuan’

Mike Rowlands

Recent anthropological interventions in heritage studies have emphasized the redemptive and curative potential of local heritage projects. Bound up with powerful local mythologies of belonging to disappearing or lost pasts, heritage offers a language to salvage an ‘authentic’ sense of self and community. Recognition ontological and emotional attachments to place, objects, rituals, and the temporalities of past, present and future inscribed in them offers communities ways of dealing with grief for lost places and objects. In this light, heritage establishes the ethical conditions of possibility for local communities and minority ethnicities to assert their collective identity as a way of demanding redress for past injustices and inequities. Reworked as an ‘ontological and metaphysical’ concern for the importance of place and material objects in sustaining local and collective identities, heritage thus calls for a locally grounded, ‘bottom-up’ conceptualization of what constitutes the materiality of cultural transmission for the future of community survival.

In this paper we explore three local and private initiatives in Yunnan and Sichuan as instances of some of these approaches. In very distinctive ways, the key individuals involved in these initiatives are driven by ethical concerns with memory, history and ‘truth’ as the condition for community sustainability. Two of the cases are small scale and low key, and in contrast to the spectacular tourist appeal of the commodifications of the past of many of the heritage projects in the region where they are located, they do not substitute kitsch reconstruction for contemplation. None of these projects are concerned with the meanings behind the objects; the objects in these projects are valued not for their semiotic quality, but for their material ontology in appealing to memories of histories as the condition for community survival. The objects, and material processes of, for example, climbing to sacred sites, engaging in local artisan production, or walking through the seas of redness in the Jianchuan museum, give object, place and process a voice which appeals directly to their audiences. Moreover, the ethnic identification of two of these projects
accentuates their appeal to interests in cultural transmission of materialized memories of communities that have long histories of marginalization by the dominant Han state.

The Performative, Sensory, and Embodied Experiences of Heritage: Spatial Changes and Heritage Construction in Rural and Urban China
Marina Svensson, Lund University

This paper is inspired by recent literature that emphasise the performative, sensory, and embodied experiences of heritage practices, as well as by the recent “spatial” turn in China studies. Both rural and urban China has undergone dramatic spatial changes since 1949 that at first were brought about by ideological and political movements and later by market economic reforms. These changes have destroyed many sites, buildings and cultural practices of importance to the local community. Ancestral halls on the countryside were for example after 1949 confiscated to serve as government offices or cowshed, and this physical appropriation also implied a denial of certain memory practices and place-makings such as ancestor worship and temple fairs. With the ideological more open climate of the early 1980s, many old cultural practices have been revived and traditional buildings re-claimed or re-built on the countryside. In the cities a similar revival has not been possible and the spatial changes brought about by the market reforms have more dramatically challenged people’s links with the past. However, in recent years different actors, including local governments, businesses, intellectuals, and civil society actors have been engaged in different attempts to re-create and commemorate the urban past. This also include some more grass-roots and alternative readings, commemorations, and re-imagination of urban space in the form of documenting old buildings and creating so-called heritage walks or city walks that aim to re-create and link people with the past. This type of embodied experience of the urban neighbourhood and ways of performing cultural memory through walking is common in many historic preservation and regeneration projects in the West but a new feature in China.

In the paper rituals and ceremonies, in the form of ancestor worship during New Year celebrations and temple fairs, in one village will be discussed with respect to their temporal, spatial, sensory and performative memory practices, and contrasted with attempt to re-create and re-imagine the past through heritage mapping and heritage trails in one urban neighbourhood. The different contexts, processes, and stakeholders in rural and urban China will be identified and discussed. In focus will also be the challenges and negotiations that occur when sites are elevated to heritage sites and cultural practices become inscribed as intangible heritage (or official cultural festivals) promoted and
administered by local governments or tourism companies rather than by the local community itself.