A well-baked Charter

This paper describes a collaborative project between the Chinese National Administration for Cultural Heritage, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Australian Heritage Commission. The aim of the project is to design and propagate a Charter, or set of guidelines, for heritage conservation practice in China – a Chinese equivalent of the Burra Charter.

The expression 'well baked' was used in the Ching Dynasty by the Chinese Emperor and his court to describe a barbarian (that is, a non-Chinese) who had attained a high level of Chinese culture and who had a high respect for Chinese civilisation. This was seen to be in desirable contrast to the normal barbarian who could be regarded as 'raw'. This phrase is explained in a remarkable book on the meeting of East and West – Alain Peyrefitte's *The Collision of Two Civilisations* – an account of the first British expedition to China in 1792, which was aimed at setting up a British Embassy in that country. This book has many pleasures and gives many insights – still valid – into the degree of misunderstanding possible between East and West. Here we can read two dramatically different views of the progress of the expedition and its likely success – one the assessment by the great Chinese Emperor Chen Long and the other by Lord McCartney, the leader of the British expedition. It has to be said that Chen Long's assessment was the more accurate, for the simple reason that the fate of the British expedition was ultimately in his hands.

The likelihood of British success was not helped by the fact that, of the 700 or so people who made up the British expedition, only one – John Staunton, the ten-year-old son of the deputy leader of the expedition – had learnt Chinese. He diligently studied it during the long sea passage to China. His elders found other occupations. As soon as he could, Chen Long withdrew the Portuguese priests who had acted as interpreters for the English. Thus at certain stages of the progress – most notably during the long-awaited interview with the Emperor – the English had to rely on the ten-year-old boy for written and spoken communication. The Emperor perceived that this boy was much more 'well baked' than the English Lords, and consequently paid him some real attention and bestowed some marks of favour on him.
A ‘well baked’ Charter is what the Chinese seek in our collaboration with them. They want a Charter that, while it acknowledges and uses international best practice, is essentially Chinese – following Chinese practice and fitting into Chinese culture. They want international help with the former aspects, while maintaining firm control over the latter. The challenge for us, if we were to add value to the process, was to overcome the language and cultural barriers to ensure that we truly understood each other and to appreciate the varying points of view that came from the different cultures.

**Background**

The Getty Conservation Institute, through its senior conservation project leader Dr Neville Agnew, has worked in China for more than 10 years. The Getty project has been to work with the Chinese managers to help conserve the ancient and beautiful Buddhist cave temples on the Silk Road, especially those at the World Heritage site of Magao in western China. In the course of this work, the Chinese requested that the Getty arrange a course on the management and conservation of such sites for Chinese site managers. I was involved in teaching at the course, using the methodology of the Burra Charter. In part, as result of this course and feedback from it, and at the suggestion of Dr Agnew, the Chinese requested the Getty Conservation Institute and the Australian Heritage Commission to assist in developing a Chinese code of practice for professional cultural heritage managers and specialists. Models such as the Burra Charter would be used as a basis for development.

We have now been working on the Charter for three years with our Chinese colleagues. The team consists of Dr Neville Agnew and Dr Martha Demas from the Getty Conservation Institute, Mr Zhang Bai and Mr Jin Hongkui and their colleagues from the National Administration of Cultural Heritage, Mr Peter Barker our interpreter, and Ms Kirsty Altenburg and myself from the Australian Heritage Commission.

The work began with a two-week trip to Australia by ten senior Chinese bureaucrats to study cultural heritage management in Australia, and to take time out from their busy schedule to work on the first draft of the Charter. Work has continued in China and Australia over the last 2 years refining the draft Charter, discussing each article in detail, and field-testing the results at sites in China such as Cheng De and Magao. At Magao, a draft plan of management using the Charter methodology has now been drawn up by senior staff, led by their Director, Mrs Fan.

The Charter is now in final draft and is scheduled to be launched in late 2000. Prior to this the Chinese authorities will hold a two-week workshop for all their Provincial-level cultural heritage managers to work through the Charter, and to agree on ways of implementing it. The Getty Conservation Institute and the Australian Heritage Commission have been asked to attend his workshop and to assist by providing relevant international examples of good practice. The proposal for the future is that the team – Getty Conservation Institute, Australian Heritage...
Commission and Chinese State Administration for Cultural Heritage – will work on implementing aspects of the Charter at various important sites in China.

**Chinese conservation issues**

China has a well-structured and relatively powerful heritage bureaucracy. There are 500,000 recorded heritage sites in China. Approximately 60,000 staff at a national, provincial, regional and local level are responsible for conserving these sites. Strong and thorough laws operate to protect the sites. The sites demonstrate the immense depth of culture and history that characterises Chinese civilisation.

The Chinese have always used the past as a guide to judging the present and to planning for the future. This has remained the case for most of the period after the foundation of the People's Republic of China (except for the period of the Cultural Revolution). One of the priorities of the new Republic was to protect and conserve the places that symbolised the long history and richness of civilisation in China. Hence the first cultural heritage manager was sent by the party hierarchy to safeguard the Magao cave temples, even before their rule had been firmly established throughout the whole country (see Figures 2–4).

The use of the past as a didactic device has left its mark on the selection and management of cultural sites. The 'best' sites have been carefully selected for protection – that is, those that tell us most about the high culture of, and important steps and developments in the history of, Chinese civilisation. And their conservation has been aimed at conserving the cultural values that the Chinese believe embody this civilisation. Stress on the importance of the continuity or renewal of Chinese culture has meant a cultural-heritage practice that often has a higher degree of intervention than its Western counterpart.

At the same time, the Chinese have been conscientious in studying international practice and in adopting Western methodologies relating to research and conservation. For example, the practice of archaeology and conservation of archaeological sites is a very
strong theme in China. The concept of archaeology and its research and field methodology is Western, but the aims of the work have reflected the Chinese interest in confirming, celebrating and exhibiting Chinese imperial culture.

Another example is the use of the Venice Charter. Elements of it can be discerned in Chinese heritage-conservation legislation, and it is widely recognised in China as the pre-eminent example of international best practice. Yet the Venice Charter, when we look at it closely, is more about conserving the past in stasis than acknowledging the contemporary value of sites. The sites are seen as having their principal significance as exemplars of past historic or aesthetic value, or as storehouses containing information about this past. The Venice Charter does not really deal with the issue of living sites that have a strong cultural continuity as one of their major elements of significance. Yet, despite the disruptions to Chinese culture and society, this theme of continuity is a very strong one at some sites and the revival and adaptation of traditional Chinese culture in Mainland China is adding to this tendency and to the complexities of modern site management.

One of the issues for the Chinese, therefore, is to consciously acknowledge this
mixture of Western methodology and traditional cultural-heritage values that characterises their practice. These strands need to be integrated to create a modern methodology that acknowledges international best practice but remains true to the Chinese sense of place and history. The impressive progress in cultural heritage management in China is one reason why the idea of a conservation Charter for China is attractive to the Chinese, who feel they can confidently undertake thoughtful analysis of their practice. Indeed, one of the most valuable parts of the exercise has been the conscious articulation and examination by our Chinese colleagues of their traditional practices and assumptions.

Another issue that is significant in China today is the opening up of China to Western economic and social ideas. One result of this for the Chinese heritage bureaucrats has been the ability to consider and re-work their practice more freely. This is becoming increasingly necessary because of the changes that modernisation is bringing to heritage conservation in China. Previously the Chinese bureaucracy could very tightly control the sites that it had listed. There was no challenge from the provinces, because of the centralised nature of the party structure, nor were there major dangers from development, competing use or private ownership. This is no longer the case. Additionally the whole cultural landscape in some areas of China, not just the listed sites, now needs sensitive consideration and the application of complex conservation methods if it is to survive.

Privatisation of heritage assets, and inevitably in the course of time, of professional heritage practice is also a challenge. The Chinese see the need for a code of practice that is generally accepted in the heritage profession in China and which is

Figure 5 Tourism to very remote areas – on the Silk Road, Central Asia. (S. Sullivan)
voluntarily adopted. On their visit to Australia they were further convinced of this. We had many discussions with the Chinese about the validity of some Australian conservation work during their visit here and the Chinese also witnessed lively debate about conservation issues among Australian practitioners. However, one of the key aspects of Australian cultural heritage practice that they noticed and appreciated was the universal use of the Burra Charter language and the acceptance and understanding of its methodology, even during the conduct of animated debate about the acceptability of the outcomes of a particular heritage policy.

The Chinese also face a range of problems relating to site management. To date, the emphasis on conservation work in China has been on physical conservation. This has been essential because of the major problems faced by the Chinese in the conservation of complex and ancient sites. However, increased visitor numbers and the opening up of many sites have meant that management issues have come to the fore. Chinese management has traditionally been very hierarchical and segmented, with little overall site coordination and integration of various roles. Some jobs, such as maintenance and visitor services, have not been seen as core responsibilities for senior managers. This is not a lot different to the management issues facing many heritage bureaucracies. The Chinese are perhaps unusual in recognising these issues so clearly and in seeking to rectify them as part of their review process.

The initial trip to Australia undertaken by the Chinese provided an important and challenging opportunity to examine some of these issues. Australian heritage sites, in comparison with those of China, are either very subtle and low key (for example the ancient Aboriginal sites of Australia) or scarce evidence of very recent European migration. There is little that Australia can teach the Chinese about the spectacular and ancient places of their own civilisation. On the other hand, issues such as the significance of continued use, contemporary social significance, integrated management systems, the involvement of the private sector and the protection of cultural landscapes were very interesting to the Chinese.

The debate about the importance of fabric versus the importance of continued use was a key theme of the visit, with discussion focusing
on the adaptation of a 19th-century department store that had sacrificed some of its original fabric to allow its continued use as a department store in a modern context. The qualities of social significance as a cultural value were also hotly debated. Was it an 'intrinsic' value that the site had, a value of equal importance to the site's historic aesthetic or research significance, as the Burra Charter clearly stated, or was it a secondary value, the acknowledgment of which brought potential dangers to fabric conservation and to rigorous significance assessment practice?

Another interesting difference was the wider and more flexible legal and customary framework for heritage conservation in Australia than in China. China has had a set of carefully assessed and graded sites with strict rules about their conservation and strong bureaucratic control over them. However, apart from these sites, there are few more-general provisions that protect cultural landscapes or allow for development and land planning provisions that could benefit heritage sites – including those not formally listed. Australia's more flexible system demonstrated weaknesses as well as strengths. However, despite perceiving this difference, the Chinese were very interested in learning more about the Australian system, since it was clear to them that they require a more comprehensive regime of heritage conservation in order to deal with the challenges of modern China.

The Chinese were also very interested in the extent of private practice in the heritage field in Australia and I think were impressed by the quality and dedication of people working in the industry. The wide use of the Burra Charter by private practitioners, their adherence to it in debating heritage issues with their clients, and the mutual support provided by Australia ICOMOS also interested the Chinese, and they could see possibilities for the own future practice in this model.

**Differences and similarities**

The Charter is in final draft. It is owned by the Chinese and it would be inappropriate to discuss its provisions in detail prior to their official acceptance of...
it and its official release. Significance assessment is at the heart of the new China Charter, and the process of conservation planning laid down in it mirrors the Burra Charter methodology to a considerable extent. Formal recognition of the importance of significance assessment prior to management decisions is potentially the most important element of the Charter. The articles of the Charter proceed in the same order as those of the Burra Charter and cover much the same ground. However, a number of very interesting differences between the Burra Charter and the draft China Charter have also emerged.

As I have already hinted, there is a significant difference in the definitions of significance. The notion of social value has been a difficult one for the Chinese to deal with. This is because at the present time the cultural heritage professionals are besieged by a very strong push, especially in the provinces, to use cultural heritage sites to raise revenue directly or indirectly through tourism and associated development. In this situation it is easy for social significance to be perverted or defined in a simplistic way as any value that the local community now ascribes to the site, including its capacity to bring in money. Instead, the Chinese have provided a very careful definition of what we might call public value, which seeks to acknowledge legitimate contemporary use of sites while at the same time conserving their other values.

The definition of 'original state' is also one that has caused a lot of discussion. Chinese legislation contains this phrase and lays down that nothing must be done to a site that compromises this 'original state'. What does this mean? There is an
internal conflict between this rule, and the necessity to pay due regard to significant past change to fabric and meaning at a site, and indeed to contemporary use and value. The Chinese have addressed their problem, once again, by careful definition and by a clear emphasis on conserving all important periods of a site’s development. In a way, this potential internal conflict in the China Charter reminds me of one which is inherent in the Burra Charter – the fact that while the beginning of the Charter defines cultural significance broadly and defines conservation as the conservation of all the elements of significance that a site possesses, the subsequent articles of the Charter have, until recent amendments, concentrated exclusively on fabric conservation.

Another difference between the Burra Charter and the China Charter is the latter’s emphasis on management. The China Charter acknowledges the crucial role of maintenance and management in the long-term conservation of sites and contains a number of articles that relate to this important area. This is a crucial need in China, which the China Charter reflects with more comment on management and management process than is contained in the Burra Charter.

The Charter itself is relatively short (though longer than the Burra Charter) but the accompanying commentary is quite long and detailed. It is much more so than the Burra Charter commentaries. There is a danger that the details will drown-out some of the simpler messages of the Charter. On the other hand, at this stage of the development of Chinese bureaucratic practice, detailed directions are probably expected and will serve as a safety net for nervous practitioners.

Writing the Charter has been an invaluable experience for our Chinese colleagues and for us. The project has been treated with the utmost seriousness and very senior cultural heritage managers have devoted a great deal of time to it. The Charter is indeed ‘well baked’ in a sense that it is truly a Chinese product with every article seeming to meet contemporary Chinese needs and understood and approved by the key players. It has been important for the Getty Conservation Institute and Australian Heritage Commission partners to acknowledge this and to hand final decision-making, and hence ownership, to our Chinese colleagues, even when full agreement about a particular issue was not reached. In selling the Charter, it will be important for the Chinese to demonstrate that it arises out of Chinese tradition and progresses naturally from the very considerable, and in some circumstances heroic, achievements of the Chinese in conserving the great heritage of China since the foundation of the People’s Republic.

Selling the Charter is a very formidable task – we are talking about a quarter of the world’s population, 60,000 heritage managers, more than 40 different cultural groups, and a vast variety and richness of sites. The Chinese are actively seeking the assistance and cooperation of Australia ICOMOS in propagating the China Charter and making it a living document throughout China, because they have seen the Burra Charter in operation and are appreciative, indeed one might say envious, of its almost universal acceptance – a well baked charter for Australian palates.

endnotes