Repairing Broken Continuity: Garden Heritage in the Historic Villages Xidi and Hongcun, China

Lei Gao, Jan Woudstra

Abstract
This paper investigates the role of local people in conservation by examining residential gardens and the concept of heritage in China. Current conservation guidelines (e.g. the Burra Charter, the China Principles) acknowledge local people as participants, however, their power is often curtailed and it is officials and professionals who are the real decision makers. The authors argue that local people ought to have a more significant role in some aspects of heritage conservation, but before doing so their association with heritage should be thoroughly understood. Two Chinese villages, Xidi and Hongcun, have interpreted conservation guidelines differently; one approach created museum-like conditions, where the emphasis lies on preserving the gardens as they were in 2000 (when the village was listed as a World Heritage Site). They can therefore only be appreciated at one level, namely as archaeological remnants without the whole range of sensory richness that would historically have been found in traditional gardens. In contrast, the other village paid less attention to historic fabric and created fortuitous circumstances, as a result of a greater need and freedom that saw the best conditions for restoration of its garden culture. Within the context of China’s rapid development this second approach may be of greater importance than the conservation of relics in a museum-like or archaeological sense.

Introduction
Garden Culture of Xidi and Hongcun: Political Change and Broken Continuity

The villages of Xidi and Hongcun are located in the south of Anhui province, a mountainous region historically known as Huizhou (a name which is still used) and renowned for its distinctive merchant houses and gardens. Unlike the majority of the Chinese who at the time subsisted on agriculture, Huizhou people lived from trading due to the shortage of farmland in Huizhou. From the late 15th century, Huizhou merchants extended their trade well beyond the region into the Lower Yangzi River, the economic centre in contemporary China. By establishing a network with bureaucrats and officials, Huizhou merchants successfully controlled the market in salt, timber and tea as well as other products, and assured that Huizhou became one of the wealthiest regions in southern China. As a result the arts flourished; exquisite houses and gardens were established; there was a range of public projects including schools, roads and bridges, and villages were improved with small public gardens at the entrances referred to as ‘water mouth gardens’. These joint improvements created a distinctive regional character referred to as Huizhou culture which was particularly noted for its distinctive merchant houses and gardens.

From the second half of the nineteenth century China became embroiled in a series of wars. The imperial court fought Western forces over trade expansion; at the same time there were domestic wars, notably the Taiping Rebellion in which peasant armies rebelled against the imperial government. These troubles caused a sharp economic decline, which also had a significant influence on Huizhou trade. The trading network established and maintained by Huizhou merchants over generations was destroyed. Huizhou became a battlefield, which caused significant damage to property. With insufficient resources to restore damaged homes and to maintain the former merchant lifestyle, the Huizhou building and garden culture soon declined (Zhang & Wang 1995: 5, 609-610).

With the rise of communism in 1949 free trade was banned and the merchant class was ousted. As elsewhere the main occupation changed to agriculture, but with land shortages in this populous area; by the 1950s Huizhou had turned into one of the most impoverished regions in China. Meanwhile, the Land Reform movement of the early 1950s transformed the living conditions, with large residences being confiscated from their merchant owners, divided into small flats and allocated to poor peasants. In other instances residences were demolished to enable the building materials to be re-used. The general lack of resources made neglect evident everywhere. Ornamental gardens were considered as unnecessary and unaffordable luxuries which did not fit a proletarian life style. Many private and public gardens were converted into vegetable plots, cleared to provide land for housing, or used as school grounds. After such a lengthy period of decline, Huizhou gardens and its garden culture had virtually disappeared. Although over half of Huizhou buildings remained because they had been adapted to new uses, such ‘usefulness’ could not be demonstrated for ornamental gardens and only few survived (Gao 2006b; Gao 2007).

Xidi and Hongcun were known from existing literature as some of the best surviving villages in the Huizhou region. However, whereas initial site visits in 1997 and 2001 confirmed that more historical buildings and gardens had survived than in other villages, Xidi and Hongcun each had fewer than ten surviving gardens. Some of these gardens were in a poor condition, several only surviving in parts, with an individual courtyard or some ornamental stones. They all suffered greatly from a lack of care and maintenance.
However, return visits in 2006 and 2007 revealed interesting changes. The gardens in Xidi had remained in a similar state of neglect, however in Hongcun there had been significant improvements. Existing gardens had been restored and additionally new gardens had appeared on vacant plots. Such contrasting results unavoidably generated a series of questions: what are the factors which created the different fortunes of gardens in these two villages? Can these new gardens in Hongcun still be referred to as heritage? Or, what do we mean by heritage in this instance? What is valued? How is it possible to restore a disrupted garden(ing) tradition? What is the best way to preserve garden heritage in this instance?

Methodology

Visits to Xidi and Hongcun over an interval of five years revealed significant differences asking the question why these changes had occurred and making their comparison an obvious case study for the investigation of the affect of different management styles. Xidi and Hongcun were in similar geographical settings with similar cultural background and with gardens and garden(ing) culture that had been similar until the end of the 20th century. These similarities in the initial condition enabled the subsequent changes in approaches to be investigated and compared on a common basis. This was done by reviewing the administrative structures for conservation and tourist management, the condition of existing gardens and the values held by those involved with gardens, professionals, politicians and residents. Both private and public gardens of the two villages were studied and compared, although this paper only presents the results relating to the survey of private gardens. Such comparisons are helpful in revealing different attitudes and attachments to gardens and how decision makers had different attitudes both with regard to how they valued gardens and understood the principles of conservation. The research was done through a number of site visits, where the condition of the gardens was recorded by producing annotated sketch plans and through photography. This was followed up with interviews of the garden occupiers, local officials, tourism managers, scholars and an architect.

A total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in Xidi and Hongcun. All interviewees were key figures with responsibility for heritage management, including two local government officials (one at each village), three managers of tourist companies (one at Xidi and two at Hongcun) and two well-known local scholars (one at each village). The interviewees were asked the same questions, which included an introductory question exploring their previous experience of working with heritage; their opinions on current heritage management; their perceived values of the gardens; their visions with respect to an ideal scenario and the possible future of these gardens; and their understanding of conservation and heritage values in general. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into texts, which were then analysed using the software NVIVO 8. Answers to the same questions were compared for differences and similarities. This helped to reveal the perceived heritage values, the real decision makers and how their participation affected the garden heritage.

Additionally twelve private gardens were chosen as case studies; six at each village, selected after the field survey and including suggestions from local officials and scholars. All of these gardens have remnant historical (at least a hundred years old) features and are locally known as ‘ancient gardens’. The garden owners were given a questionnaire that asked about their relationship with their garden, maintenance and alterations (if any), daily life in their garden, attitudes towards gardens as heritage, their vision of the future of their garden, etc. Sketch plans were drawn in situ and photographs were taken to record the garden layout and the location of garden features and plants.

Heritage Conservation and Tourism Management at Xidi and Hongcun

Attitudes and Approaches to Cultural Heritage in China: A Brief Review

Conservation ethics are shaped by the way in which a person or society perceive life, the world and themselves. The traditional Chinese worldview sees human history as a cyclical process rather than a linear progression. Therefore, not authenticity of individual features, but harmonisation of an ensemble sets the fundamental standard of being ‘authentic’ (Bodde 1957). This view makes reconstruction rather than preservation morally acceptable as a conservation method. Before the 1930s, such negation of authenticity as a value dominated architecture and garden management in China. If resources were available, old structures and features were periodically renewed and changed in order to maintain structural stability and visual perfection.

During the 1930s, Liang Sicheng, who had become an influential conservationist after an architectural training in the USA, introduced Western conservation philosophy and popularised the emphasis on material authenticity as ‘restoring the old as the old’. This was a juxtaposition to the traditional notion of ‘restoring the old as the new’ (Cui 2004). Meanwhile, the nationalistic government and local gentry also promoted heritage preservation for the sake of building up a national identity, but these efforts were soon interrupted by wars. In a different context of mass production and industrialisation in the communist era during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the government ordered cultural objects to be listed and protected. Yet from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, this was famously annulled during the Cultural Revolution which lent much lesser significance to this, and by disregarding it as part of the imperial past changed national perception of cultural heritage. It was not until 1982 that some of the historic values were restored when China promulgated a new law on heritage conservation entitled Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics (1982, revised 1991 and 2002). This was primarily led by the desire to promote tourism and included imperial palaces, temples, as well as some traditional villages with buildings and gardens. It also opened the possibility for regional governments to organise their own policies for heritage conservation (Standing Committee of the Provincial Peoples Congress of Anhui province 1997). In 2000 China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage, assisted by ICOMOS (Australia) and the Getty Conservation Institute from the U.S.A., drafted its first conservation regulations following international standards in Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (The China Principles). These were promulgated in 2004 as national guidelines for heritage conservation and management and they reinforced authenticity and integrity as the key issue of conservation ethics (China ICOMOS 2000, revised 2004). Unfortunately the China Principles do not reflect the diverse nature of heritage sites and their contemporary...
values to society, which both the Florence Charter (ICOMOS-IFLA 1962) and the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1999) have as a core interest. Instead, they define conservation as ‘all measures carried out to preserve the physical remains of sites and their historic settings’ and therefore returns the meaning of conservation to preservation based on protection, maintenance, technical intervention and management. This conservative approach is potentially counterproductive when dealing with landscape, which is always in a process of change. The China Principles were followed by Methods of Conservation and Management of World Cultural Heritage (State Culture Administration of PRC 2006), which concentrated on the most significant heritage sites. From 2006 onwards the government ordered the second Saturday of each June as a Cultural Heritage Day aiming to generate popular interest and promote care of cultural heritage.

Since the early 1980s the focus in China has been on economic development and much of the urban expansion resulted from this has been to the detriment of heritage. If the cost of preserving historical buildings and gardens turns out to be larger than razing them and building anew, the decision is generally for the cheaper option, particularly as decision makers are mainly governmental officials rather than architectural and conservation professionals. This view of built heritage as a hindrance to economic development is one that perpetuates. For the officials in charge, the faster they demolish old structures and begin new projects, the faster they are able to progress in their careers (Meyer 2008: 177-8).

The development of the tourist industry is seen as one of the most effective ways to promote heritage values: ‘But often this form of development is haphazard instead of careful [...] China wants UNESCO World Heritage sites the same way actors want Oscars, for the recognition’ (Meyer 2008: 179). This means that heritage values are primarily seen in terms of economic gain or as a way to accumulate prestigious awards. This attitude can be seen in both Xidi and Hongcun.

Making Old Villages a Source of Tourism

In 1978, after three decades of isolation from the West, China reopened its doors and launched a series of reforms to reinvigorate the national economy. This change meant that from a self sufficient economy based on agriculture and manufacture, a more varied economical basis was pursued, which included tourism. In 1979, China’s economic reform was promoted by Deng Xiaoping, the party leader who championed tourism (Deng 2000). It took a while before this new concept was explored but after being encouraged by a group of architects, the first group of foreign tourists from Japan visited Xidi in spring 1985. When this proved to be a success, the village quickly gained a reputation with visitor numbers increasing fast. This encouraged the local government to seriously consider tourism as a source of income and to establish the Xidi Tourism Service Company in 1993, run by local staff with revenue raised to benefit the local authority, which thereby managed to increase welfare in the area providing free education as well as pensions for the elderly (Gao 2006a). On the other hand, strict rules and punishment were set up to prevent any illegal alteration. A resident who created a new door through an old wall of her house was imprisoned for three years; this provided a general warning to all other villagers (Xu et al. 2006). In 1996 they took the decision to outsource tourist management to a ‘Tourist Development Company’ - a private Beijing based company - leasing it to them for a period of thirty years. It was thought that local people would benefit more from an independent and professionally organised tourist company. Indeed the involvement of a commercial organisation led to instant investments in infrastructure and marketing, and meant that Hongcun quickly became a popular tourist destination. Although Xidi had started tourist development almost ten years earlier, Hongcun quickly caught up, and from 2003 exceeded Xidi in number of visitors and revenue (Gao 2006c). (See Figure 1)

In 2000, Xidi and Hongcun were jointly designated as World Heritage Sites because ‘their street plan, their architecture and decoration, and the integration of houses with comprehensive water systems are unique surviving examples’ (UNESCO 2000). This worldwide recognition of the heritage value boosted tourist numbers in both villages and encouraged the desire to improve and restore private gardens as both the means of attracting further tourists and as a way to improve the local environment, thereby increasing the quality of life.

Heritage Management of Xidi and Hongcun

The heritage management of these villages has been organised very differently. Xidi, where the local government manages the tourist industry, set up strict rules about the management of houses and gardens based on heritage management in the spirit of the China Principles, a ‘China’s Burra Charter’ but more rigid and less accepting of change (Gao & Woudstra 2007; Qian 2007). These restricted alterations to houses and gardens provided residents only with responsibility for daily maintenance. Material authenticity was maintained with a carrot-and-stick policy wherein residents were rewarded for following official policies to the letter. They were actively engaged in various events organised by the Xidi authority and vouched their allegiance to conservation policies by communally writing letters to the UN general secretary. In return for their expression of commitment to the heritage, villagers received welfare and a share in income generated from the revenue (Gao 2006a). On the other hand, strict rules and punishment were set up to prevent any illegal alteration. A resident who created a new door through an old wall of her house was imprisoned for three years; this provided a general warning to all other villagers (Xu et al. 2006).

In contrast to Xidi, the local government of Hongcun was less concerned with the principles of heritage conservation. The close relationship of the regional government with the tourist management company means that the latter is reaping the main profits. However, while the local government has lost some of its revenue and ability to decide over the nature of tourism as it is outsourced, it has reaped benefits by means of a regular income. Unfortunately, the locals have benefited less and share only a small portion of the revenue. While this is problematic, the local government encouraged the residents to generate their own businesses, such as producing and selling souvenirs, opening restaurants and guest houses. These became additional attractions for the urban tourists who come here to experience the ‘happy life of the farmers’, which
became the way in which life in the village was represented with reference to the recent past in which they exalted their life's experiences as farmers, rather than merchants. Soon, dozens of families opened their homes as hostels or restaurants. When tourist numbers kept increasing and with further experience in their management, some villagers used their resources to improve their gardens in order to provide additional services and be more competitive. These improvements were often done by the locals themselves and included extensive modifications and adaptations, which were clearly against the China Principles and most international charters about the definition and process of conservation (Australia ICOMOS 1999; China ICOMOS 2004). Besides the gardens that had been renovated there were also new gardens built in a traditional manner. As a result, while the surviving gardens in Xidi have not changed much since 2000, gardens in Hongcun have not only been regenerated almost beyond recognition, but have also increased in numbers. It seems therefore that the authenticity of the gardens of Hongcun, or even its historic environment as a whole, may be questioned. As this appears to conflict with UNESCO conservation guidance, it merits further investigation. This is done by surveying the condition of gardens in both villages and the people associated with them in order to detect what is really valued in these examples.
Gardens and Garden Culture in Xidi and Hongcun

Private Gardens in Xidi and Hongcun: A Brief Description of Twelve Examples

The six gardens investigated in Xidi (see Table 1 and Figure 2), except for one example, are included within a residential complex permanently inhabited by the residents. One other occupant had recently moved elsewhere into a new building, with the old house being boarded up as it had become structurally unsound. The gardens however were open to visitors on request. Those residents with well preserved houses and gardens suitable to be visited by tourist parties are contracted to open their residence on a daily basis. They become shareholders and receive annual returns from the tourist company. They are not allowed to convert their property for other uses, but are permitted to have a small provisory stall to sell souvenirs. As the gardens were visited daily by hundreds of tourists, residents tended to escape in order to avoid tourists. It was noticeable that there was little evidence of upkeep of the gardens and except for keeping them clean and tidy there was no physical difference compared with ten years earlier.

The six gardens of Hongcun (see Table 2 and Figure 2) are used in a different way. While in Xidi residents are passive with respect to the garden visits, in Hongcun many residents are actively engaged in generating tourist trade. Four of the six gardens had been adapted to new uses as family restaurants and hostels and had been creatively improved. Two of the gardens not aiming to attract tourists had been adapted by their owners to create better living conditions.

In comparison with the gardens in Xidi, those in Hongcun are more engagingly designed with garden buildings and features, and better planted. It is clear that the owners associate more closely with their gardens and they are therefore part of daily life.

Local Residents’ Attitudes and Approaches towards Their Garden: A Comparison between Xidi and Hongcun

The questionnaire of garden owners was helpful in revealing the reasons for the physical differences between gardens in Xidi and Hongcun (see Table 3).

The interviews with garden occupiers and surveys of gardens reveal a wide range of issues that can be identified as indicators of attachment; it indicates how gardens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Visual appearance (See Figure 2, in which each picture is numbered to indicate the respective garden)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deyi Tang (Virtue and Righteousness Hall)</td>
<td>three gardens (one historical fish pond)</td>
<td>residential place (for many generations); souvenir stall</td>
<td>Ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi Yuan (Jade Garden)</td>
<td>six gardens and courtyards (one historical fish pond)</td>
<td>residential place (for retirement); family hostel</td>
<td>Hb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maohua Ju (House of Splendid Flowering)</td>
<td>one garden and one courtyard</td>
<td>residential place</td>
<td>Hc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jianqin Xie (Sword and Zither Pavilion)</td>
<td>one garden with a historical fish pond</td>
<td>residential place; Family hostel</td>
<td>Hd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jushan Tang (Benevolence Living Hall)</td>
<td>one garden with a historical fish pond</td>
<td>residential place; family restaurant and hostel</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songhe Tang (Pine and Crane Hall)</td>
<td>one garden with a historical fish pond</td>
<td>family hostel and restaurant</td>
<td>Hf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Residential gardens at Hongcun
(Source: extracted from field surveys and informal talks with garden owners at Hongcun, conducted by Lei Gao in August 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical knowledge</th>
<th>Xidi</th>
<th>Hongcun</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time spent in gardens</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening work</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of enjoyment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden expenses</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>100x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden modified</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Attitudes and approaches towards garden: a comparison between residents in Xidi and Hongcun
Notes: ‘+’ means that it is of greater significance than ‘-’. (Source: extracted from twelve questionnaires of garden owners at Xidi and Hongcun conducted by Lei Gao in August 2007)
are valued. It is thought that the greater the attachment, i.e. the higher a garden is valued, the more likely it is to survive. The garden occupiers at Hongcun score better on a wide range of issues; they have a greater historic knowledge; they spend more time in the garden and do more gardening work; they spend more than a hundred times as much money on their gardens than is done in Xidi; they have all modified their garden; they have a vision of how they might develop it; they see it as essential in order to enhance the living environment and the quality of life. Most residents have plans for renovation and are engaged in the process of doing so.

Garden occupiers in Xidi see conservation as the prime objective, and while they have learned to accept this as their responsibility, in fact, they have little motivation in any maintenance and upkeep of their gardens. There is insufficient official advice to enable them to manage their garden with confidence. Conservation is largely understood as ‘preserving the old buildings as they are’. Therefore, ‘doing nothing’ turned into the safest method and this is what the majority of residents have actually adopted. As a result there is minimum maintenance and expenditure just enough to preserve them. There is a minimum or no engagement in the processes of gardening and residents do not see how this might improve the quality of their lives. The notable difference is that there is a weaker sense of community and local pride in Hongcun, which suggests that garden making is probably quite competitive there. The answers also provide the sense that residents of Xidi are all in the same boat in being ‘subordinate to the central power’, which results in their stronger ‘sense of community’ and ‘local pride’. Their situation might be interpreted as living in a museum and being the custodians of the heritage. So from these observations it is clear that, in terms of managing private gardens, the main decision makers in Hongcun are the property owners, while those in Xidi are governmental officials, professionals and tourism managers.

New Gardens as Heritage?

While in Xidi surviving gardens are preserved as they were in the year 2000, in actuality the approach used there has led to social detachment resulting in a gradual deterioration of the fabric. In Hongcun old gardens are renovated by their owners and new gardens are constructed. This raises questions about the heritage values of these gardens. Are legally preserved but deteriorating gardens more ‘authentic’ than those which have been renovated? Which village preserves its garden heritage better?

In order to answer these questions, four individual gardens, two in Xidi and two in Hongcun, are compared with respect to their historic development, their designs and features, as well as their use and meanings from the point of the occupiers. This is to provide a basis for understanding the current garden culture of Xidi and Hongcun. These are to be compared with traditional Huizhou gardens, as they can be understood from historical research and neighbouring examples. This distinctive Huizhou character is then measured against gardens in Xidi and Hongcun.

Historically, Huizhou garden culture was the result of a prosperous trade economy developed by merchants and it might be argued that ‘trade’ is once again the economic foundation of the gardens, although this is now in the form of tourism related trade. Huizhou merchants gardens were initially built mainly for two purposes: to create a comfortable and meaningful place for living and to provide an admirable social space in order to entertain a business network. The recent revival of the garden culture in Hongcun is the result of the tourist economy: villagers renovate their gardens in order to increase competitiveness in attracting tourists, as well as to fulfill their desire for a better quality of life.

Traditionally, the design of Huizhou gardens adopts feng-shui theories and values of Neo-Confucianism, for example, in the selection of the site for a dwelling place (facing open land or water and backed by hills), and the orientation of the entrance. The best direction is believed to be facing southeast (a south facing entrance, normally the most popular in other areas of China, is seen as inauspicious because south has the nature of fire, and fire was thought to destroy the wealth accumulated by merchants). Feng-shui also determined ideas about the direction of water flow; i.e. never let water flow outside, but lead it into the courtyard, since water has the symbolic meaning of wealth. To let water escape from one’s house is compared with becoming poor. Huizhou, the hometown of Zhu Xi, one of the foremost founders of Neo-Confucianism, was strongly influenced by Neo-Confucianism ideas. This is evident in its gardens as they have been laid out on an ordered plan and are rich in symbolic meaning through their various features and decoration, with an emphasis on diligence in study and agriculture, and obedience to social hierarchy. Neo-Confucian ideas survive in Hongcun today, where visitors are told by the local residents about the unique feng-shui values of gardens and the symbolic meanings, often with good awareness of historic garden features. Additionally, some historical gardens of Huizhou have exotic garden features (such as fountains, Western style ornaments, etc.) and themes adopted from other garden cultures in China (Gao 2003). This resulted from trade connections with other regions and inherent curiosity about new things. Interestingly, in various conversations with today’s garden owners in Hongcun, it appears that they also have collected ideas from distant places, either by visiting gardens in Suzhou best known for its famous gardens or through advice given by visitors.
In terms of garden making, most renovated or new gardens of Hongcun are designed by their owners based on their requirements (such as for private use by the family, or to serve as a house restaurant, etc.) and constructed by local carpenters and craftsmen familiar with vernacular techniques inherited over many generations. Before 2000, many local craftsmen left their hometowns and worked in factories as a consequence of limited use for their craft. But the boom in garden construction has provided good opportunities and has meant that many have returned to their home town. It is clear that this has helped to restore traditional building and garden design techniques.

The new gardens reflect the unique Huizhou character in an appreciation of order and regularity, which in contrast to the naturalistic character of most gardens in the region of Lower Yangzi River, adopted simple orthogonal layouts with straight paths and walls, without any occult serpentine walks concealed, for example, by rockeries. Planting was also simple, often planted in lines. All this reflected the continuing influence of Neo-Confucianism (Gao 2003). Some of the new gardens of Hongcun however are more generic and depart from these local characteristics, while in Xidi they have lost their completeness in that they no longer appear to respond to life, culture and customs, and have literally turned into 'cultural relics'.

The study of the historic planting tradition in Huizhou suggests that more than half the number of species of plants were utilitarian species, including fruit trees, kitchen herbs and medicinal plants. Although exotic species were also appreciated by Huizhou residents, most ornamental plants in their gardens were local species. Many plants in Huizhou embed moral values and have therefore been planted for educational purposes. For example, winter sweet (Chimonanthus praecox) in gardens provides the spirit of endurance and confronts hardship with beauty and elegance. Today, the plants grown in private gardens in Xidi and Hongcun are mostly native species. Useful, beautiful and meaningful are still key values for local people in choosing their plants. This reflects the continuity of garden tradition in Huizhou. However, there are fewer plant species in Xidi gardens than in Hongcun gardens suggesting a greater enthusiasm for active gardening with plants in Hongcun.

Discussions And Conclusion

The case studies reveal that different aspects in these World Heritage Sites are valued as ‘heritage’. The Huizhou garden tradition has been restored by residents in Hongcun by enabling them to revive a gardening tradition. The designs and features not only add new meanings to the gardens, they also provide an attachment to the place that is not repeated in sterile museum-like approaches, such as at Xidi. Therefore it is believed that the loss of historical features and authenticity through renovation can be outweighed by the revival of this tradition. While this may not be a general rule, it seems to be applicable in this situation which concerns residential gardens only. Unfortunately these are unique instances; traditional houses and gardens in China have been fast disappearing to make way for high-rise and more or less identical buildings. For this reason it is even more important that traditional living quarters with gardens should be preserved, as they may indeed once again form models for sustainable ways of living. In this context it is even more important that the traditional and threatened garden culture should be kept alive, but in a manner that is meaningful to their occupants. Gardens are therefore an important part of our heritage.

In terms of garden conservation, there are two contrasting approaches. One is to preserve the historical features by preventing any change and to restore the lost buildings and landscapes by reinstating their historical appearance (aesthetics), but adapted for a new purpose (e.g. for tourism, as a museum). The other way is to handle places (i.e. gardens) in a way one’s forefathers would have done: for the general purpose of improving the living environment by maintaining and adapting them to new requirements. The residential gardens of Hongcun are an excellent example of the latter; they are less ‘authentic’ in terms of original materials and designs, but they are more ‘authentic’ in meanings and uses. This example highlights that heritage does not only consists of objects, but also of activities, memories, knowledge and skills which are carried by the people who associate with it.

The examples of the case studies reveal distinct methods of heritage management by non-trained residents. Whereas the importance of training was recognized as part of the process of the Xidi village being declared as heritage, this was not the case at Hongcun, where vital information was passed on between different generations. Surrupitiously this has resulted in an affordable and therefore more sustainable way of conserving garden heritage. It has meant that the broken continuity with respect to the meanings of heritage to the local people has been repaired.

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