The begetting of charters: genesis of the China Principles

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The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China – the “China Principles” – are comprehensive guidelines for the conservation and management of immovable cultural heritage (Agnew and Demas 2002). Like all such documents, the China Principles is a product of its time, exhibiting strong continuity with past conservation practice in China as it has developed internally over the last 70 years, while accepting new approaches to conservation and management planning developed in the west. Although there is well-developed national legislation (Law of the PRC (People’s Republic of China) on the Protection of Cultural Relics, 2002) for the protection of cultural heritage and many regulations and ordinances detailing conservation procedures, the Principles are the first set of professional, non-regulatory guidelines for the People’s Republic. As such, they constitute a significant step not only towards a consistent and deliberate, values-based approach to conservation, the Principles’ particular debt to the Burra Charter, but also towards the development of professionalism in the practice of conservation.

Figure 1 The China Principles have been printed in both Chinese and English, and are also available on the Getty Conservation Institute, Australia ICOMOS, and Australian Heritage Council web sites. (Getty Conservation Institute)

Continuity: historical roots of conservation practice

In content and formulation the Principles incorporate legal and professional approaches to the conservation and management of cultural heritage that have their roots in the early part of the twentieth century. Legislation on the protection of cultural heritage goes back to the very end of the Qing Dynasty with the promulgation of the 1909 ordinance (Lai, Demas and Agnew 2004), while certain practices and legal formulations go back even further. For example, the four legal prerequisites (demarcation of the boundaries of a site; erection of a plaque declaring a site a protected entity; creation of an archive for records; and designation of an organisation or person dedicated to management) have a long history that may be traced to the mid-Qing dynasty in the late eighteenth century. The beginnings of professional practice came out of the innovative and formative period of the 1920s and 1930s in tandem with the development of the disciplines of archaeology and architectural history. Preeminent in the development of architectural history and conservation was Liang Sicheng (1901-1972) who recognized the value of ancient architecture and the need for its preservation, as well as the importance of raising social awareness as a means to achieving its survival. Liang’s ideas parallel those of the Athens and Venice Charters in rejecting restoration to splendid and new condition and advocating a respect for ancient architecture as an authentic record of the past. Liang’s initial prominence after 1949, and his subsequent decline and victimisation during the Cultural Revolution are reflections of the ambivalence the new order felt towards the past: on the one hand, the native Chinese respect for tradition and China’s greatness in history, and on the other a desire that flowed and ebbed at various times between 1949 and 1979 to sweep away the physical manifestations of that past as a reminder of a corrupt feudalism. Yet, Liang remains a figure of great stature in Chinese architectural history and his seminal ideas and emphasis on physical fabric permeate conservation practice and theory to the present day including a strong influence on the China Principles (Lai, Demas, and Agnew 2004). What Liang and his successors could not have foreseen was the explosion of development and social change that would hit China in the 1980s and have a profound impact on the cultural heritage.

Opening up: development and tourism

The opening of China after 1979, under Deng Xiaoping, was a major catalyst for change. To realise how rapid economic development and social change is in China consider that 20 years ago (in 1984) the first private vehicle appeared in Beijing – an anomaly amongst the myriad of bicycles. Today five concentric beltways ring the city and premier brands of vehicles are commonplace. In cities large and small throughout China, this pattern is being repeated. Nowhere is development more rapid or on the scale seen in cities like Beijing and Shanghai – it is as though a new frontier has been opened, a sort of latter day Gold Rush, which indeed it is. The influence of these changes and their physical effects can be seen throughout China. The consequences for China’s traditions, its built and archaeological heritage are dire, and continuing. Much has been lost, through over restoration or compromised authenticity. What future has China’s cultural heritage?
This question is, of course, rhetorical or even meaningless for most Chinese, some of whom, with new-found wealth and a freedom to move within the country, increasingly visit historical sites, and see evidence of architectural restoration projects in which China's imperial history is being reconstructed or dressed in bright new paint. Hand-in-hand with development has been the rise of the tourism industry, which is heavily dependent upon the historic heritage and also, ironically, beginning to significantly threaten it. Domestic tourism numbers in China dwarf those of any other country, with 870 million domestic visitors, 31.6 million overseas visitors in 2003 (China National Tourist Office, 2004); increasingly, international visitors to sites contribute to the rapidly expanding tourism industry.

The opening of China has also brought with it a renewed engagement with the international cultural, scholarly and scientific community. China ratified the World Heritage Convention (1986), and joined ICCROM, and plays an increasing role in ICOMOS. Authorities have also welcomed involvement of foreign institutions such as the GCI (Getty Conservation Institute) beginning in 1988. These developments created a productive climate that allowed the creation of long-term collaborations such as led to the development of the China Principles.

The need for good heritage management

Professional heritage conservation and management practice in China scarcely had time to recover from the disasters of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) before the new extraneous forces of development and tourism, described above, mushroomed and produced new threats to the long-term conservation of China’s cultural heritage. The tools and skills in the country were quite simply unavailable to deal with this crisis. The weaknesses within the conservation profession, as identified by SACH (State Administration of Cultural Heritage) and senior site administrators, were many-fold: poor conceptualisation of what conservation encompasses; a formulaic, indiscriminate and ‘magic bullet’ approach to the conservation of fabric; lack of supervision of contract workers (often with only on-the-job training); haste to intervene; a tendency to over-restoration; and many more. Site management skills were similarly undeveloped. The traditionally hierarchical nature of the conservation bureaucracy, tight compartmentalisation of responsibilities.

Figure 2 The Guanyin Temple in Daif (stated by locals to have been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution) has been recreated in concrete and made oversize to accommodate more tourists - an example of inappropriate ‘conservation' treatment. (Getty Conservation Institute)

which, on site, divided the spheres of physical conservation, visitor management, security and development, and the comparatively low status accorded to skills of site management generally all contributed to this, at a time when the rapid rate of change meant that management skills were becoming increasingly necessary.

In the face of such pressures and threats, there seem to be five key elements which will be necessary for China to achieve success and excellence in its approach to the preservation of its heritage (cultural and natural, tangible and intangible). These are

• national legislation;
• an educational system to produce well-trained practitioners in science, conservation and management;
• a set of professional guidelines to promote good practice;
• an effective national management structure which ensures on-the-ground conservation at a national, regional and local level; and
• an integrated national policy that over-rides the artificial separation (by no means unique to China) of authority and responsibility that different ministries exercise over essentially inseparable categories of heritage.

National laws for the protection of heritage are in place, and have been since the earliest period of the PRC, and the 1982 law has recently been extensively revised (Law of the PRC on the Protection of Cultural Relics, 2002) (with greater emphasis on the control of looting, “irrational use" of heritage, and with regard to private ownership). But better enforcement of the laws and regulations is needed (Rogers, 2004); for example, the recent takeover of the Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong

Figure 3 The new gilt Guanyin statue in the temple. (Getty Conservation Institute)
Family Mansion in Qufu, a World Heritage site, by entrepreneurial tourism, was in conflict with the law (China Daily, 2002).

In terms of education, conservation training courses are regularly run by the SACH and CNICP (China National Institute for Cultural Property). These are often of a month's duration or longer, and while they cannot substitute for formal qualifications they serve important functions of networking and raising awareness as well as inculcating skills and procedures. Two such activities in which the GCI has substantively involved were the Yungang Grottoes site management training course in 1992 (Sullivan 1997), which led eventually through the realization of an urgent need, to the development of the China Principles; and the new master's degree course being organized by the Dunhuang Academy and Lanzhou University. Other courses have been created, such as in the Archaeology Department of Peking University and at Qinghua University where a graduate degree is offered in architectural conservation. It is formal education in heritage studies and conservation and management that is absent, as well as skills-based training. By filling these gaps the overall standard can be raised and the great regional and site-specific disparities in conservation and management standards can be eliminated. Progress so far is encouraging, but the question remains whether academic programs in heritage studies and conservation/management attract the best and the brightest in the present economic climate and in the face of the lure of highly paid, high-status professional competition.

The third element, instruments for heritage conservation management and use that seek to strengthen conservation and knit together the legal framework with a professional methodology have been under active development over the past few years. These include detailed regulations at the provincial level, the development of protocols for site master planning, and certification to write such plans. But these new regulations, while necessary, are unlikely to achieve this linkage, as discussed later in this paper. An essential component of this element — the establishment of professional guidelines — has been achieved through the development and official approval of the Principles for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage Sites in China.

The fourth element, a national management structure which delivers heritage conservation down to the local level, is in place, in the sense that there are officials and staff responsible for conservation at all of these levels, organised in a nationally coherent way. A key issue at present is the growing independence of provincial and local governments, and the potential conflict within them, between conservation and the pressures of development and tourism. The development of a nationally accepted code of practice may assist regional and local heritage officials in their sometimes difficult jobs.

The fifth need, a national policy, seems beyond the reach of possibility for now and will be touched upon elsewhere in this paper.

The China Principles

The China Principles were collaboratively developed over a period of three years (1997-2000) by a core group of 10 Chinese professionals who, with the GCI and the AHC (Australian Heritage Commission), drafted the document. This group included senior professionals from architecture, archaeology, conservation, and site management and a larger group of 30 experts who vetted the drafts and provided input at various points in the process. Leading the team was deputy director-general Zhang Bai of SACH who is also currently chairman of China ICOMOS.

The Chinese leadership of the China Principles initiative recognized that the process would benefit by having an outside, international perspective; hence the tripartite partnership and involvement of outside organizations. The process agreed upon comprised a series of workshops and meetings in Australia, China and the US over a 3-year period (1997-2000).

During the two workshops in Australia, the main focus was on the Burra Charter: how it was developed, adopted, and used in everyday practice. Particular attention was paid to what the Burra Charter does best: significance assessment and planning. Visits were made to a number of key sites which demonstrated a range of conservation and management issues and methodologies. Other concepts which were particularly significant were adaptive reuse, and the use of the Burra Charter as a common language in Australian practice. Meetings with heritage practitioners demonstrated the interaction between official heritage agencies and the private sector. The Burra Charter was translated into Chinese for this purpose, which was the beginning of what became a major sub-initiative of the project, the development of a glossary of professional concepts and terms to ensure consistent usage and common understanding between the Chinese and English languages. Meetings with Australia ICOMOS members were also built into the workshops in order to assist China ICOMOS in the development of its membership.

![Figure 4 Delegates from SACH, the GCI and the AHC discussing conservation planning and implementation at Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. (Getty Conservation Institute)](image)
The China Principles team in Yunnan. This temple, slated for dismantling and full restoration, was the subject of a debate on-site as to what the appropriate approach to its conservation should be. (Getty Conservation Institute)

Chinese delegates from SACH discussing site stabilization at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. (Getty Conservation Institute)

The meeting convened in Beijing by SACH at the formal presentation of the China Principles. (Getty Conservation Institute)

The workshops, site visits, and discussions with professionals in three countries provided a way to work through difficult concepts and test the legitimacy of the developing Principles against international norms and real site issues. The Principles were reviewed by a committee of some 30 Chinese experts convened by SACH, and finalised and formally launched at a conference in Beijing in the autumn of 2000.

English translation of the China Principles followed in 2002 (Agnew and Demas). The China Principles is seen as a living document to be revised in due course, when it will undoubtedly change as practitioners confront and respond to the many challenges they are facing in conserving the cultural heritage of China today; and, as discussed below, certain constraints and limitations imposed by Chinese law and administrative structures (and tradition-bound thinking) will, it is hoped, eventually find resolution in revision of the document.

The Principles are largely a codification of existing practice, which goes back to basic concepts established by Liang Sicheng 70 years ago. But they also incorporate new concepts and methods of planning that mark a real step forward in the approach to conservation in China. Most important, perhaps, is the explicit recognition that the assessment of significance (understanding why the site is valued and by whom) is the highest priority. The Principles furthermore recognize intangible and tangible values, and the need for consultation with all interested parties (i.e. stakeholders). They also make explicit a planning and decision-making process, which follows a logical progression from investigation and research to assessment, and leads to the development of master plans for cultural sites that are integrated and holistic. An important innovation in the China Principles is the explicit introduction of a section on site management, and its recognition as a key component of ongoing conservation (Sullivan, 2001).

Despite the focus on architecture (a legacy of Liang), there are articles in the Principles that are specific to archaeological sites. They emphasize minimal intervention at archaeological sites and are progressive in seeing reburial of excavated sites as the norm and leaving sites open for public display as the exception. It is also significant that the China Principles were issued under the auspices of a professional organization – China ICOMOS, rather than the governmental body responsible for heritage (although they have been approved by SACH). This is a first step toward a fully professional, non-governmental approach to conservation, one in which the ethics of the profession rather than official regulations and legislation begins to take precedence.

Circumscriptions and critique of the China Principles

From its inception the China Principles were circumscribed in a number of ways, some trivial, others that fundamentally limit the document’s reach and effectiveness. Among the former was the name, initially proposed as the China Charter, but this was deemed unacceptable as the term ‘charter’ connotes ‘law’ in Chinese. And, indeed, the subordination of the Principles to the law was always to the forefront throughout the drafting and revision process. This is most evident in the retention of the three values (historic, artistic, scientific) stipulated in the national legislation. Social values are acknowledged tacitly in the Principles, but cannot be explicitly identified. The 2002 revision of the law did not include social value, but has stuck to the original three. Social value, like economic benefit from the use of heritage sites, is likely seen by legislators as a derivative of the three intrinsic values, and therefore not appropriate for inclusion. The extensive Commentary that is part of the China Principles, however, places emphasis on the social and economic benefits of heritage sites.

A further constraint in the writing of the Principles was a consequence of the administrative division of responsibility in government between the SACH (under the Ministry of Culture) with authority over sites and monuments, and the Ministry of Construction, principally responsible for historic cities (although
technically a shared responsibility with SACH). For this reason, the Principles are focused on sites and monuments, not historic towns or urban settings, which have a particular set of needs that are not explicitly stated. Article 37 makes clear that while the Principles are applicable to ‘historically and culturally famous cities’, the urban/historic town category of heritage essentially lies outside their scope. The Principles try to be inclusive while at the same time not intruding into other administrative units’ responsibilities. It is not very satisfactory, but is part of the reality of the division of heritage administration in China today.

The Principles also emphasise the values of physical fabric and their preservation, seen as following western practice rather than ‘Asian approaches’, as exemplified in the Nara Document and the oft-cited example of the reconstruction of the Ise Shrine. It should not be surprising that China does not conform to an ‘Asian approach’ given that the beginnings of conservation in China (developed by Liang Sicheng) adhered basically to western approaches to conservation, the only models available at the time; together with the long break with traditional use, including any religious use of buildings, since 1911 and 1949 respectively, and isolation from international trends and approaches. The emphasis on preserving fabric in the Principles also relates to a strong desire among professionals to reduce large-scale, and often indiscriminate restoration and reconstruction of sites, and exploitation of cultural sites by tourism.

These, and other limits on the otherwise comprehensive scope of the Principles, have been recognised. As the first Asian charter for professionals the Principles have attracted attention which overall has been favorable. Luxen, in a review of the Principles, has pointed out that they are consonant with the Venice Charter and in some important ways go beyond it, but mentioned, inter alia, the absence of urban and rural architectural ensembles, and of cultural routes (Luxen 2004). Taylor has stated that the treatment of values in the Commentary on the Principles is more comprehensive than the Burra Charter (Taylor 2003). Egloff, in a review of the Principles in a previous issue of *Historic Environment*, found that while some principles are consistent with the Burra Charter, many go considerably further, including the need for on-site archives and the requirement for a buffer zone. He too has pointed out that while social value is not defined as an historic value, social and economic values are dealt with extensively elsewhere in the Commentary (Egloff 2003). No doubt, as dissemination and application proceeds, further objective assessment will occur. The ICOMOS Congress, to be hosted by China in 2005, will provide further opportunity for discussion of the Principles and perhaps provide the impetus for revision. Critique is to be welcomed, as ultimately a stronger instrument for conservation will result.

**Challenges: the China Principles at work**

The main challenge now is to ensure widespread adoption of the China Principles by site management and conservation professionals who carry out the work on a daily basis. The GCI’s and AHC’s contribution toward this goal is primarily focused on application of the China Principles at two World Heritage listed sites in China, the Mogao Grottoes and the Imperial Summer Resort at Chengde. Working closely with directors of the sites and their staff, master plans have been developed using the methodology of the China Principles. Detailed strategy development and implementation of some components, such as visitor management and interpretation, visitor carrying capacity studies, and architectural conservation are being undertaken. The objective is to give the highest visibility to these initiatives in order to demonstrate the value, utility, and effectiveness of the Principles.

Critical to ensuring adoption will be continued strengthening of the role of non-governmental, professional bodies in China, such as China ICOMOS, dissemination of the Principles in training courses and university curricula, and capacity building in mid and senior management levels throughout the bureaucracy. China ICOMOS for now is a fledgling without much recognition nationally, and the task is consequently formidable. The situation is also not helped by the entrenched and self-assured practice of large municipalities like Shanghai and Chongqing, which march to their own drumbeat.

A non-mandatory instrument such as the China Principles is somewhat alien in China with its ancient tradition of edicts, laws, regulation and ordinances. It is the interface between official directives and professional guidelines that needs to be developed. A further aspect, with both positive and negative consequences for national adoption and use of the Principles concerns the newly drafted Management Regulations on the Writing and Approval of Conservation Plans for Priority Protected Heritage Sites at the National Level to be administered by SACH. This detailed document, yet to be formally issued, and being a regulation, strives to provide operational substance to the China Principles. Encouragingly, it reflects...
important aspects from the Principles, notably assessments of values, condition, management and use, and states that the plan should be consistent with the Principles (Article 9). Among the salient points are that:

- Once approved the plan will have force of law
- The timeframe for a plan is generally 20 years, though a short-term plan up to 5 years can be written to address major problems
- Only qualified organizations, recognized by SACH, may draw up plans.

A supplementary document specifies in detail the basic content and format. The purpose as stated (Article 1) is to improve the process of writing and approval of plans. However few organizations are authorised to write plans, and the comprehensiveness required is daunting, so that to date few sites have plans - nor will the situation change soon. A critical point seems to have been overlooked, one that was emphasised in the drafting of the Mogao and Chengde plans using the China Principles: the importance of having site managers and their staff fully involved in the discussions leading to the writing of the plan. And finally, being both long-term and legally binding, an approved plan may lack flexibility since proposed changes will have to go through the approval process again.

An important corollary of the China Principles, as yet unrealised, is the development of an illustrated version, akin to the Illustrated Burra Charter. There is a real need for this publication as it will provide an accessible visual overview of the Principles and promote adoption. However preparation at present has stalled.

The future

Where is heritage preservation in China heading? Despite the caveats mentioned, a number of signs offer encouragement. The establishment of NGOs like China ICOMOS, and its official product, the China Principles (though in reality generated by SACH, the GCI and the AHC), and He Shuzhong’s organization the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Research Center (formerly called Cultural Heritage Watch. Email: chphb@vip.sina.com) being nominally outside of government, are potentially more flexible and are not bound by Party policy, and can act to some degree independently, while having strong connections to the heritage arms of government. On the other hand, in the absence of a national heritage policy, lack of coordination between various ministries will remain an impediment to efficient coordination of effort, as witnessed by the ambiguity over responsibility between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Construction. And, as we have seen, tourism, presumably encouraged by the Ministry of Tourism, is a potent driving force for economic exploitation of sites; witness the response of the Ministry of Culture and eight other departments to the takeover of the ‘money-tree’ sites.

China’s extensive areas of degraded natural environment and management of the scant number of relatively unspoiled parks also need to be brought into the equation. As previously mentioned, there is an opportunity here and an urgent need for an integrated national policy with respect to natural and cultural heritage preservation and management, particularly in view of the many natural-cultural World Heritage sites. The set of existing, essentially prescriptive laws cannot substitute for an integrated policy that would overcome the fragmented authority that presently assigns responsibility for different heritage categories to various ministries. Were China to do this it would not only catch up but would also show a leadership role in Asia and for much of the world. The pyramidal and compartmentalised bureaucracy mitigates against this happening. Even were the leadership to see the need, decisions at the very top would be required for a national policy to be created and implemented.

As David Lowenthal has pointed out ‘heritage is a consummately crisis-driven pursuit’ (2003, 7). In China today the crisis is especially acute. One can only hope that too much will not be lost before equilibrium is established.

Conclusion

It would be incorrect to see the China Principles as a child only of the Burra Charter. As mentioned, Liang Sicheng’s ideas and their development uncannily paralleled thinking and evolving conservation theory in the West, and spanned the Athens and Venice Charters. What the Burra Charter provided to the Principles was a systematic, methodological approach to decision-making in which primacy is afforded to the preservation of significance, that is, to all the values including social value, of a heritage place. The Principles stress the integration of conservation and site management, previously viewed as separate, independent activities, and begin the process of weaning from the purely ‘scientific’ or technical interventional approach. It was the confluence, therefore, of Liang’s seminal legacy and the Burra Charter that begat the China Principles, a landmark in East Asian guidelines for the conservation and management of heritage sites.

References:


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