Cultural heritage as a socio-cultural construct: a contextualised trajectory in China

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Cultural heritage as a socio-cultural construct: a contextualised trajectory in China

The intangible turn in cultural heritage studies over the last three decades has featured a growing recognition of socio-cultural constructivism. In responding to the constructivist approach, the paper extends the discussion of cultural heritage in the context of China from joint comparative and evolutionary perspectives. On the one hand, by situating the reception of the cultural heritage concept from a socio-cultural construct dimension, the paper reveals the unique dialogism between the two divergent epistemological and methodological paradigms of *wenwu* (cultural relics) and *wenhua yichan* (cultural heritage) that underline the appropriation and practice of cultural heritage in China, and implicates the issue over authenticity in the debate of heritage tourism, heritage conservation and urban development. On the other hand, the Chinese experience promotes the dual mission of constructivism as both a socio-cultural and a discursive enterprise. A cross-cultural dimension is added as to see if the East-West difference in conceptualisation is mutually influenced, in a hope to enrich cultural heritage studies in its content as well as its global understanding.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; socio-cultural construct; conceptualisation; China; *wenwu*

**Introduction**

Over the past decades, cultural heritage studies have been highlighting a strong constructivist tendency in both its epistemological as well as methodological paradigms, and have greatly affected the field on the level of research, practice, and policy-making, both locally and internationally.

As a socio-cultural construct, cultural heritage, though a universal phenomenon, depends on contextualised cultural interpretations. East and West, the two cultural hemispheres, have developed relatively independently from each other in history, generating remarkable cultural differences. China, as one of the four ancient civilisations with unique cultural continuity (Yan and Zhuang 2006), derives its own way of understanding and dealing with the past heritage throughout history. The expanding knowledge not only provides
insights into the current heritage practices in China, especially in their relation with heritage
tourism and urban development, but also helps to enrich cultural heritage conceptualisation in
general.

Concerning cultural heritage scholarship, the past decades have witnessed growing
interaction and cooperation between the two cultural hemispheres. The bilateral knowledge
transfer has resulted in the dynamism and evolution of cultural heritage conceptualisation
both worldwide and in China, a process believed to continue in the future. This cross-cultural
communication is believed to deepen the understanding of social constructivism in the
cultural heritage field.

This paper aims at contributing to the discussion on cultural heritage conceptualisation
from a non-western perspective, focusing on the research question ‘how is the cultural
heritage concept socio-culturally constructed?’, by taking into account both cross-cultural and
contextual dimensions which implies space, society, values and politics. The paper begins
with a review on the notion of cultural heritage as a socio-cultural construct, presenting the
trajectory of scholarship on the cultural aspect of construction. It proceeds to historicise the
East-West cross-cultural negotiation process from the pre-2000 and the post-2000 phases, and
as a result the conceptual evolution of cultural heritage in general. The discussion then
addresses the unique evolution and negotiation between the two paradigms of wenwu (cultural
relics) to wenhua yichan (cultural heritage) in China, which further illustrates the interactive
dynamics in an opposite (West to East) direction. It’s followed by a comparison between the
two alternative concepts and their practical implications. This cross-cultural dimension
reveals the dynamism of and negotiation on cultural heritage in general as well as in China
through East-West cross-cultural interaction necessitated by globalisation. Parallel to this
horizontal comparative approach, a vertical contextual and longitudinal dimension is added to
pinpoint several seminal turning points as well as recent trends in heritage perception and
practice in China that still have their influences today, in a hope to untangle the complex
relation between heritage and society and to pinpoint the current status quo of such a relation.
The pertinence of the joint comparative and evolutionary perspectives in the Chinese context
may relativise the debate over authenticity in cultural heritage, relevant to the research of
tourism and urban development in contemporary China.

Heritage as a socio-cultural construct

Despite the heterogeneous normative approaches to heritage, the consensus has been reached
upon the social constructivism (Brett 1996, Lowenthal 1998, Avrami et al. 2000, Harvey
2001, Graham 2002): not only is heritage concerned with the past, but about how the past is
adapted by the present. An ‘evolution in concept-making’ and the shifted attention from
‘what’ to ‘how and why’ (Pearce 1998, 1) to ensure heritage studies in its own right is
unanimously endorsed, and has been widely theorised from cultural, economic, and political
2012).

The socio-cultural construct perspective enforces concepts such as cultural diversity
and cultural value on heritage interpretation and practice: ‘It is us - in society, within human
culture - who make things mean, who signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change,
from one culture or period to another.’ (Hall 1997, 61) A concept may render differently in
different cultures, bringing about the danger of misunderstanding among them. The cultural
comparative approach is thus pertinent in deepening the understanding of social
constructivism, an epistemological endeavour to understand meaning production in socio-
cultural settings. The early comparative perspective (Wei and Aass 1989) in heritage
conservation usefully argues for a material/spiritual dichotomy between the West and the
East, with the West valuing the material aspect of cultural heritage, and the East, the ‘genius
loci’. This dualism of material/spiritual has been consistently pursued in the later researches
of Lowenthal (1998) and more recently by Taylor (2004), Munjeri (2004), Smith (2006), Carman and Sørensen (2009), and Fairclough et al. (2010), with the later vehemently questioning the naturalisation of traditional western mania for physical conservation by UNESCO and ICOMOS. The emerging challenges and revisionism to the western voice highlights a ‘compelling direction of progress in our field’ (Tunbridge et al. 2013, 369), while the detailed research of cultural heritage in non-western contexts just begins. Therefore, an attempt is made in the following two sections to investigate if and how western and eastern constructs and interpretations tend to diverge or encounter.

**Development of cultural heritage scholarship and cross-cultural convergence**

A brief historical review may help to profile the two-phase development in cultural heritage scholarship: the pre-2000 phase and the post-2000 phase. The pre-2000 phase features a strong western voice exemplified through and disseminated by instruments like UNESCO and its advisory body ICOMOS, the ‘authorized heritage discourse’ in Smith’s (2006) term. This phase commences from the Athens Charter (1931), the first international document on historical monument drafted by European countries. It was not until 1964 that three non-European countries, Tunisia, Mexico, and Peru were convened to the Venice Charter, the most influential reference on heritage conservation till today, which, together with other charters and regulations that followed, are applied and greatly promoted by UNESCO and ICOMOS since then. The first cultural turn in heritage studies was heralded by a local initiative, the Burra Charter (1979) by Australia ICOMOS. It is echoed by the UNESCO Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the first international move to promote cultural diversity and relativity of the authenticity concept in heritage conservation. In line with the actions by UNESCO and ICOMOS at the international level, national initiatives had been taken to promote the sensitisation and preservation of cultural heritage. As early as 1950s Japan has distinguished cultural heritage between tangible and intangible, and similar engagements are
seen in the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, etc. The Nara Document on
Authenticity can be seen as a result of concerted non-western national efforts (Kurin 2004,
Munjeri 2004, Bortolotto 2007). In this pre-2000 phase of cultural heritage studies, however,
except few researchers (Bowdler 1988, Layton 1989, Ryckmans 1989, Wei and Aass 1989,
Lowenthal 1998), issues on the dominance of the western voice and the cultural relativity had
not been duly raised and taken into consideration.

The post-2000 phase has seen increasingly manifest critical cultural analysis in
heritage studies worldwide. Culture-sensitive heritage consciousness becomes prominent in
such conventions as China Principles (2002) and Hoi An Protocols (2005)\(^1\) and in literature
On the one hand, the identification of the authorised historical, institutional and political
discourses of the West is regarded highly useful for the discovery and revaluation of ‘certain
understandings about the nature and meaning of heritage (that) have been excluded in heritage
practices’ (Smith 2006, 42). On the other hand, the intangible shift commenced by the Nara
Document on Authenticity and finalised by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the
Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter the 2003 UNESCO Convention)
constitutes an evolution in western thinking that goes beyond the obsession for tangible
heritage and goes into the eastern approach focusing on a construct of the mind (see the later
section).

UNESCO’s conceptual evolution towards intangible cultural heritage, heralded by
Asia-Pacific countries like Japan and Bolivia, has been well documented (Aikawa 2004,
of intangible cultural heritage, efforts have been made, especially in Asia (Winter 2014), in
search of non-western approaches to cultural heritage conservation both in the academia and
through the instruments like UNESCO and ICOMOS. What is under-exposed in this
intangible turn is the understanding of the dynamisms of cultural heritage as a construct.

Cultural heritage is a socio-cultural process in constant negotiation with different norms and realities across time and space. ‘It [The cultural heritage concept] is the result of a cultural process that must be thought through and carried out not just on a European but world basis’ (Vecco 2010, 324). Undoubtedly, interaction features two-way. The western notion of cultural heritage has taken a more intangible turn influenced by the East. In the same way, the following session shows how China is influenced by the world at large towards embracing the western notion of cultural heritage and the continuity and inheritance idea inherent within.

From *wenwu* to *wenhua yichan*: the Chinese trajectory

In heritage academia, terminologies of other languages are seldom discussed in the literature (Tunbridge et al. 2013), nor are their impacts on heritage practice and conservation. ‘Many cultural objects and ideas have been diffused in connection with their terminology, so that a study of the distribution of culturally significant terms often throws unexpected light on the history of inventions and ideas’ (Sapir 1929, 210). The conceptual development of cultural heritage from *wenwu*, to *wenwu guji*, and to *wenhua yichan* illuminates both the internal and the cross-cultural dialogic dynamics of cultural heritage as a construct, and the spread of new interpretation as well as misunderstanding.

The shift from *wenwu* to *wenwu guji* highlights the first conceptual shift in scope from individual objects to buildings and sites. It formulates the first conceptual change out of a deeper understanding through the domestic Chinese heritage practice. The word of *wenwu*, literally cultural (*wen*) objects (*wu*), was first recorded in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Since around mid-1930s, the concept has already been extended from movable objects only to include immovable relics (Xie 1993). To echo this wider denotative scope, *guji*, literally ancient (*gu*) relics (*ji*), was affixed to *wenwu*. However, in practice *wenwu guji* is often abbreviated as *wenwu* (as a broadened concept), referring to valuable physical remains from
the past (Xie 1993). The English version of the Heritage Conservation Law translates *wenwu* as cultural relics, yet in the bilingual China Principles, ‘heritage sites’ or ‘sites’ is employed instead, as the former is ‘deemed outmoded’ (China ICOMOS 2002). In the same document, it is made clear that *wenwu* is used for tangible heritage, whether movable or immovable.

The second conceptual shift from *wenwu guji* to *wenhua yichan* was realized officially in the Notice of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage in 2005 (hereinafter the 2005 Notice). In this state conservation document, *wenhua yichan* is presented as the key word. *Wenhua yinchan*, literally ‘cultural heritage’, is not new, being used in many documents to strengthen the importance of *wenwu* since 1950s (Zhong 2009). The 2005 Notice is important for the recognition and inclusion of intangible heritage on the one hand, and the enhancement of its public character on the other. The Cultural Heritage Day initiative to promote public awareness and involvement in heritage conservation is a clear outcome. Since then, *wenhua yichan* has enjoyed popularity, used alternatively with *wenwu*.

The shift from *wenwu* to *wenhua yichan* reflects a cross-cultural negotiation on the concept of cultural heritage. Undoubtedly, the intangible heritage turn in both the world and China helps to promote the concept of *wenhua yichan* as the *wenwu* concept fails to embrace the increasingly important intangible scope. A general consensus exists in regarding *wenwu* as an important part of *wenhua yichan*, with a tendency regarding *wenwu* as tangible heritage. However, this simple equation is not helpful in understanding and evaluating heritage and conservation practices in China for the subtle but fundamental connotative differences between them. Therefore, in the following section, a rigorous distinction between *wenwu* and *wenhua yichan* (cultural heritage) is to be deciphered in terms of temporal scope and social attribute, so as to allow for a better understanding of the negotiation between the two concepts in China.
Comparison between *wenwu* and cultural heritage (*wenhua yichan*)

In terms of temporal scope, *wenwu* focuses on things left from the past, while cultural heritage focuses on past things in relation to the future. *Wenwu* is defined in the Encyclopaedia of China as objects and sites of significant historic, aesthetic and scientific value in the history of human development (Xie 1993). In the Heritage Conservation Law, the aim is explicitly stated as ‘strengthening the protection of cultural relics, *inheriting* (italics ours) the splendid historical and cultural legacy of the Chinese nation’ (SCNPC 2002). The link to the future is not clearly mentioned. In contrast, making rational use of heritage as part of the national conservation principle is clearly stated in the Heritage Conservation Law, therefore entailing more readiness for contemporary engagement. The origin of heritage can be traced back to Ancient Greece, representing a family’s land that could neither be traded or sold, but *transmitted* from one generation to the next (Zouain 2006). The concept of cultural heritage in the West experiences changes, but its future orientation is nevertheless consistently obvious and decisive. In China, the difference between *wenwu* and cultural heritage in this aspect is translated into their different focus on either conservation or use – an inherent dissonance of the concept.

In terms of social attribute, *wenwu* stresses the non-public and material quality, while heritage implies a public and cultural character. Starting from the first imperial collection in the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) and the first wave of private collection in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) to New China (1949) national conservation practice, *wenwu* is practiced away from the public. Throughout the Chinese history till very recent, heritage conservation bears two parallel lines. One is state-led conservation initiative for historic (and to a lesser extent, artistic and scientific) purpose. The public awareness in heritage conservation and sense of ownership in heritage hardly exists. The other is the private collection for artistic interest and later economic interest along the commercial line. *Wenwu*
collectors become more diversified from purely art-lovers to money-makers after the founding of New China. The wenwu market and auction market have grown more and more active and publicised since 1990s when the former was legalised and the latter was open. Amazingly, cultural awareness and responsibility have hardly existed in the public domain for this ‘cultural object’ - wenwu.

It is argued that the promotion of wenhua yichan with its cultural value is not only caused by the denotative failure of wenwu discussed previously, but also its connotative limits to meet the current socio-cultural requirements, which will be elaborated later. As Shan (2008, 65) rightly notices, from wenwu to wenhua yichan, public involvement and continuity have been emphasised. Shan (2008) further recognises that cultural inheritance and development is of significance for China in the globalising world where cultural diversity is crucial to the development of the state and the world as a whole.

Heritage conservation in China: historical evolutions and recent trends

This part builds up a narrative from the vertical/historical dimension, elaborating the evolution of heritage conservation in its interaction with society. It first focuses on the pre-contemporary history (before 1840), revealing how the awareness and outlook on history shape understandings of spiritual/material value, past/present, and old/new, and conservation practice in the Chinese cultural tradition. The contemporary history witnessed drastic socio-cultural ups and downs and the same with cultural heritage and its conservation. By pinpointing important shifts, it shows how the role and evolution of conservation are negotiated in contemporary China.

Between spiritual value and material value

Heritage destruction and reconstruction are common in different countries in varied degrees. In China when old regimes are overthrown, historical buildings and imperial palaces,
considered as the outdated and the historic draff of these regimes, more often than not encounter the same fate. However, this does not mean no conservation efforts have been made. The massive iconoclasm goes hand in hand with a historiographical tradition in conservation. The earliest recorded are the royal collections of books and paintings since the Han Dynasty (202-8BC) (Xie 1993). The important progress started from the Northern Song (960-1127) when epigraphy was developed. Taking the long history of China into consideration, this is of course not very early. Since Northern Song, the collections have been extended to bronzes and other categories, and the interest of private collections developed as well. However, the value of bronzes is directly linked with whether they have epigraphs (Ryckmans 1989). This historiographical tradition is much influenced by the historical awareness displayed in the ‘respect to heaven and ancestors’ ideology. The past is from the very start valued out of its historicity, different from the aesthetic value bred in early western conservation (Xie 1993). Books, paintings, calligraphy, historical records have always been the first items for conservation, which is ‘a different attitude toward the way of making the monumental achievement’ (Mote 1973, 49-50) in the West. It explains why China distinguishes itself with the large collection of historical documentations, in contrast with tangible historical remains. What sustains the Chinese culture is not the material object, but the immaterial symbol exemplified (Wei and Aass 1989, Ryckmans 1989, Taylor and Altenburg 2006, Conan 2009). This can be seen through the fact that the constant destruction and reconstruction of historical buildings throughout history neither receives disputes nor weakens the significance of those buildings.

Two points deserve special attention in this spiritual/material discussion. For one thing, the traditional practice and the contemporary economic-driven reconstruction have to be discriminated. Second, the heritage value indicates both material as well as spiritual concerns, but in varied degrees and importance across time and space. Just as the growing
acknowledgement of the intangible importance of cultural heritage in the West, architectural concern has been raised high in China recent years, especially in face of mass destruction in the process of urban development.

**Between past and present; between old and new**

The historical thinking embedded in the traditional Chinese culture shapes the Chinese perception of the past and the present. The past can be looked at from the present, and the present refers to the past as a reference. Mao Zedong in 1964 formally proposed the guideline of ‘making the past serve the present and the foreign things serve China’, which had its embryonic form already in 1942 (Deng and Feng 2013). Though originally a guideline on dealing with history and culture, this thought reflects the general view on the past and the present. Both in the Heritage Conservation Law and China Principles, rational use of heritage, though not detailed, is clearly stated as part of the guideline in heritage conservation.

Under this historical development outlook, the same logic applies to the relation between the old and the new, leading to the natural embrace with the new without breaking up with the old. This old/new harmony was first challenged from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century when the western thoughts and sticks found their ways to China. It has been gradually transformed into an old/new dichotomy with China and the West on both ends. The New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s campaigned against the old feudalist culture and tradition and brought this harmonious unity into utmost confrontation. The ancient concern for the old and heritage had given way to the new and modernity.

The founding of Communist China (1949) has triggered the debates over the conservation in the 1950s around ‘what to conserve and how to conserve’ in the struggle between the old and the new (Lai et al. 2004). Chen (1957) argues that the cultural objects are easy to be conserved, for only several rooms are needed for exhibition. However, historical buildings demand financial, human and technical resources that are badly needed in
developing new China while some of them are even in the way of the new life. Therefore, he insists prioritizing the necessary ones and the ones that can still play a role in reality. Apart from this, Chen advises to preserve maps, photographs and written records. Although different voices were heard, Chen’s arguments represented the basic tone of the period in dealing with the old and the new.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) posed unprecedentedly drastic and detrimental challenges to the old tradition and culture. The study of the past was considered reactionary. The archaeological research came to a halt and certain archaeological and heritage sites were destroyed (Trigger 1984, Sofield and Li 1998). Through the eradication of the four old evils (old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits) and the persecution of intellectuals, culture and cultural heritage became taboo and the cultural spirit was greatly lost in the public.

Setting foot on the modernisation journey

‘The Cultural Revolution was so great a disaster that it provoked an even more profound cultural revolution, precisely the one that Mao intended to forestall’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 3). But this time, the political culture has been shifted to an economic one. The economic focus brought new hope to the Chinese people who had just experienced economic and cultural turbulences. As advocated by Deng in his southern tour in 1992, economic development was considered the only hard truth. Undeniably, the market-oriented economic reform since 1978 has brought China to rapid socio-economic development in its pursuit of socialist modernisations (in the fields of industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology). However, along with the rapid economic development, the socio-cultural problems also became more acute.

In the culture and heritage field, the coin also has its two sides. Heritage conservation has made great progress since 1949. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage was set up immediately (1949). Provisional Regulations for the Conservation and Management of
Cultural Relics was issued in 1961 before the first Heritage Conservation Law (1982) was carried out. Three nation-wide surveys of cultural relics have been conducted, in 1956, 1981-1985, and 2007-2011 respectively, to update inventories and improve management qualities of the already existing sites. The financial and administrative support from the state is ever growing. However, the lens of success at the same time spotlights its failures and frictions. Led by the economic development and modernisation, China has witnessed mass destruction of cultural heritage, especially historic buildings, in the name of urbanization and urban renewal. According to Xie, a distinguished heritage specialist, throughout history heritage has been the most seriously damaged since around the 1990s (Zhen 2009), though this period was also the one with the most heritage conservation efforts. In addition, it’s not only the forms that are lost but also peoples’ memory. Spurred by the market economy, the already weak and vague cultural and heritage awareness in the public is decreasing, which, together with the pursuit of a modern life, explains the public’s neglect to heritage conservation.

In 2003, the concept ‘scientific outlook on development’ was proposed, which assumes a ‘people-centred’ approach to a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development. The shift on the thinking from economic to social development comes out of its self-reflection on the development path in the changing national and global contexts (Fewsmith 2004, SOD 2010). In the field of cultural heritage, the idea of integrating heritage conservation into social development has been practiced through the development of ruins parks, which aims not only for conservation, but also for neighbourhood regeneration and improvement of living environment. Daming Palace National Heritage Park in Xi’an was such an example. Daming Palace, four times the Imperial Palace in Beijing by size, was once the imperial palace complex of the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), the most prosperous dynasty in China’s history. It served as the royal residence for more than 220 years and was damaged and later burned down in wars at the ending years of the regime. Daming Palace was
protected by the state in 1961. The Daming Palace National Heritage Park was constructed
from early 2008 and was finished and opened to the public in late 2010. Concerning social
benefit, it provides public space and improves the neighbourhood environment. However,
many other voices are also heard, like the gentrification of the area and the threat of the
heritage from over-commercialisation. Nevertheless, the ruins park model is being practiced
in many other cities. Through trial and error, China is searching its own way of balancing
heritage conservation and all kinds of benefits, be it social, cultural and economic.

Cultural development and the development of cultural value in heritage

With more in-depth economic development and exchange with the world, the question on
how to carry on its culture and promote its cultural identity has become more and more urgent
for China in the new century. As an important cultural resource, heritage’s cultural value has
been redeveloped, especially with tourism development. In 2009, the National Tourism
Administration and the Ministry of Culture jointly issued the Guide for the Integrated
Development of Culture and Tourism, outlining ten initiatives including Year of Cultural
Tourism and China International Cultural Tourism Festival. In line with this first policy
document on cultural tourism, heritage consumption and heritage tourism development have
been greatly promoted (IDCT 2009). The recognition of heritage’s economic value has
strengthened awareness and conservation efforts, but at the same time pushed heritage into the
economic logic, as reflected in recent massive construction of antique-style buildings.
Although criticized by experts, the practice is still going on in one place or another. The fact
that the economic motive in heritage tourism development prioritizes heritage appreciation
and conservation further intensifies the frictions between conservation and use of cultural
heritage.

As mentioned earlier, the 2005 Notice officially promotes the concept of wenhua
yichan. Through emphasising the public character of cultural heritage, the sense of ownership,
in terms of both right and responsibility, is hopefully to be raised in public. The setting up of
the Cultural Heritage Day in 2006 is a follow-up initiative to publicize cultural identity in
heritage and enhance public awareness and involvement. These efforts are believed to
promote direct public protection on the one hand and indirect public supervision in the long
run on the other hand. Public involvement in heritage conservation as a bottom-up initiative
has the potential to counter-balance the side effects of the top-down state or municipal ones
that often tend to put economic interest above cultural concerns.

Cultural development has become an important theme in China in the new century, as
illustrated from the above-mentioned state initiatives. The recent development of cultural
industries since 2002 has witnessed a cultural turn, but also a double-edged sword for heritage
conservation. It promotes conservation awareness, while at the same time prioritizes the
economic value to the detriment of heritage conservation. In those waves of thoughts and
practices, how can heritage and culture find their own way out is the question to be addressed
in this new century for China.

Conclusion

The consensus on cultural heritage as a socio-cultural construct has been reached and
deepened over the past three decades. This paper responds to this issue and investigates into
the conceptual construction of cultural heritage in general, and that in China per se. It displays
the dynamic nature of cultural heritage from the lens of East-West cross-cultural negotiation,
showing how both approaches have evolved into a more hybrid conceptual thinking of
valuing both the material and the immaterial aspects. The Chinese case within the global
framework sheds light on the construct of the cultural heritage concept and its consecutive
dealing with and evaluating heritage conservation and commodification as an example of the
Eastern approach. The understanding of the present Chinese cultural heritage scenario is
crucial not only in dealing with heritage issues in China, especially in the current context of
rapid urban development, but also in global negotiations based on international charters.

The horizontal dimension examines the conceptual evolution from the perspective of East-West interaction and comparison. The intangible turn towards a constructive infill by the present society and the symbiotic relationship between the tangible and intangible aspects can be set against the background of constant negotiation about the material object. The consensus contributes not only to the embracement of the immaterial value in the West, but also to the consideration of the very physicality that is being gradually recognised by legislation but nevertheless still under threat in the rapidly developing eastern countries. The second layer of cross-cultural comparison and interaction is based on different interpretations of cultural heritage in China and the West. As one of the four ancient civilisations with unique cultural continuity, China continues its own heritage perception and practice over the history as has been embodied in the wenwu concept. The trajectory of the conceptual development from wenwu to wenhua yichan implies a constant negotiation with, and appropriation of, the western notion of cultural heritage and conservation. The simultaneous employment of both wenwu and wenhua yichan is characteristic of the status quo of cultural heritage perception, practice and conservation in China.

The vertical dimension shifts the discussion on cultural heritage and its conservation along the socio-historical development in China. The first problem in cultural heritage conservation comes from the economic priority from both the state and the people, which is worsened by the lack of heritage conservation awareness. The state has started to recognise and address these issues at the levels of policy and legislation in the culture and heritage fields since around the new century. Undoubtedly, public involvement is essential to heritage conservation, with its potential to counterbalance the top-down state or municipal initiatives which often tend to prioritize economy over culture. However, the cultivation of such awareness and the formation of a public involvement mechanism are still to be further
developed in China. The threat from rapid urban development cause a second harsh issue.

State efforts have been made to integrate heritage conservation into urban regeneration through the lens of so-called heritage tourism, like the ruins park practice. Yet questions concerning the potency of heritage tourism in a broader and more international manner and its conditions are still to be researched in depth.

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Notes


3. Epigraphy, the study of inscriptions or epigraphs, provides valuable historical records. Epigraphy in China values the evolution of those items and has greatly promoted the scientific study of heritage. See Xie (1993) for further information.

4. China has entered into the contemporary phase, a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, since the 1840 Opium War. In face of foreign invasions, some Chinese began to reflect upon their culture and society, while others simply put blames on it without critical analysis. The struggle has never stopped since then.

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