

World Heritage in reverse



Since UNESCO launched the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972, it has not only built up a platform for transnational cooperation in heritage protection, preservation, and education, but has also created a powerful international reference for heritage definition. Scholars have criticised the paradigms¹ used by UNESCO for universalising the definitions and typologies of heritage and standardising the conservation approaches based on European philosophy, without taking into account different interpretations in diverse cultural contexts.²

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WHILE UNESCO HAS BECOME a single target in “authorized heritage discourse”,³ and its formulated heritage paradigms have been criticised as a globalising program to local contexts,⁴ it is also important to recognise that UNESCO is an inter-governmental organisation composed of States Parties⁵ and to acknowledge in what ways it has been manipulated by them. Askew and Logan both point out that States Parties have used UNESCO and the World Heritage List for their national interests;⁶ Long & Labadi assert that States Parties use the World Heritage List as “a form of soft power”, “a means of communicating their cultural, social and even environmental credentials to the world”;⁷ Tim Winter demonstrates how countries in Asia (China, Japan, Korea and India) have used heritage aids as their international relations strategy.⁸ They all show how UNESCO might indeed be forcedly imposing its Eurocentric and state-centric paradigms on States Parties, but also that it is noteworthy to study how the States Parties possibly manipulate UNESCO’s paradigms and World Heritage status for their own ends.

This article explores two ways in which the World Heritage system can be *reversed*: in application, the international conventions can be reversed to national heritage policy; in principle, the goal of safeguarding heritage of mankind can be reversed to fulfil the nationalist’s agenda.

Taiwan focus

Taiwan lost its UN membership in 1971 to the People’s Republic of China, and has since been ineligible to join affiliated organisations, including UNESCO’s *Convention*. Nevertheless, UNESCO has indirectly played an important role in Taiwan. The Council for Cultural Affairs (文建會, hereinafter referred to as CCA)⁹ asserted that Taiwan, as a member of the ‘global village’, should not be excluded from UNESCO’s World Heritage affairs just because of its unrecognised status. As a consequence of its lengthy exclusion, Taiwan has fallen ‘behind’ the world trend in heritage protection and regulation by almost 30 years

(dated back to the year when the *Convention* was launched). In an attempt to catch up with current trends, to update fellow countrymen with the concept of World Heritage, and to learn methods of protecting cultural and natural heritage, CCA has organised a series of World Heritage forums in Taiwan since 2001.¹⁰ It also joined ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites)¹¹ in 2003 through the Bureau of Cultural Heritage (文資處) as an Institutional Member, and Dr Fu Chao-ching (傅朝卿) as an Individual Member.

In 2012, the Ministry of Culture (文化部, formerly CCA, hereinafter referred to as MOC) organised the first TICCIH¹² congress in Asia. After the four-day assembly, the participants issued the *Taipei Declaration for Asian Industrial Heritage*, based on an agreement on the particularity of Asian industrial heritage and on the promotion of further conservation.¹³ It is noteworthy that such an important declaration was launched in Taiwan, a country not even recognised as a state by the UN (or UNESCO). Moreover, Taiwan has even referred to UNESCO’s conventions in law making. The Taiwanese national law, *Cultural Heritage Preservation Act* (文化資產保存法, 1982), was modelled after UNESCO’s *Convention* and has been modified over the years under the influence of UNESCO’s developing paradigms. The 1982 version of the Act was antique-centred, starting with the definition and related regulations of ‘antique’ (*guwu* 古物).¹⁴ In the 2005 version, the notion of ‘cultural asset’ was developed from antique-centred to monument-centred, with an increasing number of the articles concerning monuments (*guji* 古蹟). New categories ‘historic building’ and ‘cultural landscape’ were added to the Act in 2000 and 2005 to include more diverse types of cultural assets. In the latest Draft Revision of the Act (2013), ‘intangible heritage’ is officially differentiated from ‘tangible heritage’. Drawing on the definition of UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) article 2,¹⁵ the Taiwanese draft includes five categories: ‘traditional performing arts’, ‘traditional craft art’, ‘folk customs’, ‘oral tradition’ and ‘traditional knowledge and practices’.

Zhaishan 翟山 tunnel in Kinmen. Located in the southwest of Kinmen Island, it was built in 1960s for military purposes. Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of 夏天 on flickr.

Study on how Taiwan used World Heritage paradigms in national law and foreign diplomacy

Heritage diplomacy of Taiwan

Taiwan does not always passively accept UNESCO's paradigms, but has also financially contributed to restoration projects. In 2004, the government of Taiwan funded approximately US\$700,000 for two restoration projects in Antigua Guatemala (capital city of the former Spanish colony Captaincy-General of Guatemala): the Las Capuchinas monastery and the Sor Juana de Maldonado monastery. Founded in the early 16th century, the city is known for its rich Spanish colonial architecture and was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 1979. The total amount of financial assistance UNESCO allocated to Antigua is US\$ 96,016 (1979-1999).¹⁶ The Taiwanese government not only provided a large grant, but also sent a research group from National Cheng Kung University to assist in the restoration work. The assistance was not through UNESCO, but was arranged between the Taiwanese and Guatemalan governments, with the goal to benefit their relationship.

The diplomatic relations between Taiwan and Guatemala is complicated. Recently (in 2014), the former Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo was caught using a bank account in New York City to launder money that he had received as a bribe from Taiwan. Portillo admitted that he had accepted the money in exchange for a promise that his country would continue to recognise Taiwan diplomatically while he was in office from 2000 to 2004.¹⁷ Taiwan has diplomatic ties with only twenty countries in the world, most of which are in Central America. To preserve these ties, the Taiwanese government has executed the strategy of 'dollar diplomacy', whereby 'heritage' has become a new tool. Former vice-president Lu Hsiu-lien (呂秀蓮) signed a letter of intent in 2005, promising that Taiwan would provide aid to restore historical sites in Antigua, thereby further developing Taiwan's diplomatic relations with Guatemala.¹⁸

One may conclude that Taiwan has been exploited by Guatemala, for its skills and resources; yet Taiwan has, by participating in this heritage project, found a way to promote itself as a nation. When the Las Capuchinas monastery re-opened as a museum, Taiwan's contribution to the restoration was signposted in Chinese, Spanish and English, and Taiwan's national flag was seen flying over the new museum. By showing locals and visitors how Taiwan is capable of undertaking such restoration projects, the project coordinator believes the project will be a stepping-stone for Taiwan towards more international collaboration projects in the future.¹⁹

It is also interesting to see how an excluded state such as Taiwan positions itself in a World Heritage restoration project. The case shows the inconsistency in UNESCO's conventions and its practices: although UNESCO claims to preserve the world heritage of mankind as a whole, it does not include heritage of all states, nor does it give sufficient assistance, even to those who are already inscribed on the World Heritage List. This could be attributed to UNESCO's structure as an inter-governmental organisation, whereby it is largely reliant upon the participation and donation of States Parties.

Potential world heritage in Taiwan

In 2002, CCA initiated the *Potential World Heritage Sites in Taiwan* program. Although the government acknowledges the fact that the potential sites cannot be listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, it still wishes to award sites with an equivalent to the UNESCO World Heritage designation. The program started by asking for domestic recommendations from local governments, experts and historians, resulting in eleven sites of value as potential world heritage sites. Later in the year, CCA invited foreign experts to visit the eleven sites and to assess them for their potential as World Heritage sites.²⁰ One of these experts, an Australian architect, commented: "Everyone wanted to please and inform in the hope that their site might be considered of World Heritage significance even though some people may not have realised the implications of the designation other than in potential tourism and monetary terms. The government's policy is to double tourism in Taiwan by 2008."²¹

Fu suggested four benefits of becoming a World Heritage site: at the national level, by means of nominating properties in Taiwan for the World Heritage List, the concept of World Heritage will be introduced and disseminated in Taiwan; also, local identity will be reinforced in preparing the Tentative List. At the international level, joining UNESCO is an opportunity for Taiwan to attract global attention and to increase the income of tourism industry.²² To the Taiwanese government, gaining a World Heritage site is not only beneficial to the tourism industry, it can also be used as a diplomatic strategy. As Chiang indicated, the plan of preparing Taiwan to join UNESCO-based international heritage affairs in the future is "in line with Taiwan's search for a position in the global arena".²³ Taiwan has long been absent from international affairs, and is thus under-represented as a nation. This absence results in a lack of opportunities for Taiwan to participate in worldwide issues or to receive international aid; and it means that Taiwanese culture remains underrepresented in the world.

Can the serial transnational nomination be an icebreaker?

Despite its exclusion from the UNESCO World Heritage list, the state of Taiwan does not give up. The desperate state has even considered a serial transnational nomination as a strategy to have Taiwan locations inscribed.²⁴ On 12 December 2013, the MOC Minister Long Ying-tai (龍應台) proposed that Taiwan collaborate with China to nominate properties together. Long's statement set off a firestorm of debate, not only among officials, but also in the media and on the Internet. At the Legislative Yuan, there are two different opinions held about the idea of preparing the nomination of serial transnational properties together with China. The sovereignty of Taiwan is the main concern. Some legislators pointed out that, since Taiwan is not a member of the UN (or UNESCO), there is a risk that any Taiwanese property will end up being inscribed as China's, instead of being shared by two states. As a result, the inscription may incorrectly infer that Taiwan is part of China. One legislator even argued that Taiwan could be named 'Taiwan, China' in the nomination document, similar to when it joined the WTO.²⁵ Yet, some legislators share Minister Long's sentiment, and believe that UNESCO's World Heritage is about preserving the heritage of mankind, which is beyond politics.

The sensitive nature of a Taiwan(ROC)-China(PRC) collaborated nomination stems from the decades-long conflict between the two states over which is the 'true heir' of traditional Chinese Culture. The competition is not only fought out in military style, but on a cultural level too. To exacerbate matters, the specific Taiwanese location that Long suggested for nomination (together with China), was once the military frontline of the cross-strait conflict, Kinmen, where numerous battles took place during the post-Cold war era (second half of 20th century) between the PRC and the ROC. Yet, in the eyes of the Taiwanese government, the negative past of Kinmen and its military remains have been transformed into a peace memorial and are valuable for present tourism. The battlefield remains in Kinmen and Xiamen (in China) are living museums of the cold war history; together, they are witness to the fact that the intense cross-strait relations have become peaceful.

Importantly though, is the idea of sharing heritage between Taiwan and China really about protecting serial transnational properties, or is it about respective interests? To date, China has 47 properties on the World Heritage list and 38 elements on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list; thus, unlike Taiwan, it has no need to collaborate with other states to have locations inscribed. Why would China agree to 'share' heritage with Taiwan? It would see little benefit in the arrangement. And, would a collaboration reflect a cross-strait reconciliation, as the Taiwan government puts it, or would it simply risk Taiwan's sovereignty on the world stage? I leave these questions open for further research.

Conclusion

Scholars have pointed out that "UNESCO World Heritage interventions are judged by observers on the basis of their impact in introducing (or imposing) external values, which would undermine local ways of coping with the past, memory and transmission of culture."²⁶ But the Taiwan case study shows that UNESCO criteria can also be appropriated by local contexts and that UNESCO's World Heritage project and status can in fact be used for national interests. Becoming a world heritage site should not be simplified as a homogenising trend of globalisation; the designation provides a platform for nations to promote their national distinctiveness and compete with others. Not only does the 'local' have to find a way to apply global policies to a local context, and to represent local culture within the global framework (i.e., UNESCO's criteria for selection), but the 'global' is also appropriated to meet the needs of the 'local'. Hereby, the translation of World Heritage paradigms is mutual, and worthy of further investigation in future critical heritage studies.

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The history vestage of Kinmen. Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Llee Wu on flickr.



References

- I use the term 'paradigms' here to refer to the ideas of heritage and the models of heritage conservation endorsed by UNESCO. Even within UNESCO, there is no single and coherent paradigm of 'the heritage', so I use a plural noun that refers to the concepts of heritage, the criteria for the inscription of World Heritage, and the principle of the UNESCO's World Heritage centre, that are stated in the *Convention* and the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2013).
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- States that have signed the agreement of the *Convention* are States Parties in UNESCO's World Heritage Centre. In 2012 there were 191.
- See note 2
- ibid.
- Winter, T. 2014. 'Heritage conservation futures in an age of shifting global power', *Journal of Social Archaeology* (<http://tinyurl.com/shiftingpower>)
- The Council for Cultural Affairs was the council for cultural infrastructure in Taiwan, including promoting national and local culture and making cultural policies. In 2012 it was upgraded as a larger organization, the Ministry of Culture.
- White Paper of Cultural Policies 文化白皮書 (2004), p. 106.
- ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) is a non-governmental international organization dedicated to the conservation of the monuments and sites of the world. It is one of the Advisor Bodies to the World Heritage Committee to evaluate the nominated properties for World Heritage inscription. Unlike UNESCO's World Heritage *Convention*, which is ratified by States only, ICOMOS also accepts support from individuals and institutions.
- TICCIH (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage) is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to the study and preservation of industrial heritage. In 2000, TICCIH became ICOMOS's designated consultant in assessing industrial sites for the World Heritage List. Taiwan has joined TICCIH as a country.
- The *Taipei Declaration* can be accessed here: <http://tinyurl.com/taiwandecoration>
- In the *Cultural Heritage Preservation Act* (1982), 'cultural assets' refer to assets having historic, cultural and artistic value: *guwu* (antiquities), *guji* (monuments, including ancient buildings and archaeological sites), folk arts, folk customs and related artefacts, and natural cultural landscapes.
- The 'intangible cultural heritage' is manifested *inter alia* in the following domains: (a)oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b)performing arts; (c)social practices, rituals and festive events; (d)knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e)traditional craftsmanship.
- <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/65/assistance>
- BBC News, 22 May 2014 <http://tinyurl.com/portillojailed>
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- My translation and summary. For more information, see pp.33-34 of Fu, Chao-qing 傅朝卿. 2013. 'Rang shijie kanjian Taiwan: denglu lianheguo shijie wenhua yichan de yiyi讓世界看見台灣:登錄聯合國世界文化遺產的意義 (Making the world see Taiwan: the meaning of inscription on UNESCO Cultural Heritage)', *新世紀智庫論壇 (Taiwan New Century Forum)* No. 61, p.29-34, Taiwan New Century Foundation.
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- 'Serial transnational nomination' was added to the UNESCO *Operational Guideline* at the 7th extraordinary session in 2004, referring to a series of properties located in the territory of different State Parties, which do not need to be contiguous but that are nominated with the consent of all State Parties concerned.
- Taiwan joined WTO in 2002 as 'Chinese Taipei' (Separate customs territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu).
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