

Visit to China, hosted by the British Council, 21-27 April 2012
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As I leave China, the overwhelming impression is one of scale. Everything is enormous. Suzhou Railway Station would dwarf most international airports. Construction is happening everywhere. And in large proportions. During the 1½ hour drive between Shanghai and the water towns, there is little that could be called countryside. Just acres of urban sprawl. Meals are delicious but copious and never ending. Consumption generally seems large and a hunger for global brands prevails. The Shanghai Metro Stations offer a vast subterranean world of shopping (and confusion between myriad exits!). Blocks that appear a short hop on the map turn out to be a major hike.

Despite this powerful sense of an unstoppable juggernaut of growth – that, to quote Dr Zeus's Lorax, just keeps 'biggering and biggering and biggering' – and some underlying unanswered questions about censorship and human rights which had come to a head both before (with the Bo Xi Lai story) and during (Chen Guangcheng's escape from house arrest) our visit, there was much to encourage the heritage professional.

The places we visited, especially Zhouzhuang and to a lesser extent Tongli, Suzhou and Pingyao, were busy with tourists. Mostly Chinese people and many on what appeared to be organised group tours. There is a palpable need to 'see' places, although the quality of visit/sense of place perhaps questionable. Zhouzhuang was particularly overrun, with infrastructure bursting to capacity.

The local heritage professionals we met understood that this kind of intense tourism was not sustainable and were eager to share experience. I was surprised by the openness of those we met, who happily voiced challenges and shortcomings:

- a) lacking awareness and undue focus on economic development
- b) poor enforcement/lack of regulation
- c) failures in urban planning
- d) need to understand how to develop tourism and protect heritage at the same time
- e) limited government funding (tends to be spent on infrastructure projects)

The invitation to Shanghai came about as part of the British Council's UK Now Festival, which is marking the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations. The aim of the Forum was to share experience in the field of cultural heritage, to show how historic towns in the UK are balancing tourism, economic growth and environmental issues, and to discuss best practice in heritage education and youth engagement.

Understandably, finding the right balance between economic development and heritage protection was high on everyone's agenda. Clearing historic buildings to make way for high rises, mindlessly following the European style

of architecture and building fake reproductions/inventions (such as city walls that never existed) were also of concern to all.

The water towns are cited as a success story for the way historic buildings (and therefore in many people's eyes, creativity, tolerance and inclusiveness) have been preserved.

Delegates were very interested in hearing more about how to ensure good (planning) decisions are made, how public and private funding streams work (and how to make more of a case for the latter), volunteerism and the CSR agenda, and successful education and training programmes.

In Tongli we learned that 20% of the entrance ticket price (100 RMB, circa £10) was spent on heritage protection with tourism providing 50% of GDP. The importance of water means that environmental issues and eco-tourism are also coming up the agenda.

As in many places, striking the right balance between quality of life for the local community and providing an authentic tourist experience is challenging. The way our hosts talked about understanding visitor needs, letting people 'feel the quiet', providing a quality product, protecting the rights of local people, profit sharing and the need for innovation felt very comfortable (if not massively in evidence) and I think there is much that we could share in the future.

The economic impact of World Heritage Site status had been recorded and shared although there was surprise at levels of secondary tourist spend (low) and a need to manage expectations of the value of UNESCO recognition. Professor Ruan told a story of a tower he had helped save only to be horrified at plans to build an adjacent larger viewing platform to boost tourism. Not for the first time, he stressed that the protection of heritage is not for economic growth but for future generations.

Debbie Dance outlined the role of heritage in tourism in the UK and highlighted examples of heritage-led regeneration at Oxford Castle (a former prison now converted to a very popular hotel) and destination management by how Christchurch College is dealing with Harry Potter mania. Kersten England made the case for a good planning and heritage management framework to ensure that China made the most of its strong economic growth, rapid urbanisation and enormous untapped heritage potential.

David Anderson introduced some great grassroots education/engagement projects at the V&A and St Fagans. Jane Grenville described the history of heritage protection in the UK, the different roles of heritage professionals and organisations today and current debates (such as reconstruction and reconciling economic concerns, public attitudes and academic knowledge).

Simon Molesworth told us about the National Trust in Australia, its drop in staff numbers (from 800 to 400 in the last 15 years), its 800 sites (of which 400 are open to the public) and 3,000 volunteers. He stressed that the

National Trust Victoria has a budget of \$8m of which less than \$200,000 comes from government sources. He emphasised the power of citizen action by describing the sit-in at Rippon Lea (a 15 acre sustainable 19th Century estate) by 11,000 Trust supporters to prevent its demolition.

Simon said that the National Trust Register was a powerful tool as it reflected public opinion (vis-à-vis the government register) and stressed the importance of the National Trust approach to built and natural heritage – particularly as some people identify more with the green agenda.

Professor Xiaoming spoke about the successful RYHF work camps, underlining that cross-sectoral support was key alongside team work (important in a culture of 1-child families), skills development and connection. She felt that there were two important features to the Chinese work camps and these were that the activity happened in densely populated areas (see and be seen) and that they have a vast resource of volunteers.

The Chinese youngsters, including Professor Ruan's grandson, spoke so enthusiastically about their work camp experiences and subsequent leadership roles back home (establishing the Youth Heritage Forum).

Rempart co-ordinate some 200 work camps across France every year between June and September for 16-60 year olds, providing unique moments of intercultural dialogue ('restoring the past to build the future'). Linked to sources of public money, their work involves disadvantaged youth and 700 out of their 3,000 participants are from overseas. Heritage is very much part of being good citizens and as Marie-Georges Brousse said 'If you involve one or two volunteers in your struggle, victory will soon be on the horizon'.

We also heard about WHITRAP, the successful UNESCO inspired youth camp/heritage club programme in China.

In Zhouzhuang, we stayed in a beautifully restored government-owned traditional guest house, but this was completely eclipsed by the Yi De Hotel in Pingyao with its delightful courtyards, exquisite rooms, friendly staff and delicious food. Pingyao too was a more comfortable place to visit (probably as we were there mid-week). We took in the Global Heritage Fund's pilot restoration project, with its emphasis on local craftsmen and materials, and learned that UNESCO were running a programme to advise homeowners on traditional restoration techniques.

Our slightly mad trip around the surrounding temple sites in an electronic golf cart (which left our British Council minders having kittens) revealed historic artefacts we might only dream of in our damp, iconoclastic country including scores of well preserved wooden medieval Buddhas and statues, and a population keen to worship at their feet.

I particularly enjoyed the trip to Liangcun, where Rempart have been working on a temple site. A beautiful walled town with some 4,000 inhabitants, Liangcun seemed not to have been touched by tourism (yet!) and we had the

privilege of viewing several domestic compounds, accompanied by the town's mayor, and learning more about vernacular architecture and living conditions.

INTO should take more credit for the fact that Rempart and the Ruan Yisan Heritage Foundation came together at the ICNT in Dublin and as a result of those discussions developed this pioneering workcamp programme.

In Suzhou, we met the building construction company for an(other!) exquisite lunch followed by a short tour, primarily to see the Rempart work camp site for this year. In the conversation, I tried to explain about Main Street and it could be worth following up when/if Mr Chen visits the UK/US.

Talking of visiting the UK ... returning to Tongli to view the INTO working holiday site (a turn of the century former clinic/cottage hospital with stunning wooden balconied courtyard in need of some TLC), we had a very good meeting with the team responsible, who want to come to the UK and see how working holidays are managed here.

The INTO/Ruan Yisan Project in Tongli will run from 15-28 August 2012. Volunteers will be accommodated in the local youth hostel and will mostly do carpentry and masonry. They will work from 8-12 (with a break at 10am) and 3-6pm. Lunch and supper (at about 8pm) in local restaurants. The Chinese have a preference for younger people, but this is not essential. The British Council are providing some travel bursaries to Shanghai and volunteers will need to pay 1,200 RMB (circa £130) for accommodation and food.

So, mixed emotions on the plane home. An extraordinary experience – from the food (chickens feet, pigs stomach, lake snails and jelly fish set against beautiful dishes of broad beans, aubergine, baby bamboo and the contrasting flavours of edible plants we didn't even know existed, flowers, ferns, seeds ...) to the language (do I have the time/energy to learn Mandarin??); differing levels of luxury, beautiful locations, friendly, open people. I know I have taken far too many pictures, eager to try and capture the 'essence' of China (impossible!) and help me remember the incredible adventure.

Thank you to everyone who made it happen – particularly to the British Council for inviting me to speak at the Forum, paying my expenses and generally looking after us all, and to the Ruan Yisan Heritage Foundation for the wonderful post-conference visit to Pingyao and return to the water towns.