Transition from Cultural Property Protection to Cultural Heritage Conservation

City is a topic involved with both history and reality. Comparing to the history of our planet beginning more than 4 billion years ago, human history can be only considered transient. And comparing to human history dating back more than 3 million years, the city as a form of human settlement can be only considered a recent happening. In fact, the city first appeared merely more than 6000 years ago. However, the city has seen the fastest process of human evolution.

The city is where we live and where human civilization develops. Our cultural heritage in different historical periods, like history books, records vicissitudes of our cities. Cultural heritage of special importance that has survived can continue the history of our cities while meeting increasing needs for human development today and sustaining the glory and appeal of our cities.

We do not have to worry if too many sites and monuments are inscribed on our protection lists. Given common needs of human kind and future generations, we have too few cultural patrimonies to be protected, instead of too many. We should spare no time in rescuing and protecting valuable cultural patrimonies as many as possible, not only for the people today but also for generations to come.

China is in a fast urbanization process today. Urban construction is being conducted in an unprecedented scale and speed. Thus it is the most urgent and critical period for the conservation of cultural heritage and urban culture. Facing increasing problems and challenges, we should adopt a strategic perspective and make analysis from an overall and sustainable perspective so as to develop innovative and appropriate solutions.

I. From function-oriented cities to culture-oriented cities

Over the past 30 years, China has scored world-acclaimed achievements in urban construction. However, some cities put inadequate emphasis on urban cultural development while making fresh progress in material construction. In general, we should address challenges or avoid negative impacts in eight major aspects.

1. Avoid disappearance of urban memory. Urban memory has been accumulated over the sweep of history. From cultural landscapes to historic streets, from sites and monuments to indigenous houses, from traditional skills to social traditions, numerous tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources are combined to form urban memory and embody a city’s cultural values. However, in the process of urban re-development and modernization, some cities’ traditional houses and historic quarters have been razed out. As a result, urban cultural space has been destroyed, historical connection discontinued and neighborhood dismembered, leading to the disappearance of urban memory.

2. Avoid identical urban appearances. A city’s physical appearance embodies its historical and cultural evolution, represents its spirit and disposition, and reflects its material life, cultural traditions and geographic settings. A culturally matured and historically profound city is known for its distinctive characteristics and individualities. However, in planning and constructing cities in China today, copying and imitating have been widely practiced and as a result, most cities look virtually the same. You can now hardly distinguish them. Ethnic and local characteristics are replaced by high-rise buildings with identical appearance.

3. Avoid disorder of urban construction. We build the city in order to provide better places for human living, not only physically, but also culturally. Urban planning serves as an important means to reasonably allocate public resources, protect cultural and natural environment, safeguard social justice and complement the weakness of market. The fundamental objective of urban construction is not only to build a function-oriented city with beautiful environment but also a culture-oriented city with social harmony. However, in urban construction practices, some cities are lack of scientific attitude and cultural awareness. They heavily rely on land management as the means to propel economic growth, leading to the new “movement of enclosures”. For some cities, they make blind pursuit of large, new and westernized cities and are enthusiastic about building large squares, lawns, waters, landscape avenues and luxurious office buildings. These construction projects highlight functions but neglect cultural responsibilities.

4. Avoid low-class urban image. Urban image embodies a city’s material level, cultural taste and citizen quality in a comprehensive manner. It reflects the city’s past while demonstrating its future pursuits and development trends. A good urban image can not only help citizens in their pursuit of urban characteristics and enrich their experience, but also arouse their sense of identity, honor and responsibility. However, it is now hard to find well-defined urban cultural images full of humanity in some cities. Quite a number of small and medium-sized cities blindly imitate large cities and wrongly take high-rise buildings and skyscrapers as symbols of modernization. They hope to quickly change images of their cities by building new, novel and eccentric buildings. However, as a result, their urban landscapes turn out to be monotonous and superficial.
5. Avoid deterioration of urban environment. Urban environment is a complex system integrating a city’s social, economic and natural dimensions. Urban environment is closely associated with urban eco systems and thus is highly sensitive. A good urban environment can not only keep human health but also stimulate their initiative and creativity. Today, we should build our cities into places suitable for both human living and human development. However, in some cities, natural resources have been exploited in an unrestrained manner in order to meet the desire for development. As a consequence, many prominent environmental problems have confronted human existence, such as air, soil, water, visual and audio pollution; increasing heat island effect, traffic congestion and resource shortage; less green space, safety space and activity space; and cultural heritage utilized in a more commercial and urbanized way.

6. Avoid decline of urban spirit. Urban spirit is an inherent core of urban culture. Urban spirit has been developed in a prolonged process and played an important role in both history and reality. By generalizing the urban spirit, more citizens can understand and accept urban pursuits and boost their cultural awareness. However, in some cities, material interests are highlighted while cultural ecology is neglected. Blind and unpractical pursuits have become a trend in urban construction. Emphasis has been given to economic growth, construction scale, modern elements and superficial appearance while human spirit, overall coordination, traditional characteristics and practical effects are neglected. As a result, these cities demonstrate their superficial knowledge of culture and traditions, misunderstanding of urban spirit and perplexity in pursuing the orientation of urban development.

7. Avoid misunderstanding in urban management. Urban management is a complex system that should take the responsibility for the future. The objective of urban management should be to provide not only a comfortable, convenient, safe and beautiful material environment but also a cultural environment of peace, harmony, happiness, courtesy and spiritual morality. To realize this objective, we should guide our urban management by cultural awareness. However, in some cities, emphasis has been given to superficial dimensions, rule by man, experiences and near effect while neglecting internal elements, rule by law, scientific attitude and long-term effects. They fail to work out solutions for urban management at a strategic level. Emergency and remedial measures are taken only when problems appear in a massive manner. The key to urban diseases lies on the lack of long-term and strategic perspectives and cultural visions.

8. Avoid decline of urban culture. Urban culture represents an overall form of citizens’ existence conditions, spiritual appearance and urban landscapes and is closely associated with citizens’ social mentality, ways of behavior and values. Urban culture has been developed to form a city’s cultural traditions. To some extent, a city’s cultural resources, atmosphere and development level represent its competitiveness and determine its future. However, for some cities, when facing dominant cultures coming from outside, they do not consider to cultivate their history and traditions. Instead, they superficialize their cultures. As a result, ways of behavior featuring mediocre ideas, superficial culture and low-class tastes prevail in cultural life of these cities and fine traditions and cultures are marginalized. In essence, it is a crisis in cultural identity and cultural stance.

The Athens Charters, proclaimed in 1933, put forward the concept of "function-oriented cities", which holds that the city should be planned by functions and the city’s four major functions, including living, working, leisure and transportation, should be well-coordinated and developed in a balanced manner. This concept has had important impacts on urban planning and development in the past century. However, with years of practice, people have come to realize that many complicated problems facing urban development cannot be solved merely by function-based division.

Urban culture epitomizes social civilization and embodies social harmony. The concepts of “emphasis on human concerns” and “scientific development” not only provide guidelines for state governance but also represent essential elements of urban culture, offering guarantees for realizing social harmony, honesty, responsibility, respect, justice and care. Cultural and economic development can be progressed and well coordinated only by putting these concepts into practices of urban development.

Being suitable for living is an important characteristic of a harmonious city. A city suitable for living is an objective demonstrating our transition from emphasis on materials to emphasis on people. We should focus more on cultural development, human development and people’s role, instead of building “vanity projects”. And all these set higher requirements for urban managers and decision makers.

Urban competitiveness is a comprehensive concept, including economic and cultural competitiveness. Today, cultural competitiveness has increasingly prominent impacts and roles and become an important driving force to propel a city’s sustainable development. In today’s world where material growth patterns become increasingly identical and pressure on resources and environment continue to grow, urban culture has become a new driving force for urban development and demonstrates greater economic and social values.
Cultural soft strength can enable people to accept values imperceptibly. Today, economic activities, including scientific research, production management, technical training and more, heavily rely on cultural elements and cultural spirit. Culture plays an increasingly important role in social and economic development.

Today, cities are faced with not only insufficient conservation of cultural heritage but also insufficient cultural creativity. The loss of cultural heritage will lead to the loss of cultural memory. Without new cultural creations, a city will lose its direction. Urban culture must bear on a city’s historical continuations distinctive characters, realistic progress, creative development and future trends.

Urban culture is not a fossil which can retain its values only because it is old. Urban culture, however, is a living thing. Its life can be sustained only by development. Its influence can be promoted only by spreading. Urban development cannot be sustained without the impacts of urban culture. Therefore, we need to not only carry forward traditions but also make new creations and innovations. A city without cultural richness cannot be a city with charm and vitality.

I. From “cultural property protection” to “cultural heritage protection”

So far China has 760,000 inventoried items of unmovable cultural property, among which some 70,000 sites and monuments are listed under various levels of protection, including 2352 key sites and monuments under state protection. China has proclaimed 116 national cities with historical and cultural importance and 350 national towns and villages with historical and cultural importance. China has 41 sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, including 29 cultural heritage sites and 4 mixed sites of cultural and natural heritage.

China has 3415 museum. These museums run 10,000 exhibitions and receive 500 million visitors annually. Each year, nearly 100 cultural property exhibitions from China are organized overseas. Beginning in April 2008, China’s museums have been opened with free admission. Private collectors of cultural property have continued to increase, regulation of antique markets develops steadily and the art auction industry has emerged quickly.

According to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, an administrative system featuring jurisdiction management and level-specific responsibilities is exercised on the protection of cultural relics. People’s governments at various levels are responsible for the administration of cultural property within their jurisdiction. In the new Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics, amended in October 2002, guidelines for cultural property-related work in the new period are defined and central and local governments are required to increase fiscal grants annually for the protection of cultural property.

In December 2005, the State Council of China issued the Circular on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage. It is China’s first government mandate on the topic of cultural heritage, demonstrating a historical transition from the protection of cultural property to the conservation of cultural heritage. Implications of cultural heritage conservation have been expanded and deepened, with more emphasis on continuity and public participation. The scope of cultural heritage conservation continues to expand, with new development trends emerging.

1. Implications of cultural heritage conservation deepened

The definition of continuity stresses that creation, development and continuation of cultural heritage is a historical process. Every generation has the right to share cultural heritage and the obligation to protect cultural heritage. Human civilization continues to develop and progress in cultural creation and accumulation by generations of people. Every generation should make their due contribution to it. We should not only make our own cultural creations but also hand down them to generations to come.

As contemporary generation, we should not dispose at our own will the cultural heritage handed down by our ancestors. Future generations also have the right to carry forward these cultural heritage resources and conduct mental communications with their history and ancestors and draw wisdom and power from them. Therefore, we should not only protect this valuable cultural wealth and utilize it appropriately for our purpose, but also make sure it can be carried forward and utilized by our future generations.

The definition of public participation holds that cultural heritage conservation is not the privilege of governments and cultural heritage conservators. It is the common cause for all the people and every person has the right and obligation to protect cultural heritage. Support by the general public provides a decisive force to sustain the existence and development of cultural heritage conservation. If the general public do not care, protect or carry forward our cultural heritage, it will be inevitably destroyed and lost in an accelerated manner.
We must respect and safeguard public’s connection with and affection for cultural heritage and guarantee their right to know, participate in and benefit from cultural heritage conservation. Due respect that cultural heritage should enjoy cannot be realized without sincere, lasting and conscious protection by local people. And without respect, cultural heritage cannot survive with vitality. Only with public’s active participation can cultural heritage conservation become a common will of the whole society.

2. Implications of cultural heritage conservation expanded

A. Transition from the protection of individual cultural property to the protection of mixed heritage and cultural landscape combining cultural elements with natural elements. The creation and development of cultural heritage is closely associated with the natural settings they are located in. Chinese people have long put much value on harmonious co-existence between man and nature and integration of cultural elements with natural elements constitutes an important characteristic of Chinese cultural heritage.

B. Transition from the protection of static heritage to the protection of living heritage. Cultural heritage is not lack of life. It is dynamic, ever-changing and full of life. Many sites and monuments still play an important role in people’s life and production practices today.

C. Transition from the protection of individual sites and monuments to the protection of both large-scale cultural heritage and lineal cultural heritage. The scope of cultural heritage conservation has expanded from individual sites, historic building complexes, historic streets and towns and villages to large-scale group sites, cultural routes and cultural heritage corridors.

D. Transition from the protection of ancient cultural property and modern sites and monuments to the protection of 20th-century heritage and contemporary heritage. Drastic changes are taking place in every aspects of Chinese society. If we fail to cultivate and protect modern cultural patrimonies in a timely manner, we may very possibly forget this part of history within a short period of time.

F. Transition from the protection of important historic sites and representative buildings to the protection of folk cultural heritage reflecting people’s lifestyles, such as vernacular buildings, industrial heritage and time-honored brands. They were considered common and ordinary and thus overlooked in the past. But in fact, they represent an important form of expression of cultural diversity.

G. Transition from the protection of tangible cultural heritage to the protection of both tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage are two different definitions only because they have different carriers. In fact, cultural elements they reflect are integrated and inseparable.

Why do I put forward the concept of transition from “function-oriented cities” to “culture-oriented cities”? I do not mean that modern cities should given less attention to urban functions. Instead, we should try our utmost to meet all citizens’ needs for urban functions. However, urban development should not be merely involved with economic growth and construction. More attention should be given to cultural development. A city should be not only functional but also cultural.

Why do I put forward the concept of transition from "cultural property protection” to "cultural heritage conservation”? it is not merely a simple verbal transition; it represents the continuation and progress on the basis of original definition. From antiques to cultural property to cultural heritage, this process of verbal transition reflects human kind’s emphasis shift from material wealth to cultural implications to spiritual domain. Comparing to the definition of cultural property, cultural heritage has a broader, more comprehensive and more profound implications.

We believe that a successful city in the 21st century must a culturally-oriented city and China’s cause of cultural heritage conservation will see greater success!