

EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

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“Heritage Across Borders” 4th Biennial Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies Hangzhou, 1-6 September 2018

The Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS), together with Zhejiang University, co-organized the 4th Biennial Conference titled “Heritage Across Borders”. The conference was held in Hangzhou, China, from 1 to 6 September 2018 at the vast and beautifully scenic campus of one of the leading universities in China.

The key theme of the conference was the concept of “borders” in heritage. It was examined, analysed, discussed, reinterpreted, and deconstructed in a wide variety of contexts and disciplines in order to find the connections and divisions between the contrasting notions defining heritage, such as nature vs culture, urban vs rural, global vs local, tangible vs intangible, legal vs contested, past vs contemporary, etc.

As Prof. Le Cheng of Zhejiang University wrote on behalf of the Organizing Committee, the conference constituted a platform to bring together researchers and experts from different disciplines “to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the role of heritage in global and local cultural dynamics”.

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One of the sessions which captured this spirit featured an important discussion about the role of experts/researchers in both the global field of theoretical exchange and the local field of the down-to-earth management and safeguarding of heritage.

The numbers accompanying the event were astonishing, as usually the case in China. Over 500 participants affiliated with over 200 universities and cultural institutions from 43 countries gave 560 presentations in 84 sessions over the spread of four working days. The programme brochure of the conference was quite probably the most browsed-through printed object during this time, as all the participants tried to keep up with the hectic and nearly impossible task of taking maximum advantage of the opportunities offered by being present at least at half of the presentations in their field of interest. The impressive group of over 500 academicians was comprised of both well-known authors and theorists of critical heritage studies, as well as a wide range of junior researchers representing a variety of interdisciplinary fields, proving that the topics surrounding institutional changes, local and national heritage law enforcement, safeguarding practices, and international heritage dialogue are all being followed, observed, and debated within the growing community of specialists in an increasing number of countries.

The location was meaningful in many aspects. In terms of the global context, it was the biggest conference about heritage so far organized in Asia. China has become one of the new leaders in the heritage safeguarding movement – as defined and propagated by the UNESCO-offered safeguarding framework – with 53 inscriptions on the World Heritage List (bypassed only by Italy with its 54 inscriptions) and 40 inscriptions on the intangible cultural heritage lists and register (with Japan in second place with 21 inscriptions). It also passed a heritage protection law (which came into force in 2011) and has popularized the cultural heritage concept via numerous academic, popular, and press publications as well as via TV programmes country-wide. Also, due to the location many researchers and experts from the neighbouring East Asian countries had the opportunity to participate, as the discussion about Asian heritage and its safeguarding has been taking place from Mongolia to the Philippines and from Kazakhstan to Japan.

Moreover Hangzhou, as one of the seven ancient Chinese capitals – established over 2200 years ago and known in the West as Quinsai thanks to Marco Polo's alleged visit in the late 13th century – boasts not only Xi Hu, the picturesque West Lake and subject of countless Tang dynasty poems, with its green tea grown around the lake known for its unique taste; but also exemplifies the long history of traditional Chinese education. In addition, the province of Zhejiang, next to Fujian, has been (among others) one of the areas cherishing and supporting education since ancient times, and Hangchow University – one of the first Protestant schools opened in China already in the first half of the 19th century – was later transformed into Zhejiang University following the establishment of the People's Republic. As both Chinese and international researchers have pointed out in re-

cent years, contemporary Hangzhou, as a modern metropolis, has been a positive example of how to protect both cultural and natural sites and to safeguard the cultural memory of the local communities. Those participants of the conference who took part in the excursion on the last day of the event to the Liangzhu Museum, where the symposium on the Neolithic jade culture was held, had a chance to experience this first-hand. The site has received generous local government attention and funding and has been turned into a well-maintained cultural and leisure destination. Those foreign experts well-read in the theory of critical heritage discourse might have felt slightly abashed by the active involvement of the authorities in the organization of the symposium. That, along with many other issues that might have caught foreign experts' attention while in Hangzhou, demonstrates the need for more cross-border heritage dialogue to facilitate understanding. Holding the ACHS 2018 in China was undoubtedly a positive and successful step towards such future exchanges and understandings.

Some keynote speeches given by renowned Western researchers also stirred up some controversy among the audience, resulting in off-site discussions over the need for more gender and racial diversification in the selection of future keynote speakers.

The previous conferences were held biennially, since 2012, in Gothenburg, Canberra, and Montreal respectively. The upcoming one is going to take place in London in 2020, and the ACHS members in Hangzhou voted to hold the ACHS conference of 2022 in Santiago, Chile.