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Reframing China's heritage conservation discourse. Learning by testing civic engagement tools in a historic rural village.

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Abstract

Urban heritage conservation in China has been subject to severe criticism, although there is now a sense of paradigm shift. Charters, declarations and agendas had the merit of filtering down the international discourse on heritage, while more innovative approaches were arising. The UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape recommendation, offers a new angle from which to observe this process of change. The underlying argument of this article is that HUL can provide a platform to achieve greater sustainability in transforming historic sites in China, particularly in rural areas, overcoming, at the same time, the easy shortcut of the East-West discourse of difference in respect to heritage conservation. This is primarily due to the shifting focus from the materiality of heritage to its role in sustainable development with increasing attention on the role played by local communities. By presenting the proposal for the protection of the historic rural village of Shuang Wan in the Jiangsu Province, this paper aims to reflect on this shift showing its advantages but also some of the risks. These are inherent in a discourse of heritage in danger of legitimizing mere pro-growth development approaches, if not accompanied by participatory practices considerate of the specific social reality of China.

Keywords

Urban conservation, Historic Urban Landscape, Chinese villages, Local Development, civic engagement.

Introduction

Stigmatizing China for adopting unorthodox approaches to urban heritage conservation might be an easy exercise. This is a common trait of (western) observers when facing the shiny gold *Jing'an* Temple in the heart of Shanghai, the *hutòng* area of Beijing or the East gate of the ancient walls of Suzhou. No matter if the criticism respectively stems from a perception of monument over-commercialization, of inner-city over-gentrification or of fake reconstruction (indeed a real fake in Suzhou), the verdict is often the same: these buildings and urban areas do not retain cultural significance, as the *Australia Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 2013) would suggest for the conservation practice of the inherited city¹. They instead represent invasive alterations of the built environment or even arbitrary reinventions of the past. However, this reading, which is quite frequent among international scholars, fails to distinguish between arguable conservation practices and more understandable (although undesired) costs of the urbanization/modernization process. Regarding the former point, Taylor (2004) already correctly pointed out the importance of charters and principles in the Asian region for developing a shared *ethos* for the management of cultural heritage resources. As it will be argued in the next section, many steps have been taken in China to adhere to wider international standards but also in formalizing a divergent approach especially around the notion of authenticity. Regarding the latter point, the urbanization process has implied (and still does imply) such a tremendous process of social and economic change that these costs appear to be unavoidable to a certain extent. They relate in particular to efficiency-seeking but controversial top-down approaches in urban transformation, which have determined social resentments and oppositions at the local level (He and Wu 2009). Nevertheless,

some innovations in the direction of overcoming the barriers to citizens' participation in urban planning in China are taking place (Morrison and Xian 2016).

The approval of the UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) Recommendation in 2011 and the discussions that followed in the Asian region and in China offers a privileged angle by which to observe how the latest international debate on urban heritage conservation has been received in this part of the world². As a matter of fact, the HUL approach suggests readdressing the object of attention to achieve more sustainable urban outcomes in two main ways: 1) from (urban) conservation *per se* to the management of urban and territorial changes; and 2) from the centrality of the conservation of the built environment, and its materiality, to the need to embark on different and more holistic approaches to heritage conservation, being considerate of the communities embedded in those urban contexts. This suggests going beyond the historic perimeters defined during the twentieth century (shifting in scope) and to include communities in the heritage discussion (shifting in process), in the attempt to capture the fast-changing challenges of the contemporary age, particularly in emerging countries (Bandarin and Van Oers 2012).

Indeed, HUL has been widely discussed at the regional level during the drafting and then approval of the *Shanghai Agenda* for the HUL implementation in China, from 2013 to 2015³. While many issues appear to be common international concerns, others are country-specific as the *road map* for HUL in China traced by Van Oers and Pereira Roders (2013) has outlined. According to the authors, the challenge for China is twofold: how to deal with metropolis which 'are turning into a collection of objects, primarily iconic tall buildings that have no connection with each other or their immediate physical settings, which contain fewer and fewer surviving historical structures' and 'creeping suburbanization' which 'swallow up semi-rural villages on

the outskirts' (p. 6); and how to implement 'civic engagement tools', in the attempt to 'educate a diverse cross-section of stakeholders and empower them to identify key values in their urban areas, develop visions, set goals and agree on actions to safeguard their heritage and promote sustainable development' (p. 9).

The problems related to the existing management of the built environment is quite clear, given the impact of the unprecedented Chinese urbanization on the historic urban structures. Less evident are the practical solutions, although they are generally related to engaging local communities in the process of regeneration and conservation of historic areas, thus reducing the overall social tension of such transformations and improving the richness and diversity of its physical outcomes. This is the case of the well-known regeneration process of Tianzifan in Shanghai (Yung, Chan, and Xu 2014). However, Tianzifan is still more an exception rather than the norm, although the Chinese government is increasingly showing this adaptive strategy where intense dialogues between stakeholders can take place, as in the controversial case of Enning Road in Guangzhou (Tan and Altrock 2016). Overall, there is wide international consensus that effective community involvement in urban transformation and upgrading would result at least in the sharing of some economic benefits, curbing dangerous gentrification processes (UN-HABITAT 2008).

In the attempt to ensure greater social sustainability and inclusive growth, the HUL approach advocates for widening the range of available tools to deal with the legacy of the past. Civic engagement tools (*in primis*), knowledge and planning tools, regulatory systems and ad hoc financial tools (UNESCO 2011), which are traditionally lacking or scarcely integrated in the urban planning practice, should be tackled in a more holistic fashion. Therefore, their full implementation and integration

is the main goal of various pilot cases across China, the Asia-Pacific Region and the rest of the world, which have been tested in preliminary forms⁴.

By reflecting on the debate around the adoption of the *Shanghai Agenda* in 2015 (WHITRAP 2015), and by reporting the preliminary outcomes of one of the HUL pilot cases in China implemented between 2015 and 2016 (WHITRAP 2016), the aim of this article is to show how the shift in the scope and process of urban heritage conservation is taking place, as well as the limitations encountered in the pilot case. The case reported is the proposal for conservation and regeneration of Shuang Wan Cun, a historic rural village in the Wujiang district of Suzhou where a multidisciplinary and international research team have been involved in shaping the bottom-up demand for local change. In the conclusion the paper will argue that the attention given to the sustainable management of the village and ways to finance its budget have been used as the main argument to legitimize the engagement of local stakeholders and the proposal for heritage conservation and rural landscape enhancement. This suggests that, while the concept of urban heritage conservation is still largely rooted in a more general East-West heritage discourse of difference (Winter 2014), the HUL approach could provide a platform to potentially overcome long-lasting cultural and even ideological divisions.

Moreover, this case shows that the legacy of the past, which has been considered a long-term burden in China or, more recently, a commodity for private economic exploitation, can be turned into an opportunity for sustainable local development when integrated approaches are utilized. However, some risks still remain and they will be discussed in relation to the emergence of a prevailing economic discourse over the regulative one and the broader issue of legitimacy of civic engagement tools in non-western contexts.

The heritage discourse in urbanizing China: beyond the East-West discourse of difference

The dispute around the notion of authenticity of heritage and its implication for the Asia Pacific region is part of a long-lasting debate regarding the hegemonic power of western value and beliefs in the heritage field. This is tightly linked to a well established stream of development in heritage studies ‘related to the more recent societal changes connected to colonial (and post-colonial) experience’, which relates local identities to power relationships (Harvey 2001). This debate finally emerged internationally during the writing of the Nara Document on authenticity in 1994, where Asian scholars (with particular engagement of the Japanese ones) stood in favour of a reconsideration of Asian approaches to materiality beyond the dogmatic assumptions of the Chart of Venice (1964). The *Nara Document* is ‘a tacit acknowledgement of the plurality of approaches to the issue of authenticity ... [which] does not reside primarily in Western notions of intact fabric’ (Taylor 2004, 430).

Nevertheless, the practice of heritage conservation in China has evolved both in the direction to conform to international practices and, contextually, to retain its own identity. This has been clarified within the *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* (ICOMOS China 2000). While the China principles emphasize the ‘minimal intervention’ on heritage in the conservation practice, particular governmental needs might justify the relocation of heritage⁵ and, similarly, a greater tolerance in the reconstruction of historic sites might be applied (Qian 2007).

In a nutshell, the divergence between China and the international practice materialized around the need to replace certain materials (wood *in primis*) and the need to allow flexible approaches in particular cases of urban conservation. This is also the main outcome of the recent Qufu Declaration of 2015, which placed attention on the need to apply flexible criteria to conservation in the case of fragile settlements, such as natural villages in rural areas (Zhu 2015). Around these notions the entire radicalization of the discourse of difference have been pursued.

However, as Winter (2014) pointed out, the East-West heritage discourse of difference has been biased by a narrow focus on the concept of authenticity. This has prevented careful analysis on the contextual process of convergence of the conservation practice, which has taken place in recent years in the global conservation governance arena, as “the conservation of material fabric is understood (just) as the starting point for the broader goal of maintaining sociocultural continuities, the very real, albeit analytically elusive, social glue that binds past and present” (Winter 2014, 134). As an example, the importance of social (or ecological) sustainability for the perpetuation of cultural landscapes is paradigmatic of the awareness “that heritage places are not isolated islands and that there is an interdependence of people, social structures, and the landscape and associated ecological systems” (Taylor and Lennon 2011, 537).

As already mentioned, the recent UNESCO HUL Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape aims at building a general framework to complement the existing set of international norms, principles and guidelines around urban heritage conservation. By suggesting the integration of a series of existing tools, it aims to incorporate *de facto* a notion of sustainability, being comprised of social, environmental and economic concerns, as it has been conceptualized in the international agendas of last decades

(and reiterated in: [UN 2012]). The HUL Recommendation is still under discussion in many parts of the world, although in China an innovative programme for its implementation has been set up at WHITRAP since 2012. In 2014 an International Advisory Board was established, with the aim of supporting the drafting of the so called ‘Shanghai agenda’ (WHITRAP 2015) in order to adapt the UNESCO Recommendation to the Chinese context⁶. The Agenda acknowledges the tension between conservation and rapid urbanization as the main challenge for urban heritage conservation in China (point 2). For the scope of this article, the main point, which is worthwhile to report, is the emphasis which has been given to community development, in particular to the need ‘to give priority to local people’s demand on the improvement of living conditions and to enable local populations to enjoy benefits from urban heritage conservation’ (point 4.2). Therefore, it recommends to ‘undertake comprehensive surveys and cultural mapping of city’s historic urban landscape – its natural, cultural and human resources’ and to ‘manage the balance of the goals of urban heritage conservation with those of socio-economic development through participatory planning and stakeholder consultations’ (point 4.1).

The issue of social sustainability is given priority, as local communities are normally treated as a passive agent in the development process. This reflects a situation where the effective preservation of the past is often threatened by the local government appetite for growth in coalition with aggressive private developers (Zhu 1999). On the other hand, those who live in historic areas today might not effectively raise their voice in the public arena (Verdini 2015), as the majority recently migrated from the countryside and are institutionally deprived of basic social rights. Therefore, it is unrealistic to find a real civil society acting to counterbalance the system of local power, as it would be more likely to expect in a Western context (Pendlebury 2008).

As a matter of fact, the Agenda advocates both the improvement of people's livelihoods and their empowerment.

The dual advocacy of the *Shanghai Agenda* mirrors *de facto* an intense debate in China regarding urban transformations and its discontents, under a non-democratic regime. On one hand, the system shows element of unfairness, partially depriving people of the benefits of urbanization. Thus, the Agenda places attention on how to improve people's livelihoods; on the other hand, the relative lack of civic awareness (and therefore engagement) in urban transformations, requires the support and empowerment of more independent organizations and individuals capable of effectively raising their voices in the public arena. However, in contrast to what historically characterized the state-civil society relationships in the West, distinctions between the private and public realm are still rather opaque in China (Spires 2011). As it will be discussed later, the notion of civic engagement, which is one pillar of the HUL approach and therefore one of the preconditions to achieve sustainable urban conservation outcomes, is still needed to be distinguished between the East and the West to avoid simplistic comparisons.

The sustainable management of rural settlements within the discourse on heritage protection.

The dramatic loss of cultural roots that the country has experienced (and still is experiencing) in the phase of the 'great urban transformation' is well known. However, China is not year zero in terms of urban heritage conservation anymore, due to recent discourses on heritage and changing politics (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013). This has been primarily determined by the fact that the state now conceives

traditional cultures and the past as a strategic factor for strengthening its soft power in the global arena (Shambaugh 2013). Although the country is endowed with an extensive legislative and regulatory system related to urban heritage (Whitehand and Gu 2007), the main threats to urban conservation stem from a perverse institutional setting for financing the city development. It incentivizes massive inner-city redevelopment at higher densities or unabated urban growth (WB and DRCSCC 2014). Normally this institutional arrangement affects the fragile built environment and in particular historic inner-city areas and traditional rural landscapes, including the rich system of natural villages that have in many cases historic characteristics.

The urbanization of the Chinese countryside has by no means implied the potential loss of a fundamental component of the country's regional and local cultures (Messmer and Chuang 2013). Therefore, the question of the sustainability of the rural-urban fringe management has assumed different connotations: from the classic quantitative correlation between urban expansion and loss of arable land to more comprehensive evaluation of the potential cultural and socio-economic threats (and opportunities) inherent in such massive processes of change (Verdini, Wang, and Zhang 2016). Considering the articulated city-regional structure of China and the presence of dense rural regions within complex polycentric urban systems (Qadeer 2000), tensions between urban growth and historic villages are almost everywhere in China. Their disappearance is tightly related to hidden social costs, which might prevent the future development of alternative forms of a more inclusive pattern of urbanization at the fringe (Verdini 2014). This fact echoes the concerns expressed by Van Oers and Pereira Roders (2013), regarding the risk of peri-urban villages washed away by urbanization. However, physical proximity (and material demolition) is not

the only risk, as other forces, such as mass tourism, might be a major cause of disruption once accessibility of rural areas is ensured⁷.

Overall, the cultural legacy of rural China, although seriously threatened by the urbanization process, is increasingly acknowledged as a resource for future sustainable development. Feasibility studies for the sustainable transformation of traditional villages (Bosselman et al. 2014), report of action-research activities (Grubert and Monpert 2013) and real case studies of the protection of villages (Cheng, Yu, and Hu 2016) have been published and, similarly, literature in Chinese is exponentially increasing⁸. Since the UNESCO HUL recommendation is concerned with the management of change in the age of urbanization and globalization, the rural focus on the Chinese urbanization process appears to contribute substantially to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities of the practice of heritage conservation from a very particular angle.

The HUL approach relies on the integrated application of different tools but the conditions for their sustainable applicability in China's rural or peri-urban areas are not equally present. The key problem is that the pressure of urban growth and the related encroachment of the city into the countryside is normally determined by financial constraints imposed locally by the central government. Therefore, cities, towns and villages, are pushed to collect resources to sustain their city budgets and to contribute to ambitious national GDP growth targets. This has generated perverse pro-growth behaviours, primarily in form of extensive land requisitions for urban development, but also fierce and often inefficient competition among municipalities especially in metropolitan areas (Zhao, Lu, and De Roo 2010). Overall, the State, being the owner of land, is ultimately one of the most aggressive actors in the development process. Under a regime of growth associated with social control but

also with increasing inequalities, Chinese cities have faced several tensions. Despite the gradual transition of the socialist political regime, ‘public participation in the formation and implementation of a plan is deficient, due to the lack of a civil society in China’ (Zhao 2015, 284).

The preponderance of the economic discourse, regardless of its perverse social and environmental negative externalities, is one of the main distinguished features of the contemporary Chinese urbanization process (Wu 2015), with direct implications on the practice of urban conservation. The most evident is the role assumed by private actors, which operate in coalition with the public. In absence of a regulatory role played by the public sector, private actors maximize their profits in the process of urban transformation with the risk that urban conservation, in the best scenario, is associated with over-commercialization of selected historic areas. The case of the conservation of Xintiandi in Shanghai and conversion into a luxury retail district proves that being part of comprehensive redevelopment plans, conservation areas of the main Chinese mega-cities often serve the purpose of increasing the land value of the surrounding areas (He and Wu 2005).

Rural areas instead perform quite differently when market forces are not strong enough to ensure return on private investments. Therefore, the public sector is normally the main, if not the sole, player for development. One of the most frequent options for rural villages is the setting up of local tourism development companies with the main purpose to attract private resources⁹. This is the case for many rural or peri-urban villages in the Jiangsu Province, where Shuang Wan is located, such as the famous Tongli water town or even less famous cases like Luxian and Yangwang in the Dongshan Peninsula of Suzhou (Lu 2014). In addition, the normative system for the protection of cultural heritage in rural areas, tends to become loosened and

scattered. Rural and peri-urban villages are frequently lacking even basic building codes and systems for protection of important historic buildings.

In summary, the risks of villages being swallowed-up in the urbanization process and transformed into money machines for mass tourism are determined by many tangled factors and, as a consequence, the space for sustainability is very limited, under the current system. The case study of Shuang Wan Cun, which will be introduced in the next section, is representative of all the above mentioned challenges. At the same time, the village has embarked on a different pattern of development, being included in the no-growth area around Tai Lake and being classified as rural with tourism vocation, despite its location in one the fastest urbanizing regions of China. This has secured a relatively favourable condition to apply the HUL approach, paving the way to experiment alternative and place-based solutions, with the engagement of the local community, partially detaching from the mainstream Chinese model.

HUL in practice: the case of Shuang Wan Cun

Shuang Wan Village, belongs administratively to the Wujiang District of Suzhou, in the Yangtze River Delta. The village is 40km South of Suzhou city center and 100km from Shanghai, near Tai Hu Lake. It has an area of 305 Hectares with an estimated population of 2,150 residents and 550 households (Village survey conducted in 2015). Almost 1,000 people are migrant workers, almost 40% of the total population are mainly employed in the textile sector. The District of Wujiang (One of the six urban districts of Suzhou prefecture level city, with more than 1.28 million inhabitants in 2013) traditionally belongs to the rich and fertile region around Tai Hu Lake, well known for its famous system of canals and water towns, as well as silk production. In

recent years, this area has undergone rapid development, especially after being upgraded from county to district in 2012 (Cartier and De 2015). This administrative readjustment has implied a rapid conversion of rural land into urban, and recently, Wujiang District has promoted a series of megaprojects like Tai Lake New City and East Tai Lake Tourist Resort, well connected with modern infrastructures with the city of Suzhou. Therefore, Wujiang is becoming functionally integrated with the dense, urbanized area of the greater Suzhou. However, this region still retains a distinguished rural character. It is crossed by the Grand Canal, which has historically ensured the stable irrigation of Wujiang, and there are water towns such as Tongli, Lili and Zhenze, which have been recently developed into popular tourist destinations. In light of this background, the Administration of Wujiang District has supported in 2015 a research activity to study a ‘Scenario for future sustainable rural development’ applied to the pilot case of Shuang Wan Cun and to test an experimental application of the UNESCO HUL approach, in order to find a balance between urban development and the conservation of the rural landscape. The methodology employed has followed 3 main steps, as summarized in table 1: qualitative interviews with decision makers; qualitative interviews and cultural mapping exercise with local inhabitants, based on the suggestion of the HUL approach; one-week residential workshop (action-research) to develop rural scenarios and a public presentation of final results¹⁰.

| TABLE 1. METHODOLOGY: PHASES, AIMS AND MAIN OUTPUTS | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| METHODOLOGY | AIMS/DESCRIPTIONS | MAIN OUTPUTS | PERIOD |
| 1) Interviews with the main decision makers | A series of interviews with the village Party's Secretary and her team, aimed at capturing strengths and opportunities of the village, from the point of view of the main local decision maker, associated with their vision of the future of the village. | The interviews have been used to draft a preliminary SWOT analysis (Strengths; Weakness; Opportunities and Threats). In summary the results are: S) proximity to Suzhou/Shanghai, rural identity, strong textile sector flourishing due to on-line selling; rich fishponds economy W) forceful conversion of fishponds into arable land, exceptionally high rate of migrants due to local industry; O) introduction of new cultivations (rose) to relaunch the image of the village; presence of historic building and a stone portal; T) low income households located in the historic area. | April-May 2015 |
| 2) Qualitative Interviews and cultural mapping with local inhabitants | A series of interviews (15 samples) with local inhabitants (both long-lasting residents and migrant workers) with the implementation of cultural mapping. The main aim was to understand people's perception of their living environment and their cultural heritage. | The interviews and the cultural maps have been used to identify the main symbolic and cultural elements of the village (natural, cultural and human). In summary the results of cultural mapping are: for local people the water systems and some historic landmarks (like the stone portal) is part of their identity; for migrants few natural landmarks constitute their main points of reference. In the interview, local people expressed concerns for the loss of their identity while migrant workers' main concerns were for their living conditions and job stability. | June 2015 |
| 3) One-week residential workshop and final public presentation | A one-week residential scenario workshop with the involvement of University students and academic staff from different disciplines (urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture and development economics). The intensive workshop was hosted in the village town hall. A group of senior students worked to implement a comprehensive village development strategy while six groups of students worked in different sectors of the village, providing alternative design solutions. Three rounds of group review have ensured consistency of the final proposal. The main aim was to develop a coherent proposal for local development, including heritage into a framework of sustainable development, to be presented and discussed in a plenary session to the local community. | The material produced by different groups has been gathered into a presentation of 74 slides including the following topics: regional accessibility; regional development strategies and policies; mental maps; 3 strategies for Shuang Wan; Development programme (2015-2019); development vision 2020; Detailed area design; Group A; Group B; Group C; Appendix: study of architectural typologies in the village. In summary the 3 main strategies aim at: 1) the optimization of the rural land and the improvement of rural landscape introducing more profitable rose cultivations; 2) the redesign and paving of the local network to allow bicycle friendly mobility and to improve the quality of the village public space and its accessibility; 3) the conservation of the historic built environment. | 6-12 July 2015 |

Table 1. Summary of the methodology employed including the 3 main phases: aims and main outputs.

As emerged during the interviews with the local leader, Shuang Wan is a relative underdeveloped water village grown along the north-south direction of the main canal, featuring vernacular architectures of relative poor quality and a cluster of historic buildings in the South part (Fig. 1). These buildings, which can be dated back to the beginning of the Twenty Century, do not retain yet a legal status of protection. However, they form a relative homogenous ensemble of old structures around a stone portal of the XVII century, locally recognized as a symbolic element of the history of the village and listed as heritage at the district level. Home-based textile industry and agriculture are the major economic activities. Currently, the entire area is one of the largest sweater production sites in Wujiang, while Shuang Wan Village's local

economy is mainly based on family workshops and SMEs, specialized in garment on-line selling (Fig. 2). Meanwhile, most of the traditional agricultural activities like aquaculture and rice planting have been leased out to subcontractors.



Figure 1. The historic buildings are mainly concentrated in the south part of Shuang Wan along the main canal.

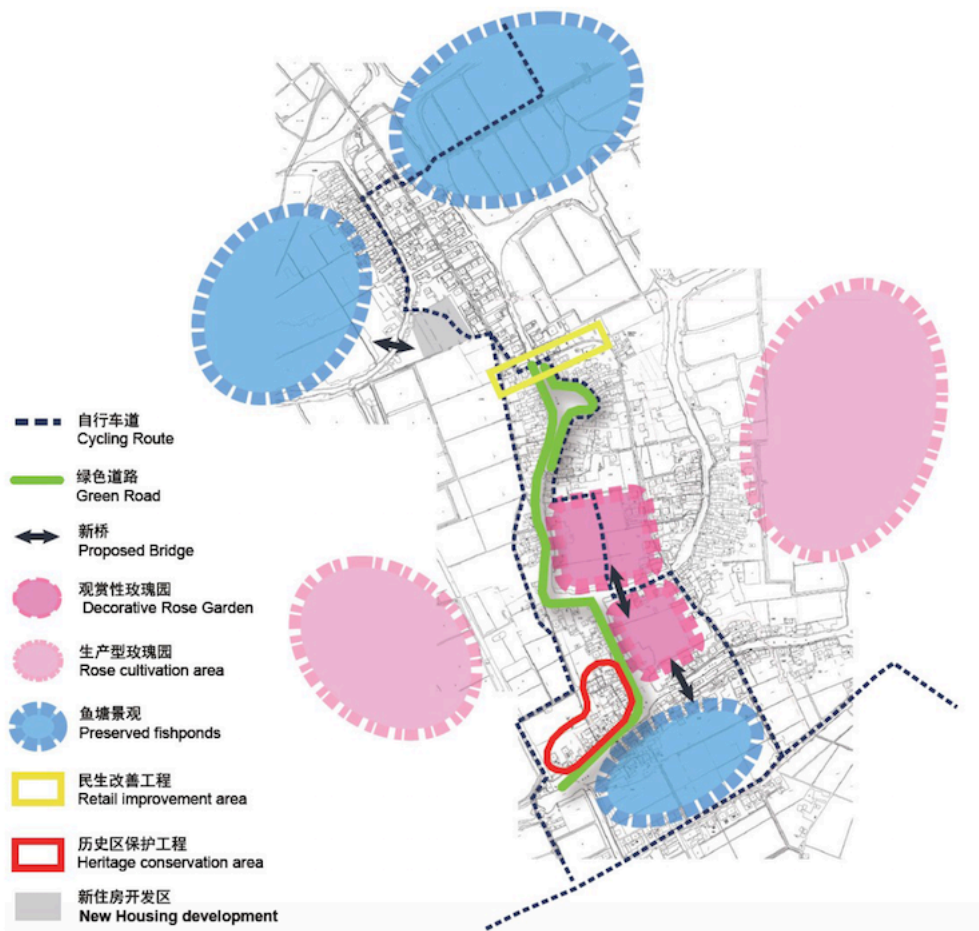


Figure 2. Many textile activities are home-based and represent an important component of the local economy, employing a significant amount of migrant workers.

The main concern of the village committee, at the time of the preliminary discussion in April 2015, was about the need to redefine a profitable local development strategy for the village, as almost 50% of the area's fishponds needed to be reclaimed in order to meet the provincial quota of cultivated land. This would have implied a potential loss for local farmers' and consequently income for the village¹¹. The leaders were not explicitly addressing heritage preservation, but they were generally in favour of strengthening the local historic identity, as many other successful rural villages have done for incrementing their tourism visibility. The intention of setting-up a participatory workshop was, moreover, to get consensus regarding a shared development vision for the future from local people and, meanwhile, to inform them of the new top down stricter environmental measures that would have potentially curbed the local economy.

The SWOT analysis provided has outlined the controversial relationship between the massive modernization of the urban areas in Wujiang and the relative decline of the surrounding rural areas, particularly due to the weakening of local traditional farming. Conversely it has outlined the unique rural character of the village, with visible traces of the past, associated with a high entrepreneurial capability amongst local people, especially in the textile sector.

During the residential workshop a possible local development scenario has been discussed with the local community and, eventually, urban design and landscape design solutions associated with place-based economic strategies have been presented (Fig. 3). Three main strategies were finally agreed, mainly regarding landscaping opportunities and the change of agricultural land use, the improvement of the public realm and mobility and the conservation of the historic built environment with the statutory protection for the historic ensemble of the village. The overall strategy has been framed as a first step to embark in quality development and consequently support alternative sources of local income linked to cultural and natural tourism, as elsewhere in the Tai Hu lake area. The spatial solutions proposed have been associated with a strategy to reconcile the dual economy of the village (agricultural and industrial), by supporting the development of a creative industry out of the existing textile industry, symbolically linked to the new production proposed.



Figure

3. The development scheme proposed at the end of workshop, during a participatory session, with the summary of the main strategies discussed.

Overall, the topic of heritage conservation has been raised on several occasions and it has been associated to different visions and aspirations of development. It has also been subject to a shift in perception (before/after the workshop), according to different stakeholders involved. Table 2 reports a simplified community engagement framework with a summary of different actors' aspirations in relation to their level of involvement, by referring to the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969).

| TABLE 2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK* | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MAIN ACTORS | <i>Heads of Working Unions - Senior influential citizens</i> | <i>Textile entrepreneurs</i> | <i>Other Local people</i> | <i>Migrants</i> |
| BEFORE (aspirations/requests before the workshop) | Generic willingness to improve the local livelihood | Request to widen the road size to allow better circulation of vans, in particular along the main canal. | Generic requests for village improvements (public realm, mobility and so on) | Requests of improving living standard and job opportunities |
| AFTER (achievements/understanding as a result of the workshop, particularly related to heritage protection) | Awareness regarding an integrated view of local development. Understanding of the tourist potential of the historic fabrics and rose' cultivation. | Understanding of the rationale of redesigning the roads along the canals for slow mobility for their tourism potential. Understanding of the potential of creative industry (textile linked to roses) and the importance of building protection for marketing purposes. | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT qualitative description | Senior citizens and former heads of the working union, which normally constitutes the village committee. Formally invited to the presentation of the results. | Eminent local actors which have been consulted by the leaders during the work and formally invited to attend the presentation. | Local people informed through 'word of mouth'. Some of them might have attended the final presentation. Their view has been captured during the cultural mapping. | Migrant workers who might have been informed through 'word of mouth'. Unlikely they have attended the final presentation due to the cultural gap and their weak institutional status. Their view has been captured during the cultural mapping. |
| LADDER OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION (Arnstein, 1969) | CONSULTATION | CONSULTATION | INFORMING | INCIDENTAL INFORMING or NON-PARTICIPATION |
| * The Community Engagement Framework here reported is a simplified version of the social reality of the village. It is instrumental to the critical analysis of the HUL approach reported in the discussion session but it cannot be considered as fully representative of the village community. ** The ladder of citizen participation has been deeply adapted and revised in the last decades to adhere better to the evolving social reality. In particular, similar groups might have different access to decision-making. Therefore, this is a simplified version of local people's real involvement. | | | | |

Table 2. A simplified framework of community engagement.

During the action-research implemented (Fig. 5) the local leadership has incorporated heritage conservation into its local vision of the development and, similarly, relatively powerful stakeholders (senior citizens and local textile entrepreneurs) have matured an understanding of the potential of preserving local heritage for re-launching the local economy. Ordinary citizens and migrants, which have been indirectly consulted during the cultural mapping exercise, have understandably expressed different views regarding the past: for the locals, it is something which represents their memory; for migrants it is just symbolically associated with their poor living conditions, as they mainly reside in the old part of the village.



Figure 4. The presentation of the workshop's results in the village town hall, 12th July 2015.

Clearly, the topic of heritage conservation is one of the most controversial to implement: on one hand, it forms part of a long-term vision for most of the local people (those consulted during the workshop and those who are in the position of decision-making); on the other hand, it is a symbolic element of deprivation for migrant workers, who have no say in the local decision making.

A short summary of the results of this experience has been published (WHITRAP 2016), and some tangible results have been already obtained. In September 2015 the village was granted the title of 'China beautiful village' from the District of Wujiang, thus ensuring a supra-level privileged channel for financing the improvement of public space¹². Despite the relative short time that has passed since the end of the workshop, some fishponds have been transformed and a new stone pavement along the main canal road has been realized, avoiding the usual poor concrete pouring which normally characterizes rural villages in China (Fig.4). However, the conservation area

identified for its intrinsic heritage value hasn't been formally protected nor its buildings listed yet.



Figure 5. The new road with a pedestrian friendly pavement is one the outcomes of the workshop which was realized in March 2016.

Discussion

One of the overarching outcomes of the workshop, pursued through a comprehensive and participatory proposal, is a shared vision to retain the historic character of the rural landscape, conserving its tangible traces. Since landscape not only represents the natural environment but also incorporates social and symbolic dimensions, comprised of local habits, customs, skills and traditions, landscape conservation is deeply associated with social sustainability (Roe 2007). In the context of China, and in the way this has been framed in the ‘Shanghai Agenda’, social sustainability assumes a precise connotation. Thus, the proposed scenario for Shuang Wan village emphasizes

the need to preserve the local identity by improving the villagers' quality of life and by enhancing their livelihoods through the introduction of compatible economic activities (new agricultural cultivations and tourism) and the upgrading of existing ones (innovation of the textile sector). Despite the lack of listed buildings, the area with potential heritage value has been conceived as a strategic component of the village and its protection a desirable outcome. Different community engagement tools, compatible with the local social landscape, have been tested to embed this topic in the development framework: cultural mapping, interviews and a public presentation. Due to the variable level of involvement of different village's actors, the model of governance employed appears to be the one described by Healey (1997) as 'entrepreneurial consensus', with limited attempts to built contextually 'inclusionary argumentations' for marginalized groups. This offers materials to critically analyse a case of HUL implementation in China, linking it to the broader issue of heritage conservation in rural areas, with the potential of being extended to urban areas. As a matter of fact, while the rural and urban realms are institutionally very diverse in China, due to the different land ownership regimes, the conditions of social marginality in some inner-city areas might be similar to what is found in rural areas. Therefore, by prioritizing analytically the social dimension of Chinese historic areas, this case will allow discussion of the shifting paradigms in the process and scope of the urban heritage conservation discourse in this country. These changes are inherent in the HUL approach, envisioning at the same time potential problems and ways forward common to a great variety of cases. In general terms the main challenges for the conservation of Chinese rural villages might be summarized as follows:

- 1) The persistency of the legitimation of private actors as a sole player (and sponsor) in the conservation process which is normally associated with pure pro-profit urban transformations (He and Wu 2005); or, in absence of private interests, an aggressive presence of the public sectors seeking to raise resources for development;
- 2) The deficiency of institutional mechanisms to promote a meaningful involvement of different stakeholders in the decision-making in China, and at the same time, a weak presence of the civil society which is now emerging in variable forms (Verdini 2015);
- 3) Last but not least, a relative deficiency of planning and especially financial tools related to heritage protection in rural areas or in less developed regions of the country; which is not surprising for an emerging country (Zhu 2012);

The scenario workshop was an effective platform to discuss a sustainable way to manage the village and finance its budget and this has legitimized both the involvement of local stakeholders and the proposal for preservation of heritage and the rural landscape, thus partially neutralizing point 1. As a matter of fact, the conditions for working effectively with the local village authority towards sustainability approaches have been facilitated by the presence of upper-level planning measures set to preserve the countryside around Tai Lake. Similarly, the top-down push to jointly transform the rural land use and to enhance the village's income has generated a fertile playground for experimentation, where both heritage conservation and local development have been jointly discussed. Heritage has gradually entered into the local policy discourse, shaping both the development of contents and the participatory process during the work. Although the involvement of

local stakeholders was just at a preliminary stage, given the timing and the exploratory nature of the activity, this is not entirely surprising, partially contrary to point 2. Recent studies show that the fiscal reform of the early 2000s has unintentionally created new alliances between the village cadres and peasants' petitions by recentralizing the fiscal authority to the county level. This fact, together with the introduction of village-level elections, has created a new generation of village leaders, disenfranchised from previous privileges and more willing to represent the voice of their villagers (Wang 2012).

Nevertheless, despite these fortunate circumstances, which have mitigated point 1 and 2, some further elements need to be considered to get to a more accurate evaluation. In particular: the selective nature of the civic engagement at the local level and the still not entirely solved conflictive relationship between conservation practice and development aspirations. As already argued, the UNESCO HUL approach helped overcome a narrow focus on the materiality of heritage by privileging social sustainability as a precondition for preserving the spirit of a place and its cultural significance. In other words: by proposing an integrated approach where civic engagement is central to the achievement of social sustainability. Without denying the physical importance of the past, it prioritizes its intangible socio-economic components. However, in the context of China, and in particular in the context of rural or peri-urban areas, this is not exempted from problems in implementation.

Urban sustainability encompasses environmental quality, economic development and social inclusion and the degree to which they are embedded in the transformation of the built environment (Wheeler and Beatley 2009). By looking at the issue of sustainable urban conservation, pro-growth strategies equally challenge the physical environment and the maintenance of sociocultural continuities. While

discussions around the materiality of heritage are converging toward a certain common understanding (or reasonable distances), how to keep alive the social landscape in historic settings is still open for discussion. This element marks an undeniable shift in the conceptualization of the discourse of East-West difference on heritage. It is a common concern of both China and the West, although invoking generically more civic engagement tools as the HUL approach does, would not help necessarily solve the question. This should be linked to a deeper consideration of who is legitimately admitted to engage in local decision making and whether local people are necessarily interested in that engagement. In China, the former issue is related to the institutional divide imposed by the Hukou system, which prevents (Chinese) migrants to be fully involved in both local decisions and local welfare benefits (Chan 2010). As a matter of fact, the discussions in Shuang Wan were not open to local migrants although a cultural mapping survey has attempted to capture their point of view¹³. The latter issue is instead related to the frequent mismatch between the experts' point of views on the legitimacy of urban heritage conservation and local people's aspirations to achieve modern living standards, to embark in short term profit oriented strategies (textile entrepreneurs) or to move away from the deprived 'historic' areas where they are often 'stuck' and obliged to live (migrant workers).

While focusing on social sustainability (or on the sustainable management of urban and territorial change) might imply the realignment of the international debate beyond the reductive perspective of materiality, HUL raises an additional question around the notion of civic engagement and its broad applicability in international practice. The entire 'ethos' of urban conservation in the West is being rebuilt in the last decades around the notion of 'consensus', by giving centrality to the (proactive) role of

community and the distinctiveness of the private and public realm. Again, this might not be entirely applicable in a non-Western context and especially in China.

Conclusions

The scenario workshop, which has been used as a platform for discussing a sustainable way to manage the village and finance its budget, has legitimized both the involvement of local stakeholders and the proposal for preservation of heritage and rural landscape. This case study shows the conditions by which the public sector can act as the main player of the development process, seeking channels of investments and mobilizing both private actors and other public sectors. This does not necessarily promote pure pro-growth behaviours, especially in the presence of a series of growth constraints, but it can stimulate the research of opportunities for sustainable local development enlarging contextually the number of stakeholders involved in the process.

It suggests a possible way to implement the UNESCO HUL approach in China by fostering a shift in both the scope and the process of the urban conservation discourse. However, some issues are still unresolved. *In primis*, because the predominant economic discourse around heritage in China can easily hide the loosening of regulatory frameworks in place for its conservation, which is particularly critical in rural settlements. At the time of the implementation of the workshop the village was still lacking a normative system for protecting the historic built environment and landscape. In absence of clear measures to carefully manage the traces of the past, initiating a local development project could be as risky as the gradual abandonment of the village or its relentless incorporation in growing urban areas. Secondly, before

participatory tools are utilized, the local social context should be carefully analysed to see whether the implementation of these tools would produce desirable outcomes or, instead reinforce exclusionary processes leading to partially ineffective (and/or unfair) results.

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Geolocation information

<https://www.google.fr/maps/place/Shuang+Wan+Cun,+Wujiang,+Suzhou,+Jiangsu,+China/@30.9983313,120.5086592,15z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x35b36acf9be9dbf5:0xd84457ab89251e75!8m2!3d30.998332!4d120.517414?hl=en>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Notes

1. The latest version of the Australia Burra Charter was adopted in 2013. Text available at: <http://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>
2. The HUL Recommendation is an official document adopted by UNESCO in 2011 with the intention of supplementing existing heritage conservation tools. It is regarded as a soft-law to be implemented by Member States on a voluntary base. According to the Recommendation “the historic urban landscape is the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of “historic centre” or “ensemble” to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting” (par. 9). For more information: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/638>
3. This can probably be regarded as one of most advanced experiences on HUL at the international level, hosted at WHITRAP, the World Heritage Institute for Training and Research in the Asia-Pacific Region. I refer here to the discussions that happened a few months before the International Conference in Shanghai on ‘Historic Urban Landscape’ (12th December 2014) until the approval of the third revision of the ‘Shanghai Agenda’ in May 2015. The document is available on-line at: <http://www.historicurbanlandscape.com/themes/196/userfiles/download/2016/3/25/jwjg2hnpjzrdcr9s.pdf>
4. A selection of cases has been published online in www.historicurbanlandscape.com and recently the first HUL Guidebook has been released. The text is available at: <http://historicurbanlandscape.com/themes/196/userfiles/download/2016/6/7/wirey5prpznidqx.pdf>

5. The discussion regarding this point was influenced by the construction of the Three Gorges dam, which would have led to inevitable flooding of historic sites in a vast region.
6. Members of the International Advisory Board are mainly Chinese scholars in the field of heritage and landscape conservation from top Chinese Universities and/or affiliated to China ICOMOS, China IFLA, China Academy of Social Science, Urban Planning society. A presence of China-based international scholars and international experts with long-lasting commitment to China was also ensured.
7. In this respect the recent opening of a high-speed train stop along the line Guangzhou-Guiyang, in the Guizhou Province, which serves the Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture famous for its remote historic Miao and Dong villages, is quite paradigmatic.
8. This is also witnessed by the recent launch of a new scientific journal regarding the rural villages in China at the Tsinghua University in January 2015 (Traditional Chinese Villages Bulletin).
9. This has often resulted in the establishment of a system of ticket payment for tourists entering the central area of a village, de facto privatizing its public realm.
10. The action-research (also called practitioners-based research) is here conceived as the focus of the research, rather than the methodology itself. It is a tool to gather data, capturing the real needs of affected stakeholders and to co-produce knowledge with them. The final public presentation is instrumental to ‘close the loop’ of the research process by getting impressions and informal feedbacks from gathered people on the final outcomes (Somekh 2006). In absence of formal participatory arrangements, as it was in the case of Shuang Wan, action-research supported by local government can partially supplement soft forms of participation, although normally they might not go

beyond the level of ‘tokenism’ of the Arnstein’s ladder of citizens participation (1969). See also table 2 in this respect.

11. According to the Suzhou ‘Four Million Mu of Farmland’ policy, released in 2012, each district of the city, and therefore each village, has to reclaim a quota of land for staple productions, in order to ensure the overall national food security. In the Tai Lake areas this often implies the conversion of fishponds into arable land.

12. This recognition comes in response to the shortlisting of the proposal for Shuang Wan Cun, for the ‘2015 Asian Townscape Award’ organized by UN-HABITAT, Asia and the Pacific Office, during the summer 2015. Although the proposal was not eventually awarded, this has resulted in the nomination as ‘China Beautiful Village’ from the District of Wujiang.

13. This is an atypical situation, given the no-profit involvement of the University in the project, and cannot be regarded as the norm.

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