

## Heritage, local communities and the safeguarding of 'Spirit of Place' in Taiwan

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### Abstract.

After brief reviews of the theoretical concepts relating to place and ecomuseological processes this paper traces the changing relationships between people and place in Taiwan. Research carried out by the authors with local communities on Matsu (a group of Taiwanese islands off the coast of mainland China), and case study material collected from local cultural workshops in southern Taiwan provides a focus for the discussion. Both sets of data demonstrate the growing awareness of heritage by local communities in Taiwan; they recognize that heritage is significant because it reflects and builds local identities, aids community sustainability and provides a sense of place. An account is given about how these inclusive processes are applied and how they appear to benefit the heritage sector in Taiwan. By encouraging community-centred approaches, consultation, involvement and democratization, significant improvements to safeguarding natural resources, the cultural environment and intangible cultural heritage might be possible. However, striking a balance between the aspirations of local heritage activists and the wider community is difficult to achieve.

**Key words:** Taiwan, heritage, community, sustainability, ecomuseum,

### Heritage and 'sense of place'.

Terms such as 'belonging', 'identity', and 'community' are frequently used when discussing ideas about place, and the more elusive 'sense of place' or 'spirit of place'. Exploring place has been a research focus in several disciplines, including anthropology, ecology, geography, psychology, sociology and (to a lesser extent) cultural and heritage studies. The human geographers Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Anne Buttner are regarded as pioneers in using experiential perspectives to reflect on place and 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2004: 19; Hubbard *et al.* 2004: 5). Tuan (1977) reminds us that a sense of place goes beyond aesthetic appreciation – in other words places are not always comfortable or welcoming - while Relph (1976) demands that we examine the idea in terms of 'authenticity'. The notion of 'authenticity' is itself a challenging notion, and one of particular relevance to heritage professionals concerned with in-situ conservation and the interpretation of 'authentic' heritage. Buttner (1980) argues that place is something that must be experienced rather than described, a view that relates closely to ecomuseum philosophy, discussed later. All three authors emphasize that place provides 'a world of meaning' (Hubbard *et al.* 2004:5).

Tuan's view is that place is a space endowed with meaning and value. Indeed he regards space and place as mutually defined terms: 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (Tuan 1977:6). Casey (1996) agrees that place must be experienced: 'there is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it' (Casey 1996:18). Escobar (2001:140) emphasizes this dichotomy between place as a conceptualization of identity, our mental image or 'category of thought' about a locality; and place as a physical entity, 'a constructed reality'.

Our perceptions of places affect us, places modify our behaviour. In terms of heritage this is important when we try to understand its significance and the role that heritage might

actually play in the construction of a 'sense of place'. Smith (2006:77) suggests that the 'affect' of place helps us to understand the meaning of heritage and heritage sites. She writes:

Heritage as place, or heritage places, may not only be conceived as representational of past human experiences but also of creating an affect on current experiences and perceptions of the world. Thus, a heritage place may represent or stand in for a sense of identity and belonging for particular individuals or groups.

Hummon (1992) similarly suggest that places can be a 'symbolic locale', serving as an extension of self and community identity. The idea of 'symbolic locales' is very closely related to that of 'cultural touchstones', the special features of our environment that are cherished (Davis, 2005). Whether we refer to such places as 'heritage sites', or more poetically as 'cultural touchstones' or 'symbolic locales', there are undoubtedly historic, contemporary, natural and cultural features in the landscape that hold special meaning, that contribute to the creation of 'sense of place'. Hence for many local people these places, as part of the tangible landscape, are important in their own right by providing a beacon for a sense of belonging, a link with the past and a symbol of permanence. One model that attempts to conserve and interpret scattered fragments of heritage using inclusive and democratic approaches is the ecomuseum.

### **Ecomuseums: democratic approaches to heritage, place and identity**

The theories discussed above support the view that ecomuseums – as signifiers of place – can have important meanings for visitors and local people. The ecomuseum paradigm, its origins, development and diversity has been described by Davis (1999). In 2004 the 'Long Network' of ecomuseums developed in Europe defined the ecomuseum as '... a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development. An ecomuseum is based on a community agreement' (Local Worlds 2004). Davis (2007: 119), using examples from Italy, Japan and China where cultural assets have been used to improve local infrastructure, social conditions, the environment and economies leading to more sustainable approaches, further simplified this definition, stating that an ecomuseum is 'a community-lead heritage or museum project that supports sustainable development'.

Essential ecomuseum features are:

- The adoption of a territory that may be defined, for example, by landscape, dialect, a specific industry, or musical tradition.
- The identification of specific heritage resources within that territory, and the celebration of these 'cultural touchstones' using in-situ conservation and interpretation.
- The conservation and interpretation of individual sites within the territory is carried out via liaison and co-operation with other organizations.
- The empowerment of local communities – the ecomuseum is established and managed by local people. Local people decide what aspects of their 'place' are important to them.
- The local community benefits from the establishment of the ecomuseum. Benefits may be intangible, such as greater self-awareness or pride in place, tangible (the rescue of a fragment of local heritage, for example) or economic. There are often significant benefits for those individuals in the local community most closely associated with ecomuseum development (Corsane *et al.* 2007a and 2007b).

These features indicate the strong connection between ecomuseums and specific geographical localities, with the latter two points demanding that ecomuseums embrace local empowerment and heed local voices. There have been some attempts to utilize aspects of the above features in Taiwan, for example the Gold Ecological Park uses a 'split-site' approach to interpretation. More recently ecomuseum processes have been used at the fishing village in Nan Fang Ao in Yilan County in eastern Taiwan in an effort to prevent economic decline by defining heritage

features in the landscape (Chiao 2007). These inclusive processes in the implementation of ecomuseums have, to some extent, also been utilized in Taiwan's 'Local Cultural Workshops' and other heritage preservation activities that are emerging on the islands of Matsu. These projects are described below.

### **Local voices: Taiwan's Local Cultural Workshops**

In 1993, the Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA), Taiwan's central government agency in charge of cultural issues, published a report on Taiwan's contemporary cultural services and facilities, and addressed the issues of the lack of local community involvement in cultural development and the failure of the authorities and local communities to co-operate. The report proposed a stronger link between the local cultural authorities (local governments, specialist authorities) and local people in order to integrate and make best use of existing cultural resources, and especially those cultural elements, tangible and intangible, regarded as important by local people. These might be important sites such as a temple, but may include geographically localized historical traditions (such as stories, dance or music) that would not be regarded as nationally significant. In the same year (1993) the CCA introduced the *Community Renaissance* scheme, aspiring to encourage residents' involvement in local affairs through group discussion.

An understanding of local history and culture became a basic role of *Community Renaissance*. When this scheme was launched, its emphasis on 'bottom-up' approaches meant that the knowledge held by local cultural workers - useful information about local character and local distinctiveness - would be utilized. Policies accompanying the *Community Renaissance* scheme could hence be built on this information in order to meet the demands and real needs of the locality. Perhaps without realising it, moves were being made to implement more democratic ecomuseological processes, and use the 'territorial' approaches - the designation of a place identified by specific boundaries that might be marketed by a dialect, a musical tradition, a form of vernacular architecture or a particular natural landscape.

The appeal for indigenization promoted by the government at this time, (i.e. the promotion of a distinctive 'Taiwanese' culture set apart from mainland China), required action from the grassroots. The rise and development of local cultural workshops in Taiwan was such a response, promoting the development of a sense of cultural ownership (Huang, 2010). 'Workshop', in Mandarin Chinese, identifies a group of people with the same interests and targets, involved in a major project that requires professional knowledge and skills. It is different from the normal use of 'workshop' in the English language, where it is usually employed in a sense of a short-term training exercise or a place of manufacture. In Taiwan 'workshop' implies a long-term project and distinctive styles of organization. Local Cultural Workshops are defined here as voluntary community groups that operate over a long period to deal with cultural issues at the grassroots level. Confusingly, not all the local cultural workshops adopt the title 'workshop'; some larger groups with better financial and personnel support use the terms 'associations' or 'foundations'. The ways workshops are managed also vary hugely dependant on their financial situation. In the case of larger groups additional income is derived from membership fees; most workshops receive funding from different levels of government. Such governmental support is normally the result of workshops proposing their own projects and seeking funding or by taking advantage of an existing government scheme.

There are several dimensions to the term 'local cultural workshop'. 'Local' does usually refer to the workshops' geographically defined locations, but can also indicate the type of issues dealt with by the local cultural workshops; i.e. a local workshop may have a particular interest in vernacular architecture and seek to conserve buildings outside its immediate locale. 'Cultural' broadly defines the type of activities involved, but these can also be very varied.

One typical example is the Hsin-hua Local Cultural Workshop, whose director, Mr Jhong, is a retired school headmaster. He started doing fieldwork in relation to his teaching roles and developed a deep interest in local history. He now organizes day trips for local residents to interpret different aspects of the heritage of the town. According to Jhong (pers. comm.: 29/03/2006), 'although they are local people, frankly speaking their understanding of Hsin-hua is limited to the town centre... they've never paid much attention to other parts, even when they walk past, they've never paid any attention'. The tour includes historic streets, local temples, and

the scenic areas on the outskirts of the town that are rich in wildlife. The participants, Jhong described, 'were surprized [stating] "why haven't I seen these before?"' These activities encourage local residents to know and learn about their own place and promote a sense of pride in their town.

It was not until 1987, when martial law was no longer enforced on the island, that grassroots groups were able to make a significant impact. A preliminary survey of local cultural workshops, using questionnaires, interviews with government officials and seminars, was conducted by the CCA over the period July 1998 to June 1999. Its aim was to assess difficulties they faced and to seek solutions. The survey yielded some surprising results, including the fact that despite the restrictions of martial law the first organization that resembled a local cultural workshop - the Tainan Culture and History Association in Tainan City - was founded in 1957. The survey also identified that the development of local cultural workshops had occurred in three stages, 1957-1988, 1989-1992, and 1992-1999. The growth of local cultural workshops was very limited until 1988, but grew rapidly in the second period. The vast majority of local cultural workshops emerged from 1993 within the supportive environment created by *Community Renaissance*; according to the survey, there were at least thirty workshops set up every year and at least one every month during this time (CCA 1999). The bottom-up approaches that *Community Renaissance* boasts and promotes, however, were not necessarily realized in all projects. Critics of *Community Renaissance* argue that it is still essentially a top-down measure with which the government seek to create an imagined community that aligns with its preferred image of national identity (Huang 1995).



Fig 1. The surroundings of the sugar refinery, a project of the Kia-a tao Local Cultural Workshop

The Preliminary Survey of Local Cultural Workshops (CCA 1999) suggests that the growth of local cultural workshops can be attributed to government policy changes, the growing importance of the study of Taiwan's history and the growing pace of cultural development. Research by one

of the authors (Huang 2010) indicates that workshop activists identify 1993 as a milestone of the development of local cultural workshops in Taiwan. The Kia-a tao LCW was established soon after this date, and is devoted to conserving the material culture associated with the sugar-refining industry (Fig. 1.); its president, Mr. Jhiang, spoke of the phenomenal rise in numbers of workshops:

'That was to make up for the problem resulted from the long-term loose attachment to place and the issue of place identity. As soon as such motivation appeared, there were more or less a thousand workshops at its peak' (Jhiang: Kia-a-tao Association, pers. comm. 08/03/2006)

The presentation of a local community's voice is at the heart of the democratic approaches taken by the museums and heritage sector (Davis 2005). To local people, the place where they belong contains memories they share, which may not always be positive; to visitors, the place they are visiting expresses messages, values, ideas and landscapes that contrast to their known experience, their own place. These notions are central to ecomuseum philosophy and practice, where in-situ conservation and interpretation inspire reflections on the meanings of places. There are many other examples of communities taking initiatives to achieve their own agendas by making use of the available museum and heritage resources (Crooke, 2005). However, Taiwan's heritage sector has long been dominated by experts in the disciplines of architecture and planning (Yen 2006), with little scope for democratic decision-making and no consultation with local people about what elements - natural features, vernacular architecture, temples, traditional music - constitute their heritage.

As a consequence the heritage focus has in the past fallen on architectural values - especially its aesthetic value - rather than the relevance or meaning of sites and buildings to the wider community. Riley and Harvey's (2005) critique of over-reliance on expert-led knowledge construction and distribution argues for the community to be taken into consideration. Comments from local community workshop activists echo these arguments, demanding the community's voice contribute to interpretation in order to more fully understand the local context. In addition to the authoritative voice of the architecture lobby, there appears to be tensions between the interpretation of history by local people and that of academic historians. While folk stories and legends are well known among local people - and mean a great deal to them - they may not necessarily conform to what historians understand or believe. An example of this phenomenon is the town of Sia-ying in South Taiwan, which used to be a busy port, but the river silted up and the port was no longer viable. As a result the town's fortunes changed and it has become a relatively quiet backwater. Ignoring the silted port and its impact on the town's long gone prosperity the local people have developed their own explanations for these changes which are different from that of academic historians or geographers. According to the local cultural workshop Hai-chian-ying (pers. comm. 30/03/2006), a local folk-tale attributed the change of the town's fortune to the confinement of a local deity for her wrong-doing in creating an earthquake. These localized versions of historical events appear to reflect local people's own disappointment in the path that the past has taken, their fear to admit to their current circumstances and the anxiety and uncertainty over their own identities. However, such interpretations should not be quickly dismissed as false history, or irrelevant, but be seen as alternative histories.

Local cultural workshops' participation in heritage projects illustrates the possible inputs of grassroots-initiated interpretations to the traditionally bureaucratic and expert-dominated heritage practice in Taiwan. Though it is important to bear in mind that local accounts or local understandings may not always resemble the histories or theories recognized in academia, they nevertheless reveal the inner pictures of the community that non-community members may find difficult to grasp. The materials and subjects that local cultural workshops have been collecting and studying cover the vernacular and the intangible; for example, the lives and experiences of retired WWII soldiers in nursing homes is a major project for the Yuan-jiao Association. Local Cultural Workshops are able to capture a more democratized definition of heritage, one that may not represent the grandeur and magnificence of elite society, but does have significant associations with local life, the local heritage that people can easily relate to from their own life experiences.

### Local voices: heritage and communities on Matsu

The Matsu Island Chain comprises 26 main islands in the northwest of the Taiwan Strait. Being geographically close to mainland China, Matsu acted as an important defence base, the front line against communist incursion, from 1949. Only after its mission as a military installation ceased in 1992 did the mysterious veil that covered Matsu gradually lift. Since that time, the abundant cultural features and ecological resources have been actively developed for ecotourism and cultural tourism.

The following account focuses on Tisban, a small village located on Nangan Island in the central section of the Matsu archipelago. The local residents, as in many villages in Matsu facing rapid social change, have attempted to redevelop their village and attract tourists, identifying and capitalizing on their cultural and natural assets. They have followed the inclusive ICOMOS (2008) definition that 'Heritage is a broad concept and includes the natural as well as the cultural environment. It encompasses landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments, as well as biodiversity, collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences'. In order to understand if and how heritage was recognized by local people, and to investigate whether it might have a role in supporting local identities and aiding village sustainability, field research in Tisban village was conducted in March 2007 by two of the authors (PD and WL) with the help of 18 graduate students. It was felt important to listen to local people's views, and the principal method was individual interviews supported by observation.

Although official documents indicated there were 92 families (500 people) in Tisban village, our research indicated a declining population of some 50 families, a resident population of only 200 people. During 22 - 24 March 2007 local people from 36 of these families (representing 72% of the population) were interviewed by researchers, using semi-structured questions. The focus of these questions related to what they conceive their 'heritage' to be and why (and if) they felt it was important. Also of interest was how local cultural identity was perceived by different generations and whether or not individuals engaged in community affairs, such as the local community park and development of a new community centre.

Heritage was identified with traditional housing by almost all of the interviewees. There was a widespread general concern about the loss of this architecture, which utilizes local stone (Fig. 2). Fears that many older houses had fallen into disrepair were compounded by the noticeable decline in associated craft skills. Overall, there appeared to be a lack of self-confidence amongst local residents to begin to recognize their heritage resources. This is in marked contrast to the views of heritage 'activists' in the village, who have attempted to capitalize on them. These village leaders, (who are relatively few in number but highly vocal and enthusiastic) have identified many unique natural and cultural resources in Tisban village with significant potential to attract tourists. These include the vernacular architecture mentioned above, the small scale of the streets, a local temple and historical sites relating to the area's long military history. There are also significant natural resources, with fascinating geology, endemic plants and rich woodland flora, habitats that support a wide range of invertebrates, reptiles, mammals and birds. The people of the village are arguably its greatest asset, with their local craft and cookery skills, a fascinating local dialect, the village religious beliefs and a very welcoming atmosphere. Attempts have been made to sustain attractive local vegetable gardens, document the village's fishing history, and preserve intangible heritages such as drumming. Together these resources could be interpreted as a multi-site ecomuseum, encouraging visitors to experience the village in a more holistic fashion. However, the efforts made by village leaders, and the ecomuseum potential of the area, appear not to have been embraced by all residents.

This field study revealed many hidden problems and challenges, in particular how to utilize processes that will enable the democratic representation of local heritage, ensuring co-operation between local residents and outside specialists. There was, for example, tension between different ethnic groups and even between people who had settled in Tisban from different villages. There appeared to be little knowledge of how heritage projects were funded, especially in relation to other community needs, and how they might provide employment; overall, communication appeared to be a major issue. There was a noticeable difference in



*Fig 2. Traditional houses in Tisban, Nangan Island, Matsu.*

opinion about the role of tourism, and whether this should be purely to develop the local economy or whether it should be carried out in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly fashion. Many of the residents appeared content with their lives and did not want to see change at all.

International charters for conservation and restoration such as The Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964) and The Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1999) have suggested that the evaluation systems of cultural heritages should be built on the consensus of their respective cultural societies. However, this field study in Tisban indicates that the process of developing consensus takes place slowly, un-dramatically and is sometimes very difficult to achieve; it is a fragile process. Through the efforts of a few village leaders, ecomuseum processes have been used to begin to conserve fragments of tangible and intangible heritage, with valiant attempts to document the village's history and to provide new facilities for community meetings. In the longer term it is hoped that ecomuseum mechanisms will become a tool for the economic, social and political development of Tisban. However, it is clear from our experiences that progress requires compromise, good communication and extensive negotiation. The dominant forms of integration in Tisban village in terms of reciprocity are currently embedded in networks other than those which focus on heritage, particularly networks of politics, religion, and family/interpersonal relations. The trick will be to integrate heritage into these existing arenas.

Sabel (1993: 106) points out that: "trust is a by-product of events which, to the extent they are planned at all, did not have the creation of trust as their goal". Interestingly, it was activities and movements originated by local women in the first phase of the Tisban village development that successfully sowed the seeds of mutual trust among the residents. In 2002, the Tisban Development Association evolved from this group of volunteer local women, and began to appreciate the importance and role of culture and nature in the development of self-identity and

community progress. With the financial and administrative support of the Taiwanese local and central governments, local leaders invited professionals in community development, architecture, landscape and marketing to assist them. Since 2005, in the second phase of this project, some creative economic development projects led to misunderstanding about its purpose, and trust began to erode. This professional-local tension is a fundamental problem: how to create trust among residents through the processes of democracy and empowerment, but utilising the financial and professional support from outsiders? In its third phase, Tisban village faces the challenge of re-creating trust among residents and reuniting the collective memories and motivation to achieve their goal of using cultural and natural resources to become a sustainable ecotourism village.

## Conclusions

This article demonstrates how theories about place inform the need for inclusive, ecomuseological processes in heritage conservation projects. These approaches are especially relevant to the concept of 'spirit of place', as they enable local people to state how they experience their place, define what they value as heritage and help them to construct their own sense of identity. These democratic approaches are relatively new in Taiwan, where heritage conservation has been a traditionally 'top-down' phenomenon.

Evidence of change is seen in the Local Community Workshops, where inclusive processes have delivered notable successes. The experiences described in Tisban suggest that careful consideration is required when developing inclusive practical approaches to heritage. Conservation and development projects need to build in additional time to ensure the growth of trust and develop appropriate relationships between local people and professionals. While ecomuseological processes are appropriate in this situation, it is clear that democratic approaches still require strong leadership, good communication and a willingness to take small steps over a period of time to reach more ambitious goals.

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