



World Pride

China's heritage sites have born witness to a fair few skirmishes over the years. Philip Sen looks on as they host a new one, the battle between conservation and exploitation

There are not many places left in China capable of living up to a visitor's image of the country, gleaned from kung-fu movies and willow-pattern plates. Chances are those that do are marked with the distinctive circle-and-square logo of a World Heritage Site. It's a badge that places like Pingyao (see p37) rightly wear with pride.

But all is not well in picture-postcard land. The very first paragraph of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage convention reads that its charges are "increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay" but also by "changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction".

It's as if the text was written with China in mind. With the onslaught of an increasingly affluent and mobile population and the new influx of foreign tourists, squaring the circle for China's historic legacy has never been so hard.

The PRC signed the UNESCO convention in 1987 and this year the 28th session of the World Heritage committee was hosted in the celebrated canal-city of Suzhou. But the meeting was tainted by quiet complaints from delegates that sites such as the Potala Palace in Lhasa and the Forbidden City in Beijing were being improperly maintained despite the added income generated from large tourist numbers.

Cultural Heritage Watch, an organisation dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of China's attractions, is concerned about the mindset linking conservation with commercial development. But the group's director, He Shuzhong, is not against sightseers per se. "Tourism itself doesn't bring much damage to

heritage sites and on the contrary it brings social and economic benefits," he says. "The Peking Man site at Zhoukoudian is said to have little tourist value – and the less tourism develops there, the less funds are raised to use for its preservation."

Another vocal campaigner for protecting China's heritage, Professor Ruan Yisan of Shanghai Tongji University, agrees. Opening a UNESCO site to carefully managed tourism can have its rewards, he remarks. "Tourism is an opportunity to boost the local economy, to improve the living conditions of local people and to raise funds for weather-beaten buildings with thousands of years' history to get repaired and preserved."

"Local tourism bureaus spend one third of the tourism earnings of the ancient towns of Tongji, Zhouzhuang and Wuzhen on reparation and preservation," he continues. "For example, in 2001, the whole drainage system of Zhouzhuang was updated at the cost of RMB 30 million."

But you can have too much of a good thing. Professor Ruan believes that while "reasonable tourism exploitation is the answer," the authorities need to resist the temptations. "Over-exploitation in tourism can cause huge losses," he laments. "Every famous mountain in China is being enlaced by modern cable cars. Though these add to the convenience of travelling, they destroy the original features."

The irony is that tourism simultaneously contributes both to the defence and the destruction of China's heritage. Amid the understandable clamour for progress and economic growth, the history that the Chinese hold so dear is increasingly being trampled. In

the wake of their flags and megaphones, the tour group legions are seeding countless incongruous and sometimes downright tacky developments built to cater for them.

"The conflict between tourism and preservation results mainly from the low preservation sense and 'cultural quality' of tourists and local managers," adds He Shuzhong. "Poor management systems have led to poor management. Every World Heritage listed site in China has suffered damage, more or less. Too many establishments such as hotels and restaurants have been built in and around the sites, with random alterations made just to satisfy tourists."

"Tourists must have a positive attitude towards these sites," advises He. "They are a chance to learn about and appreciate history, culture and science. They are not carnivals in a pleasure ground. But as long as tourists realise the value and significance of these places, they will behave themselves accordingly."

Education and appreciation are the keys, but are they the responsibility of UNESCO, the local authorities, or the site managers? Faced with the clash between conservation and exploitation, there are limits to what even the most conscientious curators can achieve. Perhaps only the visitors themselves can make a real difference, by avoiding the aspects that don't fit in with the spirit of the sites they have come to see. Who really needs a latte grande in the Forbidden City anyway?

So if you can, don't ride the cable cars – walk. To stem the tide that is corrupting China's heritage, it's we, the tourists, who will have to vote with our feet. **W**