

Practices and Reflections on the Interpretation and Display of Silk Road World Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation and display of heritage values serve as direct means to communicate the multifaceted aspects of cultural heritage and are crucial methods for revitalizing and utilizing cultural relics. This paper employs the case study of 'Silk Road: The Network of Routes from Chang'an to the Tianshan Corridor' to showcase successful practices adopted by relevant institutions in interpreting and exhibiting this heritage. Insights garnered from the author's fieldwork at the Small Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an offer a concise exploration of the challenges and constraints encountered in interpreting and exhibiting this heritage. An interdisciplinary approach is suggested to address these challenges and constraints.

Keywords: *Silk Road World Heritage, ICC-X, Heritage Anthropology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Heritage Convention emphasizes that world heritage nominations must possess “outstanding universal value,” which refers to cultural and/or natural values that are rare, transcend national boundaries, and hold universal significance for all humanity, both now and in the future.[1] The Silk Road was a significant trade route for silk and other goods between the ancient Eurasian continents, connecting them from the 2nd century BC to the 16th century, facilitating long-distance trade and cultural exchange, and serving as a pathway for the fusion, exchange, and dialogue of Eastern and Western civilizations and cultures.[2]

In 2014, the joint application by China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan for the “Silk Road: The Network of Routes from Chang'an to the Tianshan Corridor” was successfully inscribed on the World Heritage List. How this heritage should be interpreted and presented deserves further discussion.

2. OVERVIEW OF SILK ROAD WORLD HERITAGE

The “Silk Road: The Network of Routes from Chang'an to the Tianshan Corridor” consists of 33 heritage sites, with 22 in the Chinese section, 8 in the Kazakhstan section, and 3 in the Kyrgyzstan section. Historically, this corridor served as one of the important components of the Silk Road, establishing direct and long-term connections between the ancient civilization center of East Asia in China's “Central Plains” and one of the regional civilization centers in Central Asia, the “Seven Rivers Region”. It not only holds a starting position in the entire Silk Road communication and transportation system but also plays a crucial role in the exchanges between nomadic and settled cultures, as well as between East Asia and Central Asia. [2] This corridor has facilitated extensive ethnic interactions and cultural exchanges, forming a shared historical memory.

The Silk Road heritage sites, as cultural symbols, categorize the types of values represented and symbolized by the heritage. The main types of value of the Silk Road World Heritage Site are: central city sites, trade settlement sites, transport and defense relics, religious relics and related relics.

These different types of values represented by relics or sites symbolize the historical facts of various periods along the ancient Silk Road, including peaceful exchanges and integration between different regimes, as well as wars and military conflicts, trade and commercial interactions, and the dissemination of culture and religion. In human society, in order for any particular thing to become a symbol for people to convey a message, it must be recognised and understood by the social group in which it is located, which is a basic condition for the existence of symbols. [3]

Anthropology emphasizes and acknowledges the diversity of human cultures, where the cultures of different ethnic groups represent their respective historical legacies and human characteristics. The Silk Road World Heritage exists in the form of relics or sites, symbolizing and expressing the “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV) of the cultures created by different ethnic groups. After the successful application for heritage status, the protection, monitoring, management, interpretation, and display of the heritage have become new challenges faced by heritage site managers.

3. CASE STUDIES AND FIELD PRACTICES OF SILK ROAD WORLD HERITAGE INTERPRETATION AND DISPLAY

The interpretation and display of heritage are based on the principle of authenticity and are information transmission activities built on value judgments that may involve multiple value conflicts.[4] The “Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites” provides pathways for heritage interpretation, including printed and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and off-site related facilities, educational programs, community activities, as well as ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself. Display can convey information through various technological means, including information boards, museum exhibitions, carefully designed tour routes, lectures and guided tours, multimedia applications, and websites. [5]

As a linear cultural heritage, the Silk Road heritage sites showcase the different cultures represented by various regions and ethnic groups, as well as their interactions with one another. Providing a complete and comprehensive interpretation of the value of Silk Road heritage is a challenging task. Moreover, the heritage sites distributed across the China-Kazakhstan-

Kyrgyzstan region have different interpretations and displays due to the actual circumstances of local governments and social development.

Based on the requirements of the “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention,” World Heritage sites need to interpret their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). In the interpretation and display of Silk Road heritage, various heritage sites have engaged in some common practices. Under the principle of protecting and not affecting the integrity of the ruins, exhibition halls and museums have been established, utilizing traditional display methods alongside new technologies such as digitalization to enhance the level of heritage interpretation and display, thereby improving public awareness and understanding of heritage and its value, as well as the visitor experience. For example, in 2017, the Hong Kong Museum of History hosted the exhibition “Stretching for Thousands of Miles - World Heritage Silk Road,” which showcased precious artifacts related to the Silk Road from China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, illustrating the historical and cultural exchanges and the spread of civilization along the Silk Road network.¹

In addition to the common practices of various countries and heritage sites, there are also relevant organizations engaged in the interpretation and display of heritage through diverse means. Since the application for World Heritage status for the Silk Road began, the ICOMOS International Conservation Center-Xian (IICC-X) has been actively involved in Silk Road heritage applications. In 2009, IICC-X was designated as the secretariat and information center by the Coordinating Committee for the Transnational Serial Nomination of the Silk Road World Heritage. In 2013, it was established as the secretariat of the working group for the “Silk Road: The Network of Routes from Chang’an to the Tianshan Corridor” by the committees of China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

After successfully applying for World Heritage status, IICC-X has long been committed to continuously promoting cultural heritage conservation management and international coordination projects along the Silk Road. The “Silk Road Network Information Archive Management Platform” created by IICC-X is an online platform for promoting, managing, and researching Silk Road culture. This platform adopts

1. https://hk.history.museum/sc/web/mh/exhibition/2017_past_03.html, 2024-11-12.

Chinese, English, and Russian languages and is supported by new technologies such as geographic information technology and cloud platforms, covering various aspects of information related to archaeology, history, cultural preservation, display, monitoring, and management concerning the Silk Road.²

The data from the database of this platform provides intellectual support for the successful application for World Heritage status of “Silk Road: The Zeraftshan-Karakum Corridor” and for the transnational applications of the “Silk Road: South Asia Corridor”, “Silk Road: Central Asia Fergana-Amu Darya Corridor”, and others. In addition, IICC-X has also edited and published the “Newsletter of Serial Transnational Nomination for World Heritage of Silk Road,” which has published 54 issues to date (quarterly). The newsletter compiles relevant information about Silk Road World Heritage in Chinese, English, and Russian and is provided free of charge in print or electronic format to relevant research institutions and scholars both domestically and internationally, serving as an important medium for the interpretation and display of Silk Road World Heritage.³

IICC-X has organized multiple independent or joint photography exhibitions related to the Silk Road with domestic cultural heritage institutions. The photography exhibition features not only the cultural heritage and scenic works along the Silk Road accumulated by IICC-X over the years but also outstanding photographs contributed by professionals in the cultural heritage field and photography enthusiasts from China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. These photographic works reflect the heritage and cultural landscapes of the countries and regions along the Silk Road, showcasing the rich connotations of the Silk Road as a site of multicultural exchange. In addition, IICC-X, in conjunction with UNESCO’s annual theme initiative “The Next 50 Years: World Heritage as a Source of Resilience, Humanity, and Innovation,” planned and launched the 2022 “World Heritage Volunteers (WHV) - Winds of the Silk Road” project, aimed at raising public awareness of heritage conservation, promoting youth education, facilitating knowledge sharing, encouraging

creative innovation, and contributing to the revitalization of cultural heritage.⁴

Among the Silk Road World Heritage, the relics represented by Buddhist architecture demonstrate that Buddhism, during its transmission from west to east, can better interpret the symbolic significance of the ruins through the focus on monks, Buddhist scriptures, and Buddhist architecture. The Small Wild Goose Pagoda, one of the heritage sites of the Silk Road World Heritage, was built in the first year of the Tang Dynasty’s Jing long era (707). During the Tang Dynasty, it was part of the Jianfu Temple complex, which was established in 684, located in the southern part of the Kaihuafang in Tang Chang’an City. It was built by the Li Tang royal family to offer blessings to Emperor Gao Zong of Tang, initially named Xianfu Temple, later renamed Jianfu Temple.

The location of the Small Wild Goose Pagoda has been developed into the Small Wild Goose Pagoda Historical and Cultural Park, which is situated at the same address as the Xi’an Museum. As a well-known historical and cultural attraction in Xi’an, the Small Wild Goose Pagoda’s free admission policy has attracted numerous domestic and international visitors. However, in the promotion of the heritage site, its “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV) has not been thoroughly interpreted, and the historical context and significance of Buddhism’s transmission in China have yet to be well displayed.

In the field investigation of the Small Wild Goose Pagoda, it is found that the official promotion primarily focuses on historical summaries. Tour guides focus on introducing the Small Wild Goose Pagoda by detailing: the history and legends of Jianfu Temple and Empress Wu Zetian, the mythical reconstruction of the pagoda following an earthquake during the Ming Dynasty, and the Buddhist halls and legends preserved within the Historical and Cultural Park of the Small Wild Goose Pagoda. These often intertwine history with legend, incorporating numerous fantastical and imaginative interpretative stories. However, the value and significance of the Small Wild Goose Pagoda as a World Cultural Heritage site have not been thoroughly explained or interpreted during the tourist visits.

In recent years, popular tour groups for primary and secondary school students have presented an

2. <http://www.silkroads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=list&catid=1>, 2024-11-12.

3. <http://www.silkroads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=list&catid=1>, 2024-11-12.

4. <http://www.silkroads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=list&catid=1>, 2024-11-12.

opportunity to teach students about the importance of cultural heritage and artefact conservation, employing a value-oriented educational approach to share knowledge on heritage preservation. However, in the observations of various tour groups, the interpretation of the Small Wild Goose Pagoda and Jianfu Temple still resembles the content of ordinary sightseeing tours. The interpretation of the Silk Road heritage site symbolized by the Small Wild Goose Pagoda has not received sufficient attention in terms of expressing and interpreting its cultural connotations. The richness of new technological means facilitates visitors' understanding of the linear context of the Silk Road heritage corridor; however, the interpretation and display of the micro-level values of individual heritage sites continue to be issues that heritage managers need to prioritize.

4. REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION AND DISPLAY OF SILK ROAD HERITAGE FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, scholars have combined the study of cultural heritage with anthropological theories and methods, proposing the concept of Heritage Anthropology, which posits that Heritage Anthropology studies the relationship between heritage and human social development, thereby understanding and interpreting the emergence and development of heritage consciousness in modern society, and reflecting on and critiquing the relationship between “objects” and “people.” The analytical perspective of Heritage Anthropology no longer merely places heritage in the object position of “things,” but instead positions heritage in the subject position of “people.” Although heritage is recognized and understood by “people” in the form of “objects,” it is ultimately “people” who determine the form of the heritage “objects” and decide the status and role of these “objects” in the space of modern society. The heritage itself, as an “object,” symbolizes the ancient and the past through representations such as “history,” created by “people” in history. [6]

In today's discourse on world heritage, the value of the heritage itself, as an “object,” is reflected in the understanding and recognition of modern “people.” The value created by the ancient civilizations and cultural exchanges represented by heritage is based on the needs and utilization of modern society. The historical authenticity and

integrity reflected in cultural heritage can provide inspiration and reference for people on different paths of civilization development and can also promote the progress and integration of human civilization. [4]

The Zhang Qian tomb site in the Silk Road World Heritage is defined as an “associated relic” in the application text for World Heritage status. According to the theory of applying for World Heritage status along the Silk Road corridor, the Zhang Qian tomb, located in Chenggu County, Shaanxi Province, is not within the corridor's range. However, in the selection of heritage sites and the final application, the Zhang Qian tomb was included as the only associated heritage among the 33 heritage sites of the Silk Road World Heritage. The tomb of Zhang Qian is a burial site confirmed by scientific archaeological excavations. This tomb not only possesses significant historical and cultural value but also serves as a testament to the ancient Sino-Western cultural exchanges.

Scholars have pointed out that the diverse civilizations brought by the Silk Road inspire humanity to understand that only through interactive communication can we continue to flourish, integrate into the whole world of civilization, and enter a higher era of civilization. From the macro perspective of the Silk Road, the spread of various materials and the exchange of cultures ultimately stem from the movement of individuals along the Silk Road. In the process of interpreting and exhibiting the Silk Road World Heritage, it is essential to consider the recipients of heritage interpretation and exhibition as the main subjects and to focus on modern people's understanding of contemporary issues in order to achieve the revitalization and dissemination of cultural heritage values.

5. CONCLUSION

After the successful inscription of "Silk Road: The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" as a World Heritage site, the participating nations have utilized various means to showcase and interpret their rich heritage. However, there is still considerable room for improvement. In particular, embracing an anthropological perspective would be highly beneficial.

The interpretation and presentation of the Silk Road World Heritage site are crucial aspects of heritage management. These efforts should be rooted in both existing theoretical research and

practical experiences, leveraging the theoretical advancements of heritage anthropology as an innovative approach to enhance the interpretation and exhibition of the heritage. By narrating the historical significance and contemporary relevance of the Silk Road heritage, we can fully comprehend and communicate its educational and enlightening value, thereby deepening our understanding and appreciation of this invaluable cultural treasure.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xin An completed the writing of the main text. Yidayati Yanitake contributed to the writing and editing of the text.

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