**heritage/遗产(Yí Chǎn)**

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| Final Remarks | WANG Qi, Aleida Assmann | 30 May 2022 |

WANG Qi: In Chinese context, heritage is something positive and related to the past. As a field of scholarship, it turns out to be both historical knowledge and living traditions. Comparing with the conception-orientated, continuity-seeking historical narratives, heritage can be seen as “a new kind of historical knowledge”, as Aleida Assmann says. In this sense, heritage can possibly be a supplement to official historical writings, thereby offer a diversity of views of the past.

The European conception of “national heritage” is a 19th century product and has accomplished its mission, so to speak. However, the political connotations of the conception should not be exaggerated in the globalized 21st century. Heritage is first thing first indigenous and naturally belongs to a certain group of people. Therefore it is urgent to change the mindset of “national heritage” to “heritage of all mankind”. Heritage of all over the world should be treated as cultural memories of mankind and further as part of human history.

Aleida Assmann: **Similarities**

Culture was once defined by **Erich Auerbach** as a ‘‘clearlyformulable and recognized community of thought and feeling’’. To me, this quotation captures admirably the definition of culture so beautifully described and illustrated in Wang Qi’s text on Yi Chan – Cultural Heritage. Under the English term ‘heritage’ she describes what I think has a perfect equivalent in the German word ‘kulturelle Bildung’ as summed up in Auerbach’s definition. Bildung in this sense is not just a set of texts and works that are singled out for general reception, but includes the embodied interaction between classical texts and reading responses across time and space. It is a form of living within a tradition which requires the ability to generate thoughts and feelings within a transgenerational community of readers. This community is not held together by political ideologies or other prescribed reading requirements but by a shared estimation and reception of classical texts. It is an open access community that ideally has not external limits or requirements rather than the willingness to share great art in a form in which thinking matches feeling. When Auerbach wrote his definition, German Bildung was already a thing of the past. He created this concept as a nostalgic vision. The German Jewish community, to which he had belonged and which had been the strongest supporter of Bildung in Germany until the beginning of the Nazi rule in 1933, this community was in the process of being excluded, deported and exterminated. Auerbach managed to survive; he had been saved by an invitation to Turkey coming from Kemal Attatürk who offered Jewish professors positions at his universities. Auerbach’s nostalgia had therefore a double motivation: he had just lost his own cultural milieu which was being destroyed by the Nazis, and he witnessed Attatürk’s secular modernity as a ‘‘fanatically anti-traditional nationalism’’ stripped of all elements of culture and tradition.

Wang Qi’s description of Chinese heritage is also steeped in nostalgia. As in Auerbach’s vision of Bildung, she points to a similar awareness that “with the rapid process of urbanization and modernization, China has definitely felt the urgency of conservation and culture”, and, in recent years, “also sees the threat to cultural diversity from globalization”.

Like Auerbach’s Bildung, Wang Qi’s concept of heritage can be described as a secular form of religion. It is built on Classical poetry that offers a spiritual home and allows for a form of membership across centuries. This membership requires thought and feeling. It is not made of up specialists and scholars but of impassioned readers. This concept of heritage is clearly set off from ideas of heritage as collective property, economic capital and a tool for identity politics in that its value lies in an affect that cannot be bought but has to be generated by the members / readers themselves.

Wang Qi beautifully describes the way in which this sensuous experience of classical texts is created: not only by reading, but by moving in space, by visiting landmarks that are described in immortal verses. It is a sensuous form of experience to be bodily present at famous places where the memorized verses come to life again. They allow the readers a deeper and more personal entry into the tradition by sharing the visual ingredients of light and landscape. The general tone and feeling of these experiences is veneration and delight, but also the gratification to be part of a larger community that exists across centuries. Both Bildung and Yi Chan depend on immersion and resonance. This form of heritage transmitted and kept alive in personal and embodied responses within a milieu of collective resonance. It is acquired by growing into, by doing and sharing, by learning and interacting. Membership in this cultural community is built on this desire to share, to remember, to reflect, to feel.

There is a second association which I would like introduce to deepen the sense of familiarity between Eastern and Western concepts of heritage. The landmarks praised in classical Chinese poetry can refer to constructed sites such as temples, bridges and towers or scenic sites such as mountain peaks. While mountains in China were venerated as outstanding and perhaps even holy places made immortal by poetry, they were evaded and forbidden in Western Europe until the end of the Middle Ages. There was a clear taboo not to adopt the superior position of God, man as God’s creature had no right to overlooking the world in a superior gesture of hubris and self-empowerment. Wang Qi refers to Mountain Tai which she describes as an iconic hot spot climbed by Mencius, Confucius and Du Fu, one quoting the other, thus making the site memorable by poems referring to each other. A Western analogy could be the Italian poet **Petrarch** who climbed Mont Ventoux with his brother in 1336. He wrote a short account of the event in which he tells us that on the top of the mountain he reached for a book in his pocket and opened it at random. These were the Confessions of St. Augustin, and the sentence he read was: “Men marvel at the height of mountains and rivers and the ocean and the stars, but they don’t look inward to take care of themselves.” While Chinese men of wisdom and of letters celebrate prestigious places with poems that are continuously remembered and repeated, Petrarch made his climbing immortal by writing a very subjective story about it.

In Chinese poetry visible sites merge with invisible poetry. In this way, concrete sites and buildings are transformed into nature and imaginary landscapes, emphasizing natural beauties or the setting sun and moonlight as universal images. History and time are thus transformed into nature and eternity, individual experience morphs into universal states of feeling. Wang Qi mentions the modernist poet Ezra Pound who drew great inspiration from Chinese written characters and poetic traditions. He imitated the Japanese haiku, a genre of ultra-short poetry that presents a sudden transformation of the gaze from one field of vision to another. He was also fascinated by the iconic structure of Chinese writing and drew inspiration from the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry. With this transcultural background he revolutionized modern Western poetry by creating a new kind of sensuous image that captures a moment that is fraught with time, place and emotion, using it as the central building block of poetic language and vision.

**Differences**

When comparing Western and Chinese approaches to the concept of heritage, we can find substantial affinities and similarities, but also considerable differences. An important point is that the Chinese approach to heritage is characterized by a will to de-historicize cultural memory. “Chinese people do not care too much about the accuracy of things or events.” (4) Whether the more remote or more recent past is involved, there is no effort to be precise. On the contrary, historical precision would diminish and perhaps destroy the imaginative effect of the poetic spirit and the sense of enchantment inherent in the experience of cultural heritage.

The Western approach to heritage also involves a poetic spirit and an element of enchantment. But this quality can go together with a strong historical spirit. The visual and archaeological turn, for instance, as illustrated by the Romantic discovery of ancient ruins in the age of Enlightenment, is a clear shift towards the imagination. But here the enchantment is connected not to timeless continuity, but to historical recovery and academic reconstruction.

The Chinese concept of heritage privileges timelessness, continuity and natural beauty. The Western concept of heritage markedly differs from this in that it is saturated with history. Here the clock is always ticking, registering historical change as well as ruptures and periods of disappearance due to revolutions, innovation, and internal or external violence. While the Chinese concept of heritage functions in a solid framework of tradition and stable transmission, the Western concept of heritage evolves in a temporal framework that involves ruptures, revolutions, risk and the experience of loss. The concept of cultural memory includes both operations of remembering and forgetting, of preserving and destroying. In addition, the Western concept of heritage is open to the pride and shame, affirming positively valued traditions and including negative legacies that are repressed, return and demand further attention. For this reason, the Western concept of heritage is complex, precarious and ambivalent. But above all, it is self-reflexive, registering not only the process of preserving and transmission, but also that of negating and destroying by ignorance, negligence and violence.