

Introduction to the Special Focus Column

Feng Han

College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Email: franhanf@qq.com

I am delighted to write the editorial for the first cultural landscape special column of the *Built Heritage* journal. *Built Heritage* is China's first international journal on heritage conservation, and in the field of Chinese heritage conservation, urban heritage and architectural heritage have always dominated. *Built Heritage* is the first journal in China to regard landscape heritage as being of equal importance to these other two issues. Therefore, this special column on cultural landscapes is a historic breakthrough in China. The papers selected for this issue are also aimed at this background for historical cognition of China, and present China's long-standing thought on, and exploration of, heritage landscape conservation. Some information from the selected articles may be well-known in the international heritage circle, though not yet in China. I hope this special column serves to provide an overview and focuses of heritage landscapes both for a Chinese audience and other interested parties. The topics discussed are unique to China while being regionally and globally universal. My wish is that they will stimulate debate.

The special focus column focuses on landscapes and their conservation, involving the understanding of landscape concepts in different cultures and regions, cross-cultural interactions and the dynamic development of heritage landscape conservation awareness and strategies, especially in the context of the Asia-Pacific region. The World Heritage Cultural Landscapes (WHCLs) have undoubtedly played a key role in the conservation of global landscape heritage. WHCLs bring the issue of heritage landscapes to various countries via World Heritage, which fosters both international impact and cross-cultural exchange. The creation of the WHCL was revolutionary. It was not only a new category, but more importantly, it has brought a revolution in values to the heritage community. The organic, holistic, interconnected and dynamically evolving position of cultural landscapes is a new epistemology for World Heritage. It is a methodology that gives structure to nature and culture, the tangible and intangible, and history and future.

In this sense, landscape as the result of interaction between humans and nature is in essence the practice of environmental and cultural philosophy. The process runs through humans' subjective and objective cognition of natural values. Ethical sense, cultural beliefs and scientific cognition regarding nature underpin human behaviour towards it. The human view of nature determines the key human–nature relationship in sustainable development. The study of landscape phenomena—decoding and presenting the historical wisdom and limitations of various cultural groups in the above aspects—allows us to more clearly see the challenges, directions and future of sustainability.

The interest in landscape conservation is increasing, though unclear recognition and other challenges remain within theory and practice. These mainly manifest in a number of ways. First, each culture has different perceptions of the landscape concept, and different understandings of the content and scope of landscape conservation. It is difficult to establish region-wide common cognition and a large-scale landscape conservation system. Landscape heritage conservation is still limited with regard to greatly historic and aesthetic objects, such as gardens and scenic areas, and it does not deeply venture into the various practice areas where humans and nature interact. Another challenge is insufficient awareness of associated landscapes. The intangible nature-related landscape value of areas such as philosophy, cosmology, aesthetics, religion and genealogy is insufficiently understood. There is a lack of exploration and understanding of the culture of nature and the connection between biodiversity and cultural diversity. A third issue is rural landscapes, which embody great human wisdom of harmonious human–nature relationships and sustainable land use, are severely undervalued. This is particularly evident in the process of urbanisation in developing countries. Fourth is the neglect of natural value in the city, including historical fabric, scientific value and the relevant associated forms of value. These fundamental challenges are reflected in landscape

preservation and conservation in terms of the full spectrum of space, values, attributes and strategy specifically embodied in natural, rural and urban landscape conservation. The articles selected for this issue aim to cover the aforementioned highly concerning topics and denote the growing importance of landscape conservation and sustainable development.

In this issue, Mechtild Rössler and Roland Chih-Hung Lin first illustrate the general background of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) WHCLs in terms of history, categories and objectives. International and characteristically Asian challenges in landscape conservation and principles to counteract threats are identified. Notable here is that the ways of 'seeing' nature are essential for understanding the landscape values that are also deeply embedded in the stakeholders and communities associated with, and inhabiting, the landscapes. Rössler and Lin argue that cultural landscape conservation is complex and a direct reflection of the type of future we desire. Three Asian cultural landscapes in the paper reflect the Asian context and challenges, especially the conflicts between conservation and human development. A holistic cultural-historical-natural territory approach is promoted to address these challenges and threats.

Cari Goetcheus, Nora J. Mitchell and Brenda Barrett's article, 'Evolving Values and How They Have Shaped the United States National Park System', clearly illustrates the evolution of landscape-related values and how changes in these values have affected national and regional conservation and management strategies and governance. It has been, and will continue to be, a long journey to understand the cultural landscape values of the deep interlinkage of culture and nature. This is seen in mutual interactions between people and the environment, from working landscapes to wilderness, and from built heritage to un-built heritage. Socially and culturally constructed nature, including wilderness, is another imperative topic that has long been an overarching interest of environmental philosophy. It would be inspiring if natural conservation could be debated on the platform of environmental philosophy.

Awareness of rural landscape conservation in particular is growing. Lionella Scazzosi reflects on the fact that rural landscapes in many parts of the world are undergoing radical transformation due to expansion of urban areas and progressive abandonment of the countryside, intensive and industrial farming, and the loss of local rural knowledge and traditions. She proposes dynamic conservation to manage changing and evolving landscapes.

In China and other developing Asian countries, rural landscape conservation faces severe challenges amid the process of rapid urbanisation. Bringing socio-economic benefit into rural landscape conservation is crucial for the sustainable development of the local communities.

The historic urban landscape (HUL) approach is a major initiative by UNESCO in the field of conservation of urban areas associated with the changes occurring in the world's cities. HUL has been a leading focal area in recent years. Ken Taylor gives a historical overview of the construction of cultural landscapes in the area of heritage studies. He emphasises that urban areas are a living and changing cultural landscape entity, with a series of layers through time, which link past, present and future. The holistic view of HUL, with its landscape approach, embraces cultural, natural, tangible and intangible, social, economic and political aspects of cities. Such an inclusive approach calls for dialogue and interdisciplinary exchange to manage urban changes and appreciate how layered cultural experiences influence perceptions of the urban landscape, and why these are important in the outcomes of urban renewal.

In the final article, I present the Chinese situation regarding landscape conservation, placed in the national and international context and considering Chinese traditions and the country's confusion about World Heritage and WHCLs. This includes the rise of cultural landscape conservation and how China is now taking on a richer and more holistic interpretation of this aspect of heritage. Cross-cultural dialogue and exchange allow us to be both 'outsider' and 'insider', and to maintain a sensitive awareness of familiar home culture. International exchange has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in understanding the diverse cultural landscape values around the world, thereby advancing interlinkages of culture and nature for optimally effective conservation. Understanding the deep culture-nature interaction is a long journey. Conservation of culture and nature poses a critical dilemma for many countries. At its heart, a type of management is overriding significant values. The article calls for landscape debate, research, understanding, interpretation, conservation and contribution for the sake of a sustainable future.