Jocelyne Fresnais, La Protection du patrimoine en République populaire de Chine 1949-1999

Paris, Editions du C.T.H.S., 653 pp.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 At the present moment, the title of this book on the protection of China's cultural heritage almost sounds like a provocation, in view of the massive destruction of Peking's old quarters. These have fallen victim to modernisation, imposed by some elusive governmental institution which allows the construction of city blocks lacking architectural value and emotional appeal. The Chinese press itself has echoed these same views, through the columns of its critical southern publication, *Nanfang zhoumo*. The issue of July 4th 2002, partly translated in the *Courrier international* (No. 620, September 19th-25th 2002) devotes four pages to the major and irreversible demolitions of the city built under the Mongol dynasty. That city's layout and inner fabric have survived successive dynasties, the attacks and wars of the twentieth century, and the destructions of Maoism, but alas, they cannot resist the speculative assaults which toothless regulations and non-existent urban management have been unable to restrain. And yet a good number of intellectuals in China, from cadres and architects to city planners, share this sense of loss, which shows that it is not just the reaction of a spoilt Westerner's desire for oriental exoticism.
- 2 Jocelyne Fresnais states her position straight away through the work's title, which rules out any ambiguity over whether protection for the national heritage has actually existed in China over the last fifty years. We might perhaps be dealing with a system which sees things differently, or is it a matter of that inscrutability of Chinese thought

which is so often invoked to justify a failure to understand? Essentially her position is given in the opening pages of the introduction: it is the “historical monuments” that are at the heart of her study—derived from an update of her doctoral thesis—, these “historical monuments” being quickly replaced without further ado by the term “heritage” (*patrimoine*). This somewhat indefensible widening of the term, to which the reader is not alerted, gives rise to a certain persistent awkwardness whenever the specialised language which the topic requires, is badly handled.

- 3 The point is that a “heritage” in the form of buildings, and its need for protection, is surrounded by a specialised terminology which, beyond straightforward designation, refers to legal enactments, town planning documents, and regulations. This was partly the substance of Jocelyne Fresnais’ doctoral thesis, which patiently laid out the regulations promulgated in China after 1949, and particularly over the last twenty years. However, any comparison of the Chinese and French systems for protecting heritage buildings is especially complicated because it requires a deep knowledge of the respective national contexts.
- 4 There are also many people in France who conflate “historical monuments” with “national heritage”, taking no account of the specific needs of urban heritage. The areas of a city where it is pleasant to live, where it is the quality of the urban spaces and the architecture taken together which count, are often celebrated for their village-like aspects, particularly in the media and advertising. In such cases, the “heritage” lies in the atmosphere of a bar or pub, a grocer’s shop front, the feel of authenticity which they evoke, like the details which contributed to the success of the film “Amélie”; and yet how many people recognise that the configuration of such spaces, that art of combining solid spaces and empty spaces into architectural structures that may not be special in themselves, is a part of our heritage? It is this lack of understanding which is the cause of so much depredation all over the world, wherever cities are trying to modernise. Jocelyne Fresnais makes the same mistaken assumptions when she uses the term “heritage” and “historical monuments” without distinction. And isn’t the famous *wenwu* also officially translated as “heritage”?
- 5 *Wenwu* refers to an object of exceptional interest, which is already listed, or about to be listed. It may be a building, or archaeological remains, or a famous historical site, but it can never be a city district like Nanchizi, which has just been destroyed in the immediate vicinity of the Forbidden City. So an annotated glossary would have been an invaluable inclusion in a reference work of this sort. In it the author could have justified her choices which, as matters stand, provoke perplexity over their conflicting meanings. For example, *baohu danwei* is defined as a “protection unit” or “preservation unit”, with all the ambiguities clinging to the multiple meanings of this Maoist term (*danwei*), whereas in fact it refers to a “protected entity”, and an adequate translation would simply have used the participial adjective “protected” to qualify the object or building in question.
- 6 Similarly, a terminological confusion tends to hinder the reader’s understanding, when, for example, she writes: “contemporary architecture is prejudicial to its valuable ancient surroundings” (p. 377). This collapses the meaning of “architecture”, which implicitly includes spatial qualities, into “building” which is not loaded with such meanings. This category confusion goes beyond terminology to affect the question of the means available for heritage protection, and their application, as in the chapter devoted to Pingyao (well known abroad thanks to the international photography

festival held in this “little Peking”, which was made a UNESCO world heritage site in November 1997). The author gives us a precise report on the legal measures adopted, and she assesses their effectiveness in terms of management methods and regulations, concluding that local government “is empowered to ensure the application of the general directives of the planning programme”. It is truly idealist to pronounce that the promulgation of regulations alone amounts to applying them. Such a generous interpretation reveals a lack of on the spot investigations and face to face interviews, which is particularly damaging when one knows that Chinese personalities concerned with this topic are demanding that qualified personnel be put in charge of ensuring urban continuity and a respect for the laws governing heritage sites.

- 7 Despite these reservations, her painstaking deciphering of Chinese written regulations is quite exceptional and deserving of special mention. It is accompanied by map references to the 750 listed national historical monuments, which is quite rare, and a substantial bibliography, whose only unfortunate shortcoming is that it ends with the 1980s more often than one would wish, even though the following decade was particularly rich in research in this field. It should be added that the numerous notes and illustrations in black and white are refreshing additions to the work. In sum, this is certainly a serious work which breaks largely unexplored territory. The editors are the French Ministry of Education’s *Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques*, and there is a preface by Flora Blanchon, who is well known for her dynamic exploration of new fields of enquiry. After a historical survey, the author gives us two chronological chapters dealing with laws drafted between 1949 and 1976, and then from 1977 to 1999, of which the section dealing with 1985 to 1999 appears to me rather slight. The following chapter explains the relevant administrative structures and financial measures, and therefore deals essentially with individual listings, museum management, and listing procedures. Following that, the principles and techniques involved in restoration, maintenance and upkeep are presented in detail. The main body of this imposing work of 469 pages, not counting the annexes, ends with the section dealing with urban areas, whose weaknesses have already been mentioned. It is to be hoped that this work will be followed and expanded by others, in order to carry to fruition this first venture into a still insufficiently known domain.