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Section III

Public Debates in Heritage Work: Possibilities and Limitations for Plural Voices and New Forms of Engagements
Heritage Visions of Mayor Geng Yanbo

Re-creating the City of Datong

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Abstract
The chapter analyses the role and vision of one remarkable political leader, Geng Yanbo, who served as the mayor of Datong from 2008 to 2013. Geng’s vision and strong charisma shaped the city’s heritage policy. This intriguing case shows the importance of individual leadership, the role of heritage in urban development and city branding, and the complex understandings of heritage among different actors. Geng embarked on an ambitious renovation programme that also included moving, changing, and ‘improving’ many historic buildings, and even constructing ‘fake’ historic buildings. The case reveals how expert views, political visions, and public sentiments are complex and sometimes clash. It also illustrates how influential and powerful individual political leaders can be in an authoritarian system.

Keywords: re-creation, identity, heritagization, renovation, debate, system

The Datong City renovation programme was carried out as a reaction to the exhaustion of coalmine resources, sense of victimization, and urgent need for a new identity that would make local citizens feel proud about their city. The strong personal charisma and passion of Mayor Geng Yanbo resulted in a frenzy of heritage restoration and re-creation in the historical city as well as at major heritage sites in the suburbs. From 2008 to 2013, 20 heritage sites above the municipal level faced different kinds of interventions that triggered a heated public debate. The case of Datong offers a vivid example of how various cultural, social, political and economic factors shape heritage

See Zhou Hao’s documentary The Chinese Mayor (Zhaoqi Films, 2014).
conservation in China today. It also demonstrates how different actors create and imagine their heritage differently, leading to contestation and negotiations about how to preserve and promote local heritage. Similar to the Gulou neighbourhood project (see Graezer Bideau and Yan in this volume) and the Zhizhu Temple case (see Tam in this volume) in Beijing, the Datong programme is also carried out as an answer to the previous social suppression or neglect of cultural heritage, and embodies strong emotional attachment from the local people. Moreover, Datong uniquely exemplifies the cultural ambitions of political leaders engaged in urban renewal projects and their complex motivations. The interactions between officials, experts, individual citizens, and the media today significantly influence and complicate the heritage-making process.

This chapter addresses the following specific questions: How can one individual political leader shape heritage-making in China today? How do different actors interact in the heritage-making processes, and what power do they have? How do people understand and relate heritage to their own situation in contemporary society, and what significance does heritage have for identity formation and city branding? The analysis relies on site visits, interviews, online participatory observation, and a study of a variety of documents and reports. The findings show that there is a gap between the professional expert view and the public understanding of ‘heritage’. It also shows how the political system in China enables individual political leaders to arouse and manipulate public opinions and emotions as well as to override the jurisdiction of heritage authorities such as the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH).

The history of Datong and the aspirations of Geng Yanbo

The first urban construction of Datong in northern Shanxi Province dates back to over 2300 years ago. The city functioned as the capital from 398 to 494 in the North Wei dynasty (386-534). As the power centre of the northern minority of Xianbei, Datong became an international metropolis on the crossroad of different cultures. The large Buddhist cave temples at Yungang, today’s UNESCO World Heritage site, were mainly built during this time period. In 1044, the city became the second capital of the Liao dynasty (916-1125). It kept the name of West Capital throughout the Jin dynasty (1115-1234). The two ‘national key cultural heritage’ sites inside the historical city, Huayan Temple and Shanhu Temple, were built during this time period. These temples’ main timber buildings are still authentic
remains of the Liao and Jin dynasties’ creations. The urban texture of today’s historical centre was formed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when Datong became an important military stronghold at the north frontier. The city was rebuilt on a smaller scale but better fortified. With one historical city centre and three subordinate forts outside the city gates, it was known as the ‘Single-wing Phoenix’ due to its layout. Prince Dai was enfeoffed here in 1391 and turned the city into a regional administrative and cultural centre. The Nine Dragons Screen Wall, which is a famous place of interest today, was originally a decoration in front of the gate to Prince Dai’s Mansion in the centre of the city. These different stages of construction formed the historical urban ‘palimpsest’ of Datong. Due to the many heritage sites remaining from the heydays of each historic period, Datong received the status of National Famous City of Historic Culture from the State Council of China in 1982.

Despite its rich historical urban landscape, after 1949 Datong was solely valued as an important coal-mining base. The city suffered a lot from the development of heavy industry. Environmental pollution and destruction of heritage sites made the city (in)famous for its dirt and ugliness, and it was not a popular destination for tourists. A report in 2005, however, warned that its high-quality coal resource would be exhausted within thirteen to
sixteen years (Cao et al. 2005). Datong therefore needed a total reorientation of its development model. It also faced a crisis of identity.

In January 2008, a new municipal government came to power in Datong. Geng Yanbo, the previous vice mayor of Taiyuan, provincial capital city of Shanxi, became the vice secretary of the Municipal Party Committee of Datong, and was nominated as the new mayor six months later. Geng was born in a small county in Shanxi Province in 1958. Heritage-related developments had been a constant and central element in his political career. In 1983, Geng had joined a part-time education programme at the Chinese Literature Department of Shanxi University where he showed a great passion for Chinese traditional literature and culture. It is said that the Analects of Confucius was his favourite morning reading. Wang’s Mansion in Lingshi (Shanxi Province) was Geng’s first attempt at ‘heritage branding’. In 1995, the residents inside the historical courtyards were relocated and the site was redeveloped into a tourist spot called the Chinese Residence Art Museum. Under the same kind of policy, Chang’s Mansion and the Temple of City Wall and Moat in Yuci were renovated and ‘branded’ by Geng. In 2003, the entire historical city of Yuci was razed and instead a row of new pseudo-historical buildings came to line the streets. Thanks to successful advertising, these sites became national top-ranking tourist destinations after the renovations. Geng’s passion for Chinese traditional culture and promotion of Shanxi’s heritage sites was appreciated by his leaders, who promoted Geng to vice mayor of Taiyuan (Lu 2014). However, the Yuci programme was ultimately not completed after Geng left his position. In Taiyuan he had planned to carry out a RMB 200 billion urban renovation project, but this was halted after he was relocated to Datong. Before assuming office in Datong, he pleaded to the provincial authorities to allow him to serve a full five-year term this time, and this request was accepted (Shu and Wang 2009).

When he arrived in Datong, Geng climbed on top of the ruins of the city wall and expressed surprise that over 70 per cent of it survived as rammed-earth ruins and that it was besieged by banal modern buildings. On 4 February 2008, at a meeting to announce his new appointment, Geng proposed his vision for the city’s future: ‘to fully take advantage of the abundant historical and cultural resources of Datong, and to build a worldwide brand of Chinese Famous City of Historic Culture’ (Zhao and Jing 2013: 23).

Before Geng began his term, the municipal government had adopted the fourth master plan of Datong in 2006. It included a special conservation plan of the historical city centre that identified four Historic Cultural Districts, covering less than 30 per cent of the main historical city. The three
historical subordinate forts, which were built to protect the immediate neighbourhood outside the city gates, were not taken into consideration, and the intention was to keep the city wall as a ruins park (Cao et al. 2008: 198).

After Geng came to power, on 19 June 2008, the Municipal People’s Congress Standing Committee published ‘Decisions Regarding the Conservation and Restoration of the Historical City of Datong’. The Decisions criticized the previous ‘segmental’ and ‘passive’ heritage conservation policies, and for the first time stipulated an ‘integral protection’ idea that included a total renovation of the main historical city as well as the three subordinate forts. It was also decided that the city should display cultures from all the past dynasties, and therefore long-gone historic sites, including the entire fortification system, would have to be recreated and all ‘non harmonious’ modern buildings demolished (Geng 2010a). As a result, over 40,000 families were relocated due to demolitions between 2008 and 2013. The total amount of investment for urban construction during the five years’ term of Geng’s government was over RMB 100 billion. Before 2008, the annual amount of urban construction investment had only been RMB 30 million (Shu 2013a). Datong was reshaped by the will and views of one individual political leader: Geng influenced the entire renovation programme, from general strategies and heritage ‘branding’ to detailed design of specific sites.

Manipulated heritage: The Datong renovation programme

During Geng’s renovation programme, 20 of the 30 heritage sites above municipal level in the target region, i.e. the Urban District and Yungang Town, faced interventions including demolition between 2008 and 2014.

As outlined in Figure 9.2, re-creation, physical removal, and modifications are three of the most commonly implemented interventions. The Huayan Temple (the two main buildings were built in 1038 and 1140), for instance, was massively enlarged from 2008 to 2010. Over the years of the temple’s long history, large parts of the original temple complex had collapsed and gradually been taken over by local residents. Therefore the special urban texture surrounding the temple is proof of the historical evolution of the architectural complex. These historical neighbourhoods were now demolished according to Geng’s heritage and urban branding design. Since no archaeological surveys were undertaken before re-creation, the newly built huge architectural complex caused permanent damage to the underground sites and failed to reflect the original appearance. Geng
filled the whole neighbourhood with new pseudo-historical buildings, which were planned to be luxury shopping spaces but ended up as cheap hardware stores. After 2011, the re-creation of non-existing historic sites became predominant in Datong, when most of the major existing heritage sites had already suffered heavy interventions. One example is the full-scale fictional re-creation of the long-lost Prince Dai’s Mansion (built in 1392 and destroyed in 1644), which began in 2010.

Furthermore, physical modification was another common form of heritage intervention in Geng’s Datong. One symbolic case is the new 35-metre-high Goose Pagoda constructed on top of the renovated city wall. The original 14.8-metre-high historic pagoda (created in 1624), though listed as heritage site, was dismantled and relocated in 2010, because Geng thought it looked too small compared to the renovated city wall. The municipal government also invested in the relocation and re-composition of heritage sites as in the case of the Imperial City Stage Pavilion (created between 1644 and 1661, facing the Nine Dragons Screen Wall as a stage to host traditional festivals). In 2008, the urban stage pavilion was dismantled and re-established in front of another heritage site, the Temple of Lord Guan, in order to re-create an integral cityscape. During the renovation programme, Datong became one of the biggest customers of antiquities. A large quantity of historical architectural materials was bought and recomposed for the construction
of pseudo-historical buildings. In addition, the Yungang Grottoes (mainly created from 453 to 495 AD), a famous UNESCO World Heritage site, also suffered demolition and dramatic changes. In 2008, the renovation project, which aimed to construct a much larger scenic park, destroyed the historical worship route leading to the cave temples, and in 2010 two historical side halls at the end of the temple axis were demolished and replaced with a wide pedestrian path along the cliff. This project constituted a serious violation of Cultural Relics Protection Law and became the trigger to a heated public debate.

Public debate: The roles, views and impact of different actors

On 18 August 2009, a report in Science and Technology Daily questioned the legitimacy of the massive renovation project of the Yungang Grottoes. The authors revealed that the plan of the ongoing project was carried out without any professional consultation or authorization from SACH (Zhang and Li 2009). As a consequence, the report aroused public attention about the renovation programme in Datong. This soon attracted more criticism from heritage experts and professionals which got the public involved, triggering a heated debate. The understanding of the meaning and function of heritage differs quite dramatically between different social groups (similar to the Zhizhu Temple case in Beijing, see Tam in this volume). In the following, the interaction between these social groups partially altered the programme.

Within China’s authoritarian political system, public debate is rarely seen due to the lack of transparency in the decision-making process and lack of independent and critical media. During the Datong debate, however, things followed a different path as new online media such as postings on a popular website (Baidu) and the use of the micro-blogging service Sina Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) became important platforms for public debates (new online media also played a key role in the bottom-up movement of the heritagization of covered bridges in Taishun, see Svensson in this volume).

A three-party interaction developed between the government, the heritage experts and activists, and ordinary citizens, and each party made use of different types of media. Traditional media was dominated by the government and mainly represented the official view, while new media served as a platform for information and debate for other actors. The government was, however, influenced by and had to pay attention to both traditional
media and new media. This unprecedented heritage-related debate in and through the media shaped the views of different groups. Furthermore, it offers new insights into and possibilities to evaluate the Datong debate.

In the three-party structure of the debate, the government played a dominant role. Having majored in Chinese literature, Geng had an excellent position to mobilize different figures within the cultural and literature circle, as well as to make use of his knowledge to arouse public opinions by playing on emotions and employing cultural references. He commissioned some famous Chinese writers like Feng Jicai and Yu Qiuyu to produce positive images of him and his heritage programme. Many of his own discussions built on references to Chinese culture and history and also referred to and made use of the public debate.

Geng received his strongest opposition not from the provincial or municipal government but from the central government in Beijing. According to the 2007 revised version of the Cultural Relics Protection Law, construction, restoration, and reconstruction of national-level heritage sites in the protection zone or the buffer zone must be approved by SACH. Regarding the three major national-level heritage sites in Datong, the Yungang Grottoes, the Huayan Temple, and the Shanhua Temple, SACH had used its administrative powers since 2008 to order the provincial heritage authorities, as well as the provincial government of Shanxi, to halt construction. This had no effect until Science and Technology Daily published a report that received a lot of public attention in August 2009. The circulation of this report on the situation in Datong thus provided a counter-narrative to Geng’s vision and showed that Geng was violating laws and regulations. It was thanks to the exposure in the media, that the heritage authorities eventually were able to stop parts of Geng’s projects.

SACH dispatched an investigation group as an immediate response. On the evening of 20 August, the director general of SACH summoned Mayor Geng Yanbo to Beijing for an urgent enquiry. The Yungang project was declared illegal and forced to stop (Shu 2013b). All the national-level heritage projects were prohibited and had to complete the missing procedures for authorization. SACH commanded a small number of constructions with the strongest and most direct heritage interventions to be removed and the rest to be modified. As a response to SACH’s intervention, the Datong municipality then fined four architectural firms and one local heritage management office. Eight responsible persons, including the director and vice directors of the Datong Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage, received administrative sanctions from the municipal government (Zeng 2013). SACH does not have direct administrative power over local
governments and Geng himself was not punished for his ambitious programme but he was able to shift the responsibility to his local heritage staff. In the end, the overall renovation programme was only confronted with minor alterations as compromises. Geng was never stopped by his direct superordinate, the provincial government. The unequal power relation between Geng as a local political leader and SACH as the central heritage authority is clearly visible. SACH is almost powerless when confronted with the non-professional vision and manipulation of heritage by local political leaders. The local administrative power is stronger and carries more weight than professional expertise and formal regulations (on how the vertical administrative power affects the implementation of heritage work, see Maags in this volume). The value and use of heritage in China is thus strongly politicized rather than being a subject of academic and formal deliberations (see further discussions in the introduction by Svensson and Maags). However, in the Datong case local citizens also played an important role showing how heritage has become an issue that ties into local identity and aspirations.

When the news that SACH had cancelled the Yungang project was published, over 10,000 local citizens gathered in a square in Datong and signed a petition to support their mayor. Online posts on Baidu and on Sina Weibo initiated this gathering, and the images and information of the gathering were quickly spread online. Without direct government manipulation, supporters and opponents of Geng became involved in a long-lasting bottom-up debate on the new media platforms. In 2013, a heritage student’s Weibo tweet which condemned the destruction during the re-creation of the city wall received 851 reposts and 330 comments (Cui 2013). About 64 per cent of the comments were anti-Geng. The debate was quite heated with verbal attacks originating mostly from the pro-Geng local citizens. This heated debate caused the traditional media to step in again. Journalists from traditional newspapers and magazines interviewed active Weibo users who had become well known in the online debate. The Phoenix TV website put up a permanent theme page entitled ‘Datong Revival, a Combat between the New and the Old’ which covered the reports and interviews regarding the Datong issue. The result of an online questionnaire during the period from October 2012 to May 2014 shows that 64 per cent of the 9784 participants favoured the re-creation programme in Datong and thought it helped to ‘promote local culture and bring more space for development’ (iFeng 2012). The involvement of the public thus reshaped and broadened the debate to include other opinions apart from those of government officials and experts.
Heritage activists, such as heritage volunteers, students, and scholars, mostly from outside Datong, formed the major opposition against Geng. Ruan Yisan, a famous heritage conservation expert from Tongji University, had once been invited to develop the conservation plan for the historical city of Yuci during Geng’s early political career. However, when Geng found out that they could not reach an agreement, Ruan was simply ignored. In 2009, Ruan asked for an appointment with Geng regarding Datong but was refused. Ruan therefore expressed his opinions in a letter that Geng also ignored (He 2013). During the debate, heritage activists accused the Datong programme of faking relics, heritage destruction, misinterpretation and bad construction, violation of laws and regulations, as well as misuse of public funds.

‘Faking relics’ is the most quoted objection throughout the debate. This forced Geng to construct a whole new vision of ‘authenticity’ as a defence, something that will be discussed in the next section. Many historians and architectural archaeologists complained about the accuracy and quality of the projects in Datong. For instance, a local historian pointed out that the houses in the restored urban blocks have no chimneys although these are symbolic icons of the landscape of traditional northern Shanxi cities. Guo Zhan, the deputy chairman of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), also argued during an informal seminar in Beijing in April 2015 that the bad quality of the constructions diminished the value of the projects (CityIf 2015). At the same time, the programme has brought about a huge debt for the municipality and Geng was accused of misusing public funds, whereas economists raised concerns about Datong’s financial situation. The fact that some protected heritage sites were not restored and protected, while other re-created sites were prioritized, also led to complaints from heritage activists. This kind of criticism was mostly published on new media platforms.

However, local residents’ public opinion echoed and supported Geng’s heritage vision. The pro-Geng group included local citizens as well as experts in the fields of tourism and architecture. They cared more about other aspects of the programme than whether they were authentic or not, and instead valued the programme because it meant cultural revival, promotion, and transformation of the city. The programme was recognized as a rare opportunity for the transformation of Datong from an industrial to a cultural city and as a possibility to revive Chinese traditional culture. This idea was shared among many nationalistic scholars as well as ‘pseudo-historical’ architecture design and building practitioners (iFeng 2012). Geng’s personal charisma also played an important role in attracting supporters. He worked
on the construction site wearing dirty shoes, refused bribery, and was found eating noodles alone at street stands. These images of Geng, taken by local citizens with their mobile phones, were spread across the Internet. Chinese citizens are not accustomed to meeting local politicians accidentally on their way to work. Therefore Geng was seen as ‘a different official’ leading to the development of a personal cult. Some local citizens, for instance, even donated money and bought a pair of new shoes for him (Wang 2013).

The media played a key role in stirring up the debate as well as developing it further. Although SACH held a totally different opinion of Geng’s programme, its authority did not carry sufficient weight until traditional media stepped in and aroused public attention. The widespread use of new media and slower censorship on this platform made it a perfect tool for citizens to express and exchange opinions. It was also used as a tool to organize bottom-up gatherings, such as those for the petitions among pro-Geng activists in Datong. At the same time, the debate on new media also circulated information and served as an input for traditional media. As soon as traditional state-run media reported an issue, the debate would become more legitimate and have a stronger influence on the government. In the Datong case, traditional media often initiated the public debate, and then heritage activists and individuals joined the discussion on new media and reinforced it. Afterwards, the traditional media rejoined the debate and spread it to a wider group of people, which obligated Geng and his government to respond.

Geng’s heritage visions: Cultural revival and local pride

‘Many plans were settled by me,’ Geng Yanbo said during an interview in 2009, ‘These projects including the Yungang Grottoes were all settled according to my opinion. I completely shoulder the responsibility’ (Shu and Wang 2009). It is true that he did not only initiate the whole programme, but was also personally involved in planning and designing the projects. Geng’s personal understanding of heritage, interpretation of the programme, and his defence during the public debate are crucial for an analysis of developments in Datong. From the speeches and articles written by Geng, we can infer that he developed his own heritage vision.¹⁸ He often makes reference

¹⁸ Unlike most Chinese politicians, Geng reportedly writes his own speeches and articles instead of asking his secretaries to do so. Due to this reason, this study examines his articles and speeches to identify his very personal approach to heritage.
to Liang Sicheng, one of the first Chinese Western-educated architects and the founder of the study of Chinese architectural history and heritage conservation. In some articles, Geng clearly described his understanding of heritage and presented key arguments for his defence. Concerning cultural heritage, he remarked that:

[C]ultural heritage does not only contain historical, artistic, epistemological and scientific values, but also tremendous **commercial value**. [...] The resource of cultural heritage is the most precious and unique advantage of a city. It is **the banner of cultural ideals, the expression of historical sentiments and the identity of national spirits**. (Geng 2010a: 215-216; emphasis by the author)

In Geng’s eyes, the role of cultural heritage is thus quite comprehensive. On the one hand, he acknowledges the commercial value of heritage and opposes the idea of using heritage as an obstacle for development. On the other hand, he also romanticises heritage as a symbol of national spirit and identity. Geng legitimized his Datong programme mainly from these two approaches.

Commenting on the difference between Chinese and Western traditional architecture, Geng further argued that:

The obvious differences between Chinese architecture and Western architecture should be noticed. From a material perspective, Western architecture is dominated by stone structures, therefore ruins or detached columns can be preserved in open air to demonstrate the beauty of incompleteness; while **Chinese architecture is built mainly with wood and bricks**, it is hard for a dilapidated house to survive and it will collapse completely without restoration. From a cultural aesthetic perspective, Western architecture masters individual tallness and majesty, while **Chinese architecture admires the artistic conception of a complex**. Without any continuous architectural-complex backdrop, one isolated building cannot demonstrate the beauty of traditional architecture. (Geng 2010a: 215; emphasis by the author)

Geng’s view on Chinese traditional architecture was influenced by the well-known expert Luo Zhewen. Geng used Luo’s views to support his re-creation programme inside the Shanhua and Huayan Temples in order to complete the imagined historic architectural complex.
Geng developed his own vision by relying on the two concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘integrity’. In his articles, he, for instance, stated that:

For the protection of the authenticity and integrity of Datong’s historic cultural relics, the Municipal Party Committee and the government have decided to adopt the idea of ‘one axis, two cities, separate development’ for urban construction. [...] The next step is to make plans strictly based on the following principles: logic is greater than being; history is greater than reality; ecology is greater than economy; planning is greater than rights; integrity is greater than segment; long-term is greater than present. (Geng 2008b: 204; emphasis by the author)

This is one of his most important quotes and central in order to comprehend the logic of Geng’s heritage programme. Geng’s aspirations for Datong were based on a sort of intentional correctness rather than historical or factual reality. For this reason, he did not emphasize physical accuracy and the irreversibility of time. In his view, his renovation did not aim to make Datong exactly as it was in the past but strives to make Datong even better than before.

Adding to his narrative of authenticity and integrity, Geng also argued that:

Datong is a horizontal city, with landmark buildings like the Bell Tower, Drum Tower, Kuixing Tower, Taiping Tower, city gate towers and corner towers standing among sheets of lower residential courtyards with a certain rhythm. The urban space was placid and open. With a well-proportioned skyline, the historic city’s cityscape was artistic and unique. Authenticity is to keep the original appearance of the past; integrity is to protect well the global environment of the historical city. (Geng 2008a: 205; emphasis by the author)

Furthermore, Geng invoked Luo Zhewen’s ‘Four Originals’ principle as a solution to his narrative of authenticity and integrity. On this matter, he stated:

During the conservation and restoration of the historical city of Datong, following the basic guidance of Restore the Old as Old, we stick to four basic principles: (1) Sufficient study of history. Historical references are searched and historical information is passed on based on archaeological excavations, information collection, research surveys and expert consultations. No designs without historical reference and no constructions without expert consultation, this is our persistence. (2) Heritage-centric. Heritage major restoration and re-creation is carried out according to the building form and style of its own dynasty. [...] (3) The ‘Four Originals’. Keep
The essential element of Geng’s vision was based on the belief that ‘logic is greater than being’ and ‘history is greater than reality’. When we associate this slogan with his heritage practice, especially physical modifications and demolitions, we can see that, in Geng’s understanding, ‘history’ actually means an idealized and romanticized image of the nation’s past rather than historicity, and ‘logic’ is the romanticization of heritage, similar to the idea of Romanticism in eighteenth-century Europe. As heritage is regarded as a significant representation of national achievement, heritage can be modified in cases where it discords with the ‘cultural ideals’, ‘historical sentiments’, and ‘national spirits’. The so-called sufficient study of history as well as the ‘Four Originals’ is just intended to make the projects appear to be scientific, but in fact they are intrinsically aimed at creating a ‘stylistic unity as an illustration of an ideal’ (Jokilehto 1999: 101). Rather than calling this ‘restoration with Chinese characteristics’, it should be defined as stylistic restoration in academic terms. In 1866, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, the leading figure of the nineteenth-century French stylistic restoration movement, defined restoration as reinstating a building to ‘a condition of completeness which may never have existed at any given time’ (Jokilehto 1999: 151). With a sensibility derived from outstanding comprehension of the intrinsic logic of medieval architecture, he restored many important historical buildings, including the Notre Dame de Paris.

However, the difference between Geng and Viollet-le-Duc is that Geng is neither an architect nor an architectural historian. With a strong passion for Chinese history and culture, Geng often compares himself to traditional

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19 Luo Zhewen originally raised this principle in order to present an argument in the debate surrounding the introduction of the Venice Charter and the publication of the ‘Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China’. Luo drafted the ‘Consensus about the Chinese Characteristic Restoration Theory and Practice for the Conservation of Historical Architecture’, which was signed by 33 Chinese experts in 2005, also known as the Qufu Declaration. The ‘Four Originals’ principle was officially published within this declaration.
scholars who designed their own gardens. In ancient China, the concept of art was defined by the scope of the daily life of scholars. Architectural construction was not included in this scope. Confucius, for instance, remarked: ‘a gentleman’s ability is not confined to any concrete things’.\(^{20}\) Moreover, in the ‘Notes of Yueyang Tower’, Fan Zhongyan’s famous essay written in 1046 to celebrate the renovation of a landmark tower, there is not one single word describing the building’s structure or style. A cultural landscape can be endowed with art, while the building itself is only a manufactured tool holding metaphysical meanings.\(^{21}\) Geng often visited antique dealers’ shops and purchased historical architectural components for the renovation programme in Datong (Lu 2014). He had a clear and specific understanding of the ‘age value’ of tangible, movable antiquities, which Alois Riegl defined as the ‘most modern’ value of European monuments since the late nineteenth century (Riegl 1903: 16). When it comes to the intangible composition of architectural components, in other words, the building process itself, the age value is rhetorically replaced by the ‘Four Originals’ principle. This paradox is deeply rooted in the Chinese pre-modern tradition. It reveals the unaccomplished process of ‘heritagization’ within the historical architectural tradition in the Chinese social consciousness today.

### The victimization narrative as the search for a new identity

Besides Geng’s strong personal charisma and his unique folksy image, another important factor that made him extremely popular and supported by locals during the debate is the shared sense of victimization. In Geng’s eyes, Datong bears the label of the ‘victim of modernity’. He once addressed Datong as the city that ‘time and again suffered from terrible destructions, but also repeatedly rose from ruins’ (Geng 2010a: 212). However, the destructions were not caused by wars or foreign invasions. When the Japanese occupied Datong in 1937, they created a master plan for the urban development of Datong in which the entire urban area, including the main fortified city and the three subordinate forts outside the city gates, would be protected as one whole historical centre (Li 1999: 271). After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the city was seen only as a coal production centre. For over 60 years, under the Chinese centrally planned economy, Datong emptied its

\(^{20}\) Analects of Confucius, ‘Chapter II: Governing’; my translation.

\(^{21}\) The object is to incarnate rites; Commentary of Zuo, ‘Second Year of Lord Cheng’; my translation.
mountains and contributed 2.5 billion tons of low-cost, high-quality coal for the modernization of the nation. In return, it became one of the ugliest, dirtiest, and most polluted cities in China. Apart from the intentional destruction of antiquities during the Cultural Revolution, all the city gates, the brick coating of the city wall, as well as the elegant historical blocks with courtyards and alleyways were demolished for urban expansion, including the construction of large-scale collective residential buildings for workers.

When Geng visited Japan in 2010, he found the documents of the former urban plan in the national library of Japan. After he returned to Datong, he stated during one work meeting:

I have been thinking all the time, that if Datong had been developed according to the Japanese plan after the establishment of new China, it would have been an international city by now. [...] This time we investigated Kyoto and Nara. The population in Kyoto is over 1.6 million, the number of annual visitors there is over 50 million, and the total annual tourism income is about [RMB] 500 billion. Yet, today, the number of annual visitors in Datong is less than 1 million. [...] The Japanese were invaders, they were robbers when they entered the city, but they were able to take a strategically advantageous position and make such a long-term plan for the benefit of Datong. Facing the Japanese invaders who brought deep disasters for the Chinese nation, we must remember the national humiliation and not forget the old hatred, but at the same time we cannot help but look up to this nation for their professional dedication. (Geng 2010b: 209)

The sense of being a victim of China’s modernity and the guilt from being a member of the same authority (i.e. the CCP) that caused the tragedy of his home province, made Geng want to create a city that was even more ‘historic and monumental’ than the one that the Japanese invaders planned to preserve. During Geng’s five-year term in office in the municipality, over RMB 100 billion was spent on the renovation programme with over RMB 70 billion in government investment. By the time Geng was suddenly relocated to Taiyuan in early 2013, the city had accumulated a debt of over RMB 13 billion. After Geng’s departure 125 projects were immediately halted because of lack of money. However, for Geng this was not a programme for short-term economical promotion but, as he said, an effort to ‘let Datong find its position in history; and to make Datong, the Chinese ancient capital, the city under heaven, a

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22 This number differs from individual reports with the maximum mount mentioned being 20 billion.
highland of culture and spirit and an ideal city which is walking towards the future full of cultural confidence’ (Geng 2010a: 216). So many heritage sites in Datong were relocated, modified, demolished, or re-created in order to create ‘cultural confidence’. This deep personal sense of history and responsibility towards the city and history, however, exposed a strong inferiority complex.

Many local citizens in Datong shared Geng’s opinion and some of them set up a citizen action group called the ‘Fans of Geng Yanbo’ to safeguard the ‘heritage’ left by their beloved city mayor. This action group was established in 2009 to support Geng when SACH summoned him to Beijing over the Yungang Grottoes project. The citizens asserted that they felt more confident since the urban renovation began. Most external critics of Geng or his programme were labelled as irrelevant since ‘non-Datongers don’t understand the city’. A new identity and pride had thus developed with the re-creation of the city’s lost heritage. The ‘Fans of Geng Yanbo’ have gathered regularly since 2010, and their daily meeting is held at the recreated Four Archways in the city centre, which the activists see as a symbol of Geng’s contribution to Datong (An and Yuan 2014).

Post-Geng heritage movement in Datong: The new conservation plan

In 2011, Geng was awarded the title ‘Annual Outstanding Figure for the Conservation of Chinese Cultural Heritage’ by the China Culture Relics Protection Foundation. Ironically, Shan Jixiang, the director general of SACH who summoned Geng to Beijing in 2009, presented him with the award. In addition, Geng was awarded the title of ‘Annual Cultural Figure of China’ by the China Culture Promotion Society and the Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV later that year. In February 2013, Geng was unexpectedly transferred from Datong to become the mayor of Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi Province. In the administrative structure of China, this can be regarded as a form of promotion (Xu 2013).

The new mayor of Datong was confronted with a city greatly altered and halfway re-created by Geng. The new government turned to the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design in July 2013 to commission a new conservation plan, which was in principle approved in April 2015. This is a key turning point in the examination of the post-Geng heritage legacy in Datong. In the new plan, a number of complex judgements, compromises, and

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23 This is the most commonly adopted logic backing the pro-Geng arguments during the public debate in new media.
modifications were made: (i) two blocks were designated as Historic Cultural Districts. These districts are almost identical but slightly smaller in size than those in the 2006 plan, and all areas in Geng’s urban re-creation programme were designated as buffer zones; (ii) one of the Historic Cultural Districts from the 2006 plan has been removed and another has been made secondary as a ‘traditional appearance district’ due to mass urban destruction; (iii) the protection zones of the national-level heritage sites were enlarged following the re-created scale, but none of the new buildings inside were recognized as heritage; (iv) all existing heritage sites including those relocated by Geng must be protected at their current locations; (v) the ongoing re-creation project of the Prince Dai’s Mansion is allowed to be completed as a cultural exhibition district; (vi) most importantly, the entire recreated fortification system is identified as heritage, and the concerned planning zone for the first time after 1938 includes the three subordinate forts together with the central historical area. In other words, the ‘Single-wing Phoenix’ was retained (China Academy of Urban Planning and Design 2015).

In this plan it is stated that one of the key points for the urban conservation of Datong is to safeguard the traditional urban structure, especially the spatial relations between the urban landmark buildings. Despite the massive re-creations, the rebuilding of the historic atmosphere must be regarded as the most positive contribution of the Geng era. Geng’s legacy in Datong is not only a piece of ‘historical fiction’, but also a new cultural phenomenon. In 2009, Liaocheng, a small historical city in Shandong Province, also initiated a total urban re-creation programme in its historical centre. The entire city within the existing historical fortification was razed and a brand new pseudo-traditional city was built. In September 2010, the China Ancient Capital Society published a consensus after the annual meeting, also known as the Datong Declaration. In this declaration, Geng’s principles and method of urban renovation in Datong were endorsed. Thereafter, similar programmes derived from the ‘Datong Model’ were carried out in Shuozhou, Tai’erzhuang, Kaifeng, and Fenghuang, among other cities. According to incomplete statistics by the end of 2012, more than 30 cities all over China have carried out total re-creation plans (Peng and Zhou 2012).

Conclusion

The mass renovation programme in Datong and the heated public debate it gave rise to are extreme but vivid examples of how individual political leaders are able to shape local heritage-making processes in China. Regardless of
whether it was a World Heritage site or a national-level heritage site, Geng, with his strong personal charisma, was able to implement his own heritage visions without much obstruction, apart from critical media reports and views on social media. Heritage professionals and heritage authorities are often restricted to the scientific and neutral meanings of heritage, whereas political leaders as well as the general public tend to see heritage as an embodiment of various social values, such as the resurrection from collective victimization, the rebuilding of local identity and as an opportunity for industry transformation. This shows the bigger expectations put on heritage today. Geng’s re-creation and heritagization efforts certainly exemplify this trend.

Due to the vertical system of government authority in China that makes local heritage authorities subordinate to local governments and political leaders rather than to the higher-level professional authorities, SACH does not have much power at the local level. As shown in the Datong case, one local political leader can be extremely powerful in the decision-making process. Geng was able to legitimate his vision and to win people’s support by speaking to their needs and local pride. He was furthermore successful in using both old and new media channels to convey his vision and stir up public debates.

In mid-nineteenth-century Europe, stylistic restoration ‘was strengthened by the political ambitions of decision-makers for whom restoration became a question of national prestige’ (Jokilehto 1999: 303). This is not very different from what is happening in China today. The sense of victimization that Geng gave expression to was widely shared by the local community and helps to explain the need to create a powerful cultural image as well as a new identity in Datong. This sense of victimization is shaped by the national pride derived from a romanticized view of Chinese history and culture, and dissatisfaction with the actual poor heritage conditions that have been caused by destruction and ignorance during the twentieth century. Geng’s reference to the Japanese urban plan is clear evidence of this. The wide diffusion of the ‘Datong Model’ throughout the country, in combination with the dream of ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ promoted by President Xi Jinping,24 reveals the strong appeal of using heritage as a platform for national and local imaginations. Somehow the Chinese are still seeing themselves as ‘living in history’. The awareness of modernity and the irreversibility of time in the heritage field is blurry. This is essentially rooted in the unique, non-linear, ongoing socio-ecological modernization process in China. The modern Western-based heritage consciousness backed by academics does

24 This slogan was announced by President Xi Jinping on 29 November 2012 during his visit to the ‘Road to Revival’ exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing.
not match the pre-modern public epistemological basis. The public debate on the Datong case has demonstrated this issue in a dramatic way.

The case of Datong may also trigger a new orientation for the evaluation and recognition of heritage and conservation in China. Geng’s intervention in Datong was not completely negative, which is also visible in the new post-Geng conservation plan, which designates the re-created historical city and the three subordinate forts as one complete planning zone. The definition and justification of the word ‘conservation’ have also become more and more unsettled today. Perhaps we will recognize Geng’s Datong as heritage in the future, as an outstanding example of early-twenty-first-century Chinese heritage re-creations. Heritage is, after all, something that is created by different historical periods and, with the passage of time, comes to be seen as authentic and reflecting local and national culture, aspirations, and imaginations. Whoever has the power to determine the discourse or public views on heritage, can determine how the past is interpreted, and, in other words, what heritage is truly about.

References


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