

13 July 2004

To: the Volunteers for China's Ancestral Temples
From: Peter Bol

I want to thank you again for all your help this summer. This was the second year of the China's Ancestral Temples expedition. Given the amount of material we have collected now (much of which still waits to be processed) this will probably be the last for several years. Together with Prof. Wu Songdi of Fudan University and Prof. Liu Jie of Jiaotong University, we have proposed a new Earthwatch project for next year in the mountains of Taishun County in southern Zhejiang province to look at the connections between bridges, old roads, and rural villages. This promises to be something entirely different and I hope it will appeal to both new and veteran Earthwatch supporters. Once again this year I have seen how valuable your contribution is, for without your work, morning through night, we could never have gathered the photographic materials that are so vital to making this project useful in teaching.

I hope the trip was as memorable for you as it was for me and the graduate students. You set an example of hard work that thoroughly impressed our Chinese hosts, and you set an example of a willingness to help others.

We learned a lot – I hope this was apparent from the nightly seminar reports that the grad students and visiting professors gave – and we collected even more. We will soon begin to further process the photographic materials and prepare new sites on the website. Things will not move as quickly as we wish but I hope that by next spring we will have something to show you. Do check the website for updates, for the moment:
<http://courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chnlocal/chinlocal/index.cgi> and stay in touch (pkbol@fas.harvard.edu).

Yours truly,
Peter K. Bol

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China's Ancestral Houses

Jinhua Municipality, Zhejiang Province, China

1st team June 13-27, 2004

2nd team June 27-July 11, 2004

Team 1 had 10 volunteers, Team 2 had 11

Highlights

The current economic boom in eastern China is bringing dramatic increases in new buildings and the destruction of most older housing. As was the case in 2002 we aimed to 1) create carefully documented photographic records and site plans of a series of major houses 2) to trace the history of the buildings, 3) to research the history of the resident lineages, 4) to locate the buildings relative to the landscape (both productive agricultural landscape and the viewsapes), 5) to trace the growth of the villages over time in relation to surrounding villages, 6) trace the migration and segmentation of lineages, and 7) to examine the current strategies of the families in question in light of their history.

Historical Background

Beginning in the eleventh century an important social transition took place in southeastern China as the spread of education and the civil service examination encouraged local well-to-do families to transform themselves into "literati" (people whose claim to status lay in their cultural and moral achievements). Literati families provided leadership and continuity in local society in the face of foreign invasion, rebellions, and government corruption. The material legacy of these families still exists in the form of villages and towns still populated by their descendants and in the form of houses and ancestral temples, some dating back to the fourteenth century. Given the destruction of local elite families and local culture in the 1950s-70s, the confiscation of large landholdings, the execution of "landlords," the closing and destruction of local temples and shrines images of deities, prohibitions on religious pilgrimage, burning of genealogies and ancestor portraits, closing of ancestral temples and private schools, etc., how can we account for the revival of interest in local culture, lineage, genealogy, and religion today? Our work documented these revivals and interviews with villagers suggested that the revival of these older forms of community should be understood not as an attempt to revive or preserve old things because they have historical value but because they are readily understandable concrete modes of giving expression to a vision of community which is controlled locally by participants rather than being a vehicle for party and state control.

Objectives in 2004

To compare three kinds of villages: those which had undergone the process of renovation with an aim to preserve historically significant buildings, those which are in the process of doing so, and those which have historically significant architecture but have not yet decided whether they wish to preserve an historical legacy or renovate it.

Methods

Our methods included mapping the ground plan of buildings, creating 360° panoramas of interiors and exteriors, digital videos, still photography, GIS registration of the sites, collecting and copying historical documents, and interviewing local residents and officials.

Volunteer Tasks and Accomplishments

Two Earthwatch teams of 10-11 volunteers each participated. Each was on site for two weeks. They worked together with local students and Harvard graduate students. They performed the following tasks:

- mapping buildings and one villages
- creating 360° degree panoramas with digital photography and processing the photographs
- still digital photography of architectural elements
- digital videos of community life and street scenes
- Notes on each photograph taken.

9 sites were covered. We collected over 8 hours of video, about 4 thousand images, about 40 panorama scenes, maps of main structures, and 12 editions of hitherto unavailable genealogies. In addition we employed techniques developed this past year for uploading photographs onto the Harvard server and entering data. We thus avoided creating the enormous backlog of unprocessed material that we created in 2002.

Results

We learned that the preservation of older buildings depends on a broader community effort supported by entities within local government. There is tension between those officials who are interested in the preservation of cultural artifacts and those whose job it is to promote tourism. The later have the funds to help towns because they in turn draw income from the tour groups that will visit towns; the former are more likely to be interested in history but are constrained by lack of income outside of their budgetary allotment.

We learned that in villages today there is a growing gap between rich and poor. Some families, often those with political connections, invest successfully in small scale production for export markets and relatively rich. Others have not benefited from this new wealth and the newly wealthy have shown little interest in helping poor relatives.

We learned that almost all lineages have or are in the process of recompiling their genealogies, a task made difficult by the destruction of genealogies by the Red Guards. We also learned that shrines and temples to local deities are being rebuilt, almost always by women and usually as a result of a vision experiences during a dream. In general we became convinced that the combination of family history, old buildings, and local documents would support in depth and highly detailed studies of local society at the village level going back at least 300 years.

We learned that the single surname villages generally are very aware of their relations with other villages and with the minority surnames in their village. This is sometimes a relationship of oppression.

We learned that the layout of ancestral temples in a village was directly related to the segmentation of a lineage over time. In some cases lineages are once more placing the spirit tablets of the deceased in the main and branch ancestral temples. However, ancestor worship now seems to be more commonly practiced at the household level.

We learned that almost all older buildings have gone through repeated rebuilding and renovation. In some cases this was due to fire or disrepair; in other cases the rebuilding was meant to create a grander space. To say that a building is 500 years old may mean that the earliest known building at this location was built 500 years ago.

We learned that multi-store new Western style buildings are in fact similar to classic large dwellings in that they are meant to house several generations of descendants of a common ancestor.

Discussion

Our expedition combined research questions with the gathering of data and visual case studies to be used in teaching. We have demonstrated that the historical sources for further historical research on local society still exist in the countryside. We gathered a great deal of material for teaching purposes and the volunteers who are teachers have seen the usefulness of these materials for K-12 level teaching as well. I plan to begin an undergraduate course using these materials in the fall of 2005. Of particular importance I think is the conclusion that despite efforts to erase the social, economic, and cultural elements of what the Communist Party labeled “feudal society” when local people struggle to reassert independence it is precisely these elements that reappear. The notion that historical China and “modern” China are discontinuous needs to be questioned, but the nature of the changes that have been taking place in local society during the past hundred years needs to be studied much more closely.

Problems

Our cooperation with Zhejiang Normal University has become less productive. The professors associated with the project did not maintain their agreement to visit sites and meet with local people prior to our arrival. The university switched lodgings and changed its costs on us at the very last moment. And, of greatest concern, one of the professors threatened one of the Harvard graduate students, a PRC national, with accusing her of being a spy to the Public Security Bureau, for asking questions about recent history. All this came to a head when, during our final site visit, it became apparent that the villagers had all been instructed not to respond to our questions about family history, land reform, the starvation of 1959-61, and the resurgence of local religion. This may have been a local phenomenon (i.e. a Communist Party secretary who was nervous), but it seems to have come from a higher level as well, although we still do not know who was responsible. This is distressing, because we do not know what was the cause of this or who instigated it. Given this it seems best to suspend operations in Jinhua for several years. We sometimes forget in China today that it is still a dictatorship led by the Communist Party.

Publications

<http://courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chnlocal/chinlocal/index.cgi>

Acknowledgments

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