Challenges and Future Strategies for Heritage Conservation in Macao

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ABSTRACT

In July 2005, the Historic Centre of Macao was successfully inscribed as a World Heritage (WH) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), making it the 31st heritage site in China. Macao is also the only place in China where casino gaming is legally permitted which has received over 30 millions tourists annually. Rapid growth in tourism in particularly gaming has imposed significant challenges to the city’s heritage conservation works. This paper explores the conflicts between economic development and heritage conservation in Macao, and identifies the major challenges and problems in conservation. Problems such as the absent of a clear city vision and conservation guidelines, poor inter-governmental collaboration, lack of public participation, and the backwarding heritage protection laws are identified. This paper concludes by proposing some strategies for achieving a more integrated conversation approach for the city.

KEYWORDS: Heritage conservation, Macao, China

INTRODUCTION

Macao is located on the southeastern coast of China to the west of the Pearl River Delta, and is approximately 60 km southwest of Hong Kong (Fig. 1). It is 28.2 km² in size and has a total population of about 503,000 (Macao Government Information Services, 2005). After 450 years as a Portuguese colony, Macao’s Administration was handed over to China on 20 December 1999. In 1555, Portuguese traders found a small settlement that was exposed to Chinese and Western cultures for over 500 years, producing a unique cultural heritage – still recognized in the Historical Center of Macao. This Center was enlisted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as part of World Heritage on 15 July 2005 (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006a). Macao is not only famous for its cultural heritages but its gaming activities, it is the only place in China where casino gaming is legally permitted. On the other hand, after the handover of Portuguese colonial government to Chinese administration in 1999, tourist numbers grew rapidly from only 9 millions to over 30 millions in 2008 (The Statistics and Census Service, 2008b). This fast economic growth also leads to the development of many high rises, particularly casinos and hotels which are imposing direct contradiction and threat to its World Heritage status.

Fig. 1 Location of Macao. Source: MSN Encarta, 2007

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The challenge for Macao today is how to blend in the old with the new by managing and conserving its distinct cultures and heritages while coping with the heavy development pressures particularly from tourism, gaming development and real estate.

At this stage, no clear solutions have been provided to this conflict, but only general announcement of good intentions of protecting heritages. One reason is that researches on heritage management and planning in Macao are scarce. This paper therefore serves to fill in some of the research gaps by examining the conservation challenges currently faced by Macao and how the government handles these challenges. Data for this study are from various sources including local newspapers, government policies, guidelines and ordinances related to heritage conservation and planning, as well as some academic papers and reports.

**TOURISM AND GAMING DEVELOPMENT VERSUS HERITAGE CONSERVATION**

During its 450 years as a Portuguese settlement, Macao not only transforms itself from a fishing settlement to a modern city, but has produced a unique cultural heritage which mixes the Chinese roots and the Portuguese legacy apparent in buildings, architecture, streetscape, and squares clustered in an urban fabric that led the Historic Centre of Macao to be successfully inscribed as a World Heritage (WH) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in July 2005. According to the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the government, this heritage “...bears a unique testimony to the first and longest-lasting encounter between the West and China” (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006a). There are twenty-two monuments and eight squares are designated as World Heritage (WH). Squares and streets are included as part of the WH because they represent the traditional design value of the Portuguese and they play also a pivotal role in linking different monuments forming a unique Historic Corridor of Macao. Because of this, the World Heritage Committee recommends that Macao should “make every effort to develop the management system so as to retain the existing structural and visual integrity, and to maintain the principal sightlines of the nominated area within its contemporary setting” (World Heritage Centre, 2005:14) (Fig. 2 – 3).

However, heavy development pressures impose direct challenges to heritage preservation in Macao. Macao is perhaps one of the fastest changing cities in the World. The City’s population increased drastically from only 440,500 in 2002 to 551,900 in 2008 (up to the second quarter) (The Statistics and Census Service, 2008a). Population density also jumped from 16,436/km² to nearly 19,000/km² within the same period, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Macao is a tourist city, ranked as 23rd in the world’s top destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2004). Tourist number grew rapidly from only 11.53 million in 2002 to over 30 million in 2008 (The Statistics and Census Service, 2008c).

Macao was previously called Monte Carlo of the Orient and is now more identified as the Las Vegas in Asia. The gaming industry currently accounts for 49% of its gross domestic product
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GDP), 16.1% of its total employment and 70% of its Government revenue (The Statistics and Census Service, 2007). Its gaming revenues reached to a record high to US$10.33 billion in 2007 far exceeding that of the US$6.6 billion made on the Las Vegas strip (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). The economic importance of the gaming industry led the Macao government to liberalize the casino licensing in 2002 from 1 to 3 (managed by 6 casino operators) resulting in a jump in the number of casinos from 11 in 2002 to 31 in 2008 (Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau, 2008) including the giant casinos such as Wynn, Galaxy and the Venetian casino-resort. Hotel rooms also increased almost doubt from only 8,869 in 2002 to 16,792 in 2008. In 2009, the figure will jump to 34,800 rooms (South China Morning Post, 2007). As Macao’s existing pool of skilled workforce is inadequate to meet the increased demand in the casino and hotel sector, it needs to import labour from overseas. With only about half a million population, over 100,000 foreign workers are now working in Macao (The Statistics and Census Service, 2008d), adding another development pressures of providing adequate housing for accommodating these overseas workers. All these developments were done without a master plan. Pinheiro and Wan (2007) observe that many “high class” towers are now built in century old narrow streets like toothpicks (towers) in the middle of the spaghetti mess (the roads) (Fig.4).

When the new casino-hotel development is placed in the overall context of development needs in Macao, other important development interests have to be sacrificed. This included the reduction of the overall size of “Green and Leisure Zone” area between 2004 and 2006 from 6 to 5.7 square kilometer meters. Macao Peninsular lost about 25 per cent of its green and leisure areas and the per capita green/leisure area in Macao reduced from 13 to 11 square meters during the same period (Sharif, 2007). Schools, gardens and parks were physically being eaten up, demolished in order to give way to hotels and casinos (Pinheiro and Wan, 2008a). Besides, a number of new buildings that are newly constructed or now under construction have already affected the visual integrity of the Historical Center. The Guia Lighthouse is a case in point which has been severely affected by a high-rise office construction right next to the hill where the lighthouse is located. The development of Ponte 16 Hotel also blocks the view and ventilation of the San Ma Lou Street (or the main street in most cities’ downtown). The huge number of visitors together with the poor visitor management facilities at heritage sites as Wan and Pinheiro (2005) reported has further causing overcrowding and making meaningful on-site interpretation becomes extremely difficult. Serious environmental degradation (Yu, 2008) and congestions on Macao’s heritage sites (du Cros and Kong, 2006) are also separately reported.

**Challenges and Problems of Heritage Conservation in Macao**

**Lack of a clear city vision**

Hall and McArthur (1998:22) mention that successful conservation management first requires a strategy. Conservation strategy with clear vision, mission, goals and objectives help balancing stakeholder and conservation concerns, directing the use of community resources more effectively and setting standards for evaluating performances. At the strategic level, the city suffers from a
lack of clear city vision statement for cultural heritage. According to the city’s vision statements as expressed in the 21st Century City Planning Guidelines Study 1999-2020 (21CCPGS) (Lamarca, 2002) neither culture, or heritage preservation and development has been spelled out as the City’s development goal. The Study has the following vision statements.

- International tourist leisure resort…whose dominating the mainstay should be modern entertainment and tourist services led by the gambling industry;
- A definite stop-over point for travelers from the mainland and overseas through multi-faceted tourism…;
- Showcases of development of China in the 21st Century under the principle “one country, two systems” principle; and
- City specializing in external business, trades and transportation in South China Economic Ring.

Besides, different senior government officials have different visions statements on Macao. In 2001, the President of the Cultural Institute of Macao has this grand vision for Macao - A City of Culture (Ho, 2002). This vision had soon been replaced by Mr. Francis Tam Pak-Yuen, Secretary for Economy and Finance, who envisioned Macao to be “an international convention center and holiday resort” (South China Morning Post, February 9, 2002: 1). In 2006 and 2007, Edmund Ho, the Chief Executive of Macao, in his Policy Address, expressed the need to develop Macao as an entertainment hub which comprises almost everything, including gambling, MICE and cultural hub in order to attract tourists to stay longer and spend more (Macao Government, 2006). In 2008, due to overheating gaming sector, the Chief Executive announced Macao needed diversifying its economic towards culture, leisure and entrainment. Despite this, gaming industry is still considered as the very core of the city’s future success and the Chief Executive said: “the government would focus on using its revenue from gaming to boost other parts of the tourism sector” (Macao Government, 2008:7). All these illustrate that the city’s vision has changed very quickly and the gambling industry has always been put as the top priority of the government agenda and cultural heritage are the second or even third.

**Backwarding cultural heritage protection laws**

Government initiatives in heritage conservation began in the 1950s. From merely registering architectural monuments in the early 1950’s, to the appointment of a task force to lay down strategies for protecting cultural heritage in the 1960’s, the government stepped up to promulgate the first law decree in 1976. The Cultural Institute (CI) was established in 1982 with the responsibility for implementing cultural and heritage policies. Year 1984 saw the birth of a new law decree in which categories of heritage were stipulated with measures of protection given. In 1992, another category of heritage, namely the “Building of Architectural Interest” (BAI), was added, creating a new list of the protected heritage. From then until the present, Macao’s heritage has been categorized under 5 categories (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006b) and they are:

a. **Monuments**: Churches, temples, fortresses, government buildings, walls, engraving stones etc.

b. **Buildings of Architectural Interest**: Buildings of architectural interest (BAI) are buildings whose architectural quality is representative of an important period of the evolution of the territory.

c. **Classified Building Complexes**: Protected areas of a cluster of classified buildings along alleys, streets, squares, and districts of architectural and cultural importance.

d. **Classified sites**: Gardens, coastlines, avenues, cemeteries etc.

e. **Protected areas**: Landscape areas, hills and green areas.

Besides, according to the Laws no. 56/84/M and no. 83/92/ M, regarding the “Defense of the Architectural, Environmental and Cultural Heritage of Macao”, any plans that may alter the characteristics of heritage sites or buildings must be submitted to the CI for approval. And any constructions, reconstructions or alterations inside the buffer zones are also regulated. The existing laws are reinforced by the Article 125, Chapter VI of the Basic Law of the Macao S.A.R. government (Macao Government, 2007) which stipulates that:
The Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region shall protect by law the scenic spots, historical sites and other historical relics as well as the lawful rights and interests of the owners of antiques.

Despite the intensification and institutionalization of conservation efforts, these efforts seem to be giving more tolerance toward heritage demolition instead of protecting them. Although the “Building of Architectural Interest” (BAI) category (modified in the protection law (no.83/92/M)) was created in 1992 to update the list of protected heritage, owing to private developers’ pressure, some buildings that were previously classified as monuments in the old list were allowed to be demolished under the new BAI category. The penalty was only about $1,250USD. In article number 4 of that decree law it says:

It is not permitted the demolition of classified Buildings of Architectonic Interest. If, in any circumstances, the destruction of a classified building of architectonic interest occurs, the respective owner may not develop in the land any other construction which exceeds the volume of the destroyed buildings (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006a: 2).

Here many heritage buildings were completely or partially destroyed e.g. Loc Koc teahouse along San Ma Lou Avenue (Fig. 5), The Pawnbroker’s Tower in n. 3 Virtudes Alley, houses at the Sao Miguel street no. 21-29 (Fig. 6), and houses in Horta e Costa Avenue etc. (Fig. 7).

Lack of conservation and planning guidelines

The traditional urban area of Macao is not very big but very dense; the buildings of mixed Chinese and Portuguese cultures dispersed everywhere endowing Macao with a unique art and form of architecture. All these call for careful treatments and sophisticated skills and guidelines guiding the new activities of urban construction. In Macao, one of its major problems is the absence of design guidelines in historical areas leading to plans are often developed and redeveloped according to private or government interest on a case-by-case manner. For example, in the middle of 1990’s remodeling project of the 1870 Military Club (Fig. 8), two more floors were added without destroying the quality or classic ambience of the building. In the BNU Bank project (Fig. 9), however, with only the facade conserved, the ambience and architecture of the building was totally destroyed. The Ho Tung Library (Fig. 10) adopted a new project approach. A brand new building was constructed next to it creating a site of new mixed with the old. The reasons why these examples have been dealt with so differently are not known.
Due to the absent of a city master plan, a transparent decision-making process and room for public consultation; power is centralized to the hands of few senior government officials which make corruption easier and planning to be biased towards particular interests as was the case of the former Secretary for Transport and Public Works, Mr. Ao Man Long. He was arrested in December 2006, for his alleged involvement in a massive public works corruption scandal. The limited protection guidelines can be canceled easily with no justifiable reasons and proper consultations. A most recent controversy is the Guia Hill debate. The debate started when the media announced the construction of a complex of offices, residential developments and hotel towers in a 300-meter long slot at the foot of the Guia Hill site, including a 99.91 meter high tower. Local residents believed that these developments would completely block the views of the 90 meters high Light-house - a lighthouse that contains a 17th century chapel and is the first modern lighthouse built in China during 1865 (Tso, 2006) (Fig. 11 - 12). In order to protect this heritage, development high in this site was limited to 20.5 meters by the previous Portuguese administration (Hoje Macao Daily, 14 June, 2007, p.2). Now, the guidelines are being revoked without any announcement and proper consultation.

What’s more is that the only heritage design guidelines for Macao as a whole – the Plan of Urban Intervention (PIU) is no longer applicable. The PIU was the design guidelines that have been used by the government since 1984 (revised in 1987) to preserve the old townscapes in Macao, Taipa and Coloane. It provided guidelines on building height, the styles of roof and the use of timber and window frames etc. (Pinheiro and Costa, 1998). This PIU had been applied until 2003 when government announced the new urban layout for the old Taipa Village that removed 59% of the protection zone (from approximately 230,000 to only 95,000 square meters). Not surprising, short after was presented the project for construction of a huge tower of 30 floors in the lot just in front of the Yec Long Factory (a historical site in Taipa) and Taipa old Church. The community complained to the government for not respecting the PIU and led to the Chief Executive to move the tower to another plot in the Macao peninsula.

Although the community won this battle, they lost another one. The unannounced change of this policy is considered by some architects as a possible violation of the principles guaranteed in the joint declaration and the Macao Basic law (Chapter VI, Article 125) (Pinheiro and Costa, 1998).

Lack of inter-governmental collaboration
A lack of collaboration among government agencies, between various levels of administration between planning institutions is a significant obstacle to heritage conservation. This is recognized by the government in its recent report about the problems of the city’s urban planning (Land, Public Works and Transport Bureau, 2008).
Government departments involved in planning for heritage conservation in Macao is depicted in Fig. 13. Underneath the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture (SAC), the Cultural Affairs Bureau (CAB) (more popularly known as the Cultural Institute (CI)) is mainly responsible for drafting and implementing the Territory's policies on culture (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006c). The Macao Government Tourist Office (MGTO) is tasked to create new tourism products with other departments and has the responsibility to promote and market the products (Macau Government Tourist Office, 2006). The Institute For Tourism Studies (IFT), however, is a government-owned higher educational institution, which provides degree programs and trainings in tourism, hospitality, and heritage and event management. It also conducts research regarding tourism and serves as an academic bridge between the UNESCO and the Macao government (Institute for Tourism Studies, 2007).

While the offices under the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture are responsible for making tourism and heritage policies and creating tourism products, offices under the Secretariats of Transport and Public Works and Administration are tasked to translate the polices and products into real town plans. For instance, the Land, Public Works and Transport Office (LPWTO) is responsible for land management, urban planning, project management, infrastructures, traffic and transport planning and management. It controls and approves all projects and city plans. Also, after the handover of Macao’s administration to China in 1999, the Development Office (or GDI in Portuguese) was also created to handle reclamation and large-scale projects. The Infrastructures Development Bureau (IDB) takes care of the special projects that involve private and government initiatives. Other authorities such as the Port Authority (PA) and the Housing Bureau (HB) help managing all affairs regarding the port, including the approval of maritime engineering projects (Port Authority of Macao, 2007) and determining and implementing public housing programs (Housing Bureau, 2007) respectively. Finally, the Institute for Civic and Municipal Affairs (IACM) under the Secretariat of Administration and Justice is in charge of the maintenance, renovation or rehabilitation works of public spaces and facilities (Land, Public Works and Transport Bureau, 2006).
Although roles of each department seem to be clearly defined, poor departmental and inter-departmental coordination remains found due partly to the planning by city sector tradition and an absence of planning guidelines as discusses previously which allows different government agencies to plan and implement projects. It is also because each department’s roles are too specifically defined but lack a centralized task force to coordinate all departments’ efforts. Consequently, projects are often handled fragmentally according to each department’s interest and expertise. For instance, the Institute Cultural (IC) and the Land, Public Works and Transport Office (LPWTO) approve conservation projects and obtain feedback from the Municipal Affairs Bureau (MAB) and the Fire Department. The FD and LPWTO focus only on the fulfillment of the building code rules and safety standards. LPWTO may submit the project to MAB for comments, apart from the analysis on the building garbage storage capacity; other things are not obliged to follow. Roles are very specifically defined, but lack a task force to coordinate projects. Also, since the GDI and the LPWTO both responsible for larger-scale planning projects, it is found that some works are being overlapped. The government’s recent report (LPWTO, 2008:51) also recognizes this problem and urges the GDI to return the planning power to the LPWTO, allowing this department to better coordinate large-scale planning and heritage projects. Besides, not every the above mentioned government departments acquire the ISO quality certificate (i.e. the IACM acquires it but not the CI and IDB), attributing to the differentiated work speeds, service quality standards and performances; making inter-governmental collaboration extremely difficult.

One result of the poor inter-governmental collaboration is a lack of a holistic consideration of the relationship between individual heritage buildings and sites with the environment. Examples include some uncharacteristic residential complexes situated right next to the St. Paul Ruins which create a strong feeling of disharmony to both residents and tourists (Fig. 14) and the historical San Wai Kun temple (Fig. 15) which is encompassed by motorcycles and is located next to a food market and residential complexes where there are high levels of business transactions and residential activities.

![Fig.14. Uncharacterized residential buildings surrounding the St. Paul Ruins. Photo taken by Pinheiro.](image1)

![Fig.15. The San Wai Kun temple is encompassed by motorcycles. Photo taken by Pinheiro.](image2)

Historical buildings are often poorly maintained and some of them are eventually de-classified. Example includes the historical buildings in the St. Lazarus district. Apart from the new public lighting decoration and the streets’ new pavements, most buildings are abandoned, some in ruins and untouched presenting an unattractive image of ghost houses (Fig. 16). Similar ghost appearances are at the houses in Lilau Square (Fig. 17) and Don Carlos Dockyards (Fig. 18), just beside the Ama Temple. A similar situation happens in the northern part of the San Ma Lou Avenue. Macao can improve by referring to Hong Kong’s and Singapore’s model in which one single entity known as the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) is dedicated to overseeing all aspects concerning the preservation of cultural heritage.
Lack of community participation

Conservation in Macao is basically a very centralized activity. Unlike the neighboring cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong where a statutory plan exhibition period is given for public involvement, Macao does not have any regulation, law or ordinance stipulating how the general public can participate in urban planning and heritage conservation. Public consultation is limited to a few professional bodies and key business organizations. The laymen have to use some informal channels such as the morning radio phone-in program and local community associations to express their opinions. Consultation with the public is rare in relation to rehabilitation projects. The Cathedral Square project is one of the few that have done that. Other stakeholders come from the private sector such as the Macao’s Diocese, Chinese Temples Association and the Holy House of Mercy. They are all supposed to be partners in the collegial body– the Heritage Management Council (HEMC) (State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China, 2001). This Council was created and proposed by the China State Authorities to UNESCO in 2001 for listing Macao as WH. The role of this Council was to join together all necessary efforts from different stakeholders in developing, coordinating and monitoring all necessary preservation interventions relating to monuments and buffer zones included in the City’s WH areas. However, three years had passed and this Council has never met, as far as the public knows. The closed-door planning activities means that the government assesses the cultural significance and impacts based on their own understanding and criteria and the general public is excluded in the process of forming their own cultural identity. Eventually people are losing their interests in participating, protecting and developing the City heritage tourism because they do not take pride in their own culture and heritage and cannot see how they will benefit from the activity (Harrison, 2002).

This problem is also clearly reflected in the Guia Hill debate. Local community groups (i.e. the Guia Lighthouse Protection Concern Group (GLPCG)) objected to the developments for they would totally block the views of the historical Guia lighthouse. The lack of room for genuine dialogue finally led the conflict to be brought up to the international attentions. In mid-August 2007, two community groups jointly wrote a letter to UNESCO, resulting in a warming letter issued to the Cultural Bureau of the Chinese government in September 2007 (Guia Lighthouse Protection Concern Group, 2007), and reaching the Macao government in November 2007. Obviously, this problem could be avoided if more consultations had been conducted.

CONCLUSION

Managing Macao’s heritage assets is difficult and challenging because of the heavy development pressure, especially from the tourism and gaming sectors. Despite this, proper planning and management is essential to keep this World Heritage status, to bring more tourists and to preserve the very rich and distinct cultures, urban and architectural legacies of Macao. The results of this study indicate that Macao at this stage needs improvement. Problems such as the absent of a clear city vision and conservation guidelines, poor inter-governmental collaboration, lack of public participation, and the backwarding heritage protection laws are identified. Although after the Guia Hill debate, positive steps in protecting Macao’s cultural heritages have been taken by the government which include a new heritage law will be drafted and open for public
consultation; also new guidelines are now under planning; the case-by-case conservation approach still remain. The city needs a more holistic and integrated strategy to protect its heritages for the future generations.

What the city needed first is a clearer vision statement regarding the future development goals and should place a higher emphasis on culture and heritage preservation. Senior government officials should discuss openly the issue with the community for achieving a consensus of what they want the city to be looked like in the next 30 years. Different government departments and academics should also work closely together to strive for holistic solutions. It should begin with conducting a thorough survey on the existing heritage sites and buildings including aspects like their physical condition, economic viability, maintenance and rehabilitation needs and the possible usage. It is followed by recording survey data in a data base such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) that can be shared amongst governmental departments and academics. Macao also need to have some general heritage and planning guidelines on maximum height, buffer zone, number of stories, the use of color, paint and materials etc. in order to respect the unique characteristics of each site. Complementary to the general rules, specific conservation plans should be formulated for different locations that have different urban fabrics and for individual buildings and specific sites if necessary.

Equally important is to implement a more transparent and open heritage planning and conservation process. This is essential for preventing some senior government officials to use their power to give land to others privately or cancelling laws according to their own interests. A town planning ordinance therefore should be drafted to stipulate who have the power to view and consider development proposals and how and when the general public is allowed to involve in the planning process. Finally, by setting up a statutory agency like the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), it helps to advise the highest authority on cultural heritage issues, to coordinate different government departments and to oversee the overall direction in developing and protecting Macao’s cultural heritage, avoiding the fragmented approach that is currently adopted.

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