

Conservation of Cultural Heritage and Local Community: International Charters and Global Trends

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The theme ‘Conservation of Cultural Heritage and Local Community’ has been discussed so far at a wide variety of opportunities. Whether at home or abroad, it is regarded as a self-evident and essential part of the discussion on how to conserve cultural heritage. However, regarding its implementation, there are still many points to be considered.

This presentation reviews international charters based on the theme and then concludes ideas by referring to trends found regarding the Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. To conserve cultural heritage, it is requisite to consider how to take necessary administrative measures and what types of laws to be established to support such measures (i.e. how to handle an institutional aspect), as well as how to observe such laws and how to revise them, if necessary. When doing so, it is imperative to judge what is the value to be preserved regarding relevant cultural heritage. The consideration of such value always entails issues on relationships between cultural heritage and the related communities and on how to strike the best balance between the cultural heritage and a wide variety of requests that need to be met.

The theme contains the term ‘community’, but what is the community? When judging the value of cultural heritage, it is also necessary to consider this question. Generally, a community means ‘local residents’, but various other stakeholders are also sometimes regarded as ‘communities’ and incorporated in a decision-making process. Meanwhile, the phrase ‘international community’ is often found in international charters, where the phrase is used not to refer to individuals but rather to represent a broader concept, like an international society, in many cases. These examples show that the term ‘community’ represents a wide variety of frameworks and that its definition is broad. In this regard, I would like to review international charters once again and present an overview of the positioning of ‘community’.

1. ‘Community’ Found in Charters World Heritage Convention (1972)

In this convention, the phrase ‘international community’ is used a lot to refer not to each country but to an international society in a broader sense. This suggests that the term ‘community’ used in the main body of the original convention does not clearly indicate local residents. However, a wide variety of perspectives are added almost every year to the convention’s related documents, such as operational guidelines. For example, one of the viewpoints to be incorporated at the time of the preparation of a World Heritage nomination is whether consideration is given for community involvement, which evidently shows the necessity of community involvement.

Nara Document (1994: Japan)

In this document, heritage authenticity is an important theme. The document clearly stipulates that the examination of authenticity requires an appropriate consideration of each culture and each regional context. The document states that ‘Responsibility for cultural heritage and the management of it belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it, and subsequently to that which cares for it’. The document presents a clear idea of the communities that serve as the basis at the time of the consideration of the value of culture or cultural heritage. However, there is no reference to specific involvement by a ‘local community’, suggesting that the topic was not at the centre of the discussion when the document was prepared.

Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention (2003)

This is not a convention regarding tangible heritage, but it is noteworthy that the convention contains the direct expression ‘participation of communities, groups and individuals’, indicating the importance of commitment by communities. Furthermore, the convention’s attached, Criteria for Inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity states the importance of ‘obtaining the consent of the community(ies) concerned’.

Hoi An Declaration (2003: Vietnam)

Adopted in Hoi An, Vietnam, this is the declaration of principles and recommendations on conservation of historic districts of Asia. Prof. Kunikazu Ueno of Nara Women’s University and some other Japanese researchers were engaged in the preparation of the document, leading to the incorporation of viewpoints gained from the experience of preserving landscape in Japan, namely, participation by residents and cooperation with local communities. Actually, typical Japanese schemes for conserving cultural properties were originally designed as those only for respective cultural properties as single units, such as temples and shrines. This has been followed by the introduction of the approach of preserving the entire landscape, along with the recognition that participation by local residents is an essential part of the conservation of cultural properties. This experience is now used as feedback for preserving respective structures as single units. I feel that this is perhaps basically the same in an international society.

Burra Charter (Revised in 2013: Australia)

This charter presents the importance of people’s participation in conserving and managing heritage. Moreover, the charter poses questions on differences in value seen from various perspectives and on how to strike the best balance amongst them. A good example is the recent preservation measure for Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, a world mixed heritage site in Australia. The same heritage has two types of value—value as a holy site seen from native inhabitants and value as a natural heritage site seen from non-native inhabitants. After a wide variety of discussions, it has been prohibited for sightseers to climb the rock in respect for its value as a holy site. As illustrated by this example, it is necessary to consider cultural heritage in terms of its location and diverse aspects of its value and to discuss how to strike the best balance. In a sense, it can be said that this charter was adopted in Australia partly because the country was forced to discuss such necessity, making it a leading country in the field. It can be considered that the incorporation of the concept ‘people’s participation’ in this charter shows a change in the trend of the discussion on cultural heritage over time.

Nara +20 (2014: Japan)

This document presents an overall change made over the 20 years from 1994. In the original Nara Document, the focus was placed on how to regard authenticity of cultural heritage. However, Nara +20, released 20 years later, does not mention that point at all but refers to criteria for judging value of cultural heritage and to the importance of community participation. Specifically, the document states that experts have the responsibility to involve multiple stakeholders related to the process of preserving heritage and also refers to such experts’ roles.

The Nara Document of 1994 calls for respect for cultural diversity. Over the past 20 years, however, it has been revealed that respect for diversity sometimes leads to an unsolvable conflict between competing aspects of value. To address this, it is necessary to engage in discussion for mediating such a conflict in a reliable manner through a highly transparent process. The Nara +20 requires that even if communities cannot share the understanding of the importance of the relevant heritage, such conflicting communities should be engaged in the conservation of the heritage based on their consent. Behind the incorporation of this viewpoint into the document is the regrettable fact that in the last 20 years, some heritage precious to certain culture and communities were intentionally destroyed by their conflicting groups.

As shown by the changes above found in the trends of international charters, the focus was originally placed on cultural heritage itself. However, the viewpoint of how communities should be committed was gradually being incorporated into charters. Such communities sometimes served as custodians, and at other times, as the foundation underpinning the significance of heritage. In the next phase, conflicts between various communities were placed on the list of issues to be considered. This review of the history of international charters shows that 1) experts of cultural heritage originally made decisions on the value and conservation plans of cultural heritage based on their expertise, but the conservation management did not work well, because the experts were not involved in the heritage on a daily basis; 2) the perspective of communities as custodians was generated; and 3) communities eventually came to be defined not only as custodians but also as the source of the value of the cultural heritage or even the value itself. In other words, when it comes to cultural heritage as a physical material, communities are the source of its value and should be given the right to make the necessary decisions. However, this idea is followed by the next question: What is the role of experts? The result of an in-depth discussion on this theme is presented in the Faro Convention.

Faro Convention (2005: Europe)

In this convention, the value of cultural heritage is explored basically in the framework of Europe. The convention clearly states that heritage belongs to the communities that own the heritage and that the communities are obliged to conserve the heritage. It also states that if there is any conflict between such communities, it is important to have a conversation to resolve such conflict. Since this is an idealistic convention, however, the number of signatory countries is rather small, making the convention fail to work as the basis upon which countries implement the necessary measures. The outcome of the discussion on the convention will be noteworthy even for outside Europe.

2. Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties and Future Challenges

When it comes to the definition of the term ‘community’ in the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, basically, the Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties clearly sets the positions of administrative agencies (national and local governments) and the owners of cultural properties and presents the main framework in which such owners should serve as the main player for the conservation of their cultural properties. Lately, however, there are many more issues to be addressed than before, such as those affecting local residents and various other people related to heritage (e.g. tourists and NPO members). In addition, some cultural properties are owned by two or more individuals or organisations. With this background, it is now necessary to examine how to operate the law in the future and how to reflect the law into local management of cultural properties. Such examination will eventually lead to the discussion on Community-Centred Approaches to the Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Communities, which have very diverse aspects, should serve as the main player of the conservation of cultural heritage, but the complicated problem of how to promote discussion and conservation with such communities still remains to be solved. In addition, solutions for the problem vary according to communities, and there are a wide variety of solutions, leading to the present lack of a clear solution in an international society. Alternatively, no clear solution might exist from the beginning.