

Friends of Old Villages & Bund Heimat und Umwelt (BHU)

Report on 2016 EU-China NGO Twinning Program

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Especially in the context of urbanization and the general trend of people leaving the rural areas and moving to the modernized cities in China as well as in Germany, both our organizations' commitment is the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. To contribute to the existence of sustainable communities, we aim at making people realize the precious cultural value of their living space including architecture and landscape as important elements of local culture, tradition and history. Being aware of these values is important to connect to one's surroundings, to enjoy a living there and to be eager to invest in a continuous improvement of local living conditions. So, both our organizations provide information to the public on the historical, cultural and traditional value of certain places. We also focus on supporting others who intend to preserve their local tangible and intangible heritage.

Florence Nick, Bund Heimat und Umwelt (BHU), Bonn, Germany

From July 17 to August 26 2016, I visited the Friends of Old Villages in Shenzhen in Guangdong Province of China.

Introduction (Objectives, expectations)

For our exchange period in Shenzhen, we initially wanted our common project to be the planning of a guided tour through one of the villages in Shenzhen as part of the whole project of organizing a guided tour in every of the villages of Shenzhen. But since the finding of a suitable guide took the Friends of Old Villages (in the following mentioned as the Friends) longer than expected, the whole project delayed, so we started very late to work together on the guided tour in Hubei village. We did therefore not have enough time to design a detailed outline for a guided tour. Yet, we had many activities and opportunities to compare both our organizations' ways of operating and to exchange our ideas about how to build a sustainable community and about concepts such as cultural landscape. Common and different aspects and commitments crystallized out more and more clearly with every discussion and activity. The BHU works more as a network on a level of synthesizing multiple experiences; the Friends work more on site, realizing preservation projects and supporting entrepreneurs to do so, but are also expanding their experts' network.

In the end, we decided to commonly write an essay comparing our organizations' work and

providing information about the chances we consider essential for the preservation of cultural and traditional heritage today as a conclusion of our exchange for the platform chinadialogue.net.

Challenges (Cultural contrasts)

Generally speaking, a new environment firstly needs to be gotten to know before being able to give any input to it and to connect it with own background knowledge. So in this exchange where the traditions, culture, landscapes and architecture were so new to me, Jiaqi and the Friends as the “insider” were of course much more likely to give a lot of input than me – at least up to the point at which the I had reached a sufficient level of knowledge about the local situation. So, at first, I felt that my input in the exchange was not enough. I firstly had to get to know the Chinese villages and the Friends’ work in a more detailed way. But later on, when we talked more about our organizations’ values and concepts, I found our *exchange* in its very meaning more efficient. And in the end, similarities and differences between our organizations sifted out pretty well within the whole exchange period and we found many occasions to exchange our ideas and to reflect on them.

Another challenge was sometimes the language. In the office, during my stay, including Jiaqi there were three employees speaking more or less a fluent English. I spent a lot of time with them and I was very grateful for their efforts to explain me everything, to give me all the information that was needed and much more and to help communicate with those speaking only little or no English. It would have been nice to understand more and directly in group meetings, understand booklets and webpages as well as to chat directly to other staff. Anyhow, I appreciated all the time and efforts they invested for me a lot.

Activities

In the first week, Jiaqi gave me a comprehensive introduction to the Friends’ work including projects, funding and main functions, as well as to the development of the city Shenzhen. I got to know the names of several villages of Shenzhen and their history. Also in the first week, I gave a short introduction to the work and the core values of the BHU. But as a matter of fact and of course, the process of getting to know each other’s way of operating took place throughout my entire stay, with each conversation and every trip or activity.

Visiting villages

To visit the villages was of course indispensable to get deeper insights in the work of the Friends of Old *Villages*, and to gain more background knowledge about spatial developments in China. We visited villages where preservation work has been completed successfully, such

as Da Peng (Shenzhen) and Huangpu (Guangzhou). Both of them are destinations for tourists, have museums and buildings that have been refurbished and restored. For Da Peng, the Friends had been planning to organize a marathon in the village and they investigated the place to find a suitable route. To Huangpu village in Guangzhou, Jiaqi and I were invited by Mr. Huang to hold a presentation about the BHU and to get to know Huangpu as the result of successful preservation work that was under the responsibility of Mr. Huang. Other places we visited were Hubei village in Shenzhen, and a village called “Seeing the Dragon” on the countryside in Huizhou. The latter village is classified as a provincial “cultural heritage” and there is more preservation work yet to be planned. The large contrast between rural villages and the cities was astonishing.

The Friends were working on a guided tour project including the publishing of a booklet as a guide for Shenzhen villages. To collect historical information on several villages in Shenzhen, I did some research online. But most of the information I found online was rather superficial and basic. Also, many historical relicts are at the risk of getting lost because of governmental plans to demolish the villages in favor of shopping malls or modernized buildings, or they have already been demolished. It emphasizes the urgent need to support research, refurbish and reappraise the history of the villages. In Hubei village, you can find the largest concentration of historical architecture in Shenzhen. Today, Hubei village comprises an old and a new district, the latter already modernized after old buildings and architectures have been torn down. So, the ornaments, architecture and materials that are typical for traditional Chinese villages and that you can find in the old part, do no longer exist in that new part of the village. Both parts of the village are very vivid and seem a little chaotic. We visited Hubei twice exploring the old part of the village and trying to figure out how to design a guided tour there. Hubei’s origins date back to the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century. So, arguments relating to identity and home to preserve Hubei are not considered very meaningful because members of the family that initially founded the village do not live there anymore.

In the last week, we were invited by Mr. Huang Jinrong, who used to be responsible for the restoration of the Cantonese village Huangpu in Guangzhou, to have a talk about problems of preservation work in Germany and China. I will report about the talk later in the chapter “Outcome and Impact”. Before our talk, we visited the village where most of the houses and alleys have barely changed in the past 200 years. It was very interesting to see the results of successful preservation work. The village was inviting and clean, and the buildings were in good shape – unlike Hubei with its sewerage system and waste management in a deficient situation, causing an unpleasant smell in some corners. In Huangpu, there were also shops selling local products and handicrafts and a family shrine that today serves as a museum.

The Real Expo

The Friends were part of the Real Expo in Shenzhen, an exposition for real estate in China taking place in the last week of my stay. The Friends were the organizer of that part of the exposition where Chinese villages present their successful preservation projects. They were having stands and brochures with landscape photos, project reports, women and men in

traditional clothes and jewelry, stands where Chinese tea was being made and where local products were being presented. Some of these local products have been produced by young entrepreneurs which the Friends have helped to start up by a crowdfunding. The stands were decorated featuring the characteristics of the place e.g. with reconstructed village gates or walls, with traditional furniture or equipment. Besides the stands, decision makers, academics and project organizers had presentations and there were even performances between the talks. For instance, there was a song being performed by a woman and a man about the cultural and traditional heritage of a certain village, accompanied by a video showing the beauty and peace in this place. The song was a rather romantic one expressing there is an emotional relationship between the people and their village. As a result, the visitors are not only being academically and factually informed about the cultural heritage at the risk of being lost, but also being emotionally addressed. Plus, I found it refreshing to listen to music between all the informative and argumentative talks – inspiring!

Again, the contrast between rural villages and cities was clearly visible: There was a large contrast between the the stands representing Chinese villages and the real estate stands financed by the government that promotes primarily urban investments. The small village stands were very inviting and ornate, whereas the other stands promoting urban development were even larger and equipped with more high technology. Apparently, Chinese society nowadays focuses more on cultural and traditional heritage than it was the case 10 to 20 years ago. This is what Mr. Huang concluded in our discussion round and also, it is apparent in the real estate exposition where urban development is being promoted, but at the same time village and cultural heritage preservation work is represented. However, the area and obviously the extent of investments for village projects is still smaller than the focus on urban development.

Outcome and Impact

For Hubei village, we reflected together on the design of a guided tour in Hubei. As the essence of a guided tour, we had in mind to provide information and so to make visitors and locals notice the precious value behind the environment and the different architectures. We both agreed that it is important to make the audience participate and to involve them in the story telling, for example by including questions or games. What is furthermore important is to be free in the program of the guided tour and to adapt it to the different ages and interests of the participants. In addition, we had in mind to deliver the perception local inhabitants have of their surroundings and the values they relate to. It helps outsiders to understand people's connection to their surroundings and therefore understand the core reasons to preserve the place. This approach makes outsiders become more of an insider and also changes their view and impression of the place. Making a guided tour more community-driven would be similar to a community-based tourism (CBT), on which I did some research as well. Such an initiative involving the locals in the planning of the guided tour also has the effect that the people in the community think about themselves, their

surroundings, their wishes for the place they live in and their capacities. Unfortunately, we did not have enough time for a detailed research and to gather together a group of locals to cooperate with and to have conversations with. So, it is definitely an option we will incorporate in our proposal.

We also held a presentation about rural areas in Germany and the work of the BHU open to the public. The location was a meeting room in a place called “Zhongyi Base for Old Village Start-Ups”. My Chinese colleagues published an announcement on their WeChat page, where it was also possible to register for the event. There were about six very interested people from different fields. This presentation effectively brought our NGO exchange further, also the preparation of it. It was a good opportunity for me to give some input in our exchange and for Jiaqi and me to get to know each other’s core values, concepts and ways of operating. The preparatory conversations really helped us to figure out in which ways we work differently and also how we can learn from each other. The BHU mostly fulfills the function of networking and providing information during conferences about and for stakeholders who organize projects on the preservation of cultural heritage. The Friends are in closer cooperation with the project organizers and are also project organizers on site themselves. What was interesting for the Friends and our audience was the concept of cultural landscapes the BHU follows and aims to promote in Germany and Europe. Very inspiring were to me the projects the Friends organize and the tools they use to help preserve cultural heritage, for example the crowdfunding.

We were furthermore invited by Mr. Huang Jinrong who used to be responsible for the restoration of the Cantonese village Huangpu in Guangzhou. With an audience of about ten other persons, including two persons from the Twinning program (Antoaneta Pophlebarova from Bulgaria and Yao Zhilu from Guangzhou), we talked about different problems and focuses in preservation work. In the presentation about rural areas in Germany and the way the BHU operates, we also talked about the approach of cultural landscapes which considers landscapes as a product of permanent feedback between human activities and natural processes. Mr. Huang found that very inspiring. He said, today Chinese society and government are more conscious about old traditions and culture. Yet, preservation work faces a number of problems in China, like the abandoning of villages and the general aim to modernize the infrastructure. He furthermore pointed out to the difficulty of finding the right balance between development and prosperity, and preservation. When revitalizing the place, it is important to keep it dynamic and to stimulate the economy there, and at the same time to preserve the local cultural heritage.

Together, Jiaqi and I intensely reflected on both our organizations’ challenges and major chances for cultural heritage protection. Our common goal to make the villages or rural space attractive to locals and outsiders can be achieved in making visible what is there and what is precious, valuable and meaningful for local history and culture. This means, we first need to provide information to the public. Information is at risk to be gotten lost when there is such a strong concentration on modernization. For the provision of information, aside from projects like for example guided tours, we both see a great chance in the use of digital

applications. They are especially helpful in providing and sharing information in a fast way and to a broad community, also including younger generations. Furthermore, they help to build and enlarge a network of any kind, such as a community of support, a research community sharing information or a community that donates. The latter can also be built by a crowdfunding initiative on an online platform. And when a project is being started with a crowdfunding initiative, those who donate already build a community as a first basis of supporters. This can be very helpful for the promotion of the project and its outcome in the future. The digital way of operating can also facilitate participation and it can be a way to encourage others to participate. Examples are the opening of topic-based groups for sharing experiences and ideas and distributing information or a digital interactive map where everyone can add information, such as the OpenStreetMap (OSM). Many old villages in China are for example not digitalized and detailed maps including street names often do not exist, which is another challenge for preservation work. Volunteers would be needed to help work on mapping villages.

Future Plans and Sustainability of the Partnership

We are planning to continue our common work on the challenges for heritage preservation in terms of digitalization and volunteering collaboration. Our organizations will keep exchanging ideas and work together on projects that help preservation in every direction. We will continue to share history and culture from both countries and we want to make them accessible for people from both countries. There are several possibilities to, such as to organize study trips, to help translate certain information or to spread information about the other organization and the problems in the other country. We will also keep exchanging ideas on chances for heritage preservation and future projects, such as the guided tour we together had started to outline.



Our talk with Mr. Huang in Huangpu village in Guangzhou



When we had our presentation about BHU and heritage preservation in Germany



The gate of the family shrine in Hubei village in Shenzhen

Jiaqi Liu, Friends of Old Villages, Shenzhen, China

Oct. 9th to Oct. 13th: Berlin, Germany;
Oct. 13th to Oct. 29th: Bonn, Germany;
Oct. 29th to Oct. 30th: Ghent, Belgium;
Oct. 30th to Nov. 10th: Berlin, Germany;
Nov. 10th to Nov. 13th: Leipzig, Germany;
Nov. 13th to Nov. 22nd: Bonn, Germany.

Introduction (Objectives, expectations)

Before the beginning of this exchange program, everyone from the Friends of Old villages, especially me, are very eager to learn about experience and statues quo of preservation work in rural area in Europe and four exchange topics have been listed in the application as manifestation of our major concerns or expectations. I am listing these four topics in short for your reference:

- 1 – BHU's way of networking;
- 2 – community building in European rural area;
- 3 – ideas and methods of rural landscape preservation;
- 4 – ideas and methods of social innovation.

As a matter of fact, Florence Nick has already provided an orientation of these four topics during her exchange period in China, but I was able to possess first-hand knowledge of some information only after I arrived in Europe, or rather Germany. The Central European Landscape Forum organized by BHU and Civilscape at the beginning of October, as well as many other activities took place in the rest of my stay in Bonn with BHU, helped me peep in the first and third topics. Field trips to vineyards in Ahrweiler and its nearby villages, Spreewald, DENKMAL in Leipzig, and Merseburg also allowed me to observe and learn more about the first three topics. While my trip to Ghent and Leipzig, as well as the workshop in Berlin have definitely enriched my knowledge on the last two topics.

Of course, it turns out that the exchange program has provided much more for me than expected, which will be explained in later sections of this report.

Challenges (Cultural contrasts)

(What was the most challenging/suprising when you came to work in Europe? Which hurdles could be overcome/ stayed throughout your exchange period?)

It may not be the best time to travel to Germany with strong wind, cold rain, and long nights, yet my host, Bund Heimat und Umwelt, is very helpful and fantastic,

shedding light on my attempt to comprehend the four topics mentioned in previous section, as well as building up connections with NGOs and individual that work on similar or related fields.

Nevertheless, I did encounter a few challenges. And I hope, by pointing out these challenges, my observation or experience may help future twinnings and twinning organizations.

One of these challenges, as many twinnings must have mentioned, is the language barrier. Although BHU staff and I can communicate through English and no one is too shy to speak in English, it is impossible to shift the whole conversation into English just because of one visitor in office, especially during meetings. Moreover, most material created before is in German. Hence, it is also hard for a foreigner to understand everything about the institution without asking the host to spend a long time introducing how the hosting organization works and so on.

Thereafter, it is actually a lot of work for the hosting organization to take care of a visitor or a twinning, which could be counted as the second challenge. I personally spent a lot of time with Florence when she was in China and BHU staff, like Inge Gotzmann and Dirk Gotzmann, have also sacrificed a lot of time to explain a lot of ideas and rules to me, as well as introducing German culture and history to me.

However, this extra workload is not financed by the exchange program. I wonder if it could be possible for the hosting organization to have certain amount of subsidies or funding to take care of the twinnings. Meanwhile, I believe this part of funding can also make it possible for hosting organization or twinning to take the visiting twinning to investigate different sites or organize activities for the twinning program.

Third, besides language barrier and extra workload, I think 40 euro is a very limited amount for daily allowance for a short stay in Europe. In my case, accommodation usually takes 30 euros perday, which means there are only 10 euros left for getting a sim-card and talking package, food and so on. And 10 euros are really not that much when it comes to food in cities in Western Europe. Hence, I wish the amount for daily allowance may be reevaluated and it may be better to raise it up a little bit for the stay in Europe.

Forth, the exchange period that allows peers to meet each other and the other's organization is actually limited, while more time is needed for both parties to get to know each other and establish a foundation for future collaboration. Before Florence arrived in China, nonetheless, I did not recognize how limited the time is. Although Asienhaus had encouraged us to put up a work plan before the exchange and future programs are encouraged, I think the exchange period is not used in the most efficient way. Maybe Asienhaus can organize some online ice-breaking activities before the exchange period starts and twinnings can start building up personal connections, as well as preparing for the exchange period together.

With all these challenges, I would say the whole exchange program is still very enjoyable and fruitful for me, as an individual as well as a full-time staff at the Friends of Old Villages.

Activities

(Which activities did the you participate in?)

My exchange period starts in Oct. 9th in Berlin and ends on Nov. 22nd in Bonn officially. But I arrived actually 6 days before, taking a trip in Spain as my personal vacation, as well as a buffer zone for jet lag, cultural shock and so on. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize what I learned in Europe since Oct. 3rd chronologically.

I arrived in Barcelona, which is an exciting city for architecture lovers. It is in Barcelona that I first noticed there is a similarity between donation for renovation of churches and that for family shrines in China. It is also very inspiring to think about how one architect, Gaudi, was able to attract so many tourists with his works and works by old masters could also be used for economic benefits of an area.

Toledo near Madrid is my second destination. My visit to this medieval town is lit up by a short chat with an Egyptian refugee there, whose present connects contemporary muslim migrant issues with the coexistence of three cultures in this town.

My first stop when the exchange period officially started is Berlin in Germany. BHU organized Central European Landscape Forum together with Civilscape there and it was my pleasure to be invited.

The forum centered around the *European Landscape Convention*, which has not been signed by Germany yet. The forum discussed how landscape should be seen as part of human culture and be taken care from the perspective of cultural preservation. Thoughts as well as practices shared on the forum are all very inspiring for me in person as well as the Friends of Old Villages as an NGO active in cultural preservation work.

After the forum, I went to Bonn and stayed with BHU office for a few weeks. I learnt more about how BHU and German NGO operates. Meanwhile, I also do research online to learn more about the status quo of cultural and creative industries in Europe, as well as other NGOs in the field of rural development.

My professor from University of Macau introduced me to two Ph.D. students in Chinese dialects and literature, which brought me to Ghent, Belgium. From them, I learnt about how dialects and culture mingled in rural area near the Yangtze Delta. Also, they drew my attention to environment which shapes cultural identity of a village, especially in remote area. It will be great if these scholars would contribute to some research and publication project of the Friends in the future.

The next stop was Berlin, where I attended the twinning workshop as well as visiting 3 NGOs, and old farmhouses renovated by Interessengruppe Bauernhaus (IGB) in Spreewald. The workshop helped me improve my presentation skills and it also allowed me drawing insights to other twinnings' work. The 3 NGOs I visited are IGB, European Council of Old Village and Small Town (ECOVAST), and World Heritage Watch and they are all very great NGOs that inspire me in my work and make it

wonderful if future collaborations could be established.

It was also very lucky for me to went to DENKMAL, a trade fair for conservation, restoration and old building renovation in Leipzig. I saw how old houses are taken care by professional stonemasons, carpenters, as well as IT people that analyze and record old houses digitally, and NGOs. I met some other NGOs like EUROPA NOSTRA and its member associations. I also talked with DENKMAL organizers which made it possible for the Friends to establish collaboration with Architectural Heritage Preservation International, an exposition in Shanghai.

After Leipzig, I went back to Bonn with BHU. On our way back, we stopped by Merseburg, where BHU taken multiple panoramic pictures for its do. It is also a chance for me to peep into the mobil application BHU is currently working on.

The last 6 or 7 weeks when I stayed in Europe, I introduced the Friends of Old Villages to European organizations, learnt about European organizations and their work, and investigated multiple cultural preservation projects or sites.

Outcome and Impact

(What were the concrete results and accomplishments of the exchange? What “products” came out of your twinning? E.g. reports, events, studies, work models, conferences,...)

One of the most important outcome of the exchange may be personal connections with various NGOs or individuals working on development or cultural preservation in rural area.

Reports on my trip are also going to be released on WeChat platform recently and, later, internet homepage of the Friends, so that I can share what I have learnt with volunteers of the Friends.

Some of the research and observation I gained in Europe could be used in reports and proposals the Friends is going to conduct as well.

Future Plans and Sustainability of the Partnership

(Please describe the joint follow-up project if one has been planned and reflect on the sustainability of the collaboration. Between the two organizations, other organizations you have met through the twinning as well as twinnings themselves.)

Invitations to conferences have also been received, but a conference for the Friends to participate needs to be found. Although future projects have not been confirmed, it is still helpful to found and keep in touch with European partners. It is very likely that contacts will be carried out via emails.

I am also planning to introduce the exchange program organized by Asienhaus to volunteers and associate organization of the Friends. BHU has also shown an interest in developing future exchange programs. I would like to look for a chance for a study tour in European countrysides for some inspiring projects or at some organizations I visited as well.

Please add your 3 favourite pictures/media coverage of your work



- Inge Gotzmann is introducing BHU, mentioning the Friends at the Central European Landscape Forum in Berlin



- I am Visiting a “grandma’s farmhouse” in Spreewald with IGB



- A booth in DENKMAL, Leipzig

For more information, please refer to the manual’s Guidelines for documentation and evaluation

In case of further questions please contact Stiftung Asienhaus-China Program and request access to in-depth twinning reports.