

Cultural Relics Bureau for the Wudang Shan Scenic Area

Interview with Department Head Zhao representing the Cultural Relics Bureau of the Wudang Shan Scenic Area. As the interview was conducted inside his office during office hours, it was fraught with interruptions from people passing in and out, phone calls, his signing papers, etc.

Interviewer: What attributes of Wudang Shan made it a worthy candidate for inscription as a World Cultural Heritage Site?

Zhao: Wudang Shan successfully fulfills several of the UNESCO guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites. Firstly, the sheer scale of the Wudang complex as defined by the total area and the total number of buildings and relics of outstanding significance, determined it worthy of inscription.

The second guideline that Wudang Shan fulfills is its historical value. It represents a glorious time period in Chinese history, and not only that but it actually spans several time periods. It can be seen as representative of these various time periods and is therefore of outstanding historical value.

The last guideline Wudang Shan fulfills is its urgency of protection. It had been in a state of disrepair for some time and urgently needed sound management and protection. While many sites only fulfill one, of the six UNESCO guidelines Wudang Shan amazingly fulfills three.¹

Interviewer: What steps were taken at the domestic level in the application of Wudang Shan as a World Cultural Heritage Site?

Zhao: The process is actually very complicated. Wudang Shan, having such an illustrious history and diverse natural environment, was seen by local government authorities as worthy of World Cultural Heritage Site recognition. So we began the process of research to create a suitable proposal that went to the provincial and then national level for review. At each stage there was a tremendous amount of competition and we were forced to make many revisions to our proposal before Wudang Shan became an official nominee for inscription. At that point our proposal was passed on to UNESCO for the final review. Historians, scientists and representatives of UNESCO came to Wudang Shan and did on-site research. In 1994 we were finally inscribed as a World Cultural Heritage Site.

Interviewer: How long did the entire process take?

Zhao: Well it started in 1986, so eight years.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on the local implementation of cultural relic protection as laid out in the international treaty concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage?

Zhao: A first requirement is that we must protect things as they are. For example, see this cup of tea here. Let's say that it's an ancient cultural relic. If I want to protect it [the cup] I must likewise protect its contents [leftover tea leaves]. In this sense I must protect the entire object and seek to preserve its original form.

Secondly, World Heritage Sites in all of the 178 countries comprising UNESCO represent humanity's common heritage. The preservation of these sites is essential for public welfare both today and in the future. It's important to protect these sites from damage: be it from the weather, looting or even war. And it is our duty to ensure that Wudang Shan will be preserved in its original state for future generations.

Interviewer: Have you received 'international assistance' aid from UNESCO?

Zhao: No, we've received no financial aid from UNESCO.

Interviewer: If you receive no direct financial assistance, can you explain the factors compelling you to go through the complicated process of applying for World Cultural Heritage Site status? What in your opinion is so appealing in being labeled a World Cultural Heritage Site?

Zhao: Well, it's a tremendous honor and with the name brings respectability around the world. Everyone knows UNESCO; it's international. So if a site is an official World Cultural Heritage Site it will be internationally known as priceless treasure of world culture and will bring many tourists from around the world.

Interviewer: So then there are material benefits to UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site inscription, if indirect. Would you agree?

Zhao: Yes. Bringing tourists to the region helps spur development and boosts the local economy. In a poor region like ours this can have a tremendous impact.

Interviewer: Can you tell me anything about the origin of your funding here at the Cultural Relics Bureau?

Zhao: For this question you'll have to ask the Regional Government Office.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on the reasoning for *Trustworthy People of Wudang* (Chengxin Wudang Ren)?

Zhao: Raising the level of civilization of residents is in keeping with Comrade Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening China up to the outside. This is actually a very old process in China starting in the Republican Period.

Interviewer: I've heard examples of devastation incurred during the Cultural Revolution. What was the extent of that destruction and when did reconstruction efforts commence?

Zhao: There was really no destruction to speak of. Actually no purposeful destruction has occurred in centuries. The damage is from natural circumstances like bad weather, floods and earthquakes - this sort of thing. As for reconstruction, this has been an ongoing process for the last fifteen or so years.

Interviewer: You spoke of the necessity of maintaining a site's 'original form'. Can you tell me of the methods employed to retain this 'original state'?

Zhao: We invite several experts, historians, architects and engineers skilled in the traditional methods of construction to help research and design renovation plans. The rule is simple: If the site is not totally destroyed, we'll go through the process of rebuilding it. But if it's completely dilapidated, we need the original records before we can proceed. Without these there's nothing we can do.

Interviewer: Do you expect a rise in visitor totals in the coming years, and if so how do you plan to facilitate these added tourists? Will hotels be built on the mountain?

Zhao: Yes we have experienced increases in tourists every year, but there will be no expansions - this is against the UNESCO mandate. Tampering with one aspect (either the natural environment or the cultural relics) affects the other in adverse ways. We must therefore protect both simultaneously. Expansions would adversely affect the natural environment and so they are not permitted.

Interviewer: What about renovations and additions to existing structures?

Zhao: Those wishing to make renovations to existing building must first acquire three permits: one each from the Laoying, Shiyan and Danjiang Kou government offices. This is a difficult process.

Interviewer: And additions?

Zhao: Not allowed.

Interviewer: What about the parking area and guest facilities presently being built at the base of the mountain?

Zhao: That's all right. That's where buses will stop.

Interviewer: But there will also be hotels, shops and restaurants. Does this not conflict with the above guidelines?

Zhao: Well it's not a very big area anyway.

Interviewer: So then the determination to allocate land and permit additions is based on the total area being requested?

Zhao: Well, it's all right to use a little bit of land (*yi diandian mianji*) for such purposes, but generally no additions are allowed.

Interviewer: So then depending on the demand you will permit future small additions, provided they only "use a little bit of land" for tourist infrastructure?

Zhao: No we can't expand at all. This is very serious. We must preserve the original appearance of the scenic area.

¹ The three criteria which Wudang Shan successfully fulfills are actually criteria i, ii, and vi:

Criterion i The ancient buildings in the Wudang Mountains represent the highest standards in Chinese art and architecture over a period of nearly one thousand years.

Criterion ii The Wudang buildings exercised an enormous influence on the development of religious and public art and architecture in

Criterion vi The religious complex in the Wudang Mountains was the center of Daoism, one of the major eastern religions and one which played a profound role in the development of belief and philosophy in the region.