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REF : Tito Dupret's original interview by email for Suzanne Lee, Renmin Ribao, South China News.

Regarding World Heritage protection in China

As World Heritage Conference is held in Suzhou, there are lots of discussions on over-exploitation of world heritage sites. What do you think of this issue ?

Certainly the 2nd more important issue after pollution. The problem I've found out in China is that when a WH Site is listed, local authorities understand it much more as a label of quality for tourism than as new responsibilities for the sake of humanity and the registered site. So when a new site is listed, they double the entry fees and think of building an airport next to it. This doesn't help the monuments themselves.

What can be qualified as world heritage site ?

I am not the one to be able to qualify any place in the world that deserves to be listed or not. Because it needs a lot of skills to decide if a place is of "exceptional value to humanity" in all regards (beauty, history, local and global cultural or natural interests,...).

The best thing I can tell is that these places have a soul on their own when you go there. These places give the sense of what human being is naturally on this planet : a creator.

Is it really a big boost to local economy when certain site is approved ? Can you tell me some example ?

Of course : it simply opens the site to the rest of the world. It simply means that billions more of people will know the place and be interested in going there. It's HUGE and the WH List helps people to choose what they want to see on earth before they die.

Look at Gugong in Beijing. That can bring 1.5 million people within just 3 days of vacation. It brings BIG money but BIG problems : Gugong was not built to sustain such a massive number of walkers within its walls.

Unfortunately, this money is used to help Gugong only up to 10%. Rest of the money goes to the central government. Because of that, Gugong needs financial help from other countries and organizations to save, restore and maintain it...

Another example is Jiuzhaigou : 1 valley is protected but mass tourism made the other valley that lead to the entrance of the park, a nightmare to go through and a shame. When you go to a WH Site, you don't need a casino, I think. How can visitors be educated and understand the real value and exceptional beauty of Jiuzhaigou if they are only welcome because of their wallet ?

Another problem is pollution. If you clean with your finger a small square line of 1 column in Tiantan in Beijing for example... And if you come back 1 week later, you will not find the little space you cleaned because dust already came back to cover it.

World Heritage is delicate, so it's really important to protect it well. 5 sites in China have been named as concerned sites for lack of protection or lack of enough report on protection. During your trip, have you seen World Heritage sites being improperly protected ? Examples in China are especially welcome.

Every place needs a separate answer to these questions. What I can tell is that China is changing too quick for places that are hundreds years of age. These places just couldn't adapt themselves to the new rhythm and quantity of changes that are occurring today in China. To me all WH Sites in China are in danger.

To educate local authorities and working personnel is of very big importance. Usually they don't know what is UNESCO, even if they are working on a WH Site. To find people with skills is difficult too : look at the Terracotta Army. The soldiers were very colorful when they were discovered. Now these colors have totally faded, in a very, very short in terms of History.

But sometimes, you meet miraculous people that are very aware of the beauty and importance of the place and I can see them working soOo hard in the hope to save, restore and maintain their site. I feel BIG admiration for them but that is by far too rare to make me hope in a better world anytime soon...

Regarding World Heritage application

There is a discussion in World Heritage Conference whether it's fair to limit two applications from one country. What do you think of this issue ?

I think the Committee needs a longer list to be able to choose the really most important and representative sites in a country. If you limit to 2, how can they have a better understanding of what's the cultural and natural richness of this country in regards to humanity ?

Another issue is that Asian representatives urge to limit Europe's share in World Heritage. As a European who is well-travelled, can you share with your opinion ?

Again, the WH List is NOT a guide for tourism ! But indeed Europe is very well represented with hundreds of WH sites.

I think it is better now to make western countries more aware of the VAST cultural and natural beauties in part of the world that they don't know well. It will help them to understand and respect these countries much more. That is one of my purpose with the <WHTour.org> : to show the splendor of other countries to the western world.

Some critics said World Heritage sites should be in accordance with its population, the underline message is that countries with small population shouldn't have that much World Heritage sites while big countries like China are not having enough quotas for World Heritage. Can you enlighten me in this issue ?

There is NO relation between the population of a country and the number of exceptional sites in the world. Because WH is inscribed in the timeline of History and in the entire

Geography of Earth, thinking with borders and populations is a nonsense.

There are 2.3 billion people just in India and China. Does that mean they should have 1/3 of the WH Listed in their countries ? Does that mean they should have almost more than 250 WH Sites instead of just 56 today ? But the territory of these 2 countries is much smaller than 1/3 of the planet. In China, vast areas are totally empty. In Europe, everything is packed. How can you compare ?

We are talking about EXCEPTIONAL places in the entire world that came out of History and Nature. "Exceptional" is the opposite meaning of "mass of people" or "population numbers". There is no relation.

Regarding your work

What is your latest project in shooting world heritage sites ? Can you tell me more about the work such as how you find this job (again, I have to repeat that it's really a dream job !), how you are equipped en route, how you upload photos to Internet ? I think readers in general want to know stories about your trip especially those in China.

I am back from Eastern Canada. Next country will be South Korea. I left Belgium 3 years ago and travel all the time from 1 WH Site to another. I travel simply with my laptop and prepare the work "en route" before uploading on the internet when I find a good connection on my way in hotels or cyber-cafes.

This job is a dream come true because of all the people you meet and the beautiful WH Sites you go. But on the other side, I have only little money and I work without a salary for 3 years. To build and continue the <WHTour.org> is very, very hard stuff !!! I don't have any home, any car, any children, any pets, anything nowhere. All I have is in my simple backpack. This is not a materialist job.

Over 3 years' mission to shoot world heritage sites, which is the most beautiful one to you ? Which one impresses you the most ? Which one you want the most to revisit ? Can you tell me the reasons in detail ?

Leshan Dafo impressed me very very very much. I have been there twice and hope to go back again. I just can't believe my eyes. It is like I need to check again what I saw and felt over there and the peace in his face. He looks to eternity without fear.

Do you think you get more than you pay ? What you get from the experience of shooting world heritage site ?

This adventure gives me all what a human being can expect : it is all about the feeling to be useful to others.