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Cosmological interpretation of architecture: cases from Ancient China and Mesoamerica

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6 Heritage and Interpretation in Comparative Perspective

The architecture that is often used for in-depth studies of cultural heritage, can be divided into two principal categories: (1) the buildings constructed for gods and religious purposes, including shrines, churches, and temples; (2) the buildings constructed for humans themselves, such as palaces, gardens, mausoleums, even mansions for rich persons. Those architectures, as a visually very impressive part of the remnants of human history, often contain indications that can tell us what the purposes and design ideas of the ancient constructors and users were. They may (1) reflect the concepts of the human understanding of social structures; (2) represent static, timeless references to specific historical circumstances; (3) reveal the attitudes of ancient or contemporary populations – building constructors and human users in different involvements – toward their heritage in general; and (4) reflect the universality of hermeneutical or other special aspects (such as astronomical, astrological, or cosmological features) upon distinguished architectural events.

Gadamer in his development of the hermeneutical method referred to *Goethe's* statement that everything is a symbol: "Everything that happens is a symbol, and, in fully representing itself, it points toward everything else" (Gadamer 1993: 77). In other words, humans communicate, express, and codify but also recognize and attribute meanings in the multiple aspects of daily life, particularly (and often in an intensified manner) in works of art. Such works, consequently, demand an interpretation.

In the case of the cultural heritage of ancient civilizations such as China or Mesoamerica, the original meanings often are now missing and need to be recovered. In the previous chapters, while referring to *Jones's* work on sacred architecture, we interpreted the possible meanings of both architectures in terms such as the "Sacred" and "Liminality". *Rapoport's* Nonverbal Communication method also played an important role, focusing on the "Symbolic" and "Semiotic" aspects of the building's appearance such as their colors, proportions, sizes, etc.; at the same time, the "Perception" and "Experience" approach of authors such as *Tilley* and *Ingold* also influenced the thinking about the relationship between architecture and cosmology in this thesis.

However, the meaning of architecture is not static but dynamic, a continuous development in which new interpretations, contexts, and experiences become associated with the ancient works and add to their significance. Needless to say, modern people's attitudes towards heritage may have changed significantly from those of the original creators and users. Where the ancients may have looked upon a building as the dwelling of a divine being, provoking a pious attitude, today's visitors may see that building only as a secular part of the cultural memory, or as a tourist attraction, or as something without any value at all. The interpretation of the original meanings of the heritage is obviously important for understanding the historical relics; studying the continuities and changes in the meaning and use of buildings helps us to understand more about the multifaceted and stratified nature of heritage.

Nonetheless, the interpretation of architectural heritage still faces many challenges, ranging from the identification of the builders and users as well as the positioning of the interpreters and interpreted, to investigating the credibility of the heritage information, and the emotional aspects of historical identity.

6.1 Credibility of Heritage Information: *Cosmogram* or Non-Cosmology

Looking back at the question raised by *Smith* in Chapter 1, we remember that he questioned the “credibility” of the information (cosmological information) reflected in the architectural heritage (mainly Mesoamerica), since the arguments given by contemporary scholars on this matter were too “vague” and “weak” so that they were not convincing. Through the discussion of the above chapters, it has become much more clear that the cosmological character of certain architectural heritage in Mesoamerica and China in a comparative perspective.

This problem can be extended to the information management of the entire architectural heritage, after all, some historical information may have been lost over time. *Mircea Eliade* (1907-1986), a famous Romanian historian of religions, who strongly advocated the cosmological (ritual and mythical) interpretation of architecture and notions about “sacred space”, has been enormously influential for the academic study of religion in the world, however, his ideas have also been severely criticized. *Lindsay Jones* gave a summary of the main themes in *Eliade*’s model of cosmological ideas: (1) the space of “*Hierophanies*”; (2) “*Imago Mundi*” in buildings or cities, and (3) the “Center” as “*Axis Mundi*” (*Jones 2000: ch14*). According to *Eliade*, these three aspects exist in many religions and their architecture worldwide, irrespective of many different historical, social, and cultural circumstances. One of the important criticisms of *Eliade*, therefore is that he suggested that “certain religious forms of spatial and temporal consciousness and certain types of religious symbolism employing natural objects are essentially the same” (*Brown 1981*). *Jonathan Z. Smith* questioned *Eliade*’s conclusions based on empirical rather than theoretical evidence (*Smith 1993:88-103*), that is, lack of cultural information and scientific proof in concrete cases. Although *Eliade*’s ideas have been criticized and questioned, it is undeniable that these views have attracted and influenced a large number of modern scholars (such as *David Carrasco*, *Paul Wheatley*, *Alfredo López Austin*, *Eduardo Matos Moctezuma*, etc.) in their studies of ancient Mexican/Chinese religions or religious architecture. Following *Eliade*’s phenomenological and comparative approach, these scholars have tried to interpret ancient visual art (such as the sculptures or paintings on the walls, the shape of buildings, the layout of the city, or the surrounding landscape of a house) in accordance with widespread general religious themes and interests in combination with specific information about the concrete cultural contexts as supplied by archaeological data, historical sources, and living traditions. Intercultural comparisons show the importance of certain general religious phenomena on a high level of abstraction, which may guide an enquiry as a heuristic tool to study concrete cases with empirical cultural information. Thus an interpretation may start as a speculation, but if it is supported by such information in an extensive, coherent, and consistent manner and if it fits the other known data about the culture in question, it becomes more and more

credible and convincing. In the previous chapters, we have discussed several cases in which there are good reasons for interpreting works of art and architecture in terms of ancient cosmological ideas.

6.1.1 Analogy, Comparison, and Reference

By analogy, we can arrive at the same conclusion. As a Chinese architect, who has been influenced by traditional culture and senses that ceremonial architecture is seriously shaped and affected by cosmological ideas, I can imagine that most Mesoamerican religious architecture was similarly affected by the cosmology and religion of that civilization, which must have deeply influenced the people in those days.

The ancient Chinese believed that humans were between Heaven and Earth, as individuals in the universe. No matter what people did, they could not violate the relevant theories of the *Cosmos*. When humans built a house, they tried to create a house like a small *Cosmos*. For this reason, I argue, the basic shape of a traditional building of China consists of three parts: the big roof, wall/pillars, and platform, which are seen as the symbols of the Heaven, human world, and the Earth respectively, i.e. in the total representation of the *Cosmos*. Besides this, most of the Chinese capital cities were constructed following the cosmological theories (especially the layout of the Heavenly Palaces) in urban design. This is because that cosmology was deeply ingrained in peoples' minds, and affected consciously or subconsciously daily life and the process of building construction.

Historical sources and living traditions suggest that religion, and therefore cosmology, were very important in the life of the Mesoamerican peoples and influenced their daily behaviour, ideology, and art. Gods were everywhere and could profoundly influence people's behaviour on a daily basis, in many aspects. Respect for the gods and efforts to establish and maintain a harmonious relationship with them, obviously, affected the planning and building of cities and temples.

6.1.2 Cities, Sacred Space, and Commonality

William Solesbury, in one of his articles, mentions that a city may be understood metaphorically as “community”, “battleground”, “marketplace”, “machine”, and “organism” (Solesbury 2014). These five aspects explain the form, function, organizational structure, and internal texture of a city from different angles. In other words, if you want to understand a city thoroughly, you need to explore its potential connotations from various perspectives. The three cosmological themes raised by *Eliade*, summarized by *Jones* (as articulated above), in fact, can be used as another potential metaphor to understand the architectures in both ancient China and Mesoamerica.

1. The Space of “Hierophanies”

The *Hierophanies* were created for religious purposes in both architectures, as mentioned in Chapter 5. It is worth noting that in addition to the three main religions that were popular in ancient China (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism), the philosophical system based on "Heaven" is summarized in Taoism but, in essence, differs from other contents that aim to cultivate immortality. Based on that, I propose that those buildings or cities constructed as a

mirror image of star maps - as in the heavenly *Officials* of the Heavenly Palace -, to a certain extent, may be considered *Hierophanies*. Strictly speaking, those star maps and star *Officials* are abstractions corresponding to the locations of the stars in the sky. Theoretically speaking, these buildings and cities have a "spatial correspondence" relationship with the stars in the Heavenly Palace. The astrological significance of the heavenly bodies and their positions reinforces this argument.

2. *Imago Mundi*

Cities and buildings with cosmological features, including the *Axis Mundi*, were mentioned in Chapter 2, and discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. Beijing City reproduced the layout of the heavenly bodies (Heavenly Palace), and it also created an image of the world surrounded by temples for the four gods: Sun, Moon, Heaven, and Earth. A Central Axis running from North to South pointing to the Polar-North Star and Southward to the Middle Sun was clearly designed (Figure 6-1). Such a Central Axis passes throughout the Centre of the universe. In this regard, Beijing City embodies the characteristics of an *Imago Mundi*.

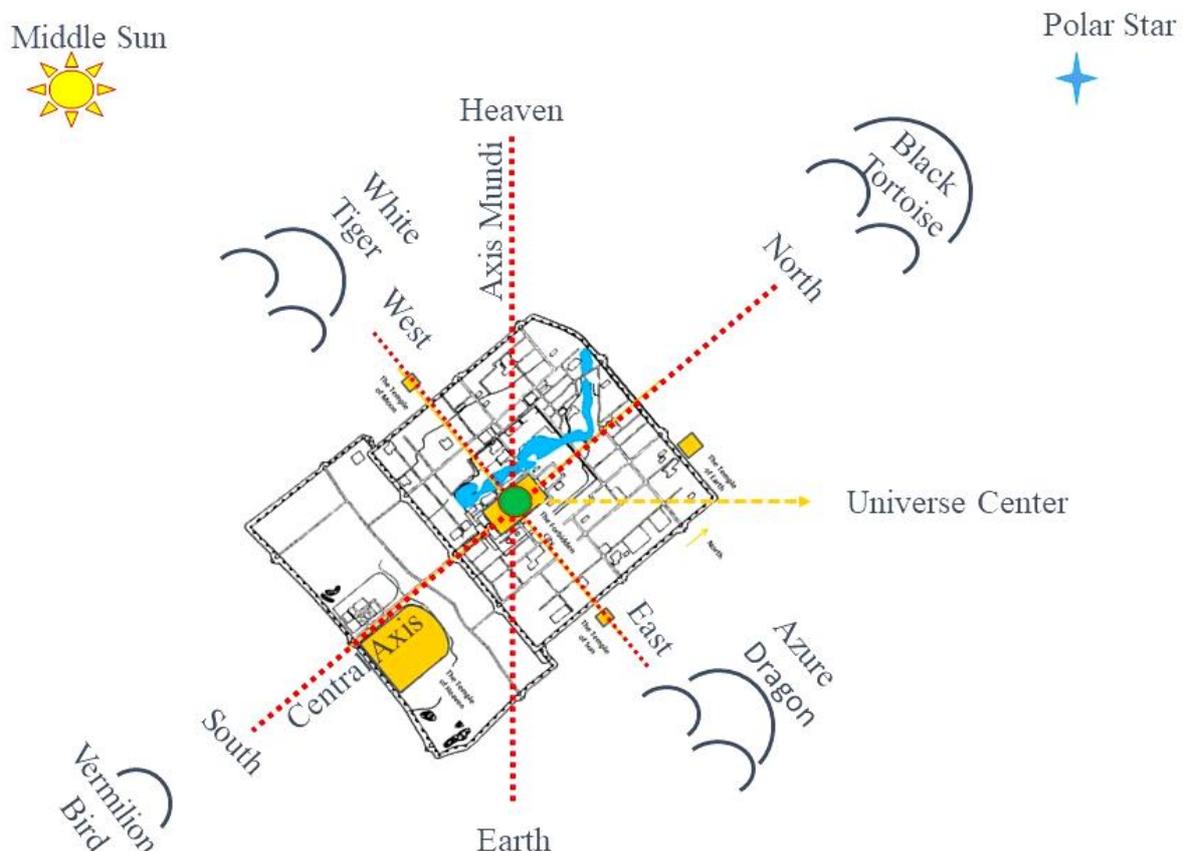


Figure 6-1 *Cosmogram* design in Beijing City (drawing by author)

In Mesoamerica, the *Imago Mundi* can not only be found in pyramids but also was integrated into the design of the cities. *Tenochtitlan* and *Teotihuacan* are good cases of an *Imago Mundi* that seems to connect the deities in the vertical direction. The city of

Tenochtitlan, for example, seems to condense the three layers of the Aztec universe: the lake and surrounding caves connote the Underworld, the islands and the city represent the Earth, and the high pyramids connect with Heaven. The Aztec city was oriented towards the East (Heaven), creating alignments to the four directions, and centred on the principles of Heaven, Earth, and Underworld. *Teotihuacan*, as we mentioned in Chapter 3, seems to be designed according to the order of the *Cosmos* into three vertical levels (Heaven, Earth, and Underworld).

3. Centre

Chinese cities (represented by the capital city) symbolize the Centre in diverse ways,

(1) The city Centre concept. A capital city, in general, followed the pattern of Zhou King City with a Miyagi in the Centre: left is the Ancestral Temple, right is the Territory Temple, front (South) is the Outer Court, and back (North) is the Back Market – a structure that derived from the basic model of the Chinese ancient Heavenly Palace;

(2) Symbolic references to the heavenly Centre, represented by the Heavenly Palace, surrounded by other buildings were associated with celestial bodies; and

(3) Symbolic references to the cosmic Centre, as in the case of Beijing City: surrounded by four temples which symbolize four gods (Heaven, Earth, Sun, and Moon) in four directions (Up, Down, East, and West).

Planning Beijing City as the Center of the universe was not a short-lived fancy of the ancient rulers; in fact, the ancient Chinese thought that China was in the Centre of the world. *Zhong Guo* (中国), the Chinese name of China, means, of course, the "Central Country". Ancient Chinese regarded China as the central, powerful country in the world; consequently, they saw the "Centre" as the noblest position among all the directions. This concept, which has continued from ancient times to present, has profoundly influenced the Chinese worldview. Consequently, people embodied this idea in the city.

Since the traditional cosmological concepts were so powerful in ancient Mesoamerica, people's life was deeply affected by them. It is not surprising, then, that while building cities people incorporated those cosmological ideas into urban planning. The cities in Mesoamerica (especially those of the ancient Maya) have a ceremonial centre located in the Centre of a perimeter square, which could be seen as a "domestic space" (Hanks 1990:299). The "domestic space" in the Maya worldview is "a direct embodiment of cultural order" (Hanks 1990:315). The centres of some cities or houses were constructed with four buildings/symbols in their four corners (Parmington 2011:9), corresponding with the four corners of the universe while also connecting the Underworld, the Earth surface, and the Heaven.

6.2 Motivation towards Divinity: Beliefs or Utilitarianism

As we have seen, ancient Chinese and Mesoamericans associated most of their architecture with deities. Some scholars use "shamanism" as a conceptual framework to interpret the cosmological ideas of both cultures in diverse ways (Chang 1963, 1967, 1981, 1983; Furst 1973-1974, 1976). *Chang* and *Furst* assumed that ancient Asian and American cultures originated from the same ideological and cosmological substratum (Qu 2017:499). The cognitive and affective aspects associated with *Cosmos*, and nature gave mystery and

sacredness to their art. Peoples' effort to provide these buildings with a magnificent and excellent appearance was meant to create a religious quality that would inspire profound sentiments and emotions and connect people to the gods. Thus, these architectures, in their purpose and motivation, are distinct from utilitarian products.

6.2.1 Chinese Belief, Utilitarianism, and Cosmological Architecture

Since ancient times, the Chinese have cultivated the worship of Heaven and Earth, especially the worship of the absolute supreme Heaven (Heavenly Emperor). In 5,000 years of history, Heaven and Earth were seen as the divine principles that are the source of the natural forces of the universe and of the order of human society. Everything in the world must be seen in relation to Heaven and must obey Heaven. Heaven as the supreme ruler is omnipresent and omnipotent (Li 2012).

The Chinese concept of Heaven has not been embodied and personalized as a specific god, an immortal individual, or a being with absolute consciousness. The so-called supreme "Heaven" has been a point of reference for the people and for the politics of the real society from the very beginning. The Chinese used the character of "human" to symbolize Heaven, used the behaviour of the sage to suggest the greatness of Heaven, and then used the doctrine of Heaven to explain the good and the bad things of the world. The ethics and highest values of existence were people-oriented, but not institutionalized as dogmas of formal religion. Three aspects are characteristic: First, the diverse belief systems coexist under the tolerance of "Heaven"; second, the existence of religion is based on pragmatism; third, Chinese religious beliefs exist in close connection to imperial politics (Li 2012).

For the above reasons, the differences between the ancient Chinese religions were a matter of outer appearance but did not actually exist (Li 2012). Chinese scholar Liu Wei comments on the attitudes of Chinese as "believe but not religiously" (Liu 2013). He said that people at different levels have different religious purposes: "Officials focus on formalization, scholars focus on philosophization, and folks focus on utilitarianism" (Liu 2013). Apart from the observance of "Heaven", ancient Chinese maintained an open attitude towards the diverse religions. Those religions can guarantee people some mental peace and comfort, but did not give them a powerful motivation to pursue the truth. Once people encounter huge and profound ideological shocks, the mentality that religion brings may get out of control, which may result in serious social conflicts. In Chinese culture exists an age-old utilitarian mentality: people seek the help of the gods through prayers and worship for psychological comfort. Another example, the Chinese offer respect to their ancestors because they want to get a good life (or eternal lives) through the protection or blessing of their ancestors (Luo 2005).

The founding of New China (1949) introduced a new ideology and a new mentality in this respect: the belief that humans themselves can control many things. The ancient gods, for that reason, were gradually forgotten. After a decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the gods were totally removed from people's lives, Chinese religions instantly disappeared and were replaced by atheism. After the Reform and Opening-up (1978), religions began to "resurrect" and have shown a strong growth trend (Du 2010). Decades later, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism flourish throughout China, at least 10% of the nationals being integrated into religious life (Du 2010). Heaven, which had such a

profound and far-reaching influence on ancient Chinese society, culture, and architecture, however, has gradually been neglected, with the demise of the imperial dynasty; only a few religions (such as Taoism) have inherited a part of its concepts.

Chinese traditional architecture has been exploring human relationships with Heaven. These are expressed and visualized in the Heavenly Emperor, the Heavenly Palace, heavenly gods, the *Cosmos*, the directions, and time, all being symbols of Heaven. The architecture created connections to the values of Heaven by making concrete references to the stars, the constellations, the Sun, and the Moon. The reference to and association with these elements was considered very positive, as being an effective way to get the blessing of the gods, or achieve the purpose of eternity and ascension for human beings. For the rulers, religions (especially the theories of Heaven) were the major ideological justification for imperial political and military objectives. They used articles, books, and education, from a theoretical point of view, convincing people that the emperor's rule of the country was legitimate, as everything had to follow the choice of Heaven. People should obey the imperial power, as this was equivalent to obeying Heaven.

6.2.2 Mesoamerican Spirituality, Christianity, and Religion

Mesoamericans had a strong connection with the natural gods and the spiritual world. Social ethics, daily life, and rituals were deeply rooted in the concept of "Spirituality", according to which the world was created and protected by divine forces or spiritual protectors (gods), with whom humans could communicate. In this worldview, those forces or protectors strongly influenced the human life. Mesoamerican peoples respected the powers of nature, their faith was based on a strong sense of spiritual connection "between the celestial, supernatural forces of the Cosmos and the biological, animal, social, and human patterns of life on earth" (Carrasco 2013:15).

Morley and Sharer (1994:514) gave their ideas about Mesoamerican beliefs in a classic work on the *Ancient Maya*: "All things, whether animate or inanimate, were imbued with an unseen power." Thus 'spirits' inhabited the rocks, trees, both in an animistic sense (Laack 2020) of an amorphous invisible power, as well as in the form of personification, in which unseen power was "embodied in a 'Deity' perceived to take animal-like or humanlike form" (Morley and Sharer 1994:514). At the same time, the world was determined by a Cosmic-Temporal Order, following the movements of the 'sky wanderers' including the Sun, stars, Moon, planets that "marked the passage of the time."

Religion, it seems, permeated the whole of Mesoamerican society and daily life, integrating different social segments; the faith in the divine powers of nature was used to explain the meaning of life and the universe. However, this belief system was profoundly affected by the Spanish Conquest. Under the (often violent) influence of the Spanish, Western culture, the Indigenous society of Mesoamerica was transformed in many ways. The Spanish colonial regime imposed Catholicism on all indigenous communities (the "spiritual conquest"). On the other hand, the indigenous communities incorporated the Christian beliefs into their own religious traditions and created diverse forms of syncretism and a symbolic synergy between the two. In this way, the local religious traditions (elements and structures of Mesoamerican concepts, *Cosmovision*, rites, sacred narratives, and ceremonial discourses)

have survived in various regions, often connected with forms of Christian worship. The precolonial deities, often, have merged with Saints; similarly, the precolonial rites and places of worship as such have been discontinued but often survive in hybrid forms.

Mesoamerican Catholicism, in turn, is impregnated with indigenous elements (Bonnefoy 1993: 46) in the same way. The Indigenous Peoples assimilated and incorporated elements of the new religion, for example, by renaming their own gods as Saints and connecting the symbolic spheres of both religions. Very soon, the missionaries understood and accepted the necessity of compromising with the local religions at the price of the “Mesoamericanization” of Christianity (Megged 1996:5; Wood 2003; Tavárez 2011). In early colonial Mexico, an inextricable and unique religious syncretism, or rather synergy, was created, which may resemble a “Pagano-Christian” religion. Often it is difficult to separate the indigenous beliefs and the ones attached to the Christian faith. Christian rituals may be carried out in a canonic way but associated with underlying Mesoamerican beliefs (Norget 2007). For example, the traditional Aztec Rain God *Tlaloc* was identified with the Catholic saints such as *San Marcos* or *San Isidro* while *Jesus Christ* was identified with the Mesoamerican Sun deity or the Maize God. For this reason, the Christian cult in Mexico may take unexpected forms; in some local churches, Saints are dressed in traditional indigenous regalia (Drucker-Brown 2003).

The pre-colonial Mesoamerican monuments, inscriptions and codices suggest that religion was an important characteristic of society, promoted and directed by rulers and priests, who by doing so must have enhanced their own prestige and authority. Spanish reports and the continuous tradition demonstrate that this religion was shared by the population at large as the basic framework for understanding the cosmic order and conforming to the social stratification (Reilly 2012). In the colonial period, the Spanish missionaries demonized and persecuted the indigenous religion and imposed the Catholic form of Christianity as the only true faith; in this way, Christianity was introduced as an alien belief system of the colonial oppressor, an ideological system that provided justification of the conquest and of the state's political, military, and economic institutions. But by incorporating, Christianity, adapting it to their own worldview, connecting it to their own symbols, ethics, and values, the indigenous communities constructed their own form of Christianity, which corresponded to their spiritual needs (Burkhart 1989, Boone and Cummins 1998; cf. Cook 1997:15-21).

6.3 Attitudes towards Heritage: Constructors and Users

Architecture, as a product built with a certain purpose, for people of different classes, reveals the attitudes of historic or contemporary people – both the constructors and the users of the buildings – towards cultural heritage. Architecture, in particular sacred architecture, was, and often still is, very meaningful to people. For the constructors it had its specific original character and function, such as (1) a tool of dwelling, pragmatic, expedient, and useful; (2) a God's body for people to worship; and even (3) a channel connecting the human world with the Otherworld. The subsequent users in different historic eras had, and have, a diversity of attitudes toward the architectural heritage, according to the different levels of understanding of its meanings and possible use.

6.3.1 Constructors: Pragmatism and Sacredness

In China, most architecture was built for human beings with a pragmatic purpose, even though it was a temple; in most circumstances, its purpose was to satisfy human needs, secular or spiritual (searching for blessings, peace, comfort or joy). The constructors built the structures with such a specific purpose in mind. For instance, the Temple of Heaven, built by the Chinese emperors in 1420, was not just for those heavenly gods; rather, it was a place to show the close relationship between the emperors and Heaven. Constructors used the architecture to express veneration of the gods, but they themselves may not even have had a strong belief in them, as the gods were considered to be far away and hardly interacting with the human world. In these circumstances, architecture was a tool for the constructor to show the order of the *Cosmos* and the order of the state, as well as the identity, legitimacy, and good character of the ruler, and so to appease the people. Similarly, the Forbidden City, as the palace of the emperors that closely connected with the Heavenly Palace and heavenly gods, originally had a strong political – propagandistic – purpose (Bai & Huang 2011).

In the eyes of the ancient constructors, a building was not a solid, incapable object, but rather like a living being, which could grow and also die someday. Thus they constructed the building as an individual with life characteristics, with a vibrant vitality and life cycle. In order to express the vitality of a building, they used wood as the main building material because, in their view, the wood was extremely strong in its life, it could continue its life for thousands of years, and also had the life cycle every year from living to death, but was not eternal. This fits the Chinese understanding of a building.

In Mesoamerica, the general opinion of experts is that the architecture, in particular the sacred architecture, was governed by religious ideas, buildings were made for gods and expressed an attitude of devotion and loyalty to the divine powers which were everywhere. The divinatory calendar and the ritual year indicated that every part of people's life was linked to one or more deities and that one had to pay homage and to bring offerings in order to get their help (Stresser-Péan 2009). Creation stories such as the *Popol Vuh* explain that the human was made by the deities, the purpose being that the human should thank and worship the gods unconditionally. As a result, most of the architecture of the civic-ceremonial centres was linked in a direct or indirect manner with religious ideas, and promoted religious ethics and worship. For example, the emblematic classic city *Teotihuacan* had a huge ceremonial center with many temples, and likely was seen as a sacred city, in which the gods had their home and had a close connection to and continuous interaction with the people (Arnold 2014:10-11). The temples, called generally “house of god” in Mesoamerican languages (*teocalli* in Nahuatl), were supposedly built as dwelling places of specific gods and even as bodies of these gods: they were places of worship, stages for rituals, storage places for offerings, they provided sanctuary and were meant to induce religious experiences (Jones 1995:211-214). People saw the architecture as manifestations, representations, and dwelling places of the divine powers, for which they felt awe, devotion, and care.

6.3.2 Later Users: Relics or Ruins

Cultural heritage expresses different meanings and values to the users in different historical periods and provokes different attitudes. The users first need to figure out what

these ancient remains exactly are and what they represent in the present. To what extent is there a continuation of the past? Who used them or for whom were they built? What was their original function and meaning, and what are their possible values and use in the present? Are they relics, a legacy of our ancestors that demand special care? How can they be given a place in the modern urban landscape and livelihood? Do they express a continuation of an ancient way of life in present-day society, a testimony of an old civilization that defies the passage of time? Or are they useless ruins? Or mere environments for sightseeing, with possible economic interest as tourist attractions? And, if so, what exactly constitutes their attractiveness?

These are difficult questions to answer (Wang & Rowlands 2017; Wang 2018:47). For example, in ancient times, travelling to religious sites most often had a purpose of experiencing and expressing religious faith: the pilgrimage—the pilgrim may be considered a traveler of religious motivation (Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018: 1-2). However, the attitude of most contemporary travelers to such sites has totally changed and has become integrated in and influenced by the international phenomenon of tourism. In the last decades, traditional pilgrimage destinations have often become tourist sites of a multifunctional nature and the tourists generally have multiple motives for travelling, even within a single journey (Durán-Sánchez, et al 2018: 2). Obviously, this development corresponds with a change in attitude towards heritage. Generalizing from personal impressions, based on (unsystematic) observations, readings, and conversations, I would sketch the following image. For Chinese, during the period of imperial dynasties, a traditional culture lasted for 5,000 years, during which architectural heritage, as part of the culture, was well protected and continued to be used by later users although the dynasty was overturned. However, China has experienced two major cultural changes in the modern era; one occurred about 100 years ago during the destruction of the feudal system, and the other was during the Cultural Revolution of the last century. These two social upheavals have profoundly affected Chinese attitudes towards traditional culture and heritage. At that time, people rejected ancient civilization and tried to completely discard its heritage, which led to the devastating destruction of the architectural heritage for a period of time. Fortunately now, with China's reform and opening up, people's interest in history and traditional culture and awareness of the need to protect heritage have intensified.

In today's China, the heritage belongs to the entire country, the government has the power to manage and use it, the public, as the users, is supervising this. People's attitudes toward heritage are related to the country's cultural policy and their depth of understanding of heritage monuments. For example, today's China attaches great importance to the protection of cultural heritage, and from the local to the central, it has increased measures to protect ancient architectural heritage. People, including intellectuals, farmers, students, and officials, are aware of the value and importance of the heritage, which is closely related to the country's mainstream cultural dissemination (through TV programs, newspapers, local policies, museum exhibitions, etc.).

The attitude of contemporary Chinese to the heritage is diverse, depending on their levels of understanding of the meanings of heritage. Some see it just because of special exhibits

(Chen & Ling 2009), some consider it to be a medium associated with the ancient world (Chen 2004). People may be curious about ancient society and are interested because of the way ancient culture is portrayed as a period of glory.¹ On the other hand, ancient culture has disappeared from modern life, and people look back at it with a mixed attitude of connection and alienation, wonder, enmity and envy. It is undeniable that quite a large number of people do not realize the true value of architectural heritage. They tend to focus on the commercial value brought by the heritage (Herzfeld 2017) and the cost of maintenance of the external image of the buildings while giving up the whole issue of the meaning of ancient art as something that seems to have no use for modern commerce. Consequently, this kind of heritage has suffered seriously from neglect or destruction both in its tangible and its intangible aspects as well as in its environmental context.

In Mexico (and other parts of the Americas) colonization has interrupted the autonomous development and continuation of the indigenous civilization and has changed profoundly the composition and identity of the population.² The majority of the population has indigenous roots but has been transformed (acculturated) by the cultural, religious, linguistic and in many cases also genetic influences and influxes from Europe, although there is only a small group of people of real European descent.

At the same time, however, there is a significant part of the population that has grown up in traditional indigenous communities that, to some extent, continue speaking a Mesoamerican language and maintaining indigenous customs and concepts. They constitute the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico, or what *Bonfil Batalla* has called “*el México Profundo*” (Bonfil Batalla 1996). These different segments of the population have different links with the pre-colonial past and – more importantly – also different opinions about that, depending also on their education, affiliations, and ideologies. Colonization introduced a discriminatory and racist rejection of the (oppressed and marginalized) Indigenous Peoples and cultures, which often is internalized even by Indigenous people themselves. On the other hand, after national independence, more and more admiration for the ancient civilization in the past hundred years, seen as the national past, has grown enormously. This often results in an ambivalent attitude of glorifying the Indigenous past (pre-colonial civilization) while discriminating against Indigenous culture and people in the present as being “primitive”. Consequently, a divorce is constructed between the Indigenous past and the Indigenous present: continuity is denied or dismissed. This situation is further complicated by the lack of access to information about these matters. Indigenous culture, art, history, language, and literature are often not taught in schools. This hampers identification with and interpretation of the Indigenous cultural heritage.

This disjunction leads to the bizarre contradiction that descendant communities have, in their traditional culture, very valuable, even crucial knowledge for the interpretation of ancient art and worldview, but that this is often not taken into account in the study of the ancient world, while the communities themselves are often unaware of the value of their

¹ *Qin Hongling* said that “Heritage has a unique emotional value.”(Qin 2015)

² The following synthetic – and admittedly generalising – overview is based on my participation (during various years) in international seminars on Mesoamerican heritage at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, which counted with the presence of several Mexican Indigenous scholars and other specialists in Mesoamerican studies.

traditions, as they are living in a world that has become separate from its roots (and is maintained separate through the national system of education and scientific research). Colonization has cut and divided cultural memory, even in regions where cultural continuity is obviously present. Thus, people often do not know how these buildings relate to the ancient world; when standing in front of them, they often cannot associate them with the historical development of their society. They may be curious about the appearance of the ancient architectures, but cannot give well-founded explanations as to their original function and meanings. Therefore, these buildings cannot bring a significant cultural message to them, nor boost their cultural memory and identity.

In ancient Mesoamerica, temples were seen as sacred places, a means for humans to connect with the divine powers and as the homes for the deities, creating religiously significant cultural landscapes. But today, people see them with a different attitude in a different context. There is a big problem for contemporary people to understand the meaning of this architectural heritage, the original functions and meanings having been lost in centuries of abandonment and spiritual colonization. Due to the colonial and modern changes in religious convictions and daily life, contemporary people have become distanced from the Indigenous heritage: the ancient religion has been banned and its temples are no longer places of an officially recognized worship. Most of them have been reduced to mere objects of archaeological research or opened to the public as tourist attractions. Traditional places of Indigenous worship, such as the caves where people go to pray for rain and to invoke the Rain God (or his manifestation as a Catholic Saint) on the Day of the Holy Cross (May 3) (Jiménez Osorio & Posselt Santoyo 2016) are seen by many as sites of “folk beliefs” or even “superstition” – during the colonial period, such places became known as “caves of the devil”.

Needless to say, those Mexicans who do not identify with Indigenous cultural traditions are bound to see the archaeological remains essentially as manifestations of a distant and strange “foreign” culture, topics of specialist research and speculation. Legally, the care for this heritage is the exclusive domain of the national institute of anthropology and history (INAH), which, since its creation in 1939, has never been directed by persons of Indigenous background.

In policy, the Federal Government of Mexico dominates the management of the national heritage. This may result in cases in which local and Indigenous people are prevented from the use and control of archaeological heritage. Apart from scholars and specifically interested individuals, the public in general not only knows little about the sacred history associated with the architectural sites but also has nothing to do with the management and development of the heritage. Meanwhile, Mesoamerican monuments, especially those that have been associated with new age mysticism or other fanciful meanings (e.g. visitors from outer space), have been overexploited for commercial purposes. For example, the influential archaeologist Jorge Acosta denounced that the Mexican government was more interested in getting profits from tourism instead of caring seriously about preserving the pyramids of Teotihuacan (Villalobos Acosta 2013). Similarly, modern facilities have been installed in the important Maya architectural site of *Chich'én Itzá* between 1979 and 1980 in order to get the maximum effect from tourism (Villalobos Acosta 2013).

Although more and more original meanings of Mesoamerican architectural heritage have been recovered by scholars, this information tends to circulate in limited groups. Furthermore, many aspects, such as construction techniques and the cultural symbolism of monuments and art, are complicated and still not fully understood. Thus, the visitors to an archaeological site are often given incomplete and superficial, even speculative, descriptions, while the local indications often are more concerned with the commercial interest (shops and cafes on the site) than with the archaeological ruins and artifacts on display (Walker 2013:23), that is, they may be induced to note the “entertainment” value, rather than “other motivation such as personal education, education of students, authenticity, or helping support historic preservation efforts” (Walker 2013:23).

6.4 Interpretation of Architecture: Problems and Practice

Heritage, especially the architectural remains, has been there for a long time, perhaps for thousands of years. The meaning of its initial construction and the subsequent historical functions, because of the changes over time, maybe difficult to recover and to explain to the present generation. Certainly, some buildings can be well-explained thanks to explicit historical records. In the Forbidden City of China, for instance, there are abundant historical sources, which contain details about who constructed it, what happened in the past, what was the reason to construct the city was, and so on. In Mesoamerica, the amount of preserved manuscripts and inscriptions is much less, so it is often not possible to give adequate explanations of religious symbolism nor to tell a story about historical figures and events related to the heritage. There is still much research to be done.

6.4.1 Chinese Traditions, Problems, and Reference

Conventional interpretation methods sometimes have serious drawbacks, which can be seen in the interpretation of the deep meaning of Chinese ancient architecture. As a country that faithfully inherits traditional culture, the Chinese habitually use the ancient classics and the words of the sages to explain everything, whether it is Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism, including architectural theories. For a long time, scholars have relied on ancient concepts mentioned in works related to architecture (including *Feng Shui*, *Yin* and *Yang*, astrology, ethics, etc.) to explain the causes, creative intentions, and values of ancient architecture. The theories of *Heaven and Earth* and *Heaven and Man* were used to explain the relationship between architecture and Heaven, Earth, and the *Cosmos*. They rarely use "gods" to explain things, although it is undeniable that Heaven and Earth have always been regarded as gods being omnipotent and real. It is also the main reason that people traditionally try to connect architectural creations with religion. An approach which does not take that ancient worldview into account might incur a number of misunderstandings:

1. “Heaven” is limited.

The "Heaven" which is substantially related to ancient Chinese architecture can be expressed by an invisible atmosphere, or celestial bodies such as stars, the Sun, and the Moon. Although it was rarely described as a god in ancient books, Heaven actually had the characteristics of a Supreme God who controlled everything. Since it does not have a specific shape, the “Heaven” exhibited by the buildings was multi-faceted. Scholars use historical

sources to explain the reason for this phenomenon by the Taoist theory of *Heaven and Man* or the theory of "Destiny" from Confucianism (according to which everything is arranged by Heaven, and man can change nothing). From the perspective of the *Hermeneutics* of sacred architecture (Jones 2000), Chinese traditional ceremonial architecture, in fact, often refers to a deified *Cosmos*, which is a combination of Heaven and Earth, or time and space.

2. The universe-centered worldview is ignored.

Using the theory of *Heaven and Earth*, the Chinese situated humans in the Centre of the world, with Heaven and Earth as two supreme divine powers above and below them, and with the Four Directional Gods around them located in the four directions (Figure 6-2). It seems to be a fixed pattern that allows people to meditate in calm and inactivity in the Centre of the universe when they want to consider any questions. In this pattern, each god is abstracted as a force and orientation point, while maintaining a divine status. For example, the gods of Heaven and Earth are abstracted into *Heaven* (天) and *Earth* (地), the Four Gods as symbols of East, West, South, and North, and the gods of Sun and Moon are mentioned as the *Sun* (日) and *Moon* (月).

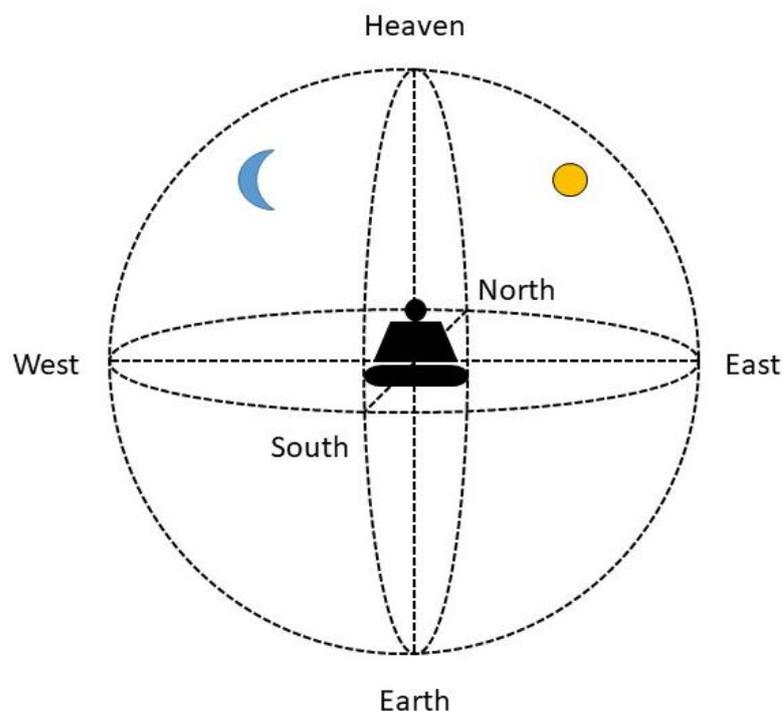


Figure 6-2 Chinese living in the Centre of the *Cosmos* (drawing by author)

3. The way of constructing inheritance is broken.

The way of building and construction in ancient China was different from today's architectural design, and the good experience was continued by students who directly got the knowledge from their *Shifu* (师傅 teacher) generation after generation. A *Shifu* generally did not write down their construction theories in books, but their knowledge was mostly transmitted by oral tradition, checked with experience. That is why Chinese ancient manuals

on architecture are not enough to explain the buildings. More seriously, the abandonment of Chinese traditional culture in the past 100 years has led to the loss of traditional skills, while, on the other hand, the implantation of modern construction methods has caused a serious loss of traditional transmission of knowledge to inheritors/successors. The craftsmanship of Chinese architects and builders - the rules of ancient construction that have not been recorded adequately in books - have disappeared with the turmoil and change of history. These skills, now rarely inherited, cannot reach the ancient level of perfection.

In order to reconstruct the knowledge of the architects and the meaning of ancient architecture, additional analysis of possible symbolic and astronomical aspects is necessary.

4. Traditional common sense rarely was recorded.

Certain aspects of architectural knowledge were not recorded in books because it was traditional common sense. This lack of register nowadays may become an obstacle to understanding ancient architecture. For instance, wood was chosen to be the main building material of Chinese architecture because it was a symbol of life and vitality, but today's people do not share that worldview anymore, so they have come to think that the ancients were stupid in using such a perishable and flammable material. Another example: for thousands of years Chinese architecture has been using an inherited model consisting of a big curve roof, pillars, and square or rectangular platform. As a common-sense knowledge, the fundamental reason for this traditional form has not been written down in the history books, so that contemporary people do not know that it actually symbolizes the three parts of *Cosmos*: Heaven, Humans, and Earth.

Therefore, contemporary people have difficulty understanding their traditional architecture comprehensively. Some of the thoughts, theories, and knowledge of the ancient architecture may be missing and not have been recorded in the classic books. Therefore, the interpretation of architectural heritage today still faces many challenges.

6.4.2 Mesoamerican Concepts, Problems, and Practice

The history of Mesoamerica took a dramatic turn after the Spanish conquest in 1521 and the subsequent persecution of native religion. In several areas, people's perception of the ancient world was severely interrupted and eroded in the process of compulsory cultural change by the Spanish conquest and because of pervasive discrimination. The interpretation of Mesoamerican architecture is particularly complicated and overwhelming because there are a number of problems in reconstructing the ancient cosmology in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

1. The fragmentation of Mesoamerican culture

The lack of ancient information, caused by the fragmentation of Mesoamerican culture, is the biggest obstacle to explaining the original meanings of its ancient architecture today. After 1521, the new government imposed a cultural policy that completely overthrew the long-standing indigenous traditions of Mesoamerica and severely disrupted the traditional culture of the region: “in the centuries following the European contact, the political conquest, completed by 1530, was accompanied by a cultural conquest that continues to this day” (Pollard 1993:3). Consequently, people have been alienated from their heritage. There is, at

the same time, a strong cultural continuity in the indigenous communities, but this continuity is a mosaic: in different communities, different aspects have been preserved, a coherent overview is still lacking. In comparison, to a certain extent, Chinese culture has been passed down in many ways, however, a coherent overview is still lacking.

2. Ancient books destroyed

It is very regrettable that no written texts have survived that would enable us to access the knowledge and intentions of the ancient architects and builders. In their crusade against indigenous religion and cultural memory, the Spanish conquerors and missionaries destroyed much of Mesoamerican writing. Less than 20 pre-colonial books have been preserved (among which only four Maya codices). A considerable number of archaeological inscriptions and paintings (pictographs in Central and Southern Mexico, and hieroglyphs in the Maya region) have been preserved, but these generally just depict rulers, priests, or deities involved in historical or ritual events. Needless to say, the ancient writing systems pose their own challenges for decipherment and understanding. Although today's scholars have successfully interpreted the general rules of Maya hieroglyphs and Aztec-Mixtec pictography, there still remain quite a few uncertainties, doubts, and questions in the interpretation of specific texts and images.

3. Indigenous scholars involved in the interpretation are limited

The large majority of interpreters of the Mesoamerican culture work in a Western paradigm, distant from the Mesoamerican worldview. Due to discrimination, adverse economical situations, and lack of educative opportunities, still very few speakers of Indigenous languages are actively and professionally involved in the study and interpretation of their cultural heritage. This imbalance implies that most research in the past and the present suffers from a lack of personal familiarity (and identification) with relevant languages, cultural concepts, oral traditions, local history and customs.

4. Mesoamerican concepts were influenced by the introduction of Christianity

The languages and cultural traditions of the present-day indigenous communities have preserved many aspects from the past and thus hold important keys to understanding the pre-colonial Mesoamerican world. On the other hand, the ancient culture is not fossilized: many transformations have occurred over time, continuities are partial and fragmented. After Catholicism entered Mesoamerica, the concepts of the universe held by Mesoamericans were influenced by the Catholic missions with their specific doctrines and European worldview: a complex process of interaction, cultural translation and symbolic synergy (syncretism) occurred. For example, the cross in Mesoamerica was a cosmic symbol of the four directions and of the World Tree(s) connecting the Three Realms of the universe (Edgerton 2005). It was also associated with the four seasons and with the Rain God (Braden 2003:62). As a pecked cross, it represented the four directions of the world and was likely used as a marker for (astronomical) observation and orientation (Aveni, Hartung & Buckingham 1978). The (tall, standing) cross in Christianity is the symbol of the passion (sacrifice) of Christ, the signal of redemption, and "the total truth about God, man, and the world" (E. Echevarria The Apostolate of College Campus Ministry—John Paul II's contribution). In contemporary

indigenous communities, the Catholic feast of the Holy Cross (May 3) is often connected to the Mesoamerican ritual of praying for rain in a local cave (“house of rain”). The beginning of May is the announcement of the rainy season and therefore of the planting of corn – corn being considered a manifestation of Christ in many Mesoamerican communities (Graham 2011; Stresser P éan 2009). In this way, osmosis occurs between the Christian symbolism (redemption: Christ) and the Mesoamerican symbolism (sustenance: corn and rain), which do not contradict but reinforce each other.

6.5 Protection of Heritage: From Tangible to Intangible

People generally agree that, as important parts of human cultural heritage and national identities, the architectural heritage of China and Mesoamerica should be vigorously protected. Indeed, heritage protection is a popular topic, with many stakeholders, different (sometimes conflicting) opinions and interests, often leading to social and political debates. International organizations, such as UNESCO, have been founded with the objective of protecting heritage, but, to a certain extent, politicians and the designs of states "have increasingly hijacked that mission so that the overreach of governments is now prevalent in the implementation of all conventions concerned with protecting cultural heritage" (Vrdoljak & Meskell 2020). Insufficient understanding of the cultural-historical meanings combined with the lack of means (protection technology), may further cause concrete challenges for architectural heritage protection.

In general, the lack of cultural-historical information leads to an incomplete understanding. It is undeniable that in present-day China and Mesoamerica, for a variety of reasons, the original meanings or cultural background of ancient architectural heritage are no longer known by us, and people's understanding of them is generally very limited.

The protection of architectural heritage should involve both the tangible and intangible aspects. It is easy for people to see the architectural ruin, the physical part that remains there as an entity, and some may feel a desire to maintain and protect it to avoid complete disappearance. For others, however, the ruin may be just a useless pile of stones that is an obstacle to modern construction activity, especially if the intangible aspect of heritage, as part of cultural memory and as a cultural value, is totally ignored due to a lack of corresponding knowledge. Especially important, the spiritual connection of people with those sites and relics is often ignored by archaeologists (mostly non-indigenous), to the detriment of both scholarly understanding and public engagement.

The examples of sacred architecture from ancient China and Mesoamerica, discussed in this thesis, demonstrate the strong link between the tangible and intangible, the material, and the immaterial aspect of heritage. For analytical purposes, we may distinguish two main attitudes of people towards the monuments in their territory. One is that of continuity and identification, in which people recognize the archaeological remains and inherited buildings as ancient testimonies of their own culture and worldview, which may have been modified over time but is still relevant to them. In that case, the original meaning of these remains still speaks to the people and inspires some form of continuation of associated expressions, e.g. ritual practices. The other attitude is one of disjunction, in which people see the remains as

belonging to a different culture, a closed chapter of the past, which may be interesting for sightseeing, but which does not provoke religious feeling. The meaning of the heritage then is basically a matter of curiosity.

These attitudes correspond to the distinction made by Rappaport (1999) between participants in a ritual and tourists. We should keep in mind however that these attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive: they can also mix. People may not be believers in the ancient worldview anymore, but still can respect it and still can value the ancient meanings. The disjunctions then are considered part of a continuous, ongoing process, a cultural memory, which creates an effect and a sense of belonging. This attitude can be inclusive and expand beyond the limits of a specific people or country, to embrace a world heritage, which transcends national and nationalist boundaries. In any case, the meaning of heritage – both the original meaning when the monument was made and the meaning for people nowadays – is an important element in the protection of heritage. If heritage is not understood, not meaningful to them, people are less likely to care about it and to protect it. The heritage then becomes a dead body without a soul. The meaning, obviously, is also a crucial consideration in determining the most adequate way of conserving and exhibiting heritage. Thus, the interpretive study should be a crucial part of heritage policies and its results should be widely shared through scientific and popular publications, as well as through educative programs and related activities.

Heritage knowledge should be accessible and heritage protection should be a transparent public process, informing the people of the country through multiple channels, and raising public awareness. Professional academic studies, archeological reports, etc., although of high scientific value, are in themselves not enough to engage and meet the needs of the public. The public is more likely to understand the stories behind the cultural relics through literature or video and film. The country's mainstream cultural information through schools, television, museums, etc. may improve people's awareness of the meaning of heritage and the need to protect it. UNESCO and other international organizations have formulated standards and regulations for heritage protection and recommended public outreach policies, but it is important that these are also grounded on the culture, the religious convictions and the social values of the peoples and countries involved; otherwise understanding will remain lacking and the implementation of international norms will remain limited.