

*The 10<sup>th</sup> Lions International Youth Exchange  
Essay Competition – Heritage Preservation*

*Challenges to Eastern Cultural Heritage Preservation*

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*‘Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’*

From *Ozymandias*, P.B. Shelley

Perhaps no one would excel Shelley in his vivid yet grimly bare depiction of the ruins of Ozymandias: what was once a colossal marvel, now is a mere derelict wreck. But it is not only in poetry that one discovers such pitiful vestiges of the past; even now, the tragedy of Ozymandias is occurring everywhere in the east.

In China, after a century of cultural devastations, the last survivors of the Cultural Revolution are clinging to their last breaths, and Confucian scholars are still overshadowed by the scriptures of Mao Zedong. In Japan, relatively well-endowed compared to its unfortunate neighbours, cultural heritages are smothered by the waves of urbanisation and economic developments, with the ever-decreasing population indulging in Nou and Kabuki. In India, the everlasting urban encroachments of Mumbai and New Delhi, coupled with the feud between Hindus and Muslims, are crushing the last remnants of the Indus valley civilisation.

As the governments strive to revitalise these fading heritages, they may well discover that their endeavours are up to no avail. The art of Guqin continues in its downfall, traditional craftsmanship of silk and Xuan paper perseveres on its course to annihilation. Behind the failures of the governments lurk the shadows of cultural destruction, growing ever stronger and more formidable than the past.

Dating back centuries ago, the shadows of cultural destruction had extended its claws towards the Oriental cultures. As the age of discovery unfolded, so did the insidious impacts of colonisation and ‘white men’s burden’. To re-educate the ‘brutes of Africa and Asia’ and inculcate them with western holy ideals and religions is the ultimate crusade – a marked transition from the bloodshed battles in Jerusalem.

And the East accepts them. As the world plunges into the depths of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it witnesses the palpable monopoly of western culture. McDonalds and Wal-

Mart pervade in every single part of the world, while the aesthetics of Leonardo Da Vinci and Van Gogh are celebrated across the art communities of the world. Western scholars attempt to brighten the picture with the term ‘global cultural integration’, in a devious attempt to mask the fact of a cultural monopoly around the world. Traditional operas like Kabuki and Yueju are no longer fashionable, and Beckett-styled theatres flood the major cities of the world; in craftsmanship, concrete and cement are expelling traditional carpentry and stonecutting, regarded by modern citizens as unreliable and hazardous. Perhaps only diversity in religion has survived this wave of westernisation and acculturation.

Accompanying the social evils of western colonisation were the seeds of industrialisation and capitalism. But out of these seeds stemmed not only capital and affluence, but also the catastrophe of cultural destruction. In this epoch of economic and capital pre-eminence, who would spare a penny for heritage preservation? Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motors, famously remarked, “History is bunk.” Rituals and customs inherited from the past are mere nuisance, and ancient wisdoms and epitaphs are degraded to disposables. The Indian Vedic chants become an annoyance while the traditional Confucian values of the agrarian supremacy are mere hindrances to capital accumulation.

On the other hand, from industrialisation and mass production grew mechanisation, the tempest for artisans and craftsmen. Creativity is no longer needed; everything is cloned, standardised. Pottery and silk should be ergonomically, not aesthetically, designed. Sameness marks progress – or does it?

But this leads nowhere near to the core of the problems of eastern cultural heritage preservation. Westernisation and industrialisation have culminated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But even now, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cultural preservation is still in a grave crisis – Why? The ultimate obstruction is the perversion of individualism.

If uniqueness is the fertiliser of culture, then the excess of it would surely soil the roots of culture. Individualism promotes cultural diversity, the blooming of culture. Yet what sort of diversity is the world progressing towards? Incessant rituals, esoteric symbols – the signs of superficial formalism. People are now performing their duties for the sake of it, not for their purposes; and behind all their pious conforming to traditions is emptiness and absent-mindedness. Men are falling into the trap of mannerisms and hypocrisy.

A notable example is the Mid-Autumn Festival in China. Traditionally a festival to celebrate the union of different generations of a family, ancient Chinese used the full moon to symbolise ‘Tuan Yuan’ (Union). Yet in recent years, this festival has been grossly commercialised, being degenerated into a festivity for bakeries to market their latest brands of moon cakes and lanterns. Men no longer stay with their families for the festival; instead, they roam around the streets with their friends, shopping and chattering. And as the values of family unity and harmony are lost, the festival has been devalued to the level of a mere social event. Which are more important, values or rituals?

I have a dream that one day on the parched banks of Huanghe, the last remnants of the Chinese civilisation will be weathered and eroded by the encroaching deserts and cities. I have a dream that the streets of India will one day be deprived of the ancient wisdoms of Shiva and Brahman, when the businessmen of Mumbai become the new gods. I have a dream that throughout the lands of Asia, the memories of Gagaku and Vedic chants will perish for eternity, swiped away from existence. All these that would be lost symbolise not only the loss of culture, but also the loss of national identity. The storm has gone, but the salvage has not begun – it would be up to us whether we can revive the spirit of traditions and embrace them in time, to avoid the ultimate realisation of this nightmare. (987 words)

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