



PROTECTING WORLD HERITAGE

A painstaking process in the preservation of Kulangsu comes to fruition By Jacques Fourrier

In February 2016, China officially submitted Kulangsu as the nation's nominee in 2017 for inscription onto the UNESCO's World Heritage List. After a year of unprecedented effort and despite a devastating typhoon causing great damage, Kulangsu was finally inscribed on the World Heritage List as a "Historic International Settlement" at the 41st session of the World Heritage Committee in Krakow, Poland, on July 8.

Protection

With its unique mixture of architectural styles including traditional southern Fujian, Western classical revival and veranda colonial, Kulangsu, a small island off the coast of Xiamen, southeast China's Fujian Province, has long been a popular destination for tourists.

Thousands of villas and buildings of major architectural significance have survived the ravages of time since the island was established as an international settlement in 1903. The Japanese occupation in 1938 marked the end of an era, but the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949

formally ended the half-century-long foreign presence on the island.

For a long time, the villas on the island had not been properly preserved. Even at the beginning of the 21st century, Kulangsu was still a minor tourist destination, renowned locally for its scenic spots, its unique blend of Eastern and Western cultures and its bright sandy beaches. However, this situation changed as China made impressive strides in developing the tourism industry while protecting its cultural heritage.

Hard on the heels of Beijing's successful bid in 2001 for the 2008 Summer Olympics, things started to change, and enhancing Kulangsu's core cultural and scenic elements became a top priority of the local government.

"The 2008 Beijing Olympics played a decisive role for Kulangsu," explained Cai Songrong, Deputy Director of the Kulangsu World Cultural Heritage Monitoring and Management Center.

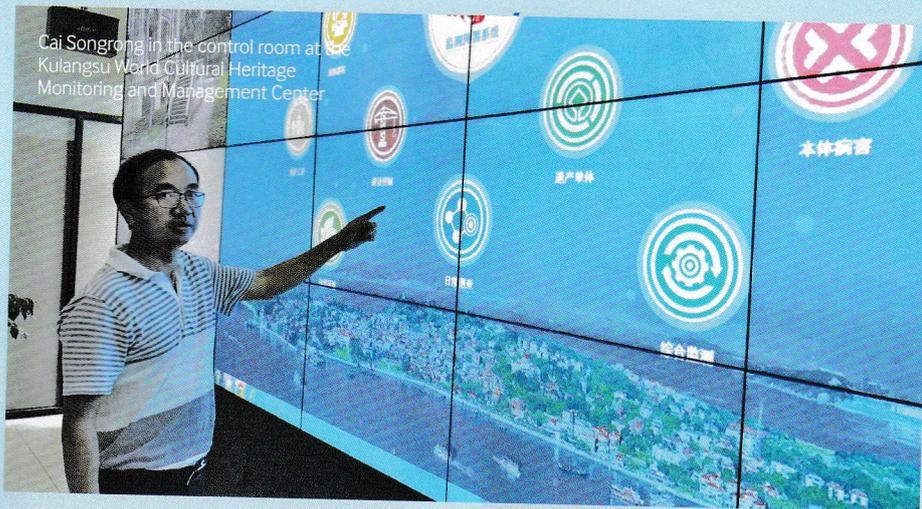
In November 2008, Xiamen's authorities decided to start working toward including Kulangsu in the World Heritage List. A monitoring and management center was eventually set up together with an archives center, and Kulangsu officially applied in February 2016 and entered UNESCO's tentative list

in August that year.

Within this period, Kulangsu successfully reached its preservation and planning targets. "Our first goal was to set up a systematic cultural and environmental preservation plan together with a local regulatory system," said Cai. "Then, we established a monitoring center for the day-to-day management of Kulangsu's activities." Also, emphasis was placed on protecting and renovating endangered buildings of cultural significance and preserving old crafts native to the island. An international research center was also created, as Kulangsu started to attract renewed and increased worldwide attention.

"Kulangsu is representative of China's ancient maritime culture and of the interaction with the West in pre-modern times. The island was also a microcosm of China's pre-modern evolution, a place where local culture, together with the international settlement culture and overseas Chinese culture, mixed rather harmoniously. These historical and cultural elements are unique in China and we must preserve and protect them," remarked Wu Yongqi, an expert on Kulangsu culture and history, adding that Kulangsu is a delicate cultural and environmental ecosystem.





Cai Songrong in the control room at the Kulangsu World Cultural Heritage Monitoring and Management Center

Typhoon *Meranti*

Typhoon *Meranti*, which wreaked havoc on this tiny 1.88-square-km island, made a prominent example. Kulangsu was awaiting an inspection by a team of UNESCO Heritage experts when Typhoon *Meranti* struck Xiamen in the early hours of September 15, 2016. The inspection team's visit had to be postponed.

Much of Kulangsu's beautiful landscape and many of its historical buildings were destroyed or damaged, and even ancient trees were uprooted in the typhoon's path of destruction. Some 3,000 trees were badly damaged and in need of timely care. In addition, 25 walls collapsed, and more than 25 roads were blocked

by fallen trees and debris. A year later, there are still visible signs of the destruction.

What happened next was an incredible show of solidarity and resilience. "People from over 12 countries were involved in the cleanup exercise, making the effort representative of Kulangsu's international and multicultural history," said Zhang Xiaojuan, who runs a small hotel and volunteered in the wake of the typhoon.

In the control room at the Kulangsu World Cultural Heritage Monitoring and Management Center, Cai shows footage of that dreary night and its aftermath. "It also affected the people," he said. "Even though no one was hurt, this event will be imprinted on our minds forever."

Diversifying the activities

A disaster of such scale did not dash Kulangsu's spirits though. A UNESCO inspection team made a satisfactory visit to the island a month later. The rest is history.

With the new status comes new responsibilities and challenges. Being a World Heritage Site will undoubtedly increase Kulangsu's domestic and international profile, raising the question of reconciling tourism and preservation.

According to Cai, the management and preservation of Kulangsu's cultural and environmental heritage is a complex equation of controlling the number of tourists and reducing pollution and degradation. Kulangsu has taken drastic measures to control the daily influx of visitors during peak season.

"One day in 2012, we hit the 120,000 mark. It was an all-time record," he said. "The concentration was so high that the streets were chock-a-block with people. We had reached saturation point. It had to stop."

In 2014, authorities imposed a ceiling on the total number of visitors per day at 50,000 and implemented a new ticketing system, resulting in significant reduction of garbage, waste water and sewage, and noise pollution.

"We have set up a live monitoring system that enables us to know how many visitors are on the island at any time," explained Cai, in front of a giant screen in the control room. "We allow 30,000 visitors on the island at any given time during the day, and we have a warning system in case of overcrowding."

"Noise pollution is limited to 100 decibels. We got rid of street hawkers and have specific regulations regarding loud music," he said. Furthermore, outside barbecues are strictly forbidden to reduce air pollution. "The level of fine particles (PM2.5) on average remains as low as 20 and the AQI (Air Quality Index) varies between 20 and 50 all year round."

Another significant task Kulangsu faces is drawing more international visitors and mainland individual tourists who are more educated and have higher spending power, not just tour groups, day-trippers and backpackers. The island has already gone upscale in recent years, but there's still plenty of room for improvement.

"The next step is to look further ahead. We are planning a museum dedicated to the island," said Cai. "We have also planned international conferences, sporting and cultural events and exhibitions."

Kulangsu is now entering a new era, more focused on sustainable development and quality and more aware of future challenges, but also better equipped to address them.



A bird's eye view of Kulangsu

THE KULANGSU WORLD CULTURAL HERITAGE MONITORING AND MANAGEMENT CENTER