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THE BRIDGE OF THE DIALOGUE IN CHIAVENNA (ITALY)

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Summary

The declaration Traditional design and practices for building Chinese wooden arch bridges was inscribed on the Unesco List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2009, due to the rapid urbanization, scarcity of timber and lack of available construction space, all of which combine to threaten its transmission and survival. The traditional design and practices for building these footbridges combine the use of wood, traditional architectural tools, craftsmanship, the core technologies of 'beam-weaving' and mortise and tenon joints, and an experienced woodworker's understanding of different environments and the necessary structural mechanics. The idea to build a Timber Arch Bridge in ValChiavenna, located about 100 kilometres north of Milan in Italy, is an example of cooperation between Italy and China, and aims to rediscover this antique Chinese tradition in order to connect two places in view of a pilgrimage to the Madonna of Europe. The goal of this paper is to retrace history and typology of this cultural heritage, through the design of the "Bridge of the dialogue" in Chiavenna. A final written, entitled Our Lady of Europe and the "human bridge" between religions for peace, contains some suggestions about the intrinsic meaning of this footbridge.

Keywords: timber and Rainbow arch bridges; UNESCO; Chiavenna; dialogue; Bridging Cultures and Sharing Hearts

1. The bridge of the dialogue in Chiavenna

The idea to build a Timber Arch Bridge in ValChiavenna, located about 100 kilometres north of Milan in Italy, is an example of cooperation between Italy and China (Eng. B. Briseghella, B.Chen), and aims to rediscover this antique Chinese tradition in order to connect two places in view of a pilgrimage to the Madonna of Europe. The *bridge of the dialogue* is 25 m long and 4 m wide, with 17 arches arranged in parallel.

The traditional design and practices for building this modern footbridge combine the use of wood, traditional architectural tools, craftsmanship, the core technologies of 'beam-weaving' and mortise and tenon joints, and an experienced woodworker's understanding of different environments and the necessary structural mechanics, as illustrated in the UNESCO declaration of values for the *Traditional design and practices for building Chinese wooden arch bridges*.

2. A suggestion in this place: Our Lady of Europe and the "human bridge" between religions for peace.

Sunday, 20th December 2015. We are approaching the holy date of Christmas with the perspective of mercy. The Jubilee desired by Pope Francis is proving to be increasingly contagious. The desire to bring people, populations and cultures together is permeating hearts across the globe. A sunny morning in that of

Chiavenna is a good sign for our commitment. Organising an inter-religious event of international reach in the first ten days of September 2016, with the construction of an ideal bridge that will soon prove to be pretty much real. We head into Passo Spluga, imagining the thousand-year-old route that millions of pilgrims took over a couple of millennia. The Madonna of Europe awaits us, alert from above, standing 14 metres tall. Enveloped by the rays of sunshine that caress the golden surface, the statue is lost amidst the blue of the sky, forming a bridge between man and God. A magical place that symbolically embraces Europe. From these peaks comes the water that gradually flows through the valleys in the three directions:

the Po and Adriatic/Mediterranean;

the Rhine and the North Sea;

the Danube and the Black Sea.

Is this not magic? Does it not lead us to reflect that, deep down, everything stems from a union? The barycentre of the Alps is here! And here, with our multi-religious event, we seek to celebrate friendship, brotherhood, peace and, ultimately, evangelical love. And how can we not consider the “bridge”? And is it not always Pope Francis and a great many others now who tell us precisely to build bridges and knock down walls? Yet we do not take him at his word! This is the opportunity to move quickly onto action! Just a few kilometres. One hairpin bend after the other. Up and up further until reaching a place that simply exudes history. The historic path of the Spluga is there. We can reach out and touch it. We continue on for a few dozen metres and come across a waterfall, whose water is wedged between two masses, almost forming an access to the valley below. Crossing it is almost like fording it. Trusting in the fact that little water runs through in the winter, we can move on without getting wet. However, the image of the full flow in spring, when the snow melts, leads to think “yes!” Here we need a bridge! This is the right place. The amenity that transpires from this uncontaminated corner of the world where history seems to have stood still for centuries creates the evocation of “genius loci”. We are already seeing ourselves in the immediate future. A bridge that symbolises cultural union must be declared heritage of humanity.

So it is UNESCO that dictates the guidelines for our idea. China will help us in this wonderful, emotional journey. A wooden bridge created using ancient techniques handed down through the centuries, from generation to generation. A bridge that fits well with the place, not only because of its intrinsic nature but for the many others built beyond it, towards Switzerland, using techniques that are not dissimilar and which even today make for a beautiful exhibition, showing the care seen also in the necessary maintenance carried out over time. The Chinese will come to work side-by-side with the Italians to sanction, “hand-in-hand” that there are no distinctions of any type. Ultimately, Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci are still remembered in China with respect and admiration.

So why not reiterate these cultural intersects of a past that can today live once again without any major difficulties? It just needs to be wanted, and thus it shall be. The wayfarer shall soon be able to cross the stream in complete safety, taking the covered bridge and admiring the waterfall upstream. Or, fording the water and walking on the masses, it can revel in the new bridge, or perhaps it too will already be ancient?

But the connecting paths will also have a redesign functional to the events. Now, step after step, walking amidst the trees at the edge of the stream, we can just glimpse the bridge with its roof, protecting itself and the wayfarers. This until entering, when suddenly, unaware, you feel completely at home. Because this is precisely how the emotion of this place should be experienced, where the magic of the dream becomes reality! The miracle has taken place! The Madonna has inspired us. The Madonna has guided us. The Madonna of Europe invites us to feel as brothers, beyond all ideological obstacles to live in peace, together. That peace for which we all feel the need in inter-religious dialogue that acts as a bridge between ourselves and God... A Mediterranean Sea ideally immersed in the Alps, which can blend, in the crucible of love, all diversities of culture, thought and creed. Thus we prepare for September’s great event. The anniversary of this Madonna who still today, with the words of times past, seems to invite Europe to be more united, more tolerant, more comprehensive or, better still, more merciful. This is the real jubilee of the “human bridge” between religions for peace. Always and forever...

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