

A Study of the Institutional Framework and Practices in Italian Cultural Heritage Conservation: Implications for China's Cultural Heritage Protection

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Abstract: *As a pioneer in the field of global cultural heritage conservation, Italy has established an internationally leading position by developing a comprehensive theoretical system for cultural heritage conservation, applying cutting-edge conservation and restoration techniques, and innovating management models, thereby promoting the establishment and continuous improvement of cultural heritage conservation standards. This paper focuses on the Italian cultural heritage conservation system, incorporating field research in Florence and practical experience at the Palace Museum. Using methods such as literature review, comparative analysis, and case studies, it systematically examines the legal framework, management mechanisms, and practical models of cultural heritage conservation in Italy. The aim is to provide practical references and theoretical support for improving the framework of China's cultural heritage conservation standards and promoting internationally coordinated innovation in standardization within the cultural heritage sector.*

Keywords: *Italian Cultural Heritage; Conservation System; Chinese Cultural Heritage*

1. Introduction

As the cradle of Mediterranean civilization and humanist thought, Italy has developed profound historical depth and refined artistic taste through its multidimensional cultural accumulation spanning Ancient Rome, medieval cities, and the Renaissance. With 61 UNESCO World Heritage sites, Italy stands as a globally significant cultural power and was among the first countries in Europe and the world to enact specialized legislation for cultural heritage protection^[1]. Through its comprehensive legal and regulatory framework, Italy has established one of the world's most stringent cultural heritage protection systems. This legislative framework, shaped through a century of evolution, has developed into a distinctive institutional system unique to Italy. From the holistic preservation of historic Florence to the integrated management of aquatic erosion in Venice, Italy's successful practices offer valuable lessons for the world. While China boasts 60 World Heritage sites, its rapid urbanization and economic development have posed challenges to heritage protection, manifesting in issues such as an underdeveloped legal system, incomplete protection coverage, and limited public participation^[2]. Conducting systematic research on Italy's institutional framework and practical experience in cultural heritage conservation provides new methodological perspectives for comparative studies in this field. The practical significance of this research lies in offering direct references for China in revising its heritage laws, diversifying funding channels for conservation efforts, and promoting technological innovation—ultimately contributing to China's exploration of sustainable pathways for the dynamic preservation of cultural heritage that align with its national realities.

2. The overall framework of cultural heritage conservation in Italy

2.1 Constitutional guarantees: The top-level design of national responsibility and civic obligations

Italy's cultural heritage ownership structure encompasses both national public institutions and private entities (including governmental bodies, local authorities, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, and individuals). Legal responsibilities or obligations for cultural heritage remain consistent regardless of ownership, ensuring equal protection. The Italian Constitution provides a robust foundation for this protective mandate, establishing an inviolable source of authority and value. Article 9 of the Constitution stipulates: "The Republic shall be responsible for safeguarding the historical and

artistic heritage of the Nation and ensuring its transmission to future generations.”^[3] This constitutional principle defines cultural heritage as a collective asset of society rather than private property of individuals or groups, granting the state the authority to intervene and manage heritage to prevent arbitrary damage or destruction by private owners. Furthermore, in terms of intergenerational equity, this provision imbues heritage with enduring relevance over time. The phrase “transmission to future generations” carries profound significance: cultural heritage is not merely a creation of ancestors but a legacy belonging to posterity. This imposes a duty on the present generation to fulfill its responsibilities diligently, ensuring that cultural heritage remains intact and authentic—a testament to the essence of intergenerational continuity.

2.2 Core legislative system: A comprehensive and meticulously regulated legal network

Italy has established a clearly hierarchical and fully articulated legal framework for cultural heritage protection under its constitutional principles. Its fundamental law is the *Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code*, with the core being the Code enacted in 1975^[4]. Although it has undergone numerous amendments, its foundational structure remains intact, broadly encompassing all aspects of cultural heritage protection. First, the Code innovatively integrates “landscape” into the category of cultural heritage, positioning it alongside historical and artistic heritage, thereby reflecting a “broad heritage” concept. It extends protection not only to individual buildings, monuments, and artworks but also to historic centers, villages, archaeological sites, and even natural environments of cultural significance. Second, the Code provides detailed regulations for various stages of cultural heritage protection, including “identification, conservation, restoration, utilization, management, and education.” For instance, in heritage restoration, it clearly defines approval procedures, technical requirements, and qualification certifications, emphasizing scientific rigor and reversibility^[5]. Finally, the Code stipulates severe criminal and civil penalties for acts such as destruction, theft, and smuggling of cultural heritage, significantly raising the cost of non-compliance and ensuring strong legal deterrence. Additionally, a series of supporting regulations and implementation rules are crucial for the effective enforcement of the Code. To ensure the execution of this fundamental law, the Italian government and cultural heritage authorities have established numerous complementary regulations and detailed implementation provisions, forming a pyramidal hierarchy of laws and regulations.

2.3 Scientific governance structure: Multi-stakeholder co-governance with central coordination and local collaboration

Italy ensures the sustainability and institutional soundness of its cultural heritage protection system through a scientific management approach, coupled with a multi-stakeholder governance model characterized by central coordination and local synergy. Furthermore, Italy has developed cultural heritage protection standards tailored to its specific context, guaranteeing both the quality of standard formulation and their systematic implementation^[6]. In the realm of standard-setting, national standards for cultural heritage protection are formulated by the Italian National Unification Body’s Technical Committee for Construction Products, Processes, and Systems (UNI/CT 033) and its Subcommittee on Cultural Heritage (UNI/CT 033/SC 01). UNI/CT 033 also includes specialized bodies such as the Subcommittee on Building Information Modeling (BIM) and Digital Management for Information Processes (UNI/CT 033/SC 05), supported by 33 working groups. In the realm of governance, Italy has established the “Ministry of Culture and Tourism” as the supreme administrative authority for cultural heritage protection at the national level, while at the local level, regional, provincial, and municipal governments play indispensable roles, forming a collaborative framework of “central oversight and local decision-making”^[7].

3. Key policies and innovative mechanisms

3.1 Diversified fiscal and funding safeguard mechanisms

Central government appropriations constitute the primary funding channel for cultural heritage protection in Italy. In accordance with Article 9 of the Constitution, the Italian government regards cultural heritage preservation as a core state responsibility, annually allocating funds from the national budget to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. These resources primarily support the restoration of top-tier heritage sites, archaeological projects, staff salaries, and operational costs. Simultaneously, local governments—including regions, provinces, and municipalities—are mandated to provide matching

funds based on their financial capacities. These localized allocations sustain maintenance, minor repairs, and promotional activities for regionally significant heritage, fostering shared responsibility between national and local authorities. Beyond public financing, Italy actively encourages participation from citizens and social organizations in heritage preservation. Fiscal incentives such as reduced tax rates stimulate donations from private entities and individuals—for instance, enterprises can claim tax deductions for donations to heritage projects. The government also vigorously promotes Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), licensing qualified companies to manage and commercially develop selected heritage sites. A portion of the generated revenue is directed toward conservation and restoration, achieving an equilibrium between heritage safeguarding and sustainable utilization.

3.2 The “Percent for Art” scheme: Dynamic inheritance of cultural heritage through artistic integration in public spaces

Italy’s “Percent for Art” scheme represents another significant innovative policy^[8], skillfully integrating the creation of contemporary art with the preservation and development of modern public spaces and cultural heritage. This regulation mandates that government and public institutions allocate two percent of the construction budget for new or substantially renovated public buildings—such as schools, hospitals, and government facilities—toward the acquisition or commissioning of contemporary artworks for display in public areas. While ostensibly focused on contemporary art, the policy has fostered a positive symbiotic relationship between modern artistic expression and cultural heritage conservation^[9]. Since its implementation, the “two percent” requirement has generated a substantial body of high-quality public art across Italy, making artistic works accessible to the general populace. For instance, during urban renewal projects in historic cities like Rome and Milan, numerous contemporary sculptures and murals have been harmoniously incorporated alongside ancient Roman ruins and Renaissance architecture. This approach has revitalized historic urban quarters, transforming them from static relics into dynamic spaces, thereby successfully achieving the living transmission and evolution of cultural heritage (as shown in table 1).

Table 1. Key Features of Italy’s “Percent for Art” Scheme

Item	Description
Legal Basis	<i>Legge 717/1949</i> (“2% Law”) and subsequent amendments
Funding Ratio	At least 2% of the total budget for new or substantially renovated public buildings
Scope of Application	Public buildings such as schools, hospitals, and government offices
Utilization	Funds dedicated to commissioning, acquiring, or integrating contemporary artworks
Policy Objective	To integrate art into public spaces, enhance urban aesthetics, and ensure cultural continuity
Outcomes	A large body of public artworks created, coexisting with historic architecture and cultural landscapes

3.3 Preventive archaeology and risk control: A scientific system for proactive protection

Italy adheres to the cultural heritage protection principle of “preventive archaeology”, actively establishing mechanisms for archaeological prevention and risk mitigation that shift the focus of conservation work from emergency restoration to advance intervention. Preventive archaeology represents a standout feature of Italy’s heritage protection approach. Under relevant legislation, any construction project involving earthworks—including road construction, building projects, and subway line development, regardless of scale—must undergo archaeological investigation and assessment prior to commencement. The operational procedure mandates that if cultural relics are discovered during the survey, construction must be halted to allow professional archaeological units to conduct rescue excavations. Upon completion, the significance of the unearthed artifacts determines whether they will be preserved in situ, relocated, or documented and reburied. This forward-looking approach fundamentally eliminates the risk of construction projects damaging underground cultural relics, ensuring archaeological heritage remains safeguarded. Additionally, Italy has implemented comprehensive risk prevention systems for cultural heritage, addressing potential threats from natural disasters, human damage, and environmental impact.

4. Representative case study: Integrated urban conservation in Florence

4.1 Holistic management mechanism of a world heritage site

Florence implements a vertical management model of “state control plus specialized administration”, integrating heritage conservation into high-level local planning. The Italian Ministry of Culture directly oversees the Florentine Monuments Superintendency, which exercises comprehensive governance over the historic center of the ancient capital. This system maintains public ownership of building exteriors while granting internal usage rights to legitimate proprietors—allowing interior modifications provided that the architectural façade remains unaltered. Operating within the legal framework established by the Florence Charter^[10], the protected area extends from core zones to buffer zones. By prohibiting tourist coaches from entering the city center and designating peripheral parking facilities, the system alleviates anthropogenic pressures caused by overcrowding in heritage core areas. The Uffizi Gallery exemplifies this priority of conservation over utilization: while ensuring public access, it implements precisely regulated visiting hours and visitor capacity, achieving both cultural heritage utilization and appropriate preservation through controlled management.

4.2 Detailed regulations on window colors and building facades

To achieve architectural coherence, Florence exercises stringent control over exterior details, utilizing facade colors and window frame specifications as fundamental entry points for preservation. The city establishes distinct visual characteristics based on the historical period and architectural style of each area, developing customized color guidelines for different streets. For instance, buildings from the Renaissance period must maintain warm-toned palettes of white or light gray, with vibrant colors prohibited to preserve neighborhood integrity. Any facade modifications require both color approval and construction supervision—when residents or businesses need to restore exteriors or replace windows, they must submit detailed documentation for review by heritage authorities and architectural experts, who prohibit high-visibility colors that disrupt visual continuity. This meticulous attention to architectural details has enabled iconic structures like the Ospedale degli Innocenti’s loggia to maintain their characteristic “column-and-arch” facade design, ensuring the continuous transmission of Renaissance architectural style (as shown in figure 1).



Figure 1. Loggia of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, Florence — showing the characteristic arches and columns in Renaissance architectural language^[11]

4.2 Coordinated integration of urban landscape and public art

Florence's urban visual system embodies "spatial symbiosis" through coordinated practices in Piazza della Signoria and Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, where architectural spatial restructuring has created an integrated visual system connecting "architecture-space-art". The equestrian statue of Cosimo I de' Medici by Giambologna in Piazza della Signoria and Ferdinando I de' Medici's equestrian monument by Pietro Tacca in Piazza della Santissima Annunziata form complementary presences, while the Neptune Fountain dialogues with the Piazza's mythological fountain. Within these architecturally defined spaces, strategic placement of public art establishes visual focal points that intensify historical narrative generation. The 14th-century Loggia dei Lanzi serves as exemplary "open-air public art curation", where collected artworks and their spatial arrangement create a display system framed by the Palazzo Vecchio's historic presence. This ensemble has evolved into an iconic representation of cultural heritage's public value—simultaneously accessible to all citizens—realizing an urban landscape where heritage and public art coalesce into a meaningful visual language.

5. Characteristics and impact analysis

5.1 Holistic protection: From individual monuments to cultural ecology

Italy has elevated protection to encompass broader historical and geographical contexts surrounding buildings or sites, most notably demonstrated through its safeguarding of historic centers. In Venice and Florence's historic centers, for instance, comprehensive preservation extends beyond individual structures to maintain the original urban fabric, street patterns, and living ambiance. This approach conserves not frozen relics but dynamically evolving history integrated with contemporary life. Rather than serving as static "museum specimens", Italy's cultural heritage functions as vibrant "living heritage", ensuring authentic historical continuity while allowing visitors to immerse themselves in living history^[12]. This methodology has generated immeasurable cultural and economic wealth through sustained vitality.

5.2 Institutionalization and standardization: A framework of laws and regulations

Italy maintains a comprehensive legal framework for protection, exemplified by its rigorous and scientific legislative system for cultural heritage. The cornerstone is the *Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code* (1939), supported by detailed supplementary regulations addressing specific areas such as historical landscapes, archaeological artifacts, and historical building restoration^[13]. Heritage conservation has been integrated into standardized government operations, avoiding the treatment of preservation as temporary initiatives—a challenge observed in other contexts. This legal framework ensures the seriousness of conservation work, prevents short-term interventions, and minimizes disruptions from arbitrary human factors. All restoration and conservation projects for cultural heritage and landscapes must undergo strict review and approval procedures, fundamentally halting destructive development practices. This enables genuine preservation and appropriate utilization of cultural relics to be effectively implemented, representing a sustained and profound commitment.

5.3 Social participation and aesthetic orientation: A collaborative protection model for all

Italy emphasizes broad social engagement in culture, creating a heritage protection mechanism that integrates top-down and bottom-up approaches. From the governmental perspective, numerous tax incentive policies encourage private individuals and enterprises to participate in art restoration—such as through corporate sponsorship of artwork conservation. From the public standpoint, numerous non-governmental heritage organizations and volunteers actively contribute to patrols, awareness campaigns, and restoration activities. This extensive societal participation enriches conservation resources while reducing operational costs, significantly alleviating the government's financial burden. Furthermore, it fosters public awareness of heritage preservation and cultivates a sense of responsibility, leading to a conscientious and voluntary commitment to safeguarding cultural legacy.

6. Brief insights for China

6.1 Strengthening constitutional and legal safeguards

The incorporation of cultural heritage protection clauses into the constitution provides the most robust

legal guarantee for preservation efforts. In recent years, China's growing emphasis on cultural heritage has led to the introduction of policy frameworks like the National Standardization Development Outline, establishing a multidimensional standardization system encompassing national, industrial, local, and organizational standards^[14]. This has enabled leapfrog development in cultural heritage standardization and optimized the standard supply structure. Further lessons can be drawn from Italy's heritage protection mechanism by constitutionally clarifying the national and ethnic significance of cultural heritage while solidifying its foundational status.

6.2 Drawing insights from the “Percent for Art” scheme and refined regulatory approaches

Italy's “Percent for Art” mechanism ensures dedicated funding for cultural heritage within public works budgets, creating reliable financial channels. China could consider establishing a long-term stabilization mechanism for conservation funding, potentially allocating a defined percentage from local fiscal budgets or major public construction projects toward preventive maintenance and restoration of cultural heritage. Alternatively, adopting Italy's meticulous regulatory practices regarding building colors and environmental requirements in historic districts would enable more granular control. The introduction of detailed protection guidelines would prevent constructive destruction and well-intentioned yet damaging “conservation-driven construction”, thereby preserving the authenticity and integrity of historic structures during urban renewal and development.

6.3 Promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration and deep public engagement

While Italy encourages private capital and public involvement in heritage conservation, China should further transcend its government-led model by implementing tax incentives, franchise operations and similar measures to attract social capital investment^[15]. Meanwhile, establishing public participation platforms would enable community residents, NGOs, and academic experts to contribute to protection planning and monitoring processes. This approach would not only alleviate the government's financial burden but also enhance public cultural consciousness, ultimately forming a sustainable mechanism for cultural heritage preservation.

7. Conclusion

With its long history and abundant cultural heritage, Italy has achieved global leadership in heritage conservation through advanced philosophies and technologies, robust legal frameworks, stringent management systems, and high levels of public engagement. This progress has enabled the early development and world-leading status of cultural heritage standardization. These Italian experiences not only establish the country as a global benchmark in heritage conservation but also offer universally valuable lessons for all nations—particularly for developing countries like China that possess rich cultural legacies. Looking ahead, China's heritage conservation efforts should further elevate the legal status of cultural heritage within the national legislative system, explore sustainable funding mechanisms tailored to domestic conditions, and steadfastly uphold heritage authenticity amid rapid urbanization.

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