

# The Influence of Western Theories on the Principles of Heritage Conservation in China: Compare the Two Versions of the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (2002 and 2015)

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**ABSTRACT.** *The conservation of cultural heritage is based on the formulation of relevant laws and regulations. This paper analyzes two versions of the China Principles and explain through examples that there are conflicts between Chinese and Western understanding of the conservation of heritage sites, especially the understanding of integrity and authenticity. However, this kind of conflict has been merging in practice and gradually formed a conservation criterion suitable for China's national conditions. Secondly, through the analysis of the formulation process of China Principles, the way of cooperation among many countries can help a country quickly establish the criteria for the conservation of heritage sites, however the criteria formulated in this way need to be always in practice in order to formulate the most suitable criteria for the conservation of national conditions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *China; Heritage sites; Principles; Conservation*

## 1. The historical evolution of Chinese heritage conservation principles

China's traditional architecture forms are diversity, but because it belongs to the category of construction and technology for a long time (Lv, 2015), it has not become the primary object of historical research. In the middle and late 20th century, Liang Sicheng explored the cultural significance of architecture through the study of architectural beauty, which promoted the occurrence of a series of historical city conservation events (Zhu, 2012). During this period, the principle of not changing the original state or preservation status of cultural relics was based on the practice of Chinese cultural relics conservation. In the 1980s, with the implementation of the national reform and opening-up policy, the cultural heritage conservation industry began to pay attention to the development of the international cultural heritage conservation movement (Zhu, 2017). The main principles of international cultural heritage conservation, such as the Venice Charter, have been understood by the Chinese cultural heritage conservation community and gradually become a standard for the evaluation of the conservation of cultural heritage buildings. In 2000, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) issued Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (China Principles). In the 14 years since the application of the China Principles, China has gained a new understanding of the concept of cultural relics conservation and the level of restoration (ICOMOS CHINESE, 2015). In this process, the concept and methods of world heritage conservation has been introduced and promoted. However, it is worth noting that the new edition of China Principles pays more attention to the experience of cultural heritage conservation in China, making it a conservation criterion with Chinese characteristics.

## 2. The Differences and Integration of Chinese and Western Cultural Heritage Conservation Principle

The study of heritage sites in China originated from the Society of Architecture, whose principles for heritage conservation can be summarised as "old as old" (Liang, 1935). For example, in the renovation plan of Jingshan Wanshou Pavilion of the Palace Museum, the most important principle for the conservation of heritage site is to maintain the original appearance, and the unrepaired part should not be renewed but should be retained (Xi, 2016). Liang's thought has laid a foundation for China's interpretation of the integrity of heritage sites to a certain extent. In the same period, the organisations concerned with the conservation of world heritage sites tend to retain historical traces of different periods in their understanding of authenticity. As pointed out in the Venice Charter, the legitimate contributions made by all ages to the unification of historical buildings must be respected. Understanding authenticity is one of the foundations for the formulation of Chinese norms and the first place where Chinese and Western values collide. As can be seen in the 2000 edition of China Principle, article 21

stipulates that the existing physical status and historical information should be protected, thus, some sites began to be protected and restored according to the standards. These criteria can be seen as a response to the Venice Charter, it is a progressive decision made by China on the critical acceptance, application and reflection of western integrity theory.

Similarly, there are differences in the understanding of authenticity between China and the West. The reason for this difference is the difference between Chinese and Western understanding of the principle of repair. Liang Sicheng once pointed out that the former craftsmen often “restored the ruined temples to grandeur”. (Lin, 1996) If we admit that Chinese traditional architecture is not only a visual art, but also a cultural heritage, we should abide by article 23 of China Principles, which states that “the aesthetic value of cultural relics and monuments is mainly manifested in its historical authenticity, and it is not allowed to change the original state of cultural relics in the pursuit of completeness and magnificence”. This view is based on the fact that the cultural values expressed by Chinese architectural forms and crafts are more important than the messages conveyed by their remnants. So the limited restoration of buildings is in line with Burra Chapter's article 1.4, which states that “the meaning of conservation is the step of maintaining the importance of setting heritage sites”.

In the restoration project of Guangyu Ancestral Hall, undertaken by a Chinese team, won the highest outstanding award of UNESCO cultural relics conservation in 2003 because of the proper selection of restoration materials and techniques (Zheng and Liang, 2014). This project was completed under the joint guidance of the Venice Charter and China Principles. Western cultural heritage conservation refers to the traditional method of restoring historical sites as “filling in the gap”, with special emphasis on the principle of *identifiable*. Therefore, in the process of repairing, the Chinese team made a suitable plan to distinguish the replacement parts from the original parts stipulated in the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964), and fulfilled the requirement of sincere and factual expression of cultural value mentioned in the Burra Document (ICOMOS, 1999). At the same time, it also conforms to Article 23 of the Chinese Standards, which refers to *correctly grasping aesthetic standards* (ICOMOS CHINESE, 2002), in order to advocate the integration of scientific analysis and traditional methods. The understanding of authenticity overlaps and corroborates the concepts of China and the West. Although the Chinese criteria are based on the Western criteria for heritage site conservation, they also contain the experience and understanding of Chinese heritage conservation. For example, Chinese architecture is different from the additional decoration of Western masonry buildings and is the superposition of aesthetic and historical values of cultural relics (Zheng and Liang, 2014). Therefore, it should not be allowed to be incomplete and not interfered with like western architecture. The China Principles (2002) conclude that conservation of Chinese cultural heritage has a connection with the mainstream international cultural heritage conservation concepts and principles, rather than merely accepting the export of Western culture and values.

In addition to the understanding of authenticity and integrity, the China Principles (2000) adopted some Western protective ideas, such as the following planning methods and strict assessment procedures proposed in the Burra Charter (ICOMOS, 1999). For the first time, the China Principles clarify the procedures for the conservation of cultural relics and monuments, and puts forward six steps of “investigation, assessment, determination of conservation units at all levels, formulation of conservation plans, implementation of conservation plans and periodic inspection plans”. This procedure will help China's cultural heritage conservation to enter the process of standardised management (Lv, 2015). It combs the original vague concepts and determines a value system based on historical evidence and considering other relevant values comprehensively, which is conducive to promoting the comprehensive and balanced development of the conservation of cultural relics and monuments. However, specific social development factors with Chinese characteristics, such as the principle of “people-oriented”, were not reflected until the 2015 version. China Principle (2002) as a whole is a top-down development principle, emphasising the dominant position of the state in heritage management, allowing the state to have more space for intervention in the decision-making process (ICOMOS, 1964). Compared with the Western ideas of heritage management, the formulation of standards is usually independent of the government, which is recognised and adopted by the government. Therefore, in the process of formulation and application of China Principles, although it originated from western countries, it conforms to China's national conditions in practical application.

### 3. The Influence and Inspiration of Western Theories on Chinaprinciples

Through the analysis, we can conclude that the two editions of China Principles are indeed influenced by the western theory of cultural heritage conservation, but the real reason for their adoption is that the western theory and the traditional Chinese theory interact with each other, and there is no essential conflict. The understanding of the system of cultural relics conservation under the western ideology has indeed made outstanding contributions to the formation of China Principles and the framework of cultural heritage conservation in China.

Therefore, the publication of China Principles is not merely the output of the western value system, but the critical acceptance and development of China's advanced understanding of this, which is a mixture of Chinese and western concepts on the value and conservation of cultural heritage( D'Ayala and Wang, 2006).

This way of cooperation between China and the west requires a practical operation to verify its feasibility and authority. In the General Plan for the conservation of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang and the Study on the conservation of Cave 85 in Mogao Grottoes, which began in 2002, China Principles were used as the guidelines for the conservation procedures and principles (Fan, 2007). The Dunhuang Research Institute firstly collected relevant information about the value and preservation status of the cultural relics of Mogao Grottoes. Secondly, it evaluates its unique historical and artistic value and the value of individual caves. Finally, according to the regulations of the China Principles, the conservation objectives, the selection of repair materials and processes, and the formulation of routine maintenance measures are carried out (Fan, 2007). This series of operations is completed by the cooperation of China and the West, which could prove that the cultural relics conservation planning completed under the guidance of the Chinese Guidelines is reasonable and practical. In the China Principles (2002), due to the lack of systematic concepts of cultural relics conservation and relevant policy-making experience in China, the rationality and scientific of the process of cultural heritage sites conservation are guaranteed in the framework of the guidelines. Western theories guiding significance through cooperation with different countries and the absorption of advanced concepts of cultural relics conservation. This way of cooperation between China and the west can help the newly developed countries in the field of cultural heritage conservation successfully establish a complete system of cultural heritage conservation.

However, as in the China Principles (2002), even after much discussion and revision, the final version of the Guidelines is still a general one. Although this criterion takes into account the national conditions of the country concerned in the formulation process and effectively proposes solutions, the difference between ideal and reality cannot be ignored in practice because of the lack of practical experience. For example, traditional Chinese architecture is mainly made of wood structure, because it is easy to decay and cannot be antigenic. In the face of severely damaged wood structure, it is an unavoidable controversy whether new materials should be replaced or original materials should be added to the support (D'Ayala and Wang, 2006). The formulation of China Principles (2015) is also participated by international organisations, such as the Getty Conservation Institute of the United States. This edition emphasises the accumulation of local experience in the conservation of cultural heritage in China, which is a process of time and reflection. Therefore, in the 2015 edition of the China Principles, the concept of "sustainable development" and "rational utilisation" in line with China's development model is discussed in greater depth (ICOMOS CHINESE, 2015). It is pointed out that the utilisation of cultural relics and monuments should be premised on the safety of historical relics and highlight social benefits. With a more comprehensive understanding of the conservation system of cultural heritage worldwide, the concept of cultural heritage detection is introduced into it. Only by continually accepting and reflecting on the concept of the international organisation for the conservation of cultural heritage, can such a principle be integrated into itself. Therefore, global cooperation has made China Principles a model for the industry.

In the 20th century, the idea of protecting Chinese cultural relics and buildings was developed in a specific historical period, economic environment and academic background. With the prosperity and deepening of the international cultural heritage conservation movement, the field of Chinese architectural heritage began to reflect on the conservation methods, principles and conservation system of Chinese cultural relics and buildings, which was mainly influenced by the Venice Charter. Under the influence of the western theoretical system, China should cooperate with the west and apply the principles of international cultural heritage conservation. The interaction between the concepts and methods of cultural relics conservation in the early days of China's founding and international principles has promoted the integration of China and the world concepts. It can be seen from the formulation process and the final content of the Chinese criteria that the export of the principles of world heritage conservation and the concepts of western countries have exerted a tremendous influence on the conservation of Chinese cultural heritage. This influence runs through the formation, practice, technological development and reflection of China Principles. China's attitude towards the impact of cultural values is speculative acceptance. Therefore, the conservation of Chinese cultural heritage is influenced by Western ideas, but not dominated by western ideas, which is also an important reason why the new version of China Principles can become the leading level in the industry.

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