

Heritage Conservation at the Regional Scale: Ideological Origins, Theoretical Shifts, and Practical Challenges

Authors

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, global cultural heritage conservation has gradually moved toward regional and holistic approaches. China has likewise entered a new stage of integrated protection for historical and cultural heritage. Although research on regional-scale heritage has developed steadily, the deeper intellectual sources and academic lineages underpinning this conservation concept still require systematic examination. This article reviews the ideological origins and theoretical evolution of regional-scale heritage conservation. It identifies three intellectual lineages: the exploration of "locality" in architecture and urban planning; the environmental movement and the rise of humanistic geography; and the "spatial turn" in historiography alongside the emergence of global history. It then explains three major theoretical shifts: from the separation of nature and culture toward their coordination, from the conservation of physical fabric toward the transmission of living heritage, and from Western-centered discourse toward mutual learning among regional civilizations. Drawing on China's current practice, the article analyzes key practical challenges and offers theoretical references and lines of reflection for the protection and transmission of heritage at the regional scale.

Keywords

heritage conservation at the regional scale; ideological origins; theoretical evolution; practical challenges

Introduction

Since the 1960s, international understanding of cultural heritage has deepened continuously. The object of heritage protection has moved beyond isolated monuments and expanded into emerging concepts such as cultural landscapes, cultural routes, and historic urban landscapes. This shift has driven global heritage conservation toward more holistic and systemic approaches.

China has also attached increasing importance to the systematic and integrated protection of cultural heritage. In 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Strengthening the Protection and Transmission of History and Culture in Urban and Rural Construction, which emphasized the "systematic and complete protection and transmission of urban and rural historical and cultural heritage" and required "full spatial coverage and inclusion of all elements" [1]. The document also called for strengthening the integrated protection of cross-regional and cross-basin historical and cultural heritage and integrating such work into major national regional development strategies. After the successful inscription of the Beijing Central Axis on the World Heritage List in 2024, President Xi Jinping called for further strengthening the integrated and systematic protection of cultural and natural heritage and improving conservation capacity. This marks a new stage in which China's urban and rural heritage protection and transmission is becoming more systemic and territorial.

Chinese scholars have already explored regional-scale heritage protection from many perspectives. They emphasize the organic connection of urban, rural, natural, and cultural resources and advocate integrated protection [2-6]. Research objects have expanded to cultural routes, heritage corridors, cultural landscapes, heritage networks [3], settlement clusters [7-8], and historical-cultural spaces [4].

Core issues include identifying regional heritage characteristics [7,9], interpreting heritage value [3,10], and innovating conservation methods [7-9]. These studies have deepened understanding of different types of regional-scale heritage and explored their formation, meaning, and technical methods in the Chinese context. However, the intellectual origins and theoretical lineages that support regional-scale heritage conservation have not yet been systematically clarified. This limits deeper understanding of conservation goals, objects, and connotations, and affects the adaptability of protection strategies in complex practical contexts.

This article therefore seeks to clarify the origins and development of regional-scale heritage conservation, explain how its meaning and scope became clearer through the interaction of different intellectual currents, review its theoretical evolution, and identify practical challenges. The aim is to provide theoretical support for the protection and transmission of regional heritage in China.

1 "Origins": Three Intellectual Sources

The concept of heritage conservation grew out of twentieth-century reflection on the crisis of modernity. Modernism's emphasis on efficiency and universal models led to ecological loss, cultural homogenization, and the decline of local discourse. In this context, heritage became a medium that reconnects people, environment, and history and helps reconstruct identity.

The regional turn in heritage protection is rooted in the revival of humanism and the social critiques that emerged after the Second World War. This article summarizes three main intellectual sources: the awakening of "locality" and the spirit of place in architecture and planning; the integration of natural and cultural values promoted by the environmental movement and humanistic geography; and the holistic historical vision and civilizational dialogue opened by the spatial turn in historiography.

1.1 The Exploration of "Locality" in Architecture and Urban Planning

Rapid urbanization and modernist architectural and planning thought produced the International Style and the crisis of urban sameness. The placelessness of modernity uprooted history and meaning from their local contexts [11], becoming a central target of critique after the 1960s. Contextualism and regionalism were two major approaches through which scholars and practitioners rediscovered locality.

1.1.1 Contextualism: Continuity of Environmental Relationships

The term "context" originates in linguistics and refers to the background on which meaning depends [12]. In architecture, it came to indicate the historical and environmental setting on which form relies. Robert Venturi argued that architecture should engage actively with its environmental elements, and he proposed design ideas oriented toward this goal. Subsequently, architectural circles developed a critical movement that sought to uncover historical meaning and cultural context. Charles Jencks regarded context as including both the historical structure of the city and its urban environment. Colin Rowe's *Collage City* and Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* emphasized these two aspects respectively: the former explored how urban fabric metaphorically preserves historical structure, while the latter interpreted the morphological expression of urban context from a social-psychological perspective.

Contextualism also inspired the development of theories of place. Christian Norberg-Schulz proposed the "genius loci" to describe spiritual identification with the history, culture, and spatial character of a particular place, revealing a new relationship between subjective consciousness and the objective world. Aldo Rossi and Christopher Alexander pushed concepts such as context and place from cognition toward methodology. Through typological induction, they linked historical relationships, cultural emotions, social characteristics, and contemporary reality to create transferable material-spatial connections [13].

Contextualism values relationships within the environment more than isolated entities [12]. It expands heritage from single physical forms into socially meaningful, continuous spatial forms, laying an intellectual foundation for the protection of historic environments and pushing the carrier of heritage value from individual objects toward relational clusters.

1.1.2 Regionalism: Locality at the Regional Scale

Regionalism looks to the regional scale and explores local characteristics nurtured by broad natural geography and human contexts. Patrick Geddes, a pioneer of regional planning, argued that the city is closely connected to the region and that it accumulates and carries a region's cultural heritage as a medium of regional memory [14]. In 1924, Lewis Mumford explicitly proposed regionalism, arguing that architecture and cities should express regional character. He saw the city as a vessel of civilization and believed that its cultural meaning exists across broad regional settings, "from forest to city, from plateau to water town" [15].

Later, through the work of Mumford, Alexander Tzonis, Kenneth Frampton, and others, regionalism developed into a critical theoretical orientation. It rejected nostalgic traditionalism while avoiding blind worship of technical rationality, and it expressed the spirit of place and cultural memory in a more constructive way. Regionalism thus encouraged heritage protection to move beyond the isolated protection of local environments and to focus instead on the broader urban-rural settlement environment and its integrated regional characteristics.

1.2 The Environmental Movement and the Humanistic Revival of Geography

Since the twentieth century, the environmental movement has risen, and geography has experienced a humanistic revival. Western conceptions of nature gradually shifted from a mechanistic subject-object dualism toward an ecological humanism that emphasizes coexistence.

1.2.1 The Environmental Movement: Ethical Recognition of Nature

As early as the Industrial Revolution, people had begun to recognize the scarcity of natural resources. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* described an ideal of harmony and return to simplicity, expressing respect for the natural environment. Yet such reflections were largely romantic and limited to elite circles.

After the Second World War, severe environmental problems directly gave rise to modern environmental protection. In 1962, *Silent Spring* exposed the ecological toxicity of chemical pesticides and awakened public environmental consciousness. In 1972, the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, warning that natural resources were not inexhaustible. Sustainability gradually became a global issue. This movement quickly influenced many fields. Ian Lennox McHarg systematically demonstrated the interdependence between humans and nature, argued that ecology should be the foundation of regional planning, and proposed corresponding planning principles. By 1987, sustainable development had been formally articulated, marking the transformation of environmental protection from elite advocacy into a global agenda.

Driven by the environmental movement, nature gradually changed from an object of extraction into a value subject with ecological and aesthetic integrity. At the same time, the idea of wilderness protection emerged, emphasizing the maintenance of pure natural conditions and rejecting human traces. This idea directly reflected the recognition of nature's subject value. Overall, the environmental movement generated an ethical recognition of nature and laid a cognitive foundation for the integration of natural and cultural heritage.

1.2.2 Humanistic Geography: The Revival of Human Values

The humanistic revival of geography revealed the deep connection between the natural environment and human emotion. In traditional geography, Carl Ritter and Friedrich Ratzel had already explored human-environment relations. In the early twentieth century, Carl Ortwin Sauer proposed the theory of cultural landscape, understanding culture as the agent and nature as the medium of geographical processes [16]. This opened a line of research on the coupling of nature and culture. However, it did not become mainstream at the time. With the rise of the quantitative revolution, geography's pursuit of scientization once led to the problem of the "absence of the human."

This tendency changed in the 1960s. Yi-Fu Tuan explored topophilia from a phenomenological perspective and revealed the emotional bond between people and place [17]. Edward Relph criticized the loss of place uniqueness under modernity through the debate between place and placelessness. Tim Ingold proposed a dwelling perspective, emphasizing that humans and the natural world are co-produced through continuous practice. The Vidal school paid attention to individual experience, lived space, and people's perception of and emotional ties to environment [18]. These theories shared a critical stance rooted in phenomenology, existentialism, and related currents. They emphasized human subjectivity, embodied experience, and place attachment, re-establishing human values at the center of geographical research.

This renewed view of nature broke through narrow scientific understandings and fully recognized the role of emotion, value, religion, custom, and other cultural-humanistic dimensions. Beyond pure mountains, rivers, and artificial remains, the integrated landscapes produced by long-term human-environment interaction also became important heritage types.

1.3 The Spatial Turn in Historiography and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations

Historiography deeply shapes human identity and value recognition. Since the twentieth century, Western historiography has undergone a spatial turn and developed a global historical outlook concerned with cross-regional and intercivilizational interaction. The interpretation and evaluation of heritage meaning changed accordingly.

1.3.1 The Spatial Turn: From Political Events to the Lifeworld

In traditional historiography, the Rankean school emphasized political events and described linear changes in power. In the early twentieth century, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and other *Annales* scholars challenged this position. They argued that history should not merely narrate political processes but should extend to "all human activities and every detail of history" [19].

On the one hand, the spatial turn introduced a geographical perspective into historical research. Fernand Braudel's theory of the *longue durée* treated the slow transformation of geographical environments as the deep foundation of historical processes and emphasized the lasting shaping power of space over social form and human activity [20]. On the other hand, historiography shifted philosophically from a purely diachronic perspective toward synchrony and began to absorb structural perspectives from sociology, seeking general patterns even at the cost of exhaustive detail [21]. The basic unit of historical research therefore moved from entities defined by political boundaries toward "geo-cultural units" linked by shared geographical environments and social relations.

Historical meaning was no longer confined to emperors, generals, and political achievements, but came to focus on the ways of life and collective wisdom formed through long-term interaction between people and environment. Heritage was no longer only a monumental political symbol. Its criterion of

recognition gradually shifted from whether it was "great" to whether it authentically reflected the complex processes of human-environment relations, and it moved toward a regional and holistic logic.

1.3.2 Global History: From Eurocentrism to Civilizational Dialogue

In the late twentieth century, historiography gradually moved beyond Eurocentric narratives and global history emerged. Influenced by Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse, scholars began to reflect on the colonial perspective behind so-called objective history and to reaffirm the diversity of human civilizations. Arnold J. Toynbee argued that civilizations are parallel, contemporaneous, and equivalent, emphasizing that civilization does not evolve along a single line but develops through multiple coexisting trajectories [22].

Transculturation, translation, and identity construction based on difference became major concerns [23]. William H. McNeill regarded exchanges among civilizations as a major force changing the course of human history [24]. Jerry H. Bentley argued that large-scale migration, long-distance trade, religion, and cultural exchange are indispensable for understanding the development trajectories of individual societies and the world as a whole [25]. Historical writing therefore came to reconstruct history through cross-regional and cross-cultural networks of connection. This transformation encouraged attention to cross-regional heritage processes. Cultural routes emerged as a new heritage type, revealing historical processes shaped by long-term exchange among different civilizations through roads, rivers, and other carriers.

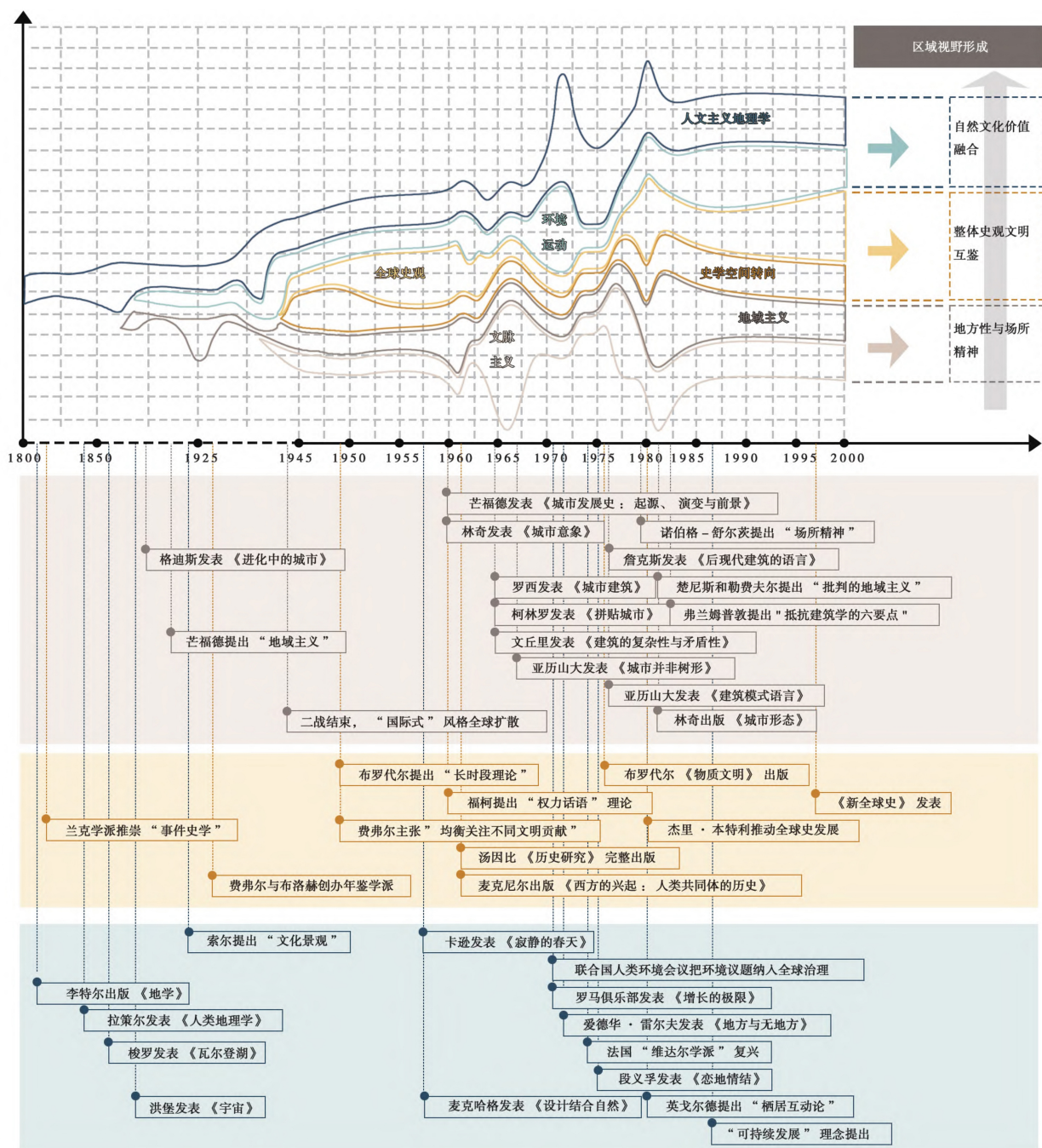


Figure 1. Ideological origins of heritage protection at the regional scale.

2 "Shifts": Theoretical Evolution of Heritage Conservation

The evolution of these intellectual sources drove theoretical changes in heritage conservation. The exploration of locality in architecture and urban planning expanded the object of protection from individual remains to regional systems carrying local memory. The environmental movement and humanistic geography promoted the coexistence of nature and culture and pushed heritage conservation beyond binary separation. Historiography's attention to civilizational dialogue and cross-regional exchange provided a cognitive foundation for new heritage types such as cultural routes.

Together, these lineages led toward a regional perspective and generated differentiated forms of practice.

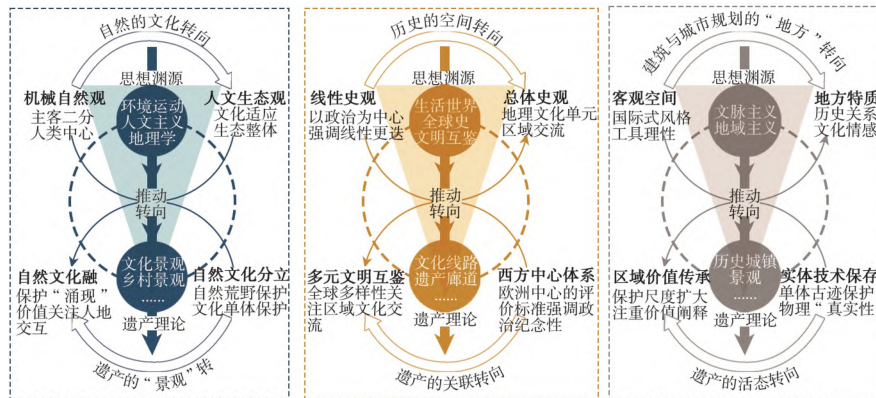


Figure 2. Ideological evolution shaping theoretical development.

2.1 From Separated Values to Coordination Between Nature and Culture

2.1.1 Initial Separation: Wilderness Protection for Nature and Physical Conservation for Culture

In and before the 1960s, natural and cultural heritage were clearly separated. Natural heritage protection was promoted mainly by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which formed a conservation concept and practice system centered on ecological integrity. IUCN advocated strict protected areas and incorporated the national park idea of the United States, focusing on ecological spaces, plants, animals, and habitats. Influenced by the aesthetics of wilderness, it tended to exclude human intervention. Cultural heritage protection followed the European tradition of monument conservation and was guided by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), focusing on monuments, buildings, sites, and other human-made physical entities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the two discourses began to intersect. The 1962 Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites proposed that nature protection should extend to constructed landscapes and sites, implicitly recognizing the intertwined value of culture and nature [26]. The 1964 Venice Charter expanded protection from "historic monuments" to urban or rural settings on the basis of the concept of cultural property. Nevertheless, the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage still strictly divided heritage into natural and cultural categories [27]. This reflected the continuing lack of institutional integration. Even the later addition of "mixed heritage" did not fundamentally overcome the structural division.

2.1.2 Toward Integration: Landscape as a Link Between Culture and Nature

After the 1980s, the concept of landscape in geography was absorbed into heritage conservation. In 1984, France proposed the notion of rural landscape to describe "highly humanized nature." The two failed nominations of the English Lake District further demonstrated that existing criteria could not fully encompass heritage in which natural and cultural values were deeply coupled. In 1992, cultural landscape became an independent heritage type, formally breaking the dualism between nature and culture.

Cultural landscape encouraged heritage types originally classified as either natural or cultural to actively absorb concepts from the other side. In 2005, the Vienna Memorandum introduced the concept of

historic urban landscape on the basis of historic areas [28]. In 2011, the Valletta Principles further stated that historic towns are necessary components of broader natural or human-made contexts, renewing the understanding of the Washington Charter [29]. At the same time, natural heritage protection also changed. National park construction in many countries increasingly incorporated cultural heritage protection, turning nature reserves from single-purpose natural protected areas into local places that combine natural and cultural value.

The integration of cultural monuments and natural wilderness into landscape-based heritage stems from a deeper recognition of emergent values formed through long-term human-environment interaction. Land-use patterns, ecological wisdom, and cultural identity produced through such interaction can be fully presented only at the regional scale.

2.2 From Physical Conservation to the Transmission of Living Heritage Values

2.2.1 Value Orientation: The Continuity of Meaning Behind Material Form

As the scale of heritage expanded, conservation thinking gradually became value-oriented. In 1979, the Burra Charter clearly proposed the conservation of "places" and established value assessment as a basic premise for conservation action [30]. The concept of authenticity also evolved, moving from the original physical state of materials and structures toward the continuity and expression of cultural meaning.

The Historic Centre of Warsaw provides a telling example. It was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1980. Because of wartime destruction, its buildings were reconstructed after the war and were not authentic ancient objects in a strict material sense. However, the old city carefully retained its medieval form and layout. Combined with the distinctive historical background of urban revival, the act of reconstruction symbolized the noble resistance spirit of Warsaw's people and demonstrated outstanding universal value [31]. This shows that the internal value of heritage has moved to the center. Material preservation is no longer the sole goal of conservation; the identification and interpretation of cultural value have become key tasks.

2.2.2 Expanding Boundaries: The Living Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage

As the importance of value became more visible, intangible cultural heritage emerged as an independent heritage type. From the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore to the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and then to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, oral traditions, performing arts, festivals, rituals, and other living cultural practices were incorporated into the heritage field. The focus of protection shifted from static restoration to living transmission.

The "living" character of such heritage lies in its continuous practice, reshaping, and re-creation by communities and groups in specific environments. Intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history, and it gives them a sense of identity and continuity [40]. This people-centered and process-based conservation concept naturally exceeds the micro scale. Living transmission is essentially a localized regional practice that cannot be separated from local social structures, ecological conditions, and cultural contexts. The 1994 Expert Meeting on the Global Strategy noted that living cultures and their depth, complexity, and diverse relationships with environment urgently required deeper understanding [32].

The call for living transmission shows that heritage conservation is no longer the technical preservation of a single object. It is the maintenance of continuous interactions among people, culture, nature, and

history within a region. Heritage protection thus moves from points to areas, and from entities to relationships.

2.3 From Western-Centered Discourse to Mutual Learning Among Regional Civilizations

2.3.1 Global Discourse: Heritage and Cultural Diversity

Under the influence of global history, the discourse of heritage evaluation gradually moved beyond Eurocentrism and expanded toward multiple civilizations. The World Decade for Cultural Development, launched in 1988, stated that the valuable parts of every culture could be included in cultural identity [33]. This marked the evolution of international heritage discourse toward pluralism and inclusiveness.

The core of this transition lies in a deeper understanding of regionality. The values of diverse civilizations are not abstract. They are embedded in distinctive regional environments and are the combined expression of natural geography, social structure, and historical context. The 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity redefined authenticity by emphasizing that the cultural values of different civilizations must be understood within their own historical and social contexts [34]. In the same year, the Global Strategy evaluated the representational imbalance of the World Heritage List and actively encouraged non-Western countries to participate in nominations. Its purpose was to discover and recognize heritage with distinctive regional characteristics that had long been neglected. In the following decade, the number of States Parties increased from 112 to 152, and formerly marginal cultures entered the World Heritage field.

UNESCO's 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity stated that culture takes diverse forms across time and space and that cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity [35]. This reaffirmed the value of cultural diversity and highlighted the key role of place as a carrier of cultural value. Heritage evaluation thus moved toward global cultural equality. This not only made pluralism a global consensus but also turned the regional perspective into an indispensable foundation for understanding and protecting the values of diverse civilizations.

2.3.2 Mutual Learning Among Civilizations: Cultural Routes as a New Cross-Regional Type

Mutual learning and exchange among civilizations have received increasing attention, encouraging heritage to move beyond the framework of the nation-state and to generate new types connected by relationships. In 1964, the Council of Europe proposed the concept of cultural routes. In 1994, UNESCO identified it as a heritage type, and in 2005 it was incorporated into the criteria of the World Heritage List. In 2008, ICOMOS adopted the Charter on Cultural Routes, which states that cultural routes arise from human migration and sustained cross-regional exchange. They connect not only spaces but also past and present, seeking the deep integration of natural and cultural, tangible and intangible heritage [36].

The Council of Europe's definition of cultural routes is broader. It does not limit them to transport corridors; they may also be routes connected by common themes. Association therefore goes beyond physical forms such as rivers and roads. At the same time, different places developed heritage types with local characteristics. The United States established heritage corridors, using rivers, railways, or historical passages as axes to integrate natural, industrial, immigrant, and community memories and to form composite heritage regions that combine ecological protection, cultural transmission, and regional revitalization.

These linear regional heritages are spatial projections of major cultural events and sustained exchange activities. They connect dispersed heritage through cross-administrative and cross-civilizational networks, embodying the transformation of heritage protection toward networked forms.

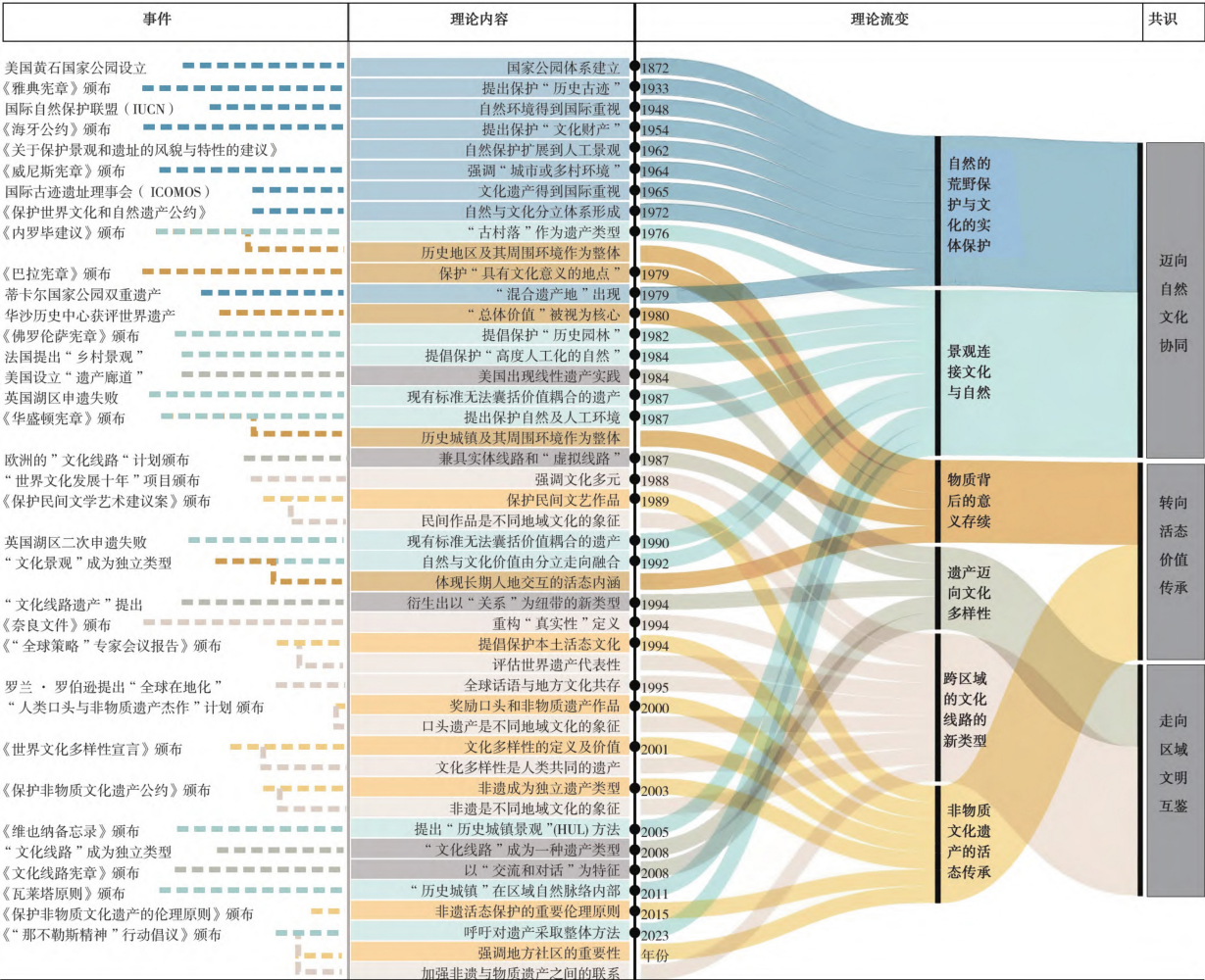


Figure 3. Theoretical evolution of heritage protection at the regional scale.

3 Practical Challenges of Regional-Scale Heritage Protection

International regional heritage theory offers important insights for China, but it also brings practical challenges. China has already advanced regional-scale practices such as large-site protection and utilization, national park construction, and the concentrated and contiguous protection of traditional villages. Yet the value of many historic settlements, cultural routes, agricultural heritages, and vernacular landscapes has not been fully identified. In practice, key challenges remain in identifying core elements, optimizing protection methods, activating and transforming resources, and establishing cross-regional coordination mechanisms.

3.1 Expanding Cognitive Boundaries and Building a Clear Path for Regional Heritage Protection

China has an integrated urban-rural historical and cultural spatial structure [37]. Heritage protection can effectively conserve and fully interpret its unique and profound meaning only by expanding cognitive boundaries, moving beyond point-based thinking, and adopting a regional perspective. Chinese cities

and villages share common roots and are closely connected through ritual order, city-building ideas, and land-use patterns. This integrated pattern cannot be fully captured by isolated protected cultural relics or scattered historic cities, towns, and villages. Although the emerging protection and transmission system has recognized the continuity of cultural heritage resources, several challenges remain.

First, regional cultural values should be explored more deeply, and recognition of value carriers should be broadened. Protection should move beyond officially listed heritage objects and include regional carriers of overall value, such as emblematic cultural landscapes, natural geographical patterns, historical roads and water networks, irrigation systems, belief and folk networks. Telling vivid local stories is the foundation for telling China's story. Only through systematic exploration, research, and interpretation of broad value carriers can regional historical and cultural meanings be revealed more fully and support a richer and more perceptible national historical narrative.

Second, research on value types should be strengthened, and differentiated paths of protection and transmission should be developed. For cluster-type heritage focused on regional culture, such as the ongoing concentrated protection of traditional villages, the core is to protect the overall pattern, landscape character, and local cultural ecology of regional agricultural civilization, preserving an integrated cultural system in which mountains can be seen, waters remembered, and homesickness retained. For heritage focused on cultural exchange, such as the Silk Road and the Tang-Tibet Ancient Road, the value lies in route networks, cultural nodes, and evidence of cultural interaction. Protection should emphasize overall connections, cultural stratification, and dynamic exchange processes. For commemorative heritage witnessing major historical events, such as the Long March routes, protection should focus on the temporal-spatial sequence of events, key scenes, and historical environments, and should interpret the significance and spiritual meaning of the events. Different types therefore require clear value attributes as well as adaptive protection goals, control scales, and transmission strategies.

Third, core value carriers should be precisely defined, and operable protection frameworks should be built. Regional heritage covers vast areas and contains complex elements. Conservation cannot treat everything uniformly, nor can it simply apply micro- or meso-scale boundary-drawing methods. It must deeply understand spatial-cultural contexts and evolutionary logic, closely follow the five historical dimensions proposed in the Opinions, incorporate local experiences into national historical processes, identify structural elements of regional value, maintain key nodes of urban-rural cultural continuity, and build regional protection frameworks that are operable and transmittable.

3.2 Applying Digital-Intelligent Technologies to Deepen Heritage Cognition and Practice

The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities for addressing the challenges of regional heritage protection. Through the integration of heterogeneous multi-source data, spatial information, and intelligent algorithmic mining, it is now possible to obtain more accurate, more complete, and deeper heritage information than before. Such information can extend to intangible dimensions such as historical information, human activities, and perceptual experience, revealing deep regional cultural contexts and providing technical support for regional heritage protection and transmission.

As computing power grows, the historical processes in which one outcome has multiple causes become more visible [38]. Researchers can see not only what regional heritage is, but also why and how it formed. This greatly improves understanding of heritage spatial structure, evolutionary logic, and the underlying genes of regional culture. It should be noted, however, that quantitative research and new technological applications in regional heritage should not stop at abstract digital platforms. Their real

goal is to interpret deep cultural structures, explain the historical continuity of urban and rural areas, reconstruct the rich and real connections between people and land, and turn regional heritage protection into a tangible, perceptible, and experienceable local practice.

3.3 Promoting Pluralistic Co-Governance and Stimulating the Internal Dynamics of Living Transmission

The development of regional-scale heritage protection shows that, when facing broad territories and large populations, effective protection must be living protection. China's urban and rural heritage protection is entering a new stage centered on transmission [39]. Its focus must shift from single rigid control toward creative transmission with people as the main actors and everyday life as the field of practice.

On the one hand, a multi-stakeholder co-governance mechanism for collaborative protection is needed. UNESCO notes that living heritage evolves through intergenerational transmission and community interaction [40]. This requires government guidance, but also resident participation, technical support from professional institutions, active input from enterprises, and public identification. Only in this way can protection cease to be an externally imposed management behavior and instead become a cultural consciousness rooted in internal need, forming an effective basis for sustainability.

On the other hand, heritage value interpretation and contemporary expression should be strengthened so that heritage becomes perceptible and participatory. The significance of many historical and cultural resources remains hidden beneath material appearances. Systematic research, narrative construction, and media communication are urgently needed to explain the deep connections between historical-cultural resources and regional collective spirit, to protect cultural roots while giving heritage new forms of expression and social functions.

Ultimately, living protection must actively enter the broader pattern of regional development and contribute to high-quality development. In current circumstances, regional heritage protection should not become a constraint that brings no benefits. In practice, it is necessary to repeatedly ask: how can cultural heritage resources be transformed into regional development advantages? How can cultural-tourism integration, creative industries, and other approaches turn heritage into a resource for development and enhance regional cultural attractiveness? These are core questions for assessing the effectiveness of living transmission.

3.4 Strengthening Cross-Regional Coordination and Exploring Institutional Innovation Beyond Administrative Barriers

In recent years, China has continuously promoted the integration of cross-regional and cross-basin cultural spaces, including the Great Wall, the Grand Canal, and the Long March national cultural parks. These practices have accumulated certain experience. However, apart from a few heritages such as the Grand Canal and the Great Wall that are managed according to cultural relic entities, many regional heritages remain mainly at the level of academic research and have not yet become clearly defined protection types. Institutional breakthroughs are urgently needed. The core challenge of regional heritage protection lies in its inherent cross-boundary character.

First, the administrative subject is often unclear. Regional heritage spaces frequently cross provincial, municipal, and county boundaries, creating ambiguous questions of who promotes, who is responsible, and who manages. This leads to practical conflicts such as disconnected planning, difficult responsibility allocation, and unresolved benefit coordination.

Second, cross-departmental coordination is difficult. Integrated protection involves many functional departments, including cultural relics, housing and urban-rural development, natural resources, culture and tourism, and water conservancy. Different protection elements are often managed separately, making policy coordination and resource input institutionally difficult.

Third, cognitive differences and technical bottlenecks persist. Regions and departments often differ in their understanding of heritage value and protection standards. The lack of unified technical standards, data platforms, and management norms has become an obstacle to integrated protection.

Only through sustained institutional innovation, such as establishing higher-level regional coordination bodies, formulating special cross-regional laws and regulations, and developing unified technical standards for classification, evaluation, monitoring, and management, can dispersed administrative resources be effectively integrated. Such innovation is necessary to promote the integrated protection and sustainable development of cross-regional heritage and to ensure the long-term transmission of valuable heritage within regional patterns.

4 Conclusion

The intellectual origins of regional heritage protection show that the field has absorbed insights from multiple disciplines and completed profound theoretical transformations: from single elements to cultural landscapes, from the separation of nature and culture to integrated living heritage, and from single value standards to respect for civilizational diversity. China has a strong civilizational foundation for regional heritage protection. Its rivers and mountains have shaped diverse geographical units and nurtured rich regional cultures. Over thousands of years, cultural continuity has persisted and formed distinctive cultural ecosystems. More importantly, cultural exchange and integration have always been normal conditions in Chinese history. North-south integration, east-west interaction, and urban-rural interembedding together form a continuous network of cultural flows. This civilizational character of plural unity and harmony in diversity gives China a deep foundation for cross-regional, long-duration, and systematic heritage cognition and protection.

Future regional heritage protection in China should therefore be rooted in its own civilization while integrating global theories and practical experience. It should explore a distinctive path supported by scientific methods, connect local stories with national narratives through cultural interpretation, coordinate regional patterns with local wisdom, and strengthen institutional guarantees and plural participation. This is not only an internal requirement for protecting the roots of Chinese culture, but also China's responsibility in responding to global heritage challenges.

Notes

[1] The Athens Charter of 1933 formally proposed the protection of "historic monuments."

[2] The Hague Convention of 1954 proposed the concept of "cultural property."

[3] The 1976 Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas proposed the protection of historic areas.

[4] The five historical dimensions proposed in the Opinions are: the long and continuous civilizational history of the Chinese nation; the historical process of modern and contemporary China; the glorious course in which the Communist Party of China united and led the Chinese people in unremitting struggle; the historical trajectory of the founding and development of the People's Republic of China; and the great journey of reform and opening up and socialist modernization.

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