

Conceptual Evolution of Urban-Rural Heritage Conservation within the Historic and Cultural City Framework

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Abstract: China's historic and cultural city system emerged during national construction, took shape during reform and opening-up, and was adjusted through rapid urbanization. After more than forty years of practice, it has entered a phase centered on living conservation, use, and cultural inheritance. This paper traces the conceptual shift from mechanistic protection through boundary demarcation and material retention to organic conservation pursuing integrity, soundness, and authenticity. In response to current requirements, it further proposes a people-centered orientation and a system of civilizational identity, clarifying the core meaning of urban-rural heritage conservation and inheritance in the new era.

Keywords: historic and cultural city; urban-rural heritage; integrated conservation; authenticity; cultural inheritance

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Since the Nineteenth CPC National Congress, central agencies and national ministries have issued a series of heritage policies that emphasize inheritance alongside conservation. The 2021 Opinions on Strengthening the Conservation and Inheritance of Historic Culture in Urban and Rural Construction marked a transition from the protection of historic and cultural cities to a broader urban-rural conservation and inheritance system [1-2]. This shift changes guiding principles, working methods, and objectives and requires the conceptual history of the system to be reconsidered [3-6].

1 "Preservation" and "Regulation" under the Historic-city System

The system developed through an exploratory period from 1982 to 1994, a period of consolidation from 1994 to 2002, and a rapid-adjustment period from 2002 to 2012. It initially protected nationally designated cities, later formed a three-tier system of historic cities, towns, villages, and districts, and ultimately established a legal and technical framework. Its first thirty years combined an objective of preservation with a method of regulatory control [7-13].

1.1 Conservation for Material Retention

Retention established a material-centered understanding of heritage. Influenced by authenticity and by the Nara and Machu Picchu charters, early practice prioritized monuments and historic buildings, then extended to historic cities, towns, villages, traditional districts, and their associated spatial patterns [8,14-16]. Chinese practice also drew on the principle that cultural relic buildings should be preserved in their existing condition. Buildings were increasingly understood as parts of urban fabric and historical meaning, which provided the intellectual basis for integrated conservation.

1.2 Boundary-based Regulatory Control

As a statutory national system, historic-city conservation relied on mandatory spatial controls. Protected cores, buffer zones, construction-control areas, and environmental-coordination zones were delineated to constrain development around cultural relics and historic districts. This approach was effective in periods of rapid construction, but fixed boundaries could separate heritage from changing urban life and encourage protection as isolated objects. The method safeguarded a large quantity of heritage while revealing the need for more adaptive governance [9-12,17-18].

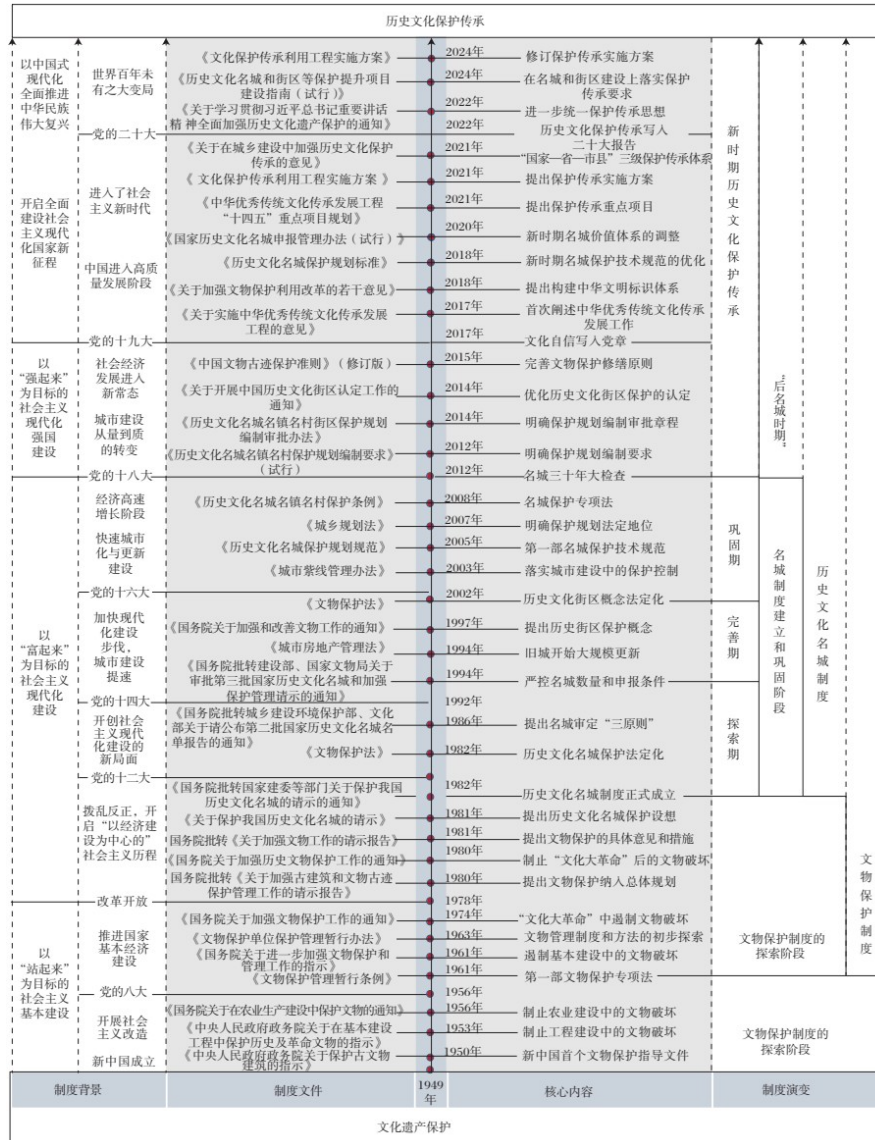


Fig. 1 Historical development of China's cultural-heritage conservation system since 1949

2 Organic Conservation in the "Post-historic-city" Period

International exchange and domestic practice shifted attention from isolated monuments to built heritage, cultural landscapes, and living settlements. Conservation became an organic process linking values, spatial relations, communities, and governance [19-23].

2.1 Pursuing Integrity in Historic Urban Areas

Integrity requires the conservation of spatial structure, streets, plots, landscape relationships, cultural functions, and the links between historic areas and their wider setting. Historical urban landscape approaches emphasize association and systems [19-22]. Chinese projects in Ningbo and other cities show that overall conservation must coordinate morphology, public space, infrastructure, livelihood, and contemporary development instead of freezing a district at one moment [21-23].

2.2 Pursuing Sound Governance in Historic Districts

Historic districts are living communities. Their conservation depends on a transition from administrative management to collaborative governance, with resident participation, community-based renewal, and incremental improvement [24-29]. Practice in Dujiangyan, Nanjing's Xiaoxihu area, and Beijing's courtyard neighborhoods demonstrates that shared decision making and small-scale action can sustain local life while improving safety and services. Conservation should retain common spatial patterns while accommodating meaningful differences [30-32].

2.3 Pursuing Authenticity in Historic Buildings

Authenticity concerns material, design, craftsmanship, setting, use, and the historical information carried by buildings. Built heritage is socially constructed and interpreted, and its value is renewed through use [33-40]. Conservation should avoid both facsimile reconstruction and rigid object worship. It should document historical layers, retain credible fabric, permit compatible adaptation, and communicate multiple values to contemporary society [34-41].

3 Urban-Rural Historic-cultural Conservation and Inheritance in the New Era

3.1 Constructing a System of Civilizational Identity

Historic-cultural space is the product of long interaction among nature, the state, regions, and local communities. A national identity system should therefore include long-duration structures such as the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, medium-duration institutional landscapes such as the Great Wall and Grand Canal, and locally distinctive historical-cultural regions such as Lingnan and Guanzhong [41-44]. Linking these scales can express both a shared national civilization and its plural regional formation.

3.2 A People-centered Orientation to Cultural Inheritance

Twentieth-century cultural anthropology reframed heritage as a social process and moved practice from object-centered to people-centered conservation [45-46]. In China, this has become a political and ethical principle: people are the creators and inheritors of history, and conservation should respond to material and spiritual needs [47-49]. Policies should support residents' initiative, preserve everyday places and collective memory, and recognize today's construction as tomorrow's heritage [50]. As a public good, heritage should strengthen social cohesion and allow individuals and communities to benefit from, understand, and enrich it [51-52].

4 Conclusion

Over four decades, the historic and cultural city system has shifted from buildings to value-bearing environments, from frozen preservation to living use, and from material retention to cultural inheritance. It has developed approaches with Chinese characteristics while safeguarding extensive urban and rural heritage. The new phase requires theory and practice aligned with national governance, civilizational identity, and people's everyday lives. Reviewing this evolution clarifies the core of conservation in the Chinese context and supports methods through which heritage can contribute actively to contemporary society.

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