

An Exploration into the Development of Cultural Heritage Research from an East Asian Regional Perspective

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Abstract. Long-standing cultural exchanges rooted in Confucian civilization have left China, Japan and the ROK abundant homologous tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This focuses on East Asia to sort out research progress and facilitate regional collaborative protection. Based on the 2024 UNESCO heritage data and the annual bulletins of the cultural and museum departments of China, Japan, and South Korea, this study selected literature from CNKI, J-STAGE, and RISS databases from 2004 to 2024 and conducted a comparative analysis using literature statistics. According to statistics, the three countries own 94 world cultural & mixed heritage sites and 90 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage inscriptions, ranking top across the Asia-Pacific region; Over the past two decades, academic research has shifted beyond mere textual research on ancient buildings, and more and more scholars are focusing on practical content such as digital filing and active operation of intangible cultural heritage. The differences in protection standards among countries, difficulties in obtaining evidence of cross-border intangible cultural heritage, and imbalances in the allocation of grassroots scientific research resources restrict the advancement of cross-national research. This article summarizes the achievements and existing shortcomings from five research dimensions, including historical tracing and national practices.

Keywords: East Asian Perspective; Cultural Heritage Research; Protection Practice; Regional Cooperation; Digital Transformation.

1. Introduction

Various countries have successively introduced laws related to cultural relics, laying the institutional foundation for the study of modern heritage in East Asia. The Ancient Shrines and Temples Preservation Law promulgated by Japan in 1897, as the earliest special protection regulation for ancient architecture in East Asia, officially ended the disorderly state of cultural relic restoration in the region that relied on spontaneous folk activities. In 1962, South Korea introduced the Cultural Property Protection Act, which for the first time established the legal protection status of intangible cultural resources in legislative form. The Cultural Relics Protection Law implemented in 1982 established a unified national system for the classification and control of cultural relics, and three pieces of legislation jointly constructed the basic framework for the institutionalization of East Asian cultural heritage research.

Rooted in shared ritual-music culture and agrarian civilization, China, Japan and the ROK preserve numerous culturally analogous historic relics. The differences in the modern development paths of various countries have gradually formed differentiated characteristics in the value cognition and management mode of regional heritage research. The implementation and application of international heritage conservation norms such as the Venice Charter and the Nara Document on Authenticity have promoted the deep integration of local conservation theories and international standards. In the past thirty years, the implementation of these norms has also continued to influence the direction of regional research [1]. The East Asian Cultural Heritage Protection Society, established in 2007, has established a stable cross-border academic exchange platform. The institution's academic achievements over the years are archived on authoritative research platforms in China, providing reliable first-hand information for the regional academic network.

Rapid urbanization and extreme weather constantly damage heritage resources and drive the expansion of relevant research.

Severe weather also erodes historic sites, rendering damage-only restoration inadequate for current conservation demands. Contemporary East Asian heritage research has gradually extended to diverse interdisciplinary fields such as ecological conservation, cultural tourism integration, and digital archiving. This study relies on the annual reports of cultural and museum departments in various countries, academic databases from China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as reports from UNESCO, without using fictional data or cases. The article systematically reviews the development of East Asian cultural heritage research from five dimensions: historical tracing, national practice, disciplinary integration, regional cooperation, and development analysis, and objectively summarizes the existing shortcomings in the industry.

2. The Historical Origins and Theoretical Foundations of East Asian Cultural Heritage Research

At the end of the 19th century, Western archaeological ideas entered East Asia, transforming traditional Chinese epigraphic research paradigms. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan was the first to introduce the Western architectural and archaeological research system. In 1871, the Law for the Preservation of Ancient Objects and Relics was promulgated, which carried out a comprehensive survey of ancient artifacts and architectural systems throughout the country in the form of national legislation [2].

During the same period, domestic historical research achieved breakthrough reforms. The dual evidence method proposed by Wang Guowei has established a mutual verification system between unearthed objects and handed down documents, breaking through the limitations of traditional epigraphy that focuses on textual research, and facilitating the shift of Chinese antiquities research toward empirical analysis. After World War II, China, Japan and South Korea rolled out specialized cultural heritage regulations, shifting heritage research from scattered individual exploration to state-governed standardized studies. In 1962, South Korea implemented the Cultural Property Protection Act, which included traditional opera and handicrafts in the legal protection of intangible cultural property; In 1982, China implemented the Cultural Relics Protection Law, which relied on the sixteen-character protection criteria to clearly define the research boundaries of movable and immovable cultural relics.

Rooted in their respective local histories, the three countries have gradually explored different approaches to heritage conservation. Japan advocates a protection model that integrates heritage into daily life, based on the experience of surviving ancient temples; South Korea focuses on local customs and deeply cultivates research on the revitalization and transformation of traditional skills; Based on the principles of authenticity and integrity of cultural relics, China is exploring a holistic protection path in conjunction with urban and rural development [3]. After the release of the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, international heritage protection standards were widely applied in the East Asian academic community. Countries refined their research standards based on their local conditions, and under the practical needs of localizing international standards, regional and cross-border academic exchanges gradually became normalized.

In November 2007, the Society for the Protection of East Asian Cultural Heritage was established in Seoul, South Korea. Through biennial academic conferences, the organization brings together scholars from China, Japan, and South Korea to discuss the practical achievements of localizing international standards. After a long period of research and exploration, East Asian scholars no longer blindly copy existing Western theories, but combine local cultural characteristics to complete theoretical improvements, gradually constructing a characteristic heritage research system that is suitable for regional development.

3. Practice Models and Regional Differences in the Protection of East Asian Cultural Heritage

Sharing similar cultural roots but differing in administration, land policies and folk customs, the three nations develop distinct heritage management and fundraising mechanisms, leading to divergent research focuses [4].

China's heritage protection adopts a hierarchical control combined with collaborative participation of social forces. Relying on the statistical bulletins of cultural relics published year by year by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the management system of three-level cultural relics protection units has been put into practice nationwide. The protection funds rely on the central finance and local finance for supplementary financing. Relevant policies continue to relax the access restrictions of private capital involved in cultural relics repair. Domestic scientific research is based on the reality of local protection, focusing on the overall conservation of historical urban areas, the remediation of cave diseases, and the implementation of multiple empirical projects for the active inheritance of intangible cultural heritage groups. The archives of landmark projects such as Pingyao Ancient City and Beijing Old City are uniformly archived in local cultural and museum management institutions.

The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs coordinates the management of cultural heritage throughout the country. The White Paper on Cultural Heritage compiled over the years divides heritage into four categories: tangible remains, intangible crafts, commemorative historical sites, and folk relics. The list of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage Holders (Living National Treasures) follows the annual dynamic update public announcement rules [5]. Most of Japan's scientific research focuses on two major directions: repairing wooden structures and preserving traditional crafts. The National Institute of Cultural Heritage regularly conducts on-site surveys of ancient building diseases, and donations from private foundations are a key source of funding. The public-private partnership management mechanism has long been a key focus of research in the Japanese academic community.

The responsibility for heritage management in South Korea is under the jurisdiction of the National Heritage Agency, which completes graded management through the dual-track list of designated cultural property and registered cultural property. Local research focuses on the integration of local heritage and rural tourism. The management regulations and village rules of Gyeongju Yangdong Folk Village are preserved in Gyeongju Cultural and Historical Archives, and the relevant practices have been used as empirical cases for heritage disciplines in Korean universities for many years.

Based on an academic perspective and horizontal analysis, China's research tends to focus on macro-level planning and design with comprehensive planning, Japan delves into micro-level techniques for ancient architecture restoration, and South Korea focuses on local resource activation and operation. Such varied protection frameworks spawn abundant comparative studies and sustain regular East Asian academic communication.

4. Interdisciplinary integration and technological innovation in the study of East Asian cultural heritage

Since the early 2000s, interdisciplinary cooperation between humanities and natural sciences has dominated heritage research. The cross-disciplinary collaborative research of archaeology, architecture, materials science, environmental science, and information engineering promotes heritage research to break away from the traditional empirical judgment paradigm and shift towards an empirical path supported by physical and chemical testing data. Digital technology iteration and various new technologies continue to enrich the implementation methods of cultural exploration and long-term maintenance.

At the level of research on the mechanism of cultural relic diseases, the Dunhuang Research Institute in China, in collaboration with universities such as Lanzhou University and Northwest University, has formed a research team to conduct a series of interdisciplinary experiments on the discoloration

of mural pigments and weathering diseases of ground layers. Relevant findings are published in Dunhuang Studies. Based on the physical and chemical testing of three core damaging factors, namely environmental temperature and humidity, salt precipitation, and microbial erosion, a practical preventive protection plan for murals has been developed [6]. The University of Tokyo and the Tokyo University of the Arts jointly established a research group on wooden ancient architecture. Based on long-term monitoring data of national treasures such as Horyu-ji and Todai-ji, the group analyzed the causes of component decay from the dual dimensions of wood physiological characteristics and structural mechanics. The results were included in the research column of the White Paper of the Japanese Ministry of Culture. The National Institute of Cultural Heritage of South Korea, in collaboration with Goryeo University, conducted electrochemical simulation tests on the corrosion of Silla metal artifacts, and the corresponding restoration techniques were included in the annual scientific research bulletin of the South Korean heritage management department.

After the implementation of digital tools, the working methods of heritage surveying and data archiving have undergone significant changes. 3D laser scanning and ultra-high-precision image archiving have been widely used in key heritage projects in East Asia. Longmen Grottoes and Dazu Rock Carvings have successively completed the whole area 3D digital archiving, and the data has been included in the national cultural relics digital resource database; The Tokyo National Museum relies on 8K imaging technology to achieve digital archiving of its national treasures; The Jingfu Palace in South Korea has installed an environmental dynamic monitoring system to continuously collect measured data on temperature, humidity, and foundation settlement. The project archives can be searched and accessed through various national cultural and museum platforms. Bibliometric data can provide intuitive evidence that technological innovation promotes the development of disciplines.

Based on the literature statistics of China National Knowledge Infrastructure, J-STAGE, and RISS from 2014 to 2024, the publication scale of interdisciplinary heritage papers in East Asia has steadily increased over the past decade, and the proportion of papers on digital protection topics has been increasing year by year. In the past five annual meetings of the East Asian Cultural Heritage Protection Society, a digital heritage sub-forum has been set up to sort out implementation cases and technical shortcomings, and the manuscript has been compiled into the annual conference publication. Scholars increasingly cross traditional disciplinary boundaries [7].

5. Regional Cooperation and International Influence in the Study of East Asian Cultural Heritage

Cross-border academic cooperation focusing on wooden structure restoration originated in the 1980s. After decades of exploring bilateral cooperation, the region has gradually established a three-tier cooperation model: bilateral project implementation, multilateral platform coordination, and joint participation in global heritage governance. The results of cooperation not only improve the research systems of each country, but also spread mature conservation practices worldwide [8].

Since the 1980s, China and Japan have been collaborating on ancient building repair technology. In 1990, the Dunhuang Academy and the National Institute of Cultural Heritage in Tokyo, Japan signed a cooperation agreement to jointly protect the murals of the Mogao Caves. The Japanese side is responsible for conducting on-site inspections of mural diseases and non-destructive testing of instruments, while the Chinese side teaches the Japanese side the repair techniques of traditional wooden buildings. Both parties shall retain all cooperation details, funding records, and expert dispatch files. Chinese information shall be kept in the External Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, while Japanese information shall be recorded in the annual report of the Japan Foundation for International Exchange. The focus of cooperation between China and South Korea is on tracing the origins of intangible cultural heritage and traditional handicrafts. The cultural departments of the two countries take turns holding academic seminars, and the conference proceedings are jointly compiled and published by cultural and museum units in both regions. The cooperation between Japan and South Korea focuses on the exchange of repair technologies for

ancient buildings and metal objects, and many improved techniques have been invested in the restoration of old city relics in both countries.

In November 2007, the East Asian Cultural Heritage Protection Society landed in Seoul, South Korea. Many public cultural and museum institutions and universities in China, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia have successively become members of the society. The society plans joint scientific research projects with multiple countries year-round, and all kinds of training arrangements and on-site research information are publicly displayed on the official website of the society. Based on this platform, countries can exchange universal standards for cultural relics census, restoration and filing, and supplement missing research data in individual countries.

In the field of global heritage governance, China, Japan, and South Korea actively participate in UNESCO's rule discussions. During the compilation of the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, several Japanese scholars participated in the writing of the manuscript, which was officially released after consultation between the Japanese cultural authorities and UNESCO. China has participated in the Angkor Antiquities International Assistance Project since 1998. The construction team has completed the repair work of Zhousa Temple and Chajiao Temple. The project progress report is released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration on schedule. South Korea relies on intangible cultural heritage related foreign affairs activities and regularly holds the East Asia Intangible Cultural Heritage Forum under the framework of UNESCO to share its practical experience in protecting folk customs with the outside world [9].

6. The Future Trends and Development Path of East Asian Cultural Heritage Research

Guided by official cultural heritage plans from China, Japan and South Korea, future research follows four policy-oriented routes. Field surveys confirm active inheritance has become a mainstream research focus. Within three national-level ICH development plans, the cultivation of inheritance teams and the implementation of folk resources into daily life are all included in the mandatory construction tasks. In the early years, the academic community mostly focused on the physical restoration of cultural relics in collections. In recent years, many researchers have jumped out of the traditional framework and conducted field investigations on the integration path of intangible cultural heritage, rural industries, and campus basic education. The pilot program of introducing intangible cultural heritage into campuses in China, the Japan National Treasure Funding Project, and the South Korean Rural Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization Project have been included in the on-site teaching list of universities in the three countries for many years. The project data is uniformly archived in the annual statistical files of cultural and tourism departments in various regions.

Digital applications have become a key research direction in the cultural and museum field. By comparing with the supporting policies of China, Japan, and South Korea during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, it can be found that intelligent environmental monitoring and the construction of cultural relics digital databases have all received special financial support. The frontline protection work has already broken away from the old idea of remedying after damage, and the long-term accumulated environmental monitoring data is being used to build a cultural relic disease warning model; Many research institutes adopt blockchain to archive original intangible cultural heritage documents and track heritage circulation, and most of the phased achievements of related projects are publicly announced on the research public platforms of cultural and museum authorities in various countries [10].

Multiple countries have gradually relaxed the entry threshold, allowing communities, private enterprises, and civil society organizations to officially participate in the daily management and protection of heritage sites. Many scholars have quantified and dismantled the rights and responsibilities boundaries and investment ratios of multiple parties based on the local situation. Japan and South Korea have long explored a mature model for private capital to participate in the operation and maintenance of historical sites, and the relevant supporting regulations in China are

still being improved. The comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of the two development paths has naturally become a topic of high attention in regional comparative research [11].

Cross-border cooperation has long been constrained by differences in heritage assessment standards among countries, and cross-border tracing and evidence collection of intangible cultural heritage have been repeatedly hindered. This is also the reason why the East Asian Heritage Conservation Society frequently convenes expert discussions. Experts attending the meeting drew up unified reference rules around joint survey and tracing of intangible cultural heritage, and cooperated with the Belt and Road Initiative humanities project and Japan-South Korea foreign cultural assistance plan, which helps spread East Asia's proven conservation experience to Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

7. Conclusion

Looking back at the century-long development of the discipline of East Asian heritage, this article combines five research dimensions, including historical origins and national practices, to outline the evolution trajectory of regional research. Divergent modernization paces amid shared cultural origins lead to differentiated research frameworks across three nations, with each country developing targeted research systems adapted to local realities. Looking through the UNESCO directory, annual reports of cultural heritage sites in various countries, and archival materials of societies, it can be seen that local research has achieved many results. Local researchers have accumulated many research results that are suitable for the local environment in the fields of protection system construction, cultural relic restoration technology innovation, and the implementation of intangible cultural heritage into daily life. These achievements have also enriched the regional research sector of global heritage protection.

Combining with the previous case studies, it is not difficult to find that regional collaborative research still faces many obstacles to implementation. The lack of unified traceability and evidence collection standards for cross-border intangible cultural heritage projects, insufficient research funding and professional talent reserves in some underdeveloped areas of Northeast Asia, and the exploration of long-term protection technologies for outdoor cultural relics caused by extreme weather are still in the exploratory stage. These practical factors continue to limit the promotion of regional integrated scientific research projects.

Based on existing policies and consensus among societies in various countries, future research should unify regional protection guidelines, fill in the gaps in scientific research in vulnerable areas, rely on local contexts to improve original theoretical systems, form an East Asian distinctive protection framework and promote its global application.

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