

Similarities and Differences in the Conservation of Historic Buildings in Chinese and French Ancient Capital Cities - Using Nanjing and Lyon as Examples

Zhongyi Guo

Nanjing University of Technology, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: Taking Nanjing and Lyon as examples, this paper discusses the similarities and differences between the ancient capital cities of China and France in the conservation of historic buildings, compares the similarities and differences between the two countries in the concept of historic building conservation, management mechanism, operation mode, public participation, etc., and extracts their respective characteristics and advantages. Finally, this paper puts forward the suggestions of improving laws and regulations, upgrading conservation techniques, encouraging public participation and exploring adaptive use, with a view to providing reference and inspiration for the conservation of historic buildings in the world.

Keywords: Conservation of Historic Buildings, International Comparisons; Lyon; Nanjing

1. Introduction

With the deepening process of global urbanisation, the conflict between the conservation of historic buildings and modernisation and development has become increasingly prominent. On the one hand, globalisation promotes the exchange and integration of different cultures, providing a broader platform for the conservation and inheritance of historical and cultural heritage; on the other hand, the urbanisation process and the pressure of economic development also bring serious challenges to the conservation of historical and cultural heritage. How to effectively protect historical and cultural heritage in the context of globalisation has become a topic of common concern for countries around the world.

China and France, as the representatives of Eastern and Western civilisations, have a long

history and splendid culture; Nanjing and Lyon, as the more famous ancient capital cities of China and France, have rich historical and cultural heritage, and in the process of urban development, both cities are constantly and actively exploring effective paths for the conservation of historical buildings. Both cities have achieved remarkable results in the conservation of historic buildings but also face some common challenges. Taking Nanjing and Lyon as examples, this paper discusses the current situation, challenges and countermeasures of historic building preservation in the context of globalisation. Most of the existing domestic and international studies focus on the conservation of historic buildings in a single city, and there is a lack of comparative studies on the conservation of historic buildings in ancient capitals of different countries. This paper will break through the limitations of a single city or a single country in the past, and comprehensively discuss the conservation of historic buildings from the perspective of the comparison of the two ancient capitals, combining the multidisciplinary perspectives of history, culture, society and economy.

2. Overview of Historic Buildings in Nanjing and Lyon

2.1 Overview of Nanjing Historic Buildings

2.1.1 Nanjing's historical development and urban pattern

As one of the four ancient capitals of China and one of the first batch of national famous historical and cultural cities, Nanjing carries the lineage of "capital of ten dynasties", and has been the capital of ten regimes from the Eastern Wu Dynasty to the Republic of China, with a history of nearly 2,500 years of building the city and a history of about 450 years of building the capital. The city pattern is based on the

landscape vein, and the remains of the axes of the Southern Tang Dynasty, Ming Dynasty and Republic of China have been completely preserved, especially the four-fold city wall superimposed system of the Ming Dynasty is the most representative. The existing historical city continues the wisdom of "city and water together", and through the control of architectural style and protection of historical texture, it has formed a symbiotic system of multiple types of cultural heritage, such as the architectural remains of the Six Dynasties, the Ming Dynasty city wall, Ming and Qing Dynasty houses, and the Republic of China's public hall complexes. At present, the overall protection is centred on maintaining the spatial scale and style coordination of the ancient city, realising the superimposed evolution of the

ancient capital city pattern and modern urban development [1].

2.1.2 Nanjing Historical Building Types and Characteristics

As the historical imperial capital, Nanjing's historical buildings are a blend of diverse cultures and have high historical value; the construction techniques are superb, and they also have extraordinary artistic value. Nanjing's historical buildings are of various types, including palaces, residential buildings and ceremonial buildings, and cover a wide range of periods from the Paleolithic Age to the Prohibition period. All the historical buildings have distinctive features, reflecting the brilliant achievements of ancient Chinese architecture, as well as the innovation and development of modern architecture, as shown in Table 1 [2].

Table 1. Famous Cultural and Historical Buildings and Architectures in Nanjing

name	Heritage Profile	Protection level	our time	placement
Jixing Temple (in Beijing)	Nanjing's oldest Buddhist temple and one of the royal temples, the first of the "Four Hundred and Eighty Temples of the Southern Dynasties".	Nanjing Immovable Cultural Relics	Liang of the Southern dynasties (502-557)	Xuanwu District Jiulong Mountain Donglu Shanfu Shang
Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum in Nanjing	The mausoleum of Zhu Yuanzhang, Emperor of Ming Dynasty, the first mausoleum of the Ming and Qing Dynasties.	UNESCO World Heritage Site	Ming dynasty	Xuanwu District Zijinshan Mountain Nanlu Dulongfu Playing Under the Pearl Peak
the Ming city wall (i.e. the oldest section of the city wall)	The Ming City Wall of Nanjing, built during the Ming Dynasty, is the longest, largest and best-preserved original city wall in the world.	UNESCO World Heritage Site	Ming dynasty	Nanjing, Jiangsu Province
Junyuan, Chinese Garden in Suzhou, Jiangsu	A model of classical garden architecture of the Ming Dynasty, known as "the first garden in Jinling".	State-level cultural relics protection unit	the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties	Qinhuai District Fushimiao Qinhuai Scenic Area
Ruins of the Taiping Heavenly Kings' Mansion	The ruins of the palace of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, a relatively well-preserved group of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom historical buildings	State-level cultural relics protection unit	Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864)	Xuanwu District Changjiang Road No.292
presidential palace	Nanjing National Government Residence, a historical site and representative building of modern China, selected as one of the first batch of "China's 20th Century Architectural Heritage".	State-level cultural relics protection unit	Republic of China	No.292 Changjiang Road, Xuanwu District

Contents from Encyclopaedia, List of National Key Cultural Relics Protection Units [4].

2.2 Overview of Historic Buildings in Lyon

2.2.1 Lyon's history and urban pattern

As a European city with a history of more than 2,000 years, Lyon is a model of multi-period architectural symbiosis, with its historical layers dating back to the time of the Roman and Gallic

capitals. Five major landmarks have been preserved in the core of the city: the ruins of the Roman Theatre of Lugdunum, the medieval street system of the Mont de Fourvière, the Renaissance housing complex of the Old City of Lyon, the neo-classical complex of the Peninsular District, and the workers' housing complex of the Red Cross Hill of Canute. Lyon's urban pattern is distinguished by its unique

historical evolution and spatial expansion: the gradual eastward expansion of the city centre, the clear spatial boundaries between the Old Town and the New Town, and the preservation of the Old Town's texture due to its specific geographical location, as well as the harmonious coexistence of Romanesque monuments, medieval buildings and modern architecture. The different neighbourhoods show the historical features of different periods, and each area develops its own functions according to its own strengths: the old city develops tourism, the suburbs become industrial areas, and the new eastern district is a scientific and educational centre and a residential area [5].

2.2.2 Types and characteristics of historic buildings in Lyon

Lyon's architecture is rich and varied, covering a wide range of historical periods, religious, commercial, industrial, residential, cultural and other different functions. [6] The city presents a complete picture of the development of

European urban civilisation, covering all periods from ancient Rome to modern times: the remains of the Roman theatre and the waterway bridge show the early urban civilisation; the medieval churches and silk craftsmen's neighbourhoods bear witness to the prosperity of religion and commerce; the Renaissance residences and printing workshops symbolise the cultural heyday; and the 19th-century industrial factories and the Canute workers' houses reflect the impact of the industrial revolution. The city has adopted a conservation strategy of "dividing the old from the new", dividing the different periods of architecture into three zones: the Old Town, where the Roman remains are preserved intact, the medieval streets and Renaissance buildings, and the Industrial Heritage Zone, which is transformed into a creative space. The architecture of the different eras reflects each other, forming a cityscape where tradition and modernity are blended, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Notable Cultural and Historical Buildings in Lyon

name	protection strategy	Introduction to Cultural Preservation	Protection level	period of time
Ruins of the Roman Theatre at Lugdunum	Conservation in situ, integrated presentation with the medieval complex	Demonstrating early urban civilisation and engineering	National Historic Monuments of France	Roman period (1st century BC-5th century AD) (1st-5th centuries B.C.)
Cathedral of St Jean the Chieftain	Strict in-situ restoration and restriction of building heights in the vicinity	Religious buildings (Gothic style), religious and political centre of the city	National Historic Monuments of France	Medieval (5th-15th centuries)
Silk artisan neighbourhood	Zoning to protect street texture and maintain traditional functions	A testament to the prosperity of commerce and handicrafts, the narrow streets are well preserved.	UNESCO World Heritage Site (in its entirety)	
Lyon Old Town	Integral conservation, prohibition of modern style alterations	One of the largest Renaissance neighbourhoods in Europe, with beautifully decorated building facades.	UNESCO World Heritage Site	Renaissance (15th-17th centuries)
Canute Workers' Housing Estate	Transformation of functions into creative spaces or community centres	Industrial housing, reflecting working class life	National Historic Monuments of France	Period of the Industrial Revolution (19th century)
Plaza Blanco	Maintaining spatial form and controlling neighbouring architectural styles	An 18th century classical example of urban space. Industrial heritage reflecting the impact of the industrial revolution, such as old factory buildings transformed into creative spaces	National Historic Monuments of France	

2.3 Comparison of Conservation Status in Lyon and Nanjing

Nanjing and Lyon, as famous historical and cultural cities in China and France, have their own characteristics in the conservation of historical buildings. Understanding the current

conservation status is an important basis for an in-depth comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in the conservation of historic buildings in the two countries. In the following, we compare the current conservation status of historic buildings in Nanjing and Lyon from the dimensions of planning zoning, street pattern,

urban landscape, and cultural heritage buildings.

Table 3. Comparison of the Current State of Conservation of Historic Buildings in Nanjing and Lyon

	Nanjing	Lyon
planning district	Nanjing Old Town is distributed in the city near the city centre and is divided into four districts: Chengnan Historic District, which is dominated by Ming Dynasty residences; Beijing East Road Historic District, which is dominated by buildings of the Six Dynasties; Gulou-Qingliangshan Historic District, which is dominated by modern buildings; and Ming Palace Historic District, which is dominated by Ming Dynasty palace buildings. 	The main city of Lyon is divided into three main parts by the river, with the old town located in the centre, where historic buildings are mainly located in the three historic districts of Saint-Jean, Saint-Paul and Saint-Georges, containing historic buildings from different periods, from ancient Rome to the Industrial Revolution. 
street pattern	The streets are roughly in a checkerboard format. From the street direction, the street direction of Nanjing Old Town is influenced by the city's historical axes in different periods, which act on different city lots, and nowadays present a pattern of several street textures collaged with each other; from the street density, there are obvious low-density and high-density neighbourhood clusters in Nanjing Old Town.	The streets are narrow and winding, reflecting medieval and Renaissance urban planning. The Old Town is dominated by three parallel streets: Rue Saint-Jean, Rue du Bœuf, and Rue des Trois Maries. The streets are interspersed with alleys and passages, some of which are "traboules", i.e. internal passages connecting buildings, which were once used as shortcuts by silk workers.
cityscape	The architectural style of Nanjing's old city is diverse, with historical neighbourhoods coexisting with modern commercial districts, and traditional dwellings and modern buildings intertwining with each other. Among them, Ming and Qing dynasty palace buildings, residential houses and Republic of China buildings are the main ones.	There is a clear spatial boundary between the old city and the new city, and different neighbourhoods show different historical styles of different periods. Some of the churches and buildings are in the Gothic style; most of the residential houses have a reddish-orange colour with red-tiled roofs, which is very characteristic.
a building protected by cultural heritage	The Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum and the Ming Imperial Palace of Nanjing have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List, in addition to 55 national key cultural relics protection units, more than one hundred key cultural relics protection units in Jiangsu Province, as well as thousands of local immovable cultural relics.	The Old City of Lyon as a whole is on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and the French Ministry of Culture has classified many of the buildings in the Old City of Lyon as "Monuments Historiques", with more than 300 protected historic buildings.

Figure: Self-drawn by the author, base figure: Copyright © 2025 Google Map online Inc. All rights reserved.

3. Comparative Analysis of the Conservation of Historic Buildings in Nanjing and Lyon

3.1 Comparison of Protection Concepts

The Chinese and French concepts of historic building conservation are highly consistent in their core objectives, both focusing on the preservation of the authenticity of historic buildings, and emphasising the cultural and artistic value of the buildings through the

preservation of historical information.

China follows the principle of "repairing the old as the old", focusing on the systematic restoration of buildings with traditional craftsmanship in a specific historical stage of the integrity of the appearance of the building, so as to make it strong, healthy, in order to maximise the extension of its life, in order to protect and reflect the value of the historical building under the premise of preserving the authenticity of the historical information of the historical building to the maximum extent possible. [8] In France, based on the framework of "authenticity" of the Venice Charter, the restoration traces superimposed on each period of the building are preserved, and the chronological authenticity of the materials and craftsmanship is emphasised, accepting the "historical superposition" of the old and the new materials that can be recognised, and the Nara Document emphasises that the evaluation of the authenticity of cultural heritage requires an understanding of its various aspects and the need for the authenticity of cultural heritage. The Nara Document stresses that the evaluation of the authenticity of cultural heritage requires an understanding of the characteristics and values of each aspect of the cultural heritage. The Nara Document stresses that the evaluation of the authenticity of cultural heritage requires the understanding of its characteristics and values.[7] There is an essential consistency between China and France in the concept of conservation of historic buildings, and the principles of "restoration of the old as the old" and "authenticity" emphasise the respect and protection of the original appearance of historic buildings, the protection of the historical information of the historic buildings, and the display of their unique cultural and artistic values.

3.2 Comparison of the Management Mechanisms for the Protection of Historic Buildings in China and France

France started early in the management of architectural heritage and has formed a relatively perfect management system for architectural heritage, establishing a protection and management system consisting of a registration system, a building management system, a system of protection officials and a system of public participation. It links protection with funding, residential construction, taxation, government functions and public participation,

and gives full play to the power of the government and civil society.

After decades of development, China has formed a protection system centred on laws and regulations, with the government taking the lead and society participating. A classification and protection system centred on "cultural relics protection units" has been established, whereby historic buildings are classified and managed at different levels, such as the national, provincial, municipal and county levels. At the same time, special heritage protection agencies, such as the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and local cultural heritage bureaux, have been established to be responsible for the investigation, assessment, restoration and management of historic buildings.

3.2.1 Legal protection system

Both France and China have established a multi-level legislative system for the protection of historic buildings, but their focus and implementation methods are distinctive. France has established the principle of "national ownership" of cultural relics through its Constitution, and with the Law on the Protection of Historic Monuments and the Malraux Law as the core, it has constructed a legal framework for the hierarchical protection of architectural heritage and protected areas, emphasising the principles of protection objects, methods and funding. Lyon strictly follows the Malraux Law, and has completely preserved the ancient street areas from the 12th to the 16th centuries, not only protecting 250 historic buildings, but also focusing on the coordination of the styles of old and new buildings and the continuation of the living customs of the residents, so as to achieve the continuity of the overall appearance. China takes the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics as the core, clearly defining the principles and responsibilities of cultural relics protection, and formulates the detailed laws and regulations on the local level in accordance with the actual situation. In China, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics is the core, specifying the principles and responsibilities of cultural relics protection, while detailed regulations are formulated at the local level in accordance with the actual situation. Both countries pay attention to the combination of legislation and local practice, but France places more emphasis on the overall protection of the historic environment and

lifestyle, while China focuses on the construction of a hierarchical system of rules and regulations to ensure that the protection

work is standardised and operable, as shown in Table 4 [3].

Table 4. Enumeration of Some Representative Bills on the Conservation of Historic Buildings in China and France

	French	sino
Basic laws at the national level	Historic Buildings Act 1840 Preservation of Historic Monuments Act 1931 Marlowe Act 1943 Heritage Code 1998	Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics 1982
Local laws	Local Urban Planning Programme (PLU) 2000	Administrative Measures for the Protection of Cultural Relics and Monuments in Nanjing 1982 Regulations on the Protection of Cultural Relics in Nanjing 1997 Regulations on the Protection of Important Modern Buildings and Modern Architectural Style Areas in Nanjing 2006

3.2.2 Protection management system

In France, a system of protection and management is centred on centralized national management, with the Cultural Heritage Department under the Ministry of Culture coordinating the management and protection of the country's historical and cultural heritage. Through the establishment of special departments and the dispatch of professionally trained experts, the professionalism and authority of heritage protection are guaranteed. At the same time, France has set up multi-level advisory bodies to help scientific decision-making. The active participation of civil society and the public has created a synergistic and sustainable conservation atmosphere between the government and the civil society.

Most of China's architectural heritage is state-owned, with a "top-down" management system centred on state administration. This system reduces conflicts between owners and managers and facilitates the implementation of conservation measures. However, the drawback is that participants are not proactive enough, and given the large number of architectural heritages in China, coupled with the stringent requirements for obtaining qualifications in heritage conservation, the single model of

state-run conservation management has constrained conservation management.

There are differences between the two countries in terms of architectural heritage management systems. In contrast, France's extensive and in-depth participation of civil society and the public, and the significant synergy between government and civil society, have resulted in a diversified and sustainable conservation model. China's current "top-down" system, dominated by the state administration, has achieved some success in reducing the conflicts between owners and managers and promoting the implementation of conservation measures, but lacks the initiative to stimulate the participation of social forces.

3.2.3 Similarities and Differences in the Operation of Historic Buildings in China and France

In China and France, historic buildings are operated in a variety of ways: festivals are organised; renovations and revitalisations are carried out to give new functions to historic buildings; some World Heritage buildings are maintained as landmarks; and some are kept in their original residential functions, thus jointly realising the diversified use of historic buildings, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Pathways and Examples of Adaptive Use

Mode of Operation	capital of China at different historical periods	Lyon, French city on the Rhône
Promoting historic buildings through special festivals and events, integrating historic buildings into people's daily lives and enhancing their understanding of historic buildings	Qinhuai Lantern Festival Shingtou Festival	European Heritage Day Lyon Festival of Lights
Giving new functions to historic	Gan Xi's house transformed into	Abandoned convent

buildings through renovation and revitalisation, so that historic buildings can take on a new lease of life in modern society and become an important carrier for cultural inheritance and dissemination	Nanjing Folk Museum The Old Mendong Historic District of Fuzimiao transformed into a cultural and tourism attraction	transformed into a branch of the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts Remains of Greco-Roman amphitheatre transformed into new theatre
Only as a tourist attraction or city landmark, without additional or altered functions	Dr Sun Yat-sen's mausoleum in Nanjing Ming Xiaoling mausoleum in Xi'an	Notre Dame de Fourvière Plaza Blanco
Maintaining the original function as a residence	Part of the residential buildings in the Laomendong Street area	Some of the houses in the old town of Lyon

3.3 Comparison of the Current Situation of Public Participation in the Conservation of Historic Buildings in China and France

The protection of France's cultural heritage is characterised by government leadership and

public participation, following the principles of the Law on the Protection of Historic Monuments and promoting comprehensive protection and international cooperation. The specific modalities are as shown in Figure 1.

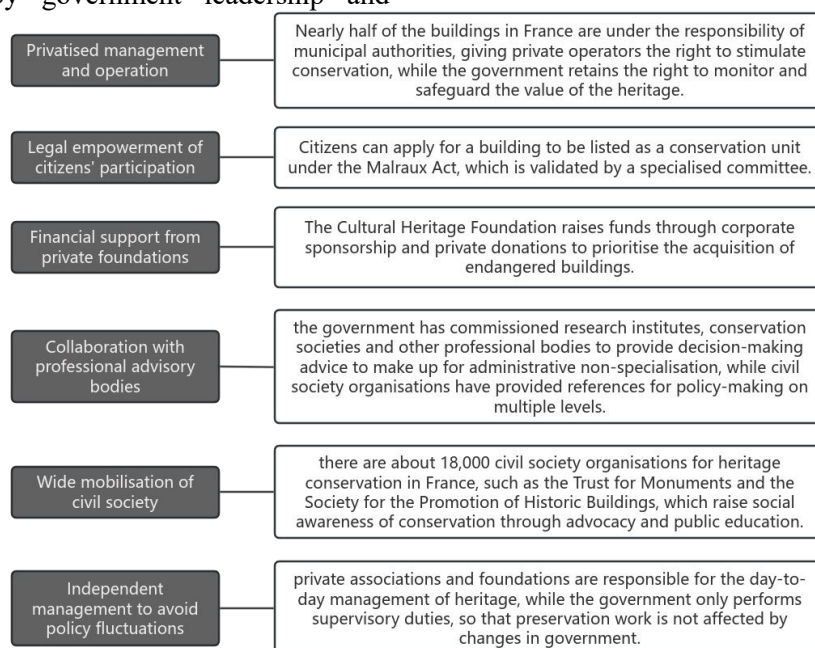


Figure 1. The way the French Public and civil Society Are Involved in the Preservation of Historic Buildings

Through legal empowerment, economic incentives, professional collaboration and social operation, the French people and civil society are deeply involved in the protection of historic buildings, building a multi-dimensional protection system led by the government, coordinated by the society and responsible by the public, which strengthens the sustainability of heritage protection and realises the organic fusion of historical value and social vitality.

In contrast, China is still in its infancy when it comes to public participation in heritage conservation. Government decision-making is authoritative and mandatory, while China's traditional heritage building protection system is relatively closed, resulting in poor feedback. The general public has no concept of "historic

building conservation", and it is difficult to participate in it, generally only through some voluntary activities or visited the ancient buildings. It is necessary to strengthen the awareness of all people's participation and take the initiative in soliciting public opinions. Public participation covers the right to know, the right to participate and the right to report, and the "act of publicity" can satisfy the right to know after the event, while the establishment of a sound and open decision-making system for heritage management, and through the "multi-directional feedback and process participation", reflecting the public's participation throughout the process. The establishment of a sound open decision-making system for heritage management, through "multi-directional

feedback and process participation", reflects the public's participation in the whole process and democratic decision-making [3].

4. Conservation of Historic Buildings in the World: Lessons and Inspiration

In the context of globalisation, the conservation of historic buildings has become the common responsibility and mission of all mankind. Through the comparative analysis of the conservation practices of historic buildings in Nanjing and Lyon, we can extract the following insights to contribute wisdom and strength to the global conservation of historic buildings, so that the precious cultural heritage can be passed on forever.

Accelerating the declaration of lists to enhance the level of protection. The inclusion of heritage buildings of significant historical and cultural value in world or national conservation lists is the key to strengthening conservation. Inclusion in the lists can raise the attention and protection priority, and secure resources and technical support. Countries should make use of the international framework to sort out the declaration of architectural heritage, set up evaluation systems, join hands with international organisations to shorten the declaration cycle, and strengthen the guidance of the government.

Improve regulatory cooperation and promote cultural exchanges. Countries around the world need to work together to improve the international legal framework for the protection of historic buildings, formulate better international conventions and agreements, clarify definitions, principles and responsible parties, and provide uniform standards. Strengthen international information exchange, share experiences and build up conservation synergy. On this basis, countries can formulate specific laws. Historic buildings carry the cultures of different countries, and in the process of global conservation, we should respect cultural diversity, encourage countries to explore appropriate conservation models, enhance understanding through international cultural exchanges, and contribute to global cultural prosperity.

Promote technological innovation to enhance the level of conservation. The development of science and technology brings opportunities for the conservation of historic buildings. Countries should actively use three-dimensional laser

scanning, virtual reality and other new technologies to record and monitor buildings in all directions, build digital models, help virtual restoration and programme evaluation, and provide support for scientific conservation. At the same time, the research and development of new environmentally friendly restoration materials will enhance the protection effect and building life.

Explore adaptive use to achieve sustainable development. Historical building protection can not only stay in the static preservation, we should actively explore ways of adaptive use. Through reasonable transformation and operation, let the ancient buildings into the modern society, play the role of cultural inheritance and dissemination, realise the economic value, drive the development of cultural tourism, and enhance the social influence.

5. Conclusion

Through an in-depth comparison of the conservation practices of historic buildings in Nanjing and Lyon, this study reveals the similarities and differences between China and France in terms of conservation concepts, management mechanisms and adaptive use. The study finds that, in terms of conservation principles, both countries emphasise the original conservation of historic buildings, but China pays more attention to the phased restoration of "repairing the old as the old", while France accepts the pluralistic state of historical superposition; in terms of management modes, China adopts government-led hierarchical management, whereas France establishes a multifaceted system of co-management in which the government and the private sector collaborate; and, in terms of revitalisation and utilisation, Nanjing focuses on the integration of the culture and tourism, whereas Lyon pays more attention to the driving effect of cultural events. In terms of revitalisation and utilisation, Nanjing focuses on the development mode of cultural tourism integration, while Lyon pays more attention to the driving effect of cultural events. These differences not only reflect the different cultural traditions and institutional environments of the two countries, but also the diversified paths of historic building conservation. It is particularly noteworthy that the perfect public participation mechanism in France has provided continuous impetus to its

conservation work, which is worthwhile for China to learn from in its future conservation practice.

Based on these findings, this paper argues that the global conservation of historic buildings needs to develop innovatively in the following aspects: firstly, the declaration of important architectural heritage lists should be accelerated to enhance the level of protection; secondly, the international regulatory cooperation framework should be improved to promote the exchange of transnational experiences; thirdly, the application of new technologies such as 3D scanning and virtual restoration should be actively promoted to enhance the scientific nature of conservation; and lastly, diversified modes of activation and utilisation should be explored to give new life to historic buildings in modern society. utilisation modes, so that historic buildings can take on a new vitality in modern society. The implementation of these initiatives requires the joint efforts of governments, professional organisations and the public, and only through international cooperation and experience sharing can we truly realise the sustainable inheritance of human cultural heritage.

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