

An Examination of the Development of Modern Museums and the Transformation of Perspectives on Cultural Heritage Protection

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Abstract: Modern social transformations have driven the traditional model of cultural relic conservation toward a modernization transition; as institutions dedicated to the collection and dissemination of cultural relics, museums' developmental trajectory is inextricably linked to the evolution of conservation concepts. Traditional approaches to cultural relic preservation were confined to closed, private collections, whereas the introduction of the public-oriented concept of cultural heritage in modern times catalyzed a shift in perception. This paper traces the historical development of museums in modern times, examines the intrinsic connection between these two domains, explores pathways for the transformation of cultural relic conservation, and provides historical insights for the advancement of contemporary cultural heritage initiatives.

Keywords: Modern era; Museum development; Cultural heritage preservation; Conceptual transformation

Online publication: June 26, 2026

1. Introduction

The preservation and safeguarding of traditional cultural relics in China have a long historical heritage; however, the existing models for preserving these relics exhibit strong isolation and niche characteristics, failing to establish a socialized and systematic approach to protection or a public communication framework. Since the dawn of modern times, the Western museum system, scientific concepts of cultural relic conservation, and ideas regarding public cultural services have gradually entered China, completely disrupting the traditional framework of cultural relic collection in the country. These epochal changes not only gave rise to the emergence and growth of the modern Chinese museum sector but also drove a fundamental transformation in the public's understanding of cultural relics and their conservation mindset. The cultural and museum field has progressively moved beyond its traditional limitations—prioritizing collection over utilization, and private collection over public access—toward a new development model

that equally emphasizes scientific conservation, public sharing, academic research, and social education. Based on this context, a systematic examination of the evolution of modern museums and the transformation of conservation concepts can clearly delineate the origins and developmental patterns of China's modern cultural and museum system.

2. The development history of museums in modern China

2.1. The budding and initial stages of modern museums during the late Qing Dynasty

During the late Qing Dynasty, society was at a critical juncture marked by the fusion of new and traditional ideologies and the collision between Chinese and foreign cultures. The dismantling of the isolationist policy allowed modern Western museum concepts to formally enter the public consciousness of the Chinese people, laying both ideological and practical foundations for the emergence of local museums. Prior to this period, the preservation of various precious artifacts, documents, calligraphy, and paintings in China was primarily undertaken by imperial courts, official institutions, prominent families, and private scholars. These items were typically stored in secure rooms or passed down through generations, with their core value centered on private appreciation and identity symbolism—there existed no public exhibition or cultural dissemination function for them ^[1]. As foreign exchanges during the late Qing era became increasingly frequent, a group of progressive officials and intellectuals ventured abroad, gaining direct exposure to the public operational models and cultural dissemination values of Western museums, and subsequently authored works introducing these novel museum formats to China. Following the First Sino-Japanese War, a wave of social movements advocating national salvation gained momentum, with cultural enlightenment becoming a key component of social reform. The establishment of local public museums thus emerged as a crucial measure to enlighten the public and preserve cultural heritage. Across multiple regions in China, attempts began to establish new types of exhibition halls and museums, with various cultural venues combining artifact collection and public display functions gradually taking shape. Although these early venues had relatively limited scales and their operational systems were not yet fully developed, they fundamentally disrupted the traditional model of closed preservation of cultural relics, marking the formal inception of the modern museum sector in China and accumulating preliminary practical experience for the subsequent standardized development of the museum system.

2.2. The rapid rise of museum institutions during the early Republic of China period

Following the establishment of the Republic of China, reforms in social institutions removed numerous obstacles hindering the development of cultural undertakings; the prevailing social trend advocating that “culture can prosper the nation and science can save the nation” continued to gain momentum, driving the museum sector from its initial fragmented beginnings toward a phase of large-scale expansion and ushering the industry into a completely new stage. At the national level, increasing attention was paid to the public value of cultural and museum endeavors, with relevant cultural regulations being gradually introduced to clarify the significance of constructing public cultural venues and establish their operational guidelines, thereby providing institutional support for the standardized development of museums ^[2]. Government-led projects to build national and provincial-level public museums were successively completed, covering multiple fields such as cultural relics, natural sciences, and science education; simultaneously, private associations, educational institutions, and progressive scholars actively participated in the construction of

these venues, while the number of private museums and thematic exhibition halls increased significantly. During this period, museums completely shed their attributes as traditional private collections, establishing themselves as core providers of public cultural services; their functions were no longer confined solely to the display of artifacts but gradually expanded to include diverse roles such as academic research, national education, and cultural popularization. The categories of collections housed in museums continued to diversify, with their scope extending from traditional rare calligraphy, painting, and imperial artifacts to folk artifacts, historical and cultural materials, and modern physical objects—among various other cultural carriers. The refinement of these collection systems further solidified the foundation for the development of the cultural and museum sector and enabled the social value of cultural relics to be initially realized.

2.3. The gradual maturation of the museum system during the mid-to-late Republic of China period

During the mid-to-late Republican era, although social conditions remained turbulent, the trend toward professionalization and scientific approaches in the cultural heritage sector did not stagnate. After decades of practical accumulation, the operational, collection, and service systems of modern museums gradually matured, initially establishing a framework for the cultural heritage industry that aligned with the development of modern society. During this period, China's cultural heritage sector progressively adopted Western scientific techniques for artifact organization, classification, restoration, and preservation, fundamentally addressing the issues of haphazard preservation, chaotic classification, and rudimentary conservation practices associated with traditional methods, thereby significantly enhancing the scientific standards of artifact protection. A professional workforce in cultural heritage began to take shape, with universities starting to offer courses related to history and cultural heritage; specialized scholars continued to engage in museum-related research on collections, exhibition planning, and cultural interpretation, thereby strengthening the academic nature of museums. Simultaneously, museums continuously optimized their social service models by regularly organizing public visits, thematic exhibitions, and science popularization activities, actively aligning with the needs of school education and public cultural dissemination, thus becoming core platforms for modern public cultural education ^[3]. Within the industry, unified operational standards gradually emerged, with tasks such as venue management, artifact registration, and exhibition planning becoming increasingly standardized, marking the completion of the full developmental journey of modern Chinese museums—from their embryonic stages and initial rise to their preliminary maturity.

3. The intrinsic connection between the development of modern museums and the transformation of conservation concepts for cultural heritage

3.1. The public-oriented development of museums promotes the socialization of entities responsible for cultural heritage protection

In traditional societies, the preservation of cultural relics was always carried out by niche groups; the entities responsible for preservation were singular and closed, leaving ordinary citizens with virtually no channels to engage with or learn about cultural relics, while these cultural heritage resources remained under private monopoly or exclusive control by official authorities for an extended period. The core transformation of modern museums lies in establishing their public cultural attributes—where all institutions adhere to the fundamental principle of being open to the general public—thereby completely transforming the ownership

and dissemination models of cultural relic resources. With the continuous establishment and operation of various public museums, cultural relics are no longer exclusive collections reserved for a select few, but have instead become public cultural resources accessible to all citizens for viewing, learning, and research. This trend toward publicization has directly driven a structural transformation in the entities responsible for cultural relic preservation, shifting the work from private activities conducted by a small minority to a public undertaking involving the collective participation of society as a whole. The government assumes the leading role in cultural relic preservation, coordinating museum-related work through the construction of facilities and the formulation of institutional norms; academic communities utilize museums to conduct professional preservation and research; and ordinary citizens gradually cultivate awareness of cultural relic preservation through visits to museums and educational activities. Thus, a socialized preservation framework involving the collaborative participation of multiple stakeholders has begun to take shape, comprehensively strengthening the grassroots and societal foundation for cultural relic preservation.

3.2. The scientific management of museums promotes the professionalization of cultural heritage conservation concepts

Traditional approaches to cultural heritage conservation lacked scientific theoretical underpinnings and systematic methodological guidance; their core objective was primarily focused on preserving the original appearance of artifacts, with conservation methods often limited to simple storage, wiping, and sealing—approaches that neglected the material properties of the artifacts, their preservation environment, and their historical value, thereby hindering the achievement of long-term conservation. During their development, modern museums have continuously introduced professional theories from Western natural sciences, archaeology, and artifact conservation, thereby establishing a scientific and systematic operational framework for cultural heritage management, which has directly propelled the evolution of conservation concepts toward specialization and refinement^[4]. In their collection management practices, museums implement standardized procedures for artifact registration, classification, and archiving, environmental control, and periodic maintenance; they also develop tailored preservation plans based on the material composition and chronological context of each artifact, effectively mitigating the issues of artifact degradation associated with traditional extensive conservation models. Meanwhile, cultural heritage scholars leverage museum collections to conduct ongoing research, continuously summarizing conservation techniques and theoretical frameworks tailored to the specific characteristics of local cultural heritage, thereby overcoming the limitations of traditional conservation practices that relied solely on empirical methods. These scientific approaches to museum operations have enabled the field to fully embrace a new paradigm of scientific, long-term, and precise conservation, driving the transition of cultural heritage conservation from empirical practice to professional, academic-based conservation.

3.3. Expanding the educational function of museums to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the cultural relic's value

Traditional societal perceptions of the value of cultural relics have been highly limited; various sectors of society generally emphasized the aesthetic, economic, and collecting values of these relics while neglecting the historical memory, cultural connotations, and educational significance they embody, thereby allowing the social public value of cultural relics to remain largely overlooked for a long period. Since their inception,

modern museums have borne the epochal mission of cultural enlightenment and national education; the continuous expansion of their educational functions has driven a comprehensive upgrade in how the general public perceives the value of cultural relics. Through systematic exhibition displays, thematic guided tours, and cultural lectures, museums integrate individual cultural relics with their historical context, cultural heritage, and social development, enabling the public to grasp the historical background and cultural essence behind these relics through direct observation. Cultural relics are no longer isolated objects for aesthetic appreciation but have become vital carriers that carry the nation's cultural lineage, document historical transformations, and convey cultural spirit. This shift in value perception has directly propelled the transformation of the core objectives of cultural relic protection: whereas traditional preservation focused primarily on preserving artifacts and maintaining their value for collection, modern cultural relic protection centers on inheriting culture, sustaining the cultural lineage, and educating the public; consequently, the spiritual and social significance of cultural relic protection has been profoundly explored.

3.4. The institutionalization of museums drives the standardization of the cultural heritage protection system

The decades-long development of modern museums has also marked a continuous process of institutionalization and standardization within the cultural heritage sector; the gradual establishment of this industry framework has directly driven the work of cultural relic protection from an unstructured, spontaneous state toward a standardized and orderly development. In the past, cultural relic protection lacked unified industry standards or institutional constraints; both private collections and government custody were conducted based solely on individual discretion, resulting in a lack of systematic planning for preservation efforts and making issues such as the loss, damage, or neglect of cultural relics particularly prominent. Since the modern era, both the state and society have introduced a series of regulatory frameworks concerning museum construction, collection management, and the acquisition and protection of cultural relics, clarifying the operational standards and professional guidelines for cultural heritage work. Under these institutional frameworks, various museums now carry out the entire workflow—including the acquisition, registration, custody, exhibition, and research of cultural relics—in a standardized manner, thereby eliminating practices such as arbitrary disposal or unauthorized transfer of cultural relics. This institutionalized development of the industry has provided clear guidelines for all aspects of cultural relic protection, gradually establishing a comprehensive operational system that encompasses cultural relic acquisition, scientific conservation, academic research, public access, and circulation supervision, thereby achieving the normalization and standardization of cultural relic protection efforts.

4. Strategies for the transformation of modern museums and cultural heritage protection

4.1. Strengthening the public cultural and museum system to broaden the comprehensive approach to cultural heritage protection

The practical experience of the transformation and development of modern cultural and museum affairs has fully demonstrated that the widespread establishment of public museums serves as a core vehicle for revitalizing societal awareness of cultural heritage protection and expanding the overall framework for such protection. In the new era, the inheritance and development of cultural and museum endeavors must continue

to strengthen the comprehensive construction of a public cultural and museum system. Various regions can leverage their local historical and cultural resources to coordinate the development of both comprehensive museums and thematic cultural and museum venues, address gaps in grassroots public cultural and museum facilities, and establish a well-defined, widely covered, and distinctive public cultural and museum venue system. Relevant cultural management authorities may utilize existing cultural and museum resources to regularly organize public welfare exhibitions, cultural science popularization activities, and cultural heritage lectures—thereby lowering the barriers for the general public to access cultural relics and acquire knowledge about cultural heritage, while continuously awakening the public’s sense of cultural heritage protection. Simultaneously, these authorities can collaborate with schools, communities, and social organizations to conduct diversified cultural and museum education initiatives, integrating the dissemination of cultural heritage knowledge throughout the entire process of national education and social cultural development; this approach will further expand the scope of social participation in cultural heritage protection, steadily consolidate a society-wide framework for cultural heritage preservation, and ensure that cultural heritage protection becomes a genuine consensus among all citizens and a common social norm.

4.2. Deepening the application of science and technology to strengthen the foundation for the professional conservation of cultural heritage

The practical application of science and technology serves as the core driving force behind the transition of modern cultural heritage conservation from an extensive approach to a refined one, and from empirical methods to professional practices; it also constitutes the fundamental support for long-term cultural heritage preservation. Continuously deepening the integrated development of science and technology with cultural heritage work can comprehensively enhance the quality and standard of cultural heritage conservation efforts^[5]. The cultural heritage sector needs to consistently introduce modern technologies for heritage maintenance, restoration, inspection, and storage, develop detailed conservation plans tailored to artifacts of different materials and preservation statuses, precisely address existing challenges such as artifact aging, damage, weathering, and mold growth, and thereby maximize the longevity of cultural relics. Within the industry, it is essential to establish regular mechanisms for technological updates and technical training to enable frontline cultural heritage professionals to continuously master advanced conservation techniques and professional operational methods, thereby enhancing the overall professional competence and practical skills of practitioners. Additionally, the sector can leverage universities and research institutions to establish dedicated cultural heritage research platforms, conduct specialized technical studies based on the specific preservation characteristics of local cultural relics, independently develop conservation technologies and maintenance protocols suited to local heritage contexts, and build a technical conservation system that integrates scientific rigor with local specificity, thereby laying a solid technical foundation for the long-term preservation of cultural heritage.

4.3. Exploring the cultural value of cultural relics to establish a dynamic utilization system

The core breakthrough in the transformation of modern cultural heritage conservation concepts lies in breaking away from the traditional mindset that prioritizes preservation over utilization, and achieving an organic integration of cultural heritage conservation with cultural utilization. In the new era, the development of cultural and museum sectors must continue to deepen efforts in excavating the value of cultural relics and promoting their revitalized utilization. Cultural and museum institutions should leverage their collections of

cultural relics to deeply explore the historical significance, cultural ethos, and contemporary value embodied by these relics; by integrating them with the broader trajectory of historical development, they can untangle the cultural narratives behind these relics, thereby transforming static cultural relic resources into dynamic cultural assets. Institutions may utilize these cultural relic resources to plan diverse utilization projects—such as thematic exhibitions, cultural study tours, and cultural creative product development—while balancing the solemnity of heritage conservation with the engaging nature of cultural dissemination, thereby integrating cultural heritage into the daily lives of the general public. Simultaneously, by aligning with the evolving cultural needs of our time, institutions can promote the deep integration of cultural relic resources with public education, cultural tourism development, and cultural inheritance. Under the premise of strict protection of cultural relics, this approach aims to maximize their social and cultural value, fostering a virtuous cycle where conservation drives utilization and utilization enhances conservation, ultimately ensuring the sustainable transmission and development of cultural relic resources.

4.4. Improving industry regulatory frameworks and establishing a long-term development mechanism

The institutionalization and standardization of cultural and museum affairs serve as a crucial guarantee for the steady development of the modern cultural and museum sector, as well as a key measure for addressing irregularities in cultural heritage protection and advancing the high-quality development of the cultural and museum industry. Continuously refining the industry's institutional framework can establish a long-term development mechanism for cultural heritage protection and museum development. Cultural authorities should, based on the current state of the cultural and museum industry and the demands of the contemporary era, continuously refine institutional norms across various domains—including museum operation and management, collection acquisition and conservation, supervision of cultural relic circulation, and public services for cultural and museum institutions—to build a comprehensive, meticulous, and actionable industry institutional system. All cultural and museum venues must strictly implement industry regulations, standardize the entire process of registration, storage, conservation, and exhibition of their collections, establish dynamic management ledgers for cultural relics, and eliminate issues such as the idleness or damage of cultural relics and their unauthorized transfer. Simultaneously, it is essential to establish a regular industry supervision and evaluation mechanism to conduct specialized oversight of museum operations and cultural heritage protection efforts, promptly rectify non-compliant practices within the industry, and utilize robust institutional constraints to ensure the orderly development of the cultural and museum sector, thereby promoting the normalization, long-term sustainability, and standardization of cultural heritage protection work.

5. Conclusion

The modern era marked a pivotal historical phase for the development of China's museum sector, characterized by iterative evolution in cultural heritage conservation concepts. Over several decades of development, this period achieved a fundamental leap from traditional museum models to a modern museum system. From the embryonic beginnings in the late Qing Dynasty to the rise and maturation during the Republic of China era, China gradually established its own indigenous modern museum industry framework, simultaneously driving comprehensive transformations across key areas—including stakeholders in cultural

heritage conservation, conservation philosophies, value perceptions, and the overall industry structure—thereby completely overturning the traditional niche-oriented, experience-based, and closed model of cultural heritage preservation. The public-oriented, scientific, educational, and institutional development of museums has formed a deeply interactive and mutually reinforcing relationship with the modernization of cultural heritage conservation concepts, laying a solid historical foundation for the advancement of China’s modern museum sector. By reflecting on the developmental trajectory of modern museums today, leveraging historical experiences to optimize the path of museum development, continuously refining the public museum system, enhancing technological empowerment, deepening adaptive utilization, and improving institutional mechanisms, we can sustainably promote high-quality development in cultural heritage conservation efforts and facilitate the intergenerational transmission and innovative development of China’s outstanding traditional culture.

Funding

Sample Schools for the Implementation of the New Curriculum under Chongqing’s “New Leading Goose Project” for Compulsory Education; Development of Excellence Class Models for “Interdisciplinary Thematic Learning in Junior High School History”; and Phase-wise Research Findings from the Chongqing General Senior High School History Curriculum Innovation Base Community

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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