APPROACH TO STANDARDIZATION SYSTEM OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION IN CHINA[*]

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ABSTRACT:

As architectural heritage documentation is one of the basic tasks for heritage conservation activities, including research, intervention, education, interpretation and presentation, its standardization system is of strategic importance and practical value. Not only the significance, techniques, contents and uses of documentation have been emphasized repeatedly in many international charters and recommendations, but also in practice, many countries have succeeded in building up administrative and technical system of heritage documentation in different ways. Nevertheless, there exist a lot of problems in this field in China, such as inadequate understanding or misunderstanding of documentation, ineffective administrative management, lack of overall plan, distempered technical and information sharing mechanism and so on. It has not met the demands mentioned in *Beijing Document* adopted by the International Symposium on the Concepts and Practices of Conservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings in East Asia in 2007: adequate recording, good quality, keeping update and open to public.

Based on the investigation on domestic status quo and experiences abroad, this paper discusses standardization system of historic building recordings from two aspects: 1) how to establish an effective administrative system of documentation. It is believed that it is the most important issue to ensure the relatively independent status of the documentation activities in all levels of administrative systems. It is supposed to be, at least, explicit in government's responsibility and effective in archives utilization. 2) The levels of the technical system. Standardization system does not merely mean compiling standards or guidelines. It could be put into three levels: basic principles, practice guidelines (including textbook, training, examples of good practice, etc.) and technical standards / specifications (actually only suitable for specific technique problems).

Establishing scientific, standardized documentation system is a long-term, complicated task. In order to make rapid progress in heritage documentation as soon as possible, the heritage authorities of different levels in China should attach extraordinary importance to its standardization development and utilize cross-discipline human resources available and even the whole public to participate in documentation activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Architectural heritage documentation is a dynamic process in which the undertakers will record, understand, analyze, study, and evaluate the information of the value, physical configuration, condition and use of architectural heritage. As integrate part of the conservation process and the start point for most conservation activities, such as research and assessment, intervention, interpretation and presentation, and education, documentation and its standardization system is of great strategic importance and practical value. Not only the significance, techniques, tasks and uses of documentation have been emphasized repeatedly in many international charters and recommendations, but also in practice, many countries have succeeded in building up administrative and technical system of heritage documentation in different ways.

In China, systematic investigation, survey and recording activities using modern method date back to the early 1930's, when the Society for the Research in Chinese Architecture began its famous sixteen-year-long field trips for searching monument survivals in China. In the last 80 years, with the development of methodology and technology, and the improvement of the related laws and regulations, a great number of documentation projects have been finished by heritage authority, archaeological institutions, architectural firms, and universities—all together forming the documentation systems in China. However, in both management and technical aspects, these systems are just in their preliminary stage, and not effective enough to meet the demands mentioned in *Beijing Document* adopted by the International Symposium on the Concepts and Practices of Conservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings in East Asia in 2007: adequate recording, good quality, keeping update and open to public (SACH, 2007).

In 2006, in order to change the backward status, China's official body for cultural heritage conservation, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) formulated *the Eleventh Five-year Plan for Scientific and Technical Development of Historic Heritage Conservation,* which explicitly recognizes the importance to construct, improve and enhance the databases of culture heritage information and to

share them with the public. In this plan, the authority promises to "actively construct the scientific and technological platforms for cultural heritage conservation", including the one for documentation. Based on our investigations, questionnaire, expert interviews, analyses, and survey practice, this paper puts forward briefly the route map and master plan of the standardization system of architectural heritage documentation in China.

2. PROBLEMS IN THE PROCESS OF STANDARDIZATION

The standardization of architectural heritage documentation means to build up scientific guideline systems for the technology and methodology used for information capture, processing, management and utilization. It can comprehensively and promptly help to manage the information served for related research and assessment, invention, education, and communication. Existing problems in the course of standardization in China are as following.

2.1 Full of Misunderstanding and Lack of Master plan

Many owners, managers and even conservers of historic properties have vague knowledge and out-of-date concepts on significance, contents and characteristics of heritage documentation, and have different opinions on many issues such as sharing information, using of new techniques and establishing criteria for recording. In short, there is a lack of the adequate understanding of the essence, difficulty and continuity of heritage documentation.

2.2 Ineffective administrative mechanism

In advanced countries, there usually exist either sophisticated administrative systems for documentation within state administrative body, or government-affiliated institutions responsible for documentation. However, in China, only temporary "leading groups" or "work groups" rather than a specific, permanent body were employed to deal with some short-term documentation programmes such as three rounds of nationwide general heritage investigation and identification in the past decades. Therefore, sustainable, balanced, and all-round development of documentation can not be guaranteed.

2.3 Chaotic Code System

So far, very few documentation-related regulations have been formulated except two rules which focus on general heritage investigation and archives system of national official protected heritage sites. But even in these documents, only the format and content of data are involved, without the manipulation directions and standards which are supposed to be the most critical and complicated parts.

2.4 Frozen Records

The destination of documentation is to make it be shared by the public. But at present, the information sharing mechanism is so poor that even professionals still have difficulties in searching and obtaining the necessary information about heritage sites. Most accumulated data are still not in circulation as social resources.

3. ADMINISTRATIVE APPROACH TO STANDARDIZATION

From overseas experiences, we find out that it is the relatively independent status of the documentation which is the most important factor in the process of standardization. In order to set up the nationwide mechanism, in which professional personnel are employed responsible only for documentation, and the goals set can be attained completely, and the resulting data can be well shared, we suggest building up two efficient running systems: **management system** (MS) **and technique system** (TS). The MS can ensure the all-round, effective execution of the TS; and the TS is the extensive products and inspecting contents of the MS. Based on the current conditions and the nature of the administrative system, the proposed administrative institution for documentation in China should include three sub-systems: **implementation**, **information management** and **technique support**.

3.1 To set up an implemental system with explicit powers and responsibilities

In national level, a central inventory/documentation office of cultural heritage may be added into the SACH. Its role is to plan, supervise, implement and inspect documentation work and provide financial support for documentation all over China. In lower levels of governments, provincial and municipal /county counterparts are required to establish to follow the direction of the central office and carry out specific documentation programmes and sent data to the central archives centre. The owner or manager of historic properties can invite universities, research institutes and private firms to do recording works, but all products should be submitted to expert commissions for quality control.

3.2 To set up an information sharing mechanism for efficient utilization

An information / archives centre of cultural heritage is proposed to be established under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. It serves for construction and maintenance of different categories of archives of architectural, archaeological and intangible heritage, including pigeonholing all kinds of accumulated data, constructing databases and formulating related standards, supervising local database construction, and training personnel for local services.

A library providing an information retrieval service is proposed to be built, in which people can searching, reading and copying archives and get consultative services. Some databases can be used online for basic services, but further information may only be accessed in the library.

3.3 To establish an expert consultative system and technique platform

It is suggested to establish a national expert consultative commission to offer technique support for heritage documentation, including formulating basic principles, recommendations, and technique specifications; inspecting important documentation projects, supervising local documentation activities.

4. TECHNICAL APPROACH TO STANDARDIZATION

The technical standardization system is supposed to control the process and products of documentation, so as to record characteristics, physical configuration, and related historical and cultural information of heritage in an authentic, precise, and scientific manner. The details of the technical methods used, manipulative process, and the results and their management, dissemination and sharing will be covered in this system. Furthermore, the process and methodology of documentation will be demonstrated and presented by abundant and detailed case-study materials, so that a series of principles, guidelines and standards to meet the needs of different users, on different occasions, and for different technique applications.

Documentation is a dynamic, complex, and multi-disciplinary process, with different needs of different users, therefore, its standardization process is not merely compiling standards or guidelines as usual. During the process, related bodies and teams are encouraged to participate in to set up short-, mid-, and long-term planning, and gradually establish three levels of sub-systems, from macroscopic to microscopic aspects. First, adapting international principles and charters and documents, and based our own fundamental research, China's own principles for heritage documentation are supposed to be formulated; secondly, taken the basic principles as guidelines, documentation work in different levels and categories can be improved through compiling textbook, guidebook, regulations and presenting good examples. As for strict technical requirement aspects, such as accuracy of survey, colour reduction, or database construction, concrete technical specifications are required. Among these three levels, principles are the sole and guiding thoughts; specifications are guarantee of quality; and the practical guide is the most critical part (fig. 1).
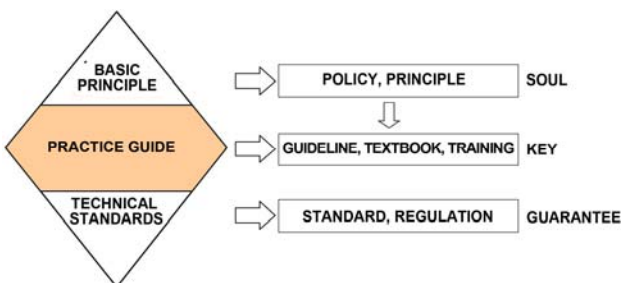

Fig. 1 diagram of three technical levels

4.1 Level of Basic Principle

The basic principles include guiding and directory documents which prescribe general issues about documentation to answer the questions of why, what, who, where, when and how to record or deal with records. It focuses on conveying of conceptions, emphasizing the unique significance and values of documentation so as to build concrete recognition and knowledge in people's minds.

4.2 Level of Practice Guidelines

These literatures are the biggest and most systematic part of standardization documents. They are composed of the documents and publications written or edited by experts from different fields to introduce the principles, methods, techniques and good examples. They can be textbooks, guidebooks, handbooks, etc, and covers all stages and fields of heritage documentation.

4.3 Level of Technical Standards

This kind of documents is used to provide universal requirements for the application of techniques or format, presentation and provision of the resulting data. This is most compulsory in all of the tree levels, and can be attained through formulate national standard (GB) and industrial regulations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Establishing scientific, standardized documentation system is a long-term, complicated task. It can not be finished overnight, especially in developing countries. In order to make rapid progress in heritage documentation as soon as possible, the heritage authorities of different levels in China should attach extraordinary importance to its standardization development and utilize cross-discipline human resources available and even the whole public to participate in documentation activities.

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