

China's International Cooperation in Cultural Heritage Conservation: An Actor–Network Analysis of the Ta Keo Temple Restoration Project in Cambodia

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Abstract

In recent decades, cultural heritage conservation has increasingly become an important field of international cooperation. Within this context, China has gradually expanded its participation in overseas heritage conservation initiatives and has developed a distinctive model of international collaboration. Among these initiatives, China's long-term involvement in the conservation of the Angkor monuments in Cambodia represents one of the most representative cases of international heritage cooperation. Taking the restoration project of Ta Keo Temple at Angkor as a case study, this article employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical framework to examine the formation and evolution of cooperation networks in China's overseas heritage conservation practices. Drawing on field research materials and interview data collected in Cambodia, the study analyzes the interactions among multiple actors-including governments, professional institutions, international organizations, and local communities-during the restoration process. The findings indicate that China's participation in international heritage governance has gradually expanded from the provision of technical assistance to a broader role involving institutional coordination. Through the translation and alignment of interests among different actors, a relatively stable cooperation network has been established. This study contributes to understanding the governance dynamics of transnational heritage conservation and provides empirical insights into the evolving model of China's heritage diplomacy.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Conservation; International cooperation; Actor-Network Theory; Ta Keo Temple; Foreign Aid Projects; Heritage Diplomacy

1. Introduction

In recent decades, cultural heritage conservation has become an increasingly important field of international cooperation. Many countries participate in transnational heritage protection initiatives to preserve historical monuments, promote cultural exchange, and strengthen global cultural governance. Within this broader context, China has gradually expanded its participation in overseas heritage conservation and has developed a distinctive model of international cooperation.

Since the late twentieth century, Chinese government has implemented a series of heritage conservation projects in countries such as Cambodia, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan by dispatching restoration teams, providing financial and technical support, and participating in multilateral cooperation mechanisms. These initiatives not only focus on the restoration and preservation of historical monuments but also emphasize knowledge exchange and capacity building in areas such as conservation philosophy, technical standards, and professional training. Such cooperation reflects a development-oriented approach that highlights long-term institutional collaboration and local capacity building.

Among these initiatives, China's long-term participation in the conservation of the Angkor monuments in Cambodia represents a particularly significant case. The Angkor monuments were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992 and were simultaneously listed as endangered due to their fragile state of preservation. In response to international efforts to safeguard the site, China established China-Cambodia Government Team for Safeguarding Angkor in 1997 and subsequently carried out restoration projects at several important monuments, including Chau Say Tevoda Temple and Ta Keo Temple. Through continuous engagement in restoration work and technical cooperation, China has become one of the earliest participating countries and one with the longest continuous involvement in the conservation of Angkor.

Against this backdrop, understanding how China participates in and shapes international cooperation networks in heritage conservation has become an important research question. To address this issue, this study adopts Actor–Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical framework and examines the restoration project of Ta Keo Temple as a case study. Based on field research and interview data collected in Cambodia, the article analyzes how multiple actors—including governments, international organizations, professional teams, and local communities—interact and negotiate within the cooperation network. By exploring the formation mechanisms and operational logic of this network, the study aims to provide insights into China's evolving role in global heritage governance.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, cultural heritage conservation has attracted increasing attention in the fields of cultural policy, international relations, and heritage studies. Scholars have explored the role of heritage conservation not only as a technical practice but also as a form of cultural governance embedded in global political and social processes.

2.1 International Cooperation in Heritage Conservation in Angkor

International scholarship generally regards heritage conservation at Angkor as a representative case of coordinated international intervention. Since its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, studies have emphasized the institutionalization of cooperation through a dual mechanism combining multilateral coordination and bilateral implementation. [1]

The literature highlights the central role of the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor as a multilateral platform that aligns standards, funding, and project evaluation among diverse international actors. At the same time, most conservation activities are carried out through bilateral projects led by individual countries, focusing on restoration, technology transfer, and capacity building. [2] Scholars widely agree that these two mechanisms are not separate but structurally interdependent.



Recent studies further note a shift from monument-centered conservation to broader approaches integrating sustainable development, including tourism management and community engagement. Overall, the literature converges on the view that Angkor represents a layered and evolving model of international cooperation, where multilateral governance and bilateral practice jointly shape conservation outcomes.

2.2 Heritage Diplomacy and Cultural Soft Power

International scholarship increasingly frames heritage conservation at Angkor within the broader context of heritage diplomacy and cultural soft power. Since its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Angkor has not only been a site of technical cooperation but also a platform through which states project cultural presence and build international influence.

The literature generally holds that participation in conservation projects enables countries to enhance their cultural visibility and strengthen bilateral relations with Cambodia. Through long-term restoration efforts, archaeological research, and capacity-building programs, external actors embed their technical expertise and cultural narratives within the site. [3] In this sense, heritage cooperation is widely interpreted as a form of “soft power in practice,” where cultural engagement complements diplomatic and developmental objectives.

At the same time, scholars emphasize that such diplomacy operates within the multilateral framework coordinated by the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor, which moderates competition and promotes a degree of balance among participating states. Recent studies further note a shift toward more collaborative and development-oriented approaches, where heritage diplomacy is increasingly linked with local capacity building and sustainable development goals.

Overall, the literature suggests that Angkor exemplifies how heritage conservation can function as a key interface between culture and international relations, where soft power is exercised through sustained, project-based cooperation rather than symbolic representation alone

2.3 Actor–Network Theory in Heritage Studies

Existing studies on Angkor rarely apply Actor–Network Theory (ANT), tending instead to focus on institutional frameworks and state-led cooperation, particularly within mechanisms such as the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor. As a result, the relational dynamics among diverse actors remain underexplored.

ANT, developed in the 1980s by scholars including Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law, conceptualizes knowledge and practice as outcomes of interactions among heterogeneous human and non-human actors. [4] It emphasizes “actors,” “networks,” and “translation,” highlighting how relationships are formed and stabilized through processes of negotiation and alignment. [5]

While widely used in broader heritage studies to analyze networked conservation processes, ANT has not yet been systematically applied to Angkor. However, its relational perspective is particularly suited to this case. Under intertwined bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, conservation at Angkor is inherently networked, involving continuous coordination among states, institutions, technologies, and local actors. ANT thus provides a useful lens to explain how cooperation is constructed, how external approaches are localized, and how core actors organize and stabilize complex international networks.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1 The Actor–Network Theory

Actor–Network Theory (ANT) was developed in the 1980s by scholars such as Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law to explain how knowledge and practice are constructed through social interactions. [6] It departs from human-centered approaches by adopting the principle of generalized symmetry, treating

both human actors (e.g., governments, institutions, experts) and non-human actors (e.g., technologies, artifacts, policy texts) as equally important in shaping outcomes. These heterogeneous elements together form dynamic “actor networks.”

ANT is structured around three core concepts: actors, networks, and translation. “Actors” refer to all entities that participate in and influence the formation of a network. “Networks” denote the evolving relational structures produced through interaction, negotiation, and coordination. “Translation” is the key mechanism through which networks are formed, as core actors align diverse interests and resources through processes such as problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization, ultimately stabilizing the network around an Obligatory Passage Point (OPP).

In the context of heritage conservation at Angkor, ANT provides a relational framework for analyzing international cooperation. Given the coexistence of multilateral coordination and bilateral implementation, conservation involves continuous interaction among states, international organizations, technical experts, material technologies, and local actors. ANT helps explain how cooperation is constructed, how external approaches are translated into local practice, and how core actors organize and stabilize complex networks.

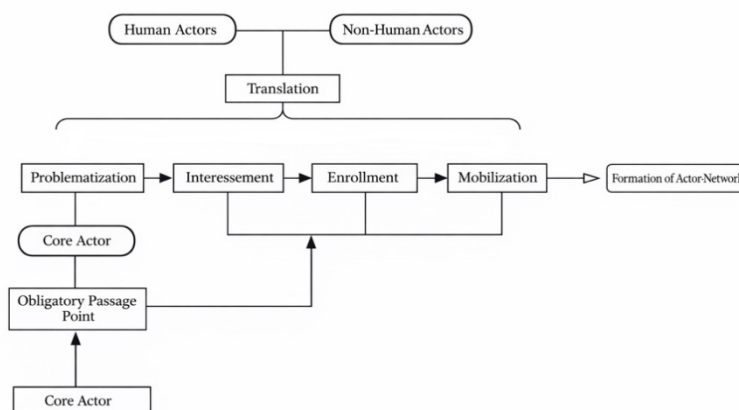


Figure 1. Diagram of Actor–Network Theory

3.2 Cultural Heritage Assistance and International Cooperation in Overseas Heritage Conservation

Scholar Xu Ying points out that cultural heritage assistance refers to China’s provision of aid, within bilateral or multilateral frameworks, to help other countries protect specific cultural heritage, particularly those that have been inscribed on the World Heritage List. [7] The forms of assistance include financial support, technology transfer, and professional training, with the aim of promoting the protection and sustainable development of cultural heritage in recipient countries. This practice emphasizes national responsibility and international mutual support, and its fundamental motivation lies in political mutual trust and mutual learning among civilizations rather than the simple expansion of soft power. In fact, the history of China’s cultural heritage assistance can be traced back to the period immediately before the founding of the People’s Republic of China. In recent years, with the growth of China’s comprehensive national strength and the deepening of the “going global” strategy in the cultural field, its diplomatic functions have become increasingly visible, prompting renewed academic attention to its nature as “heritage diplomacy.”

On this basis, cultural heritage assistance has gradually evolved into a more collaborative form of “international cooperation in overseas heritage conservation,” emphasizing consultative mechanisms and the principle of joint participation. This development represents a phased transition from “cultural heritage assistance” to “international cooperation in overseas heritage conservation.” Such a transition indicates not

only a transformation in practice—from one-way assistance to two-way interaction—but also a shift in research paradigms from project-based aid to a broader field of development studies focusing on knowledge co-production, the dissemination of norms, and engagement with international institutional frameworks. At present, this cooperative model not only advances specific restoration projects but also extends to institutional collaboration among international organizations, alignment of technical systems, and joint training of cultural heritage professionals, thereby constructing a more systematic and diversified transnational cooperation network. Compared with traditional “cultural heritage assistance,” this form of cooperation places greater emphasis on knowledge production, the dissemination of conservation concepts, and the co-construction of institutional mechanisms. Its connotations are increasingly aligned with the broader international understanding of “heritage diplomacy,” and it also reflects China’s evolving role in the global cultural governance system—from a participant to a core actor and provider of norms.

4. Case Analysis

As the Australian scholar Tim Winter notes, heritage assistance not only carries the symbolic significance of cultural exchange but is also deeply embedded in national strategic arrangements, becoming an important means for donor countries to expand influence, shape diplomatic relations, and construct regional orders. [8] At the same time, from the perspective of the Cambodian government, the restoration of the Angkor monuments symbolizes not only the process of cultural continuity and national revival but also holds profound political and economic significance. Therefore, cooperation in the conservation of the Angkor monuments is not merely a technical practice of cultural heritage protection but also a complex process of international cooperation involving multiple actors, intricate power interactions, and strategic implications. [9] In order to analyze the diverse actors and their interactions within this process, this study introduces Actor–Network Theory to reveal how technology, institutions, states, organizations, and individuals collectively form dynamic network relationships in China’s international cooperation in overseas heritage conservation assistance in Cambodia.

To more effectively analyze and respond to these challenges, this paper adopts Actor–Network Theory as an analytical tool. The theory emphasizes the relational construction and dynamic coordination among multiple actors, enabling heterogeneous elements involved in China’s overseas heritage conservation practices—such as government institutions, implementation teams, international organizations, and technical standards—to be incorporated into a unified network perspective. This approach helps reveal how different parties achieve cooperation through negotiation and translation. In particular, when addressing key issues such as difficulties in “translation,” Actor–Network Theory can help analyze cognitive differences and coordination obstacles encountered by Chinese approaches within international mechanisms, thereby providing both theoretical support and practical insights for improving cooperative effectiveness and optimizing governance structures.

Within the framework of Actor–Network Theory, China’s assistance in the conservation of the Angkor monuments can be understood as a network composed of multiple actors, including the Chinese government, the Cambodian government, international organizations, scholars and experts, and local communities. Taking the Ta Keo Temple restoration project—part of China’s second phase of assistance in the conservation of the Angkor monuments—as the main case study, the analytical framework of the actor-network for China’s international cooperation in heritage conservation assistance in Cambodia is outlined as follows.

4.1 Problematization — Core Actors and the Obligatory Passage Point of the Project

Problematization constitutes the initial stage in the creation of an actor network. Core actors must identify the problems faced by each actor in achieving their respective objectives, thereby making the solutions they propose the obligatory passage point through which other actors must pass to achieve their goals.

thereby establishing the proposed conservation schemes as the Obligatory Passage Point (OPP). In the Ta

Keo project, this OPP functioned as a nexus where China's Belt and Road diplomatic objectives converged with Cambodia's needs for sovereign cultural revival and UNESCO's multilateral preservation standards."

Therefore, the first step in the problematization stage is to determine who will serve as the core actor. Subsequently, the core actor needs to present the problems and objectives faced by other actors and propose an obligatory passage point through which a shared goal can be achieved.

Taking the Ta Keo Temple restoration project as an example, the creation of the cooperation network involves actors such as the Chinese government, the APSARA National Authority, China-Cambodia Government Team for Safeguarding Angkor, Cambodian artisans, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor (ICC-Angkor). Cambodian artisans played an important role in the restoration process by carrying out traditional craftsmanship and practical implementation; however, due to their lack of modern restoration techniques and independent operational capacity, they were unable to assume the leading role in the project. UNESCO, as a key international institution responsible for setting heritage protection norms and providing a global platform for discourse, primarily promotes value systems, principles, standards, and international cooperation agendas related to heritage protection. Its influence mainly operates at the macro-policy level and does not directly coordinate project implementation; therefore, it is not suitable to serve as the core actor of the project. ICC-Angkor, established under UNESCO's initiative, functions as a governance organization responsible for reviewing project proposals, coordinating resources, and facilitating multilateral communication, thus providing an institutional platform for the operation of the project mechanism. However, its organizational nature is primarily coordinative, lacking direct control over financial and technical resources and the capacity to independently implement restoration projects.

China-Cambodia Government Team for Safeguarding Angkor serves as the primary provider of restoration technologies and possesses strong professional expertise, playing a leading role in project implementation. Nevertheless, during the early stage of restoration, the team relied on financial support and policy guidance from the Chinese government and could not independently determine the overall direction of the project, making it unsuitable as the core actor. The APSARA National Authority, representing the Cambodian government, plays a significant role in administrative approval and policy support; however, due to limited technical capacity and restoration resources, its ability to lead the project is constrained.

As the initiator and principal funder of the project, the Chinese government possesses sufficient financial resources, technical support, and political influence to coordinate the relationships among different actors and facilitate the smooth implementation of the project. In addition, as an advocate of cultural diplomacy, the Chinese government occupies a proactive position in communication with the Cambodian government and UNESCO, ensuring the effective advancement of restoration activities. Therefore, at the initial stage of the cooperation network's formation for the Ta Keo Temple restoration project, the Chinese government can be regarded as the core actor. As the core actor, the Chinese government must identify and present the problems and objectives faced by other actors, thereby linking its own objective—high-quality cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative—with the objectives of other actors. In doing so, it persuades other actors that only by joining the cooperation network and passing through the obligatory passage point established by the core actor can their respective goals be achieved. As the project progressed, China gradually strengthened its discourse power within multilateral governance mechanisms, including ICC-Angkor. In particular, during the restoration of Ta Keo Temple, Chinese experts not only engaged in technical exchanges related to heritage conservation but also actively contributed to discussions on heritage management systems and restoration standards, promoting the integration of Chinese experience—such as the principle of "repairing the old as the old"—into international norms. This development demonstrates China's transition from a "technical assistance provider" toward a "provider of cultural norms."

Different actors pursue different objectives and therefore face distinct challenges in achieving them. As the core actor, the Chinese government proposed an obligatory passage point capable of addressing the



problems faced by all actors—the implementation and promotion of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project with the participation of all parties. By providing financial support, technical guidance, and professional training, the Chinese government not only assisted Cambodia in restoring cultural heritage but also promoted international cooperation in the field of heritage conservation and strengthened its influence in cultural diplomacy.

4.2 Interessement — Presentation of Interests among Participants in the Ta Keo Temple Restoration

Each actor entering the cooperation network of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project encounters certain obstacles. At this stage, the core actor—the Chinese government—must demonstrate to other actors that these obstacles can be addressed through coordination and that participation in the cooperation network, by passing through the obligatory passage point established by the core actor, will enable them to obtain expected benefits.

In the case of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project, all participating actors achieved multiple benefits through cooperation. For the Cambodian government, the project effectively alleviated the shortage of restoration resources and enhanced both heritage conservation capacity and national cultural soft power. For the Chinese restoration team, the project provided financial support, opportunities for technical exchange, enhanced international influence, and a practical platform for cultural cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. For local artisans, the project created employment opportunities and professional training, promoting the transmission and development of traditional craftsmanship. For UNESCO, the project advanced the standardization of world heritage conservation and strengthened multilateral cooperation. ICC-Angkor ensured the scientific validity and legitimacy of restoration through institutional mechanisms. As the core actor, the Chinese government consolidated its influence in international cultural governance through the implementation of the project, deepened China–Cambodia friendship, demonstrated the cultural diplomacy achievements of the Belt and Road Initiative, and gradually shifted from a technical assistance provider to a cultural norm provider. The realization of these interests strengthened the motivation and commitment of actors to join the cooperation network, laying the foundation for the subsequent stage of enrollment.

4.3 Enrollment — The Inclusion of Actors

During the enrollment stage, the Chinese government, acting as the recruiting actor, negotiated with other actors and attracted them to join the cooperation network of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project according to the design proposed by the core actor. In doing so, it linked its own interests with those of other actors and assigned specific tasks to each participant, positioning them within appropriate roles in the network.

In the Ta Keo Temple restoration project, the Chinese government promoted project implementation and ensured sustainable development through policy support, technical assistance, talent training, and financial investment. Within the cooperation network, the Chinese government acted as the organizer coordinating multiple parties and ensuring alignment with international standards; the Cambodian government served as the regulator and coordinator, guaranteeing compliance and facilitating the participation of local artisans; the Chinese restoration team functioned both as a provider of technical expertise and as a trainer, cultivating local professional capacity and ensuring knowledge transfer; Cambodian artisans acted as implementers and inheritors, acquiring restoration skills through practice and continuing traditional craftsmanship; UNESCO served as an international supervisor, ensuring compliance with global standards and promoting technical exchange; and ICC-Angkor acted as an institutional coordinator and reviewer, providing evaluation guidance and supervisory support. Through such multi-party collaboration, a transparent, efficient, and sustainable cooperation network for cultural heritage conservation was established.

Through the enrollment process, the Chinese government, as the core actor, clarified the roles and task allocation of the various actors within the cooperation network. The positions and functions of each partic-

ipant gradually became clear, forming a stable cooperative structure that enabled the Ta Keo Temple restoration project to proceed smoothly and achieve positive outcomes in heritage conservation, international cooperation, and talent cultivation.

4.4 Mobilization — The Formation of an Interest Alliance in the Ta Keo Temple Restoration

During the mobilization stage, the core actor (the Chinese government) must effectively organize all actors within the network to ensure their active participation, ultimately forming a relatively stable alliance of interests. The key to mobilization lies in removing obstacles that prevent actors from participating in the cooperation network to the greatest extent possible, thereby enhancing their motivation and ensuring the successful implementation and sustainable operation of the project.

In the Ta Keo Temple restoration project, during the mobilization phase of the cooperation network, the Chinese government dispatched expert teams to coordinate with Cambodian counterparts, ensuring smooth communication and information exchange. A model combining training, practice, and competition was introduced to enhance artisans' skills, while modern technologies such as three-dimensional scanning were applied to reduce technical barriers in restoration and increase local participation. At the same time, China encouraged the participation of international organizations such as UNESCO, thereby enhancing the international influence and replicability of the project. At the institutional level, communication with ICC-Angkor and alignment with relevant standards strengthened the transparency and legitimacy of cooperative governance, establishing an institutionalized framework for cooperation based on multilateral consensus.

With the gradual completion of the restoration work, Ta Keo Temple also began to transform its restored cultural value into economic value through the development of tourism resources, thereby generating additional revenue for the Cambodian government. In 2024, the Cambodian government constructed cycling greenways around the Angkor Archaeological Park and incorporated Ta Keo Temple into the route, enabling visitors to explore the site through cycling tours and enhancing the visitor experience. [10] While promoting the revitalization of cultural heritage, China's overseas heritage conservation assistance projects have also created new sources of income for local communities in Cambodia through technological demonstration, international dissemination, and tourism revitalization. Although this process remains at an early stage, it has already demonstrated the potential for heritage conservation projects to generate economic benefits, forming an important link between cultural value and sustainable social development. According to available statistics, in 2024 the Angkor Archaeological Park received more than one million foreign visitors, representing a year-on-year increase of 28.27 percent compared with 2023; among them, the number of Chinese visitors exceeded 80,000, marking a year-on-year increase of 48.46 percent.

Through these efforts, the division of roles among actors became clearer, and their interests gradually aligned, ultimately forming a stable cooperation network. The restoration of Ta Keo Temple has not only promoted China–Cambodia cooperation in cultural heritage conservation but has also provided new experience for international collaboration in heritage restoration, while contributing to the improvement of skills among Cambodian artisans and the sustainable development of heritage conservation in Cambodia.

5. Discussion

5.1 Network Governance in International Heritage Conservation

From the perspective of Actor–Network Theory (ANT), the restoration of Ta Keo Temple can be understood as a process of network construction in which multiple actors interact to stabilize a cooperative governance structure. Rather than being driven by a single institution, the conservation project involved the coordination of heterogeneous actors, including national governments, international organizations, conservation experts, and local communities. These actors formed a dynamic network through processes of negotiation,

resource mobilization, and role allocation.

Within this network, the Chinese government functioned as a central actor responsible for mobilizing financial resources, organizing technical teams, and coordinating institutional cooperation. Through diplomatic agreements and project planning, it established the basic framework within which other actors could participate in the restoration process. Meanwhile, the APSARA National Authority of Cambodia played an important role in local coordination, ensuring that conservation activities complied with Cambodian heritage management policies.

International organizations also contributed to the stabilization of the cooperation network. For example, UNESCO and the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor provided technical standards and institutional legitimacy for conservation practices. Their involvement ensured that restoration activities were aligned with internationally recognized conservation principles.

From an ANT perspective, these interactions illustrate the process of “translation,” through which the interests of diverse actors are gradually aligned. Through successive stages of problem definition, interest alignment, and role negotiation, the conservation project eventually formed a relatively stable cooperation network that enabled the long-term implementation of restoration work.

5.2 Characteristics of China’s Heritage Cooperation Model

The Ta Keo Temple restoration project also reveals several distinctive characteristics of China’s approach to international heritage cooperation.

First, China’s heritage cooperation projects are typically characterized by strong governmental coordination. In many overseas conservation initiatives, the Chinese government acts as the primary initiator and financial supporter of restoration projects. This state-led model enables the mobilization of large-scale technical resources and facilitates long-term diplomatic coordination with host countries.

Second, China’s approach emphasizes long-term technical engagement in on-site restoration work. Unlike many international conservation programs that rely on short-term consultancy or financial grants, Chinese conservation teams often remain stationed at heritage sites for extended periods. This long-term presence allows conservation experts to conduct detailed structural analysis, implement complex restoration techniques, and adjust conservation strategies according to the evolving conditions of the monument.

Third, China’s heritage cooperation initiatives often combine technical restoration with broader cultural exchange. Through joint conservation projects, Chinese and Cambodian experts engage in collaborative research, professional training, and knowledge sharing. Such exchanges contribute to capacity building in heritage management while strengthening cultural connections between the participating countries.

Together, these characteristics suggest that China’s heritage cooperation model integrates technical expertise, institutional coordination, and cultural diplomacy within a single cooperative framework.

5.3 Comparative Perspectives on International Heritage Assistance

Placing the Ta Keo Temple project within a broader international context helps illuminate the distinctive features of China’s approach to heritage cooperation.

Several countries have long been involved in heritage conservation projects in Southeast Asia, each adopting different institutional models. For instance, French heritage cooperation has historically relied on academic institutions and archaeological research networks. Organizations such as École française d’Extrême-Orient have played an important role in archaeological excavation, historical research, and heritage documentation across the region. This model emphasizes scholarly expertise and research-driven conservation practices.

Japan has also actively participated in international heritage assistance programs, many of which are im-

plemented through the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Japanese heritage cooperation projects often focus on technical training, capacity building, and community participation. By supporting local conservation professionals and strengthening institutional capacity, Japan's approach aims to promote sustainable heritage management at the local level.

Compared with these models, China's heritage cooperation approach places greater emphasis on state-led coordination and long-term technical engagement. The presence of permanent conservation teams enables Chinese experts to participate directly in large-scale restoration projects and to maintain long-term collaboration with local institutions. As a result, China's approach can be understood as a hybrid model combining technical restoration, institutional cooperation, and cultural diplomacy.

This comparative perspective highlights the diversity of international heritage cooperation models and suggests that different countries may adopt distinct strategies depending on their institutional structures, cultural traditions, and diplomatic priorities.

Country	Main Actors	Primary Contributions	Project Examples & Focus
China	Government expert teams, China Cultural Heritage Research Institute	Long-term conservation, technical assistance, capacity building	Restoration of Preah Srah, Ta Keo, Chau S Tevoda; ongoing Royal Palace core site pre systematic technology transfer and field tra for Cambodian staff
France	Government and research institutions (EFEO), ICC-Angkor co-chair	Historical conservation leadership, institutional coordination	Early restoration (EFEO), co-chairing ICC-Angkor; technical coordination and UNESCO forum facilitation
Japan	Government (Japanese Funds-in-Trust via UNESCO), academic teams, ICC-Angkor co-chair	Financial support, training, infrastructure stabilization	Bayon Temple conservation and risk mappi technical training with APSARA experts
South Korea	Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation, KOICA	Field research, conservation and restoration	Preah Pithu Temple Group project (2015–2 and ongoing maintenance/restoration activi
India	Government archaeological teams	Early conservation engagement, structural and surface treatment	Restoration work at Angkor Wat (1986–19 prior to ICC framework (existing record)

Figure 2. Comparative Perspectives on International Heritage Assistance in Angkor

5.4 Theoretical Implications for Actor–Network Theory

Applying Actor–Network Theory to the Ta Keo Temple restoration project also contributes to the theoretical understanding of heritage governance.

First, the analysis demonstrates that heritage conservation projects involve not only human actors but also important non-human actors. In the case of Ta Keo Temple, the monument itself functions as a non-human actor within the cooperation network. Its architectural structure, material condition, and historical significance shape the decisions made by conservation experts and influence the allocation of technical resources. In this sense, the heritage site actively participates in the formation of the conservation network.

Second, the case highlights the role of international organizations as stabilizing actors within transnational governance networks. By providing technical standards and institutional oversight, organizations such as UNESCO help ensure that conservation practices remain consistent with global heritage management norms. Their participation also enhances the legitimacy of international conservation projects.

Third, the concept of translation provides a useful analytical tool for understanding how diverse actors with different interests are integrated into a common cooperation framework. Through negotiation and coordination, actors gradually align their goals and establish an obligatory passage point that structures the operation of the network. In the Ta Keo Temple project, the restoration plan itself served as such a passage point, guiding the participation of various actors.

These observations suggest that ANT offers a productive framework for analyzing the governance mechanisms underlying international heritage cooperation.

5.5 Challenges and Sustainability of Heritage Cooperation

Despite the achievements of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project, the case also reveals several challenges that affect the long-term sustainability of international heritage cooperation.

One important issue concerns the imbalance of resources among different actors within the cooperation network. International conservation projects often rely heavily on external financial and technical support. While such support is essential for large-scale restoration efforts, excessive dependence on external actors may limit the long-term autonomy of local heritage management institutions.

Another challenge relates to the participation of local communities. Although local artisans and workers are often involved in restoration activities, their role in decision-making processes may remain limited. Strengthening community participation is therefore essential for ensuring that conservation projects are socially sustainable and culturally meaningful.

Finally, differences in conservation philosophies may create tensions among participating actors. International conservation standards sometimes emphasize strict preservation principles, whereas local communities may prioritize economic development and tourism. Balancing these different priorities remains an ongoing challenge in global heritage governance.

Addressing these challenges requires stronger institutional cooperation, expanded local capacity building, and more inclusive governance mechanisms. By integrating local knowledge, international expertise, and long-term institutional support, international heritage cooperation projects can achieve more sustainable outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study has analyzed China's engagement in international cultural heritage conservation through a case study of the Ta Keo Temple restoration project in Cambodia. By employing Actor–Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical lens, the research elucidates how diverse actors—including national governments, international organizations, conservation teams, and local communities—interact to establish and maintain cooperative networks in the process of heritage restoration.

The findings reveal several salient features of China's approach to international heritage cooperation. First, China's projects are predominantly organized within a state-led coordination framework, wherein governmental institutions assume a central role in mobilizing financial resources, technical expertise, and diplomatic support. [11] This governance arrangement facilitates the implementation of large-scale restoration initiatives through sustained institutional collaboration.

Second, the Ta Keo case underscores the significance of long-term technical engagement in international conservation efforts. In contrast to short-term heritage assistance programs, China's continuous presence at the Angkor site has enabled conservation teams to conduct systematic restoration work while maintaining stable partnerships with local heritage authorities. Such sustained involvement enhances both the continuity and effectiveness of conservation practices.

Third, the study demonstrates that international heritage conservation operates as a complex governance network encompassing both human and non-human actors. Through the process of translation described in ANT, the interests of different stakeholders—including governments, international organizations, technical experts, and heritage sites—are gradually aligned within a shared conservation framework. This network-oriented perspective provides a robust analytical tool for understanding the governance mechanisms underlying transnational heritage cooperation.

From a broader standpoint, these findings contribute to discussions on heritage diplomacy and international cultural engagement. Heritage conservation projects increasingly function as platforms for long-term cultural exchange and diplomatic interaction, enabling participating countries to strengthen cultural ties, promote mutual understanding, and advance the protection of shared human heritage.

Nevertheless, the study identifies several challenges that may influence the sustainability of international heritage cooperation. These include asymmetries in resources among participating actors, limited involvement of local communities in decision-making processes, and potential conflicts between international conservation standards and local development priorities. Addressing these issues necessitates enhanced institutional coordination, greater emphasis on local capacity building, and more inclusive governance mechanisms.

This study has certain limitations. It primarily focuses on a single case study and relies predominantly on qualitative data derived from field investigations and interviews. Future research could adopt a comparative perspective by examining additional heritage conservation projects across different regions or by analyzing cooperation models implemented by other countries.

In sum, the Ta Keo Temple restoration project exemplifies how international heritage conservation can be conceptualized as a process of network governance involving multiple actors and institutional arrangements. By illuminating the dynamics of cooperation networks and China's evolving role in global heritage governance, this study advances a nuanced understanding of transnational heritage conservation practices and offers insights for the development of more sustainable mechanisms of international cooperation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Tianqi Lou; Methodology: Yiming Dou; Writing: Tianqi Lou; Supervision: Yiming Dou; Project administration: Tianqi Lou.

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