

Ancient Routes, New Heritage: A Systematic Literature Review of China's Cultural Route Heritage

This study attempts to understand how cultural route heritage is conceptualized and managed in China by systematically reviewing the research literature on Chinese cultural route heritage. It intends to bring the topic to the attention of international academia and to inspire further discussion on the theoretical and practical development of cultural routes. A total of 253 research articles related to Chinese cultural route heritage from major Chinese and English research databases CNKI, WOS and Scopus have been comprehensively identified and reviewed for the purpose of the study. Four major themes of research on Chinese cultural route heritage have been identified: conceptual evaluation, list of the routes and their characteristics, conservation, utilization. The results revealed that China has very rich resources in cultural route heritage, many of which were formed a long time ago, exist across vast geographic regions, have assumed multiple functions and have undergone dynamic reciprocal exchanges among diverse cultures and ethnicities. This paper identifies nineteen cultural routes based on ICOMOS' conceptualization and the major challenges faced by cultural route heritage in China. Besides, it proposes a strategic model to address the need for a more sustainable development of cultural route heritage in the Chinese context.

Keywords: cultural route, Chinese cultural route, cultural heritage, heritage management, heritage tourism

Introduction

Cultural heritage represents the shared memory of people in a community, a region, a nation, or among nations. It bears witness to the formation of history and socio-cultural identity. Modern societies are increasingly aware of the importance of preserving their cultural and natural heritage, so that future generations can also have access to the common memories that have shaped identity and reality for present-day people. This awareness led the UNESCO to adopt the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO 1972). By the year 2019, there were 1,121 heritages inscribed in the World Heritage List, distributed among 167 countries around the world (UNESCO 2019). The heritage movement has acquired global momentum as one of the greatest collective human

achievements of the past decades.

The understanding of the essence of cultural heritage has deepened through decades of multi-disciplinary research and practical experience in the field. In the 1980s, the development of National Heritage Corridors or Areas (NHA) in the USA and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (COE) program both contributed to a significant evolution in the field of heritage conservation and utilization. Since the notion of 'cultural route' first appeared in Europe with the Santiago de Compostela Declaration (COE 1987) and the subsequent inscription of the Santiago Pilgrimage routes into the World Heritage list in 1993, the conceptualization of cultural routes has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention and discussion. In 2005, the World Heritage Center (WHC) of UNESCO included 'heritage route' as a specific term of reference to heritage in its operational guidelines (WHC 2005), in addition to the three categories that already existed, namely, cultural landscapes, historical towns and town centers, and canal heritages. A milestone was reached when the advisory body of UNESCO's world heritage program, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) defined this form of comprehensive and holistic heritage in the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes (ICOMOS 2008). In the document, a cultural route is defined as:

“Any route of communication, be it land, water, or some other type, which is physically delimited and characterized by having its own specific dynamic and historic functionality, which must fulfill the following conditions: It must arise from and reflect interactive movements of people as well as multi-dimensional, continuous, and reciprocal exchanges of goods, ideas, knowledge and values between peoples, countries, regions or continents over significant periods of time. It must have thereby promoted a cross-fertilization of the affected cultures in space and time, as reflected both in their tangible and intangible heritage; it must have integrated into a dynamic the historic relations and cultural properties associated with its existence.” (ICOMOS 2008).

The Charter on Cultural Routes marks an evolution in heritage management by adding

innovative features in the determination of this new form of heritage. For example, the assessment of heritage recognizes that the value of the route as a whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts; temporal and spatial continuity become essential parts for that determination; heritage is not only evaluated according to its natural and cultural aspects, but also in relation to its economic and social aspects (Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019; Zabbini 2012; Majdoub 2010). Subject to this definition, a cultural route heritage (CRH) is portrayed as a bridge between peoples and cultures through their reciprocal interactions throughout history. Today, it also serves as an inspiration to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among peoples and regions. Furthermore, it works as a resource for sustainable and inclusive development that contributes to rural revitalization and indigenous community empowerment (Shang 2017; Gao, 2017; Briedenhann and Wickens 2004).

Some similarities and differences can be observed in the ICOMOS definition on cultural routes when compared to other linear heritage concepts such as the ‘National Heritage Corridor’ of the US National Park Service and the ‘Cultural Routes of the COE’ in Europe. All three definitions adopt a holistic approach towards conservation management which takes into consideration heritage and its contexts, tangible and intangible heritage, etc. Moreover, all programs promote the utilization of heritage for economic and social development (Guo and Yang 2015; Liu and Shen 2017; Tao 2012; Xiong and Zhang 2019). However, the definitions of cultural route by the COE and the ICOMOS emphasize the historical and cultural aspects of a given route, whereas the definition of a heritage corridor considers the natural and ecological landscape to be its core element. Furthermore, the ICOMOS definition conceptualizes a cultural route showing concern primarily for heritage identification and conservation. This is also the case with the ‘heritage route’ concept defined by the World Heritage Center. The ICOMOS definition of cultural route also points to a physical delimitation as one of the criteria for identifying such a cultural heritage, whereas the other concepts do not specify this feature

(Zhang and Ke 2016; Guo and Yang 2015; Liu and Shen 2017; Gong and Zhang 2014).

China has a long-standing history of constant cultural exchange among various regions of the country and also with other countries in the world, which has left a legacy of very rich CRH resources in the territory (Shan 2009; Peng 2015). Nevertheless, no systematic study assessing the overall current status of China's CRH has yet been conducted in the literature in English. Indeed, in the literature in Chinese, there are only two systematic literature reviews: one is an article which primarily documents the Chinese route-based heritage that has been studied so far by Chinese scholars (Dai, Li, and Liu 2016). Somewhat confusingly, the authors of this article do not distinguish between 'cultural route', 'heritage corridor' or 'heritage route'. The other review focuses on the research status of CRH in the Chinese literature, but not on the routes (Lin, Zhao, and Zhou 2017). Consequently, there is a lack of a comprehensive and conceptually consistent evaluation of the research literature in English on the development of CRH in the Chinese context. This literature review aims to contribute to the academic discussion about this topic by addressing the following questions: How is CRH conceptualized in China? Which Chinese cultural routes have been identified? How are they currently managed?

Method

In order to clarify the research questions raised above, a systematic literature review on the topic has been conducted. To focus on quality scholarly work, this paper focuses on research articles published about the topic from the most reliable sources in both English and Chinese. It gathers information and generates insight from both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. For literature in the English language, the articles were identified and selected from international databases such as Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus; for literature in Chinese, this process

was carried out from the largest full-text scientific journal database CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The identification and selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 here

In the search for literature in Chinese, the key words “cultural route” (in Chinese 文化线路 *wenhua xianlu*) were used. The last search for articles was made in January 2021. The time range is, thus, up to the end of 2020, but without terminus a quo in order to find all the relevant articles since the earliest time possible. The articles related to the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) were not included since this paper discusses the Silk Road as a cultural heritage and this is not the focus of BRI. The search initially generated 420 articles. After careful screening, irrelevant results were removed, and 244 articles were finally chosen and analyzed.

At WOS and Scopus the key word phrase “‘cultural route’ AND China” was used to identify the relevant literature. No time limit was set for the starting year up to the end of 2020, and the articles related to the BRI were also excluded. The search initially generated 176 results in WOS and 189 in Scopus, although most of the results were not relevant to the topic, i.e., they were not related to either cultural route or Chinese cultural route. Only six articles from WOS results and seven from Scopus results were related to CRH in China. Another search with the key words “Chinese cultural routes” was performed with both databases and it generated 112 results from WOS and 107 results from Scopus. After removing irrelevant articles, only two from WOS and one from Scopus were left. Some of these articles appeared in both databases. Thus, the final outcome was only nine separate and distinct articles. Among them, there was

one article published in Spanish and another one in French. Both articles were highly relevant to the research topic and therefore were kept in the reviewing process.

For the purpose of this research, a total number of 253 articles (from which nine were in English/Spanish/French and 244 in Chinese), were selected and reviewed to map the current status of cultural route heritage in China.

Results

Research themes and methods about the Chinese cultural routes

Four research themes can be identified from the 253 research articles on the Chinese CRH, namely, conceptualization of cultural route; its identification and evaluation; conservation; and utilization. The most widely researched theme is the heritage value assessment of the Chinese CRH, which accounts for more than half (N=133, 53%) of all the articles, followed by conservation (N=66, 26%), utilization (N=38, 15%) and conceptualization (N=16, 6%). 221 articles (83%) are case studies focusing on one specific route or one of the sections of the route, and the other thirty-two articles (17%) discuss CRH as a general topic, along the lines of the four themes mentioned above. In the case studies, the most commonly researched cultural route is the Silk Road (N=42, 19%), followed by the Ancient Tea Horse Road (N=33, 15%), the Grand Canal (N=32, 14%), and Shu Dao (N=15, 7%). The rest of the articles (N=99, 45%) focus on ten other routes. The majority of the articles (N=246, 97%) adopted a qualitative research design, with a few exceptions (N=7, 3%) on heritage value assessment which used quantitative methods: the cultural route evaluation model (CREM) to assess the heritage resources of the Ancient Nanxiang Road (Liu and Cao 2018); the Delphi and analytic hierarchy process (AHP) for mapping heritage resource distribution and evaluating the weight of key

factors in an evaluation model (Li, Gan, and Han 2018; Li and Hu 2019; Wang, Xie, and Zhu 2019); the ArcGIS layer group technique as a data management model to improve management of complex data on cultural route resources over the Tea Road (Ren and Jiang 2019); and finally, chemical analysis or dendrochronology to examine the characteristics of the cultural relics found along a given section of the Silk Road (Liu et al. 2012; Wang and Zhao 2013). Scholars in Chinese CRH studies come from a variety of disciplines, such as architecture, geography, landscape, engineering, history, archeology and tourism (Lin, Zhao, and Zhou 2017).

Evolution of the cultural route concept in China

Since the concept of CRH was first introduced in Chinese academia in 2005 (Li and Yu 2005), it has undergone a development through several phases. Dai, Li, and Liu (2016) refer to them as conceptualization and application, Lin, Zhao, and Zhou (2017) describe them as concept introduction, deepening and maturation. The current study proposes another classification: introduction, application, and consolidation. The beginning of each phase was marked by some milestone events (see Table 1).

Table 1 here

The first phase (2005–2008) started with the official introduction of ‘cultural route’ as a new cultural heritage category for academia in China by Li Wei and Yu Kongjian in 2005. In the official document of the ICOMOS international conference in 2005, the definition, typical elements and preliminary identification criteria of CRH were outlined. In the same year,

'heritage route' was included in the operational guidelines of the World Heritage Center (UNESCO 2005). As a result, more researchers joined the discussion on this topic, although the term 'cultural route' was used interchangeably with other terms such as 'linear cultural heritage', 'route heritage' or 'heritage corridor', which sometimes caused confusion (Yao and Li 2006; Wang 2010; Tong 2016; Dai, Li, and Liu 2016).

The second phase (2009–2014) began after the official release of a technical document prepared by the International Committee on Cultural Routes (CIIC) of ICOMOS in 2008: *The ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes*. Chinese scholars responded enthusiastically to the *Charter*. In 2009, some scholars in the field gathered in Wuxi, China, to call for high quality research on Chinese CRH resources for more effective conservation (Tong 2016; Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019). During this phase, China was actively preparing for the inscription of two route-based cultural heritages into the World Heritage list. All those initiatives and projects boosted further research to assess the heritage values of the Chinese CRH under the ICOMOS framework, as reflected by an increase in research articles published on CRH, from twenty articles from 2005-2008, to eighty-two articles from 2009-2014.

The third phase (2015–present) was marked by the inclusion of CRH in the official regulatory document on cultural heritage in China: the updated version of *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* (ICOMOS China 2015). In this document, the 38th principle applies to the conservation of cultural landscapes, cultural routes and canal heritages, and emphasizes the holistic protection of this type of heritage as well as all their heritage elements. This phase witnessed a wider application and deeper reflection of the concept of CRH in the Chinese context. The amount of research conducted on CRH during this phase reached 151 articles, doubling that of the previous phase. In China, the term 'cultural route' became the mainstream terminology and framework for conceptualizing and guiding the work on

identification, evaluation, conservation and development of the route-based heritage. This is evident in the number of articles published with the key words ‘cultural route’, which is significantly higher than with other key words such as ‘linear cultural heritage’ (线性文化遗产 *xianxing wenhua yichan*) or ‘heritage corridor’ (遗产廊道 *yichan langdao*).

Nonetheless, throughout the different phases of this development, the application of the concept of CRH in the Chinese context has been accompanied by some challenges. Some CRH scholars claimed that the ICOMOS conceptualization of CRH was not clear enough to identify all the route-based heritage in China and to reflect its non-Western values and cultural diversity (Tong 2016; Chen and Jones 2020; Xu and Xiang 2020; Zhang 2020). Some scholars attempted to address this lack of clarity by exploring non-ICOMOS frameworks related to this type of heritage. The goal of these scholars was to draw attention to the conservation of route-based heritages that do not fit neatly into the ICOMOS’s definition, and to use them as tourism resources in order to cater to the growing needs of people to escape from stressful urban life and experience alternative, slow and simple life, to re-visit and reconnect with their roots and traditions, and to get in touch with nature (Yang 2015; Zhang, Wang, and Cao 2016; Tao 2012; Xiong and Zhang 2019).

Identification and characteristics of cultural routes in China

In their review on multiple types of route-based heritage in China, i.e., cultural routes, heritage corridors and heritage routes, Dai, Li, and Liu (2016) summarized thirty route-based heritages. However, not all of them are cultural routes according to the ICOMOS definition. Some of the routes documented on their list such as the Three-Gorges Heritage Corridor or the Li River Heritage Corridor, the Yulin Military Defense System, and some migration routes would instead be identified as heritage corridors under the US model or thematic cultural routes under the COE framework. On the other hand, cultural routes such as the Tibetan (Buddhist)

pilgrimage routes and the China Eastern Railway were not included, although similar routes such as the Mazu (Daoist) pilgrimage routes and the Yunnan-Vietnam Railway were listed.

This paper summarizes nineteen Chinese cultural routes according to the ICOMOS 2008 Charter (Table 2). The listing of nineteen routes draws from several sources (the two systematic literature reviews as well as a few case studies of specific routes), where some of said routes were featured (Ding and Song 2015; Dai, Li, and Liu 2016; Tsohla, Simchenko, and Pavlenko 2019; He and Chen 2020).

Table 2 here

Other cases of route-based heritage might be arguably added to this list, but they are not included because they do not fulfill one or another of the basic criteria of the ICOMOS definition. For instance, the current list does not include the migration routes that lack clear delimited courses (e.g. the migration routes of the Hakka people, of the population of Guangdong and Hunan to Sichuan, of the population of northern and eastern China to northeastern China, etc.), some military routes with clear itineraries but not much cross-group communication (e.g. the Long March routes), the routes which are part of a larger route network (e.g. Nanxiang road as part of the Qin national road network), some religious pilgrimage routes without definite physical delimitations (e.g. the Buddhist, Daoist or Christian pilgrimage routes), or some small-scale cultural trails (the Chongqing city trail) which may not reflect the dynamic interactions across different cultures or groups but nevertheless possess significant cultural values and bear witness to major influences or traditions in history and culture (Ding

and Song 2015; Dai, Li, and Liu 2016; Liu and Cao 2018; Chen and Jones 2020; He and Chen 2020).

The heritage value of the Chinese cultural routes was assessed according to their historical, aesthetic, scientific, ecological, touristic, social and spiritual significance (Lin, Zhao, and Zhou 2017; Wang, Xie, and Zhu 2019). The studies demonstrated that most of the Chinese cultural routes are ancient, large in scale, multi-functional and representative of very dynamic reciprocal cross-cultural exchanges throughout history (Sun 2011; Dai, Li, and Liu 2016; Ding and Song 2015; Xu and Xiang 2020). Discoveries from archeological excavations have shown that some routes existed as early as the period of the East Zhou Dynasty (8th century BC), and lasted a very long time, right up to the 20th century when they were replaced by modern transportation. These cultural routes usually expanded in a linear or radial form, crossed various regions in China or connected China with its neighboring regions and even reached out to other continents, stretching over thousands of miles. Most routes are land-based, except for the Grand Canal, the maritime Silk Road and the Mazu pilgrimage routes. Most routes were opened for transportation and trading purposes, whereas others functioned mainly as military, religious, political routes or courier infrastructures. It is also worth noting that more than half of the Chinese cultural routes identified operated in the western regions of the territory which is characterized by challenging geographical environments, diverse ethnic groups and abundant indigenous cultural heritage. (Ding and Song 2015; Dai, Li, and Liu 2016; Tong 2016; Wang 2019).

Conservation of the cultural routes in China

At the present time, the priority of China's cultural heritage management is conservation. The emphasis on conservation is also in line with China's overall cultural heritage management strategy as a tool for social cohesion, cultural identity and national image; these subserving

goals of cultural heritage explain the enthusiasm China shows for world heritage application projects (Wang 2009; Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019; Sigley 2010). The same emphasis on conservation applies to CRH management in China (Shan 2009; Ged 2013). Despite the progress in overall heritage conservation over the last few decades, the major challenges cultural heritage faces in China bear relation to heritage integrity and authenticity. Rapid urbanization, massive infrastructure construction, industrial pollution, the deterioration of the natural environment around cultural heritage sites, lack of attention to the intangible dimension of CRH, overtourism, insufficient research into heritage resources and conservation technology, or scarce staffing, all pose a threat to the conservation of CRH (Yao and Li 2006; Ged 2013; Wang, Li, and Liu 2016; Luo, Wang, and Song 2019; Chen and Jones 2020). Although China has incorporated into its national management system the conservation of CRH (ICOMOS China 2015), a lack of clear operational guidelines and cross-regional coordination makes conservation insufficient when it comes to CRH because of its integral, complex characteristics (Tong 2016; He and Chen 2020; Chen and Jones 2020). The key strategies for CRH conservation proposed by scholars include further investigation into CRH conceptualization, systematic assessment of heritage values and resources through research, development and implementation of a comprehensive monitoring system over major heritage sites, usage of relevant technology such as Geographic Information System (GIS) and Archive & Information Management System (AIMS), coordinated management, drafting of new laws and regulations (Shan 2009; Wang 2009; Feng 2016).

Utilization of the cultural routes in China

Another key aspect that has been discussed in the literature is how CRH in China has been utilized and developed. The topics covered by scholars include heritage display (Yang 2015; Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019; Zhao 2019), tourism development (Liu 2009; Wang 2012; F. Li, Q.

Li, and L. Li 2015; Fang, Yuan and Du 2018; Yu and Mei 2019; Wang and Xie 2020), or urban and rural development (Liu et al. 2018; Meng, Bao, and Ye 2019; Wang and Li 2019; Xu et al. 2020). Some main obstacles for an active cultural route development in China include the commonly perceived conflict between economic advancement and sustainability, the fragmentation of national administration, and the lack of collaborative partnerships among stakeholders along the cultural routes (Lin, Zhao, and Zhou 2017; Wang and Xie 2020; Chen and Jones 2020).

When it comes to utilization, the most widely researched general topic was that of CRH tourism development, with tourism resources, product development, tourism management and marketing among the most frequently discussed issues. For instance, in the research about touristic resources, scholars proposed construction models for CRH tourist products or resource management such as the ‘theme-subject-object-activity-multiparty value model’, the ‘point-line-area’ model, or the ‘protection-development-support-management’ model (Wang, Xie, and Zhu 2019; Fang, Yuan, and Du 2018; Tan and Yang 2017). As for touristic product development, concerns were raised about homogeneity among individual sites or sections along the same route. In response to these concerns, the ‘route +’ model was proposed to keep a balance between distinct local features and holistic route features, such as ‘the Grand Canal plus local cuisine, plus salt industry culture, plus historical figure’s hometown, plus local rural farm tour’ at different sections (Li, Zheng, and Zhang 2017). Such synergies can also contribute to the sustainable development of local communities through economic diversification. However, management across provinces appears to be the Achilles’ heel of CRH tourism development in China: the fragmented provincial administration results in a lack of holistic planning, coordinated regulation and cross-sectorial joint involvement (Yan, Yang, and Lv 2017; Tan and Yang 2017). In cultural route tourism marketing, some major weaknesses are the emphasis on heritage value over its social and emotional connection with the people, and

the emphasis on touristic attractiveness over touristic experience quality, etc. (Ren 2017; Liu 2019; Zhang 2016; Shang 2017).

After having exposed the methods and results of this literature review, this study wants to engage in a discussion to assess those points that still await for a satisfactory response in the field of CRH in China.

Discussion

Chinese scholars have invested much effort in research and witnessed much development since the introduction of the ICOMOS' concept of cultural route in China, which can be seen in the successful inscription of the Silk Road and the Grand Canal in the World Heritage List. However, they have also pointed out some major difficulties for a further development of CRH in China, among which under-utilization of CRH, lack of operational guidelines, lack of cross-provincial coordination and of collaboration among stakeholders are the top concerns.

Proposed framework for CRH development in China

In order to utilize Chinese CRH more effectively, it is necessary to introduce some breakthrough perspectives in addition to the conservation plans, so that the heritage will not only 'survive' but also 'live' (Liu 2019; Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019). To help achieve the aforementioned goal, this study proposes an innovative and comprehensive strategic framework. However, the precondition for this strategy to be meaningfully implemented would be that all stakeholders reach a common understanding and consensus on the end goal for cultural route development in China. A plausible goal can be formulated as 'let Chinese cultural routes fully play their role in promoting environmental integrity as well as sustainable and

inclusive economic, socio-cultural advancement; let them function as a resourceful tool for personal wellbeing, cultural inheritance and social cohesion; let them serve as an inspiring platform for cross-regional, cross-national, and cross-civilizational mutual understanding and reciprocal exchange.’

The innovative strategic framework for effective development of Chinese cultural routes comprises four building blocks i.e., selective development, integrative planning, inter-sectorial collaboration, and gradual proceeding.

(1) Selective development

It is noted that, although most Chinese cultural routes possess a high degree of heritage values, not all of them fit best for immediate, large-scale touristic development due to poor conservation conditions, low scenic value, fragmented landscape, or low accessibility in some sections. A selection of itineraries can be made to focus on those routes that can best fulfill the objectives with fewer obstacles. This does not mean that some routes should be ignored, but rather that a prioritized development schedule would help things move forward more efficiently. This could enhance utilization of CRH on top of sufficient conservation measures.

(2) Holistic planning

It refers to the inclusion of an array of elements in the recovery, construction and development of a given route. The development plans should holistically consider cultural and environmental aspects, tangible and intangible heritage elements, heritage authenticity as well as aesthetics, the interests of tourists as well as those of the host communities. It should also maintain a balance between the underlying thematic consistency of the route and its sectional highlights. Because this requires collaborative effort among relevant provincial administrations and stakeholders, holistic planning could also serve as a platform to foster collaboration across regions and sectors.

(3) *Inter-sectorial collaboration*

As a step towards a smoother and more sustainable implementation of any planning of CRH, this point requires coordinated actions across provinces, and collaboration between public and private sectors. This is perhaps the most complicated part in fully developing CRH in the Chinese context. One can learn from best practices of CRH management around the world. Here the Way (*Camino*) of Saint James Pilgrimage Route can provide some inspiration. In the successful development of this world cultural heritage route, the dynamic collaborative effort between the Galician Regional Government, academia, the touristic sector, the Catholic Church, and the frequently non-confessional International Associations of *Camino* friends demonstrate a great synergy in the promotion of the route in general, in responding to the needs of pilgrims/tourists, and in hosting significant events to celebrate the traditional culture unique to the route (Tilson 2005; Zabbini 2012).

(4) *Gradual proceeding*

This refers to a step-by-step implementation of the integrative cultural route development, for instance choosing the most accessible section within one specific province with the most available resources to initiate development actions. Evaluations can be conducted before and after the intervention, and lessons can be learned from success and error to improve the following proceeding until the entire route is fully operative. This could on one hand lower the barrier of cross-provincial administration, and on the other hand lower the cost for initiating such projects.

Four principles need to be observed while implementing this framework. Firstly, the principle of integration: as explained in point 2 of the framework, the design and management of a cultural route should be holistic. Secondly, the principle of sustainability: the evaluation criteria for the implementation strategies and measures should include environmental indexes

(biodiversity, water quality, air quality, natural risk management, etc.) and socio-economic indexes (host community involvement and employment prioritization, preservation of local cultural traditions and values, positive experience and wellbeing of the visitor, etc.). Thirdly, the principle of scientific research and action: in-depth research into conceptualization, methodology and technology should be introduced in the whole process of route development including planning, operation and evaluation. Lastly, the principle of innovation: breakthroughs from regular ways of proceeding that have stagnated. This requires a creative and critical mindset. In the case of the cultural routes in China, conservation-oriented practice and fragmented management must be modified to allow individuals and groups to ‘live out’ the routes like their ancestors did, in a sustainable manner, instead of letting the value of such historical richness stay ‘frozen’ in literature or in museums. In order for this to happen, it is worthwhile learning from the global experience of CRH development (Yang 2015; Zhang 2016; Ma, Xu, and Ding 2019; Gao 2020). These principles do not only apply to the existing cultural routes, but also to emerging cultural routes – those that are fostering reciprocal exchanges in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

This study aims to understand the current situation of Chinese cultural routes through conducting a systematic literature review, and by identifying their challenges and exploring some possible solutions. According to the literature, Chinese stakeholders adopted the concept of ‘cultural route’ as a new category of cultural heritage at the beginning of this century. Since 2008, the ICOMOS definition of cultural route has been the most widely studied and applied. Following this ICOMOS definition, nineteen previously researched Chinese cultural routes have been identified and listed. Many other routes are yet to be identified as the

conceptualization of CRH acquires more clarity. The common characteristics of China's cultural routes are their long time span, their large spatial span, their multi-functionality and their having witnessed active cultural exchanges between peoples and cultures. The conservation of CRH has been incorporated into China's national heritage management system, which generally prioritizes preservation over development. Utilizing cultural routes for touristic or rural development is still mainly in a theoretical phase and presents many challenges in practice. In the future, China's CRH needs to be developed with a clarified goal, following the principles of sustainability, integrity, scientific methodology and innovation. If this is achieved, cultural routes can play their role afresh in the new era to respond to the needs of individuals and societies, while functioning as a tool in achieving the UN 2030 sustainable goals. As the old Chinese saying goes, friendship between nations lies in the closeness of the people, and the closeness of the people lies in the communication of hearts. This is the value and function of a cultural route: a bridge that connects. The richness of CRH resources should not vanish into oblivion.

Some limitations of the current study come from the fact that this research focuses on Chinese cultural routes from a heritage perspective rather than from a historical, geographical, cultural, geo-political, or touristic point of view. Thus, it only focuses on research articles published about the subject of CRH. Nonetheless, other conceptual frameworks of route-based heritage and other academic sources such as graduate theses, conference papers or newspaper articles focusing on specific routes could also contribute to the depth of CRH conceptualization. Continuous interdisciplinary investigation, more quantitative research, more case studies on best practices of international cultural routes, especially on their route utilization, cross-administrative management mechanism and stakeholders' involvement, would all contribute to a better understanding and more effective management of CRH in China.

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