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Introduction

Contemporary heritage conservation is increasingly structured around scientific investigation and standardised procedures. Yet decision-making remains shaped by uncertainty, particularly when data are inconclusive and interventions carry high cultural significance.

This paper argues that traditional craftsmanship functions as a form of epistemic trust that stabilises decision-making and contributes to ontological security in heritage restoration practice.

Theoretical Framework

Ontological Security

A sense of stability and continuity produced through routinised structures and practices, particularly under conditions of uncertainty.

Spatial & Relational Ontology

Heritage understood as a relational configuration of human actors, material structures, and institutional frameworks, rather than a fixed object.

Epistemic Trust

A form of trust in embodied and tacit knowledge that becomes operative when scientific evidence is inconclusive, stabilising decision-making processes.

Craftsmanship as Embodied Knowledge

Traditional craftsmanship in Chinese architectural heritage constitutes a form of intangible cultural heritage, characterised by embodied knowledge, tacit skills, and long-term transmission across generations. Rather than being formally codified, this knowledge is sustained through practice and apprenticeship. Its authority derives not from abstract verification, but from historical continuity and accumulated expertise. Craftsmanship is not merely technical, it is epistemic.



Fig.1 Model of Ancient Architecture Commissioned by the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture (营造学社) and Constructed by Craftsmen, 1930s. Archival photograph of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture



Fig.2 Paintings Putting It On Alternative Title, 1924-1927. Beijing. Photo by Sidney David Gamble

Case: The Forbidden City (Across Time)



Fig.3 Group photo of the completion of the wooden structure of Northwest Corner Tower Restoration Project in 1957. Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing

Fig.4 Training of decorative painting craftsmen in the researched conservation project of the Hall of Mental Cultivation, the Forbidden City, 2015. Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing



Contribution

This study reframes traditional craftsmanship not as a residual element in heritage conservation, but as an epistemic resource that stabilises decision-making under uncertainty.

It extends the concept of ontological security from narrative and identity to the domain of practice, demonstrating how stability is produced through trusted knowledge.

The persistence of craftsmanship across different historical contexts suggests that epistemic trust is structurally embedded in conservation practice.

Key Mechanism

Across both cases, craftsmen's judgements, grounded in tacit knowledge and long-term experience, are relied upon when scientific evidence is insufficient, enabling decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

Case 1: Northwest Corner Tower, 1956-1957

A craftsmanship-led restoration project in which intervention decisions relied primarily on the experience and judgement of master craftsmen, with limited scientific investigation.

Case 2: Hall of Mental Cultivation (Yangxin Dian), 2015-2025

A research-led restoration project characterised by extensive scientific investigation; however, technical analysis does not always provide definitive guidance for intervention decisions.



Selected References:
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