

POLICY REVIEW

Reforms boost growth of cultural services

Renaming a village in Suzhou after novelist Feng Menglong, which has helped revive cultural activities in the village, is just one example of what reforms can do to China's cultural landscape

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Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) novelist Feng Menglong is believed to have been born in a village in Suzhou, a city in Jiangsu province known for producing many litterateurs and famous scholars throughout China's history.

Although before it was renamed Feng-menglong Village in 2014, even the village residents didn't feel any connection with Feng who captured in detail the lives of grassroots people, the ancient novelist continues to benefit his "fellow-villagers" centuries later.

"We feel proud because many people know our village due to Feng Menglong," said Qian Jun, a village resident. The common pastime of the villagers used to be playing mahjong, she recalled. "But we have many more choices now, which I think is more culturally fulfilling."

"A dramatic change has come upon our village in just a few years," Qian added. "And to better showcase our history, many cultural facilities have been set up."

A slogan in the village says: "As a hometown of a celebrity, the best way to revitalize is through culture." Besides, a memorial hall for Feng was built in the village in 2018 to highlight the ancient novelist's achievements. In the same year, the Feng Menglong Academy was established in the village for scholars to organize seminars on the Ming Dynasty novelist.

For the local residents, however, the academy is also a library with abundant collection of books. They can also learn ancient printing techniques there.

Last year, an expansive cultural center called Guangxiao Mansion, also the title of one of Feng's novels, opened in the village to host regular shows for the villagers. The ticket prices are low and the shows range from *pingtan*, a traditional musical and oral performing art form popular in Suzhou, to *xiangsheng*, also known as cross-talk.

"The revival of such traditional art forms reflects our cultural characteristics," Qian said. "They can be tourist attractions as well." Thanks to the improved cultural facilities, as many as 100,000 tourists visited the village of some 3,000 residents in 2020 despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

This village in Suzhou reflects the country's efforts to develop a network of cultural services for the benefit of the people. According to Yan Xiaodong, an official from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in charge of policy planning related to public cultural services, more than 300 cities and 2,800 counties nationwide have published their catalogues for cultural services since 2015.

Today, about 570,000 villages have their own cultural service centers. "This marks the establishment of a standardized and national system of cultural services," Yan said at a news briefing.

A new edition of national standards for public services published by the State Council, China's Cabinet, on April 20 further clarified the specific targets and contents of the services including offering reading space, organizing performances, giving people free access to the cultural facilities. The document also made clear which department would be responsible for which service.

Yan also said that more detailed and customized standards for provincial-, city- and county-level plans should be drafted to ensure the continuous development of the cultural sector.

Also in April, a national conference on key reforms in public cultural services was

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held in Suzhou. Apart from setting the criteria for cultural activities, the conference also stressed the importance of creative formats and wider participation of non-government players in the sector.

Through such cultural platforms initiated by the local governments, the public will not only enjoy cultural services, but also contribute to the vitality of the communities.

Feng Qiang teaches painting in Suzhou. Since 2017, he has been delivering lectures and organizing painting courses for the Jingcheng neighborhood service center of Hudong community.

The classes are free. "First, we had only about 10 teachers in the program," Feng said. "But more people joined the program after realizing its importance. We not only teach painting but also establish emotional connections with the community."

The program now has nearly 70 people from various fields. A person may attend one course as a student, and conduct another as a teacher. These courses attract more residents from the neighborhood to the classroom. Each person needs to pay 10-50 yuan (\$1.5-7.7) to attend one session of a course. "You have to pay," Feng said. "That's not only to show respect for the teacher but also to ensure you take the class seriously and don't skip it after signing up."

People showcasing their cultural qualities

According to Zou Guangrong, a community worker at the service center, residents have other ways to show their cultural talents in public, including organizing art exhibitions and auctioning their works. "Several people can co-organize an exhibition sharing one

theme," Zou said. "People are enthusiastic about that, which is a perfect way to promote traditional art forms."

Other regions, too, have gathered experience about how to re-invigorate urban neighborhoods through cultural activities. For example, in Beijing's Dongcheng district, about 64,000 people participated in various activities at the Jingshan Cultural Center in just three months after it was opened in September.

SL Meet, transformed from an abandoned rehearsal venue to a cultural space by the local government, began its second life as a community art center, comprising theaters, studios for cultural creativity products, offices and even residences.

As for the newly opened Shijia Hutong Museum, it is not only a place for people to relive their nostalgia, but also a community hall for residents to discuss important as well as mundane issues.

"We used to face the question of whether we have enough," said Liu Juncai, a deputy district magistrate of Dongcheng district. "But now it's time to see whether it's good or not," she added. "Only if the entire society makes more efforts can our services keep evolving and bringing more happiness to the people."

Exploring new systems

According to officials of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the ongoing cultural services reforms will continue during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) period. A new countrywide system of public libraries, for example, will cover more areas. Since 2016, more than 20,000 "branches" of major libraries have been opened, enabling smaller libraries to better share the resources.

Suzhou Library, for instance, now has 96

branches in the city, enabling readers to borrow and return books from the library's collection from any of the branches, and 123 "delivery spots" have been opened near communities from where readers can pick up the books they reserve for free.

In Changsha, capital of Hunan province, a similar system involves more than 360 libraries in the countryside, greatly expanding the reach of reading materials in rural areas. Also, 18 libraries, which were privately-owned or operated by enterprises, have been included in the system with support from the government to facilitate the exchange of their collections.

Another key reform is the formation of management councils for museums, art galleries and other cultural venues. The councils consist of members from outside the cultural institutions, including scholars and public representatives, to better oversee and regulate their operation. Though directors are in charge of the daily operations, the major businesses of the institutions are decided by the councils, which also review the directors' work report.

The ministry's statistics show that 1,051 museums nationwide, about one-fifth of the country's total, have initiated reforms. The Wuhan Natural History Museum in Hubei province is one of them. Its management council comprises 15 people, including delegates from provincial- and city-level governments, scholars from Wuhan University, and scientists from the Yangtze River Water Resources Commission, with each member having a three-year term.

"Stakeholders in the museum can thus better understand their rights and duties," Li Shuyun, director of the Wuhan museum, said. "It ushers in a well-regulated system based on disciplines."



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Government funds help improve cultural facilities

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In China, the entry to about 50,000 public museums, libraries, art galleries, memorials and other cultural institutions is free, so is the entry to the many lectures and exhibitions these institutions organize.

Yet "someone" pays the bill for the free services.

According to data released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in April, the central government allocated about 47 billion yuan (\$7.2 billion) to these institutions from 2015 to 2020. During the same period, the government also spent about 82 billion yuan to support digital services and volunteers' work in the cultural field. And more than 300 cities in the country have published catalogues on the cultural services they offer.

Also, the evaluation system for determining the quality of services will help the decision-makers to judiciously adjust financial support for each cultural venue.

"A priority for setting up a network for cultural services is to fix a basic bottom line," said Zhang Xu, vice minister of culture and tourism. And "a project to build cultural service facilities at the grassroots level is progressing with steady steps".

The commitment to safeguard people's cultural rights has also been part of the country's poverty alleviation work.

From 2015 to 2020, to help local communities build their own public services system, the government sent more than 19,000 cultural workers to poverty-stricken areas, the erstwhile revolutionary hubs that faced development difficulties, and frontier areas with large non-Han populations.

"Basic public cultural service facilities now cover the whole country," said Ye Yanlin, deputy director of the department of science, education and culture under the Ministry of Finance. "However, due to historical and economic reasons, there remains a gap between different regions and between urban and rural areas in terms of the quality of service. So in the next stage, priority will be given to the central and western regions in the allocation of resources, in order to narrow that gap."

According to Ye, fiscal support for cul-

tural services in the counties that have recently emerged out of poverty will not be reduced in the interim so they can be ushered onto the path of rural revitalization. Also, the evaluation system for determining the quality of services will help the decision-makers to judiciously adjust financial support for each cultural venue.

"In the process of building the public cultural service system, the government has to ensure fairness," said Li Guoxin, a professor at the department of information management of Peking University.

"To guarantee social justice, the market should not be allowed to manipulate the services," Li said. "A major function of the system is to popularize the arts among the people, especially at the grassroots level."

"And more digital channels should be used to catch up with the times," Li added.

Policy Digest

Public hospitals will ensure quality growth

The central government has proposed building a new system to facilitate the higher-quality development of public hospitals, with the aim of building more advanced hospitals at the national and provincial levels, and set an example for the rest of the hospitals to follow.

The vision was outlined in a guideline issued by the General Office of the State Council on June 4, whose goal is to boost the development of public hospitals to meet the public's increasing demands for quality medical services and prevent epidemics and other public health emergencies.

To achieve the goal, the guideline requires city-level grade-III hospitals — top level hospitals that are above grade-II and grade-I hospitals — to increase assistance to the county-level hospitals, which play a key role in the country's healthcare system.

Greater efforts should be made to improve specialty departments, promote innovation in medical technologies and medical services, and allow information technologies to play a bigger role, it said. The circular requires reform of the personnel management and salary distribution system of public hospitals, and strengthening the system for evaluating and cultivating health workers.

The pricing of medical services and payment methods for medical insurance also needs reforms, the circular said.

The operation and management system of public hospitals needs upgrading in order to improve the comprehensive budget management and internal control systems, and upgrade the mechanism for patients to evaluate the medical staff's performance, it added.

Science to guide greening plans



Science will play a bigger role in China's future greening efforts as the country aims to minimize potential hazards triggered by errors in policymaking.

A guideline for scientific afforestation issued by the General Office of the State Council on June 2 stresses the importance of choosing the right species of trees when it comes to afforestation. Each locality should prepare a catalogue of native varieties of trees and grass to be planted, and use non-local varieties with utmost prudence, the guideline said.

The guideline also said that greening methods in key areas, such as the mouths and branches of big rivers like the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region, should vary in accordance with local conditions.

Aiming to combat climate change and safeguard the country's ecological security, the guideline sets clear goals for the protection of arable land and water resources. To better protect arable land, greening plans should designate specific areas, primarily including barren hills, wastelands and desolate sand dunes, deserted or damaged mountain massifs, and degenerated forests and grasslands suitable for afforestation.

Water sources should be thoroughly studied before deciding to green a particular area, and science-based and targeted solutions should be applied to restore vegetation cover, the guideline said. And local governments should work out and incorporate scientific greening plans into their respective spatial plans, and implement them with proper oversight.

The guideline also calls for improving relevant policies, establishing long-term mechanisms and consolidating the achievements made so far in transforming farmlands into forests or grasslands, and providing protection for young forests survive.

Committees approved for service trade fair

The State Council has approved the plan to form an organizing committee and executive committee for China International Fair for Trade in Services. Vice-Premier Hu Chunhua will serve as the chairman of the organizing committee, according to a circular released by the General Office of the State Council on June 1.

The organizing committee will coordinate the work for organizing the event and seek the approval of higher authorities as required.

The circular requires the committees to finalize the departments and localities to be involved in the preparations, and invite other countries, international and regional organizations to attend the exhibitions and conferences on behalf of the Chinese government.

Led by the organizing committee, the executive committee will be responsible for drafting and implementing the overall and specific plans for the fair, and will complete the required tasks in time, and dispatch resources as and when required.