

# Tiny county in Anhui earns big honor

Yixian dubbed one of nation's 137 famous historical, cultural cities

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Yixian, Anhui province, is one of the country's smallest counties in terms of population with about 76,000 residents.

Nevertheless, the county possesses 1,684 immovable cultural relics — mostly ancient residential buildings — and was thus recently listed by the State Council, China's Cabinet, as a national famous historical and cultural city, a list that also includes counties.

The central government has so far granted the title to 137 regions, which vary from metropolises as large as Beijing to counties as small as Yixian.

Xu Juan, deputy director of Yixian's housing and urban-rural development bureau, said the county first applied for the national honor in 2010.

"One of the highest honors a region could get in China, the award is the result of the local government's all-out efforts," she said, adding that Yixian was established as a county more than 2,200 years ago during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC).

To distinguish Yixian from other regions, the State Council's statement, issued in June, emphasizes that the county has "distinctive characteristics for regional culture", a reference to its Huizhou culture, according to Xu.

Huizhou prefecture, which existed for nearly eight centuries, was established in the 1120s to govern six counties, including Yixian.

So far, three Huizhou counties have been listed as national famous historical and cultural cities.

The listing of Yixian will play an important role in protecting Huizhou culture and preserving its heritage, according to the local government.

## Comprehensive protection

The State Council approved 99 national famous historical and cultural cities in three batches — 1982, 1986 and 1994 — and approved another series of regions subsequently.

According to the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, such a city is defined as one with an unusual wealth of relics of important historical value, or high revolutionary memorial significance.

The law was first issued in 1982 and has been amended multiple times.

The first three batches of cities were recommended by a national team of experts. The central authorities listed the cities and required local governments to carry out strict protection measures.

Regulations were later updated to call on such regions to be approved for the designation at the provincial level, which meant provincial authorities had to look more strictly into how the relics were being preserved.

In addition, a supplementary law was created for the Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages, which took effect on July 1, 2008.

# National designation will help preserve cultural heritage

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To local officials and residents in Yixian county, Anhui province, the really exciting thing about being designated a national famous historical and cultural city could be that the honor proves it has played an important role in the development of Chinese civilization, a county official said.

In a statement issued in June, the State Council awarded the designation to Yixian, which has existed for more than 2,200 years.

Xu Juan, deputy director of Yixian's housing and urban-rural development bureau, said the



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“Better protection of ancient buildings and cultural heritage requires delicate restoration and avoidance of major surgical operations.”

**Xu Juan**, deputy director of Yixian's housing and urban-rural development bureau

According to that regulation, such areas should meet multiple conditions, including demonstrating their efforts to strongly preserve cultural relics and clustered historical buildings.

The basic requirement is that these areas must have two or more historical and cultural blocks within their protection, the regulation says.

In addition, traditional patterns and historical styles and features should be preserved in such regions, and applicant areas should either have been a historically political, economic, cultural, transportation or military center or have been the site of a historical event, according to the regulation.

Those that don't meet requirements may still qualify if they have traditional industries, or have

completed major historical projects that have had an impact on the development of their respective areas, or they collectively reflect the cultural or ethnic features of their local architecture.

## Conflicts and warnings

Yixian has preserved 92 cultural heritage protection units, including Xidi and Hongcun villages, which have jointly been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In addition, the county has preserved six national famous historical and cultural villages, 44 national traditional villages, three provincial famous historical and cultural blocks and 66 intangible cultural heritage items, according to the local government.

Being listed as a national famous city poses potentially exceptional opportunities but also tremendous challenges for the local cultural heritage protection and tourism development, said Xu, the Yixian official.

In 2013, the central authorities publicly criticized eight national famous historical and cultural cit-

ies — including Anhui's Shouxian county, which was listed in 1986 — for their incompetent cultural heritage protection measures.

Shouxian was the last capital of the Chu Kingdom during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) and has preserved a city wall built during the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Maintaining the urban area's historical layout meant the county could not carry out large-scale infrastructure construction. And restoring the large number of dilapidated ancient buildings inside the walled area placed tremendous financial pressure on the government, according to Shen Qiang, former Party chief of Huainan city, which has governed the county since 2015.

Shouxian had been a key national county for poverty alleviation until 2019.

Though the local government had taken corrective measures, relative efforts seemed difficult, according to Shen, who made the remarks in 2016.

Though multiple levels of governments had invested 279 million

yuan (\$43 million) during the 12th Five-Year Plan period (2011-15) to protect the ancient city, the county still lacked enough funds to restore 145 ancient buildings and move the original residents out to new urban areas, Shen said.

Between 2010 and 2013, Datong city in Shanxi province, which was part of the 1982 batch, rebuilt its ancient city wall with stones and bricks. The wall was originally built with rammed earth.

Datong has also been criticized by the central authorities. In 2019, it was pointed out that the city has replaced many of its original ancient buildings with new ones that were simply built in an ancient style.

At a news conference in 2014, the National Cultural Heritage Administration said that it would implement a withdrawal mechanism for national famous historical and cultural cities.

If a city loses its designation, officials responsible for wrongful practices will be seriously punished.

After Datong and four other cities were criticized in 2019, they were warned that they would have three years to correct their mistakes.

"Better protection of ancient buildings and cultural heritage requires delicate restoration and avoidance of major surgical operations," said Xu, whose department is making a plan for cultural heritage protection before 2035.

## Policy Digest

### Record filing to become easier in three provinces

To help reduce burdens for enterprises and people who need to file records, local authorities in Hebei, Zhejiang and Hubei provinces will work to standardize procedures and ensure quality service.

According to an official reply sent to the provincial governments last month and released on Wednesday, the State Council, China's Cabinet, has given the three provinces its approval to pilot reform on standardized management of administrative record filing.

Aiming to boost the vitality of market entities, the pilot program was put forth to respond to suggestions to streamline procedures for citizens who plan to start new businesses and seek administrative approval from local governments.

The program began on July 1 and will run through June 30 of next year, covering all administrative record-filing matters in provincial, city and county government departments.

According to the official reply, the management system should be improved to sort out and strictly standardize all administrative record-filing matters. In particular, the amount of required materials should be reduced, with procedures minimized, time shortened and costs lowered.

Emphasis will be placed on services frequently requested by businesses and individuals to explore intelligently-driven record filing, according to the circular.

### Skyscraper height control tightened

The National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic planner, has issued a circular to tighten scrutiny over the height of planned high-rise buildings for the sake of construction quality and public safety.

The decision was made at a time local governments have been improving the management of construction projects in terms of safety and quality amid possible loopholes that may lead to safety risks.

According to a circular issued by the commission recently, the number of new buildings above 250 meters will be strictly limited.

If such buildings need to be built, the construction plans should face stricter checks on various aspects such as fire safety, and should be filed with the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development.

The commission also banned the new construction of skyscrapers above 500 meters, according to the circular.

For buildings above 100 meters, construction plans will face strict scrutiny over seismic performance. High-rises should be in keeping with the city's size and their own firefighting capacity, the circular said.

### Nation's biodiversity conservation improved

Living conditions for rare and endangered species have undergone notable improvement as a result of the country's ongoing biodiversity protection and ecological restoration efforts.

China will build a comprehensive monitoring system for biodiversity conservation, enhance international cooperation and promote public participation, Ministry of Ecology and Environment official Cui Shuhong told a news conference on July 7.

By the end of 2019, China had 11,800 nature reserves, accounting for 18 percent of the country's land area and meeting the Aichi Biodiversity Targets' goal of protecting 17 percent of terrestrial areas ahead of schedule, he said.

Populations of several rare and endangered species have gradually recovered, and the numbers of Siberian tigers, Asian elephants and crested ibises have grown rapidly, Cui said.

Rare and endangered species such as the wild giant panda, Tibetan antelope and milu deer are living in better environments, he said.

He added that the giant panda has been removed from the list of endangered animals, with 1,800 now living in the wilderness.