

Handicrafts at heart of new policy

Blueprint calls for better protection of artworks and intangible heritage

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The growth in traditional handicrafts has added momentum to socioeconomic and cultural development efforts across the country. Many have become treasured items of intangible cultural heritage and their influence extends to various aspects of modern life, including education, tourism and rural revitalization.

Late last month, a national-level blueprint aimed at improving the protection and methods of passing on traditional craftsmanship was announced by 10 ministries and national-level administrations, including the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the National Rural Revitalization Administration.

Its goal is to identify connection points between traditional culture and modern life and then promote the high-quality development, sustainable protection and use of traditional craftsmanship.

According to the blueprint, a national mechanism to preserve traditional craftsmanship will be established by 2025. Tailored policies supporting different types of craftsmanship, as well as professional management and creative ideas will be adopted in the process.

In particular, businesses exhibiting core competitiveness in traditional craftsmanship will be encouraged to make use of modern technology and management methods to raise production efficiency.

They will also be advised to differentiate hand-crafting and production processes to satisfy consumer demands and turn themselves into upscale brands. Support will be given to help businesses innovate and set up independent hand-crafting production lines to raise the value of handicrafts and diversify offerings.

The blueprint also supports efforts by micro and small businesses and intangible cultural workshops to provide traditional craftsmanship training and create job opportunities for rural revitalization. Cultural companies are expected to take on traditional craftsmen to work in production.

“The blueprint has paid close attention to industrialization and marketing for the high-quality passing on and development of traditional craftsmanship,” said Shi Meiyu, a professor at the Tourism College at Beijing Union University.

Shi has been focused on the study of intangible cultural heritage and tourism for many years.

“All the major links in the chain are mentioned, and the connection between traditional handicrafts and modern life has been clarified,” she said.

For the first time, specific guidance and support has been offered for different items of intangible cultural heritage, which is good news and will help make related policies more pertinent, she added.

“Intangible cultural heritage is a broad category, and traditions that are not suited to the modern market should be properly preserved and documented,” Shi said. “But those that have relatively large market potential should be commercialized.”

According to Shi, one highlight of the blueprint is its advocacy of separating handmade

products from those created using machines.

“We can make authentic handicrafts a pillar product, while using elements of intangible cultural heritage in the mechanized production of creative items to enrich the tourist experience,” she said.

Shi also hailed the blueprint’s attention to the integration of business, academic institutes and inheritors of traditional handicrafts.

“It will allow all parties to play to their strengths and lead to better development,” she said.

As the blueprint revealed, there will be greater emphasis on the digitization of craftsmanship, and national-level criteria for this process will also be released.

At the moment, digital technology remains an auxiliary approach, but it is gradually helping to improve the products and methods of traditional craftsmanship, said Yao Zhihua of the Jiangsu University of Technology.

The continuous application of technology will surely help systematize the protection and passing on of traditional craftsmanship, and make it sustainable and orderly, Yao said.

A few days after the blueprint was released, Sichuan province announced that it planned to build some 50 intangible cultural heritage protection and inheritance facilities of provincial level and above by 2025.

Local authorities have received more than

20 million yuan (\$2.9 million) from the central government to train inheritors through special programs over the years, and inheritors have also been encouraged to participate in events to enhance exchange and broaden their artistic vision.

Liu Jiang, an inheritor of provincial bamboo weaving, had some of his pieces displayed at an international craftsmanship innovation expo in Paris last month.

Liu also had the opportunity to exchange ideas with fellow artists at the expo.

“My eyes were opened, and the path toward integrating traditional craftsmanship with modern life has become clearer to me,” Liu said.

Yang Huazhen, a national intangible cultural heritage inheritor from Sichuan, has also benefited from integration.

Now in her 60s, Yang has created her own distinctive style of embroidery that blends Tibetan weaving, cross-stitch and Qiang embroidery techniques.

By using the traditional colors of the Tibetan and Qiang ethnic groups in her craft, she has become a muse for many global brands, among them Japanese cosmetics brand Shu Uemura and United States coffee chain Starbucks.

Yang said that she realized that by obtaining an intellectual property right, her pieces would not only be worth more but would also

enable rural craftsmen like her to reach a wider audience.

Zhang Xuefang, an official from the Hebei Culture and Tourism Department, said that the blueprint will have a far-reaching effect on provinces that have a strong tradition of craftsmanship, like Hebei.

It will give traditional handicrafts a bigger role in assisting rural development and boosting the profile of traditional culture, Zhang said, adding that the blueprint’s detailed measures, coupled with the cooperation and coordination of the 10 government organs involved, will ensure its directives are implemented efficiently nationwide.

The official added that Hebei had around 570 certified intangible cultural heritage workshops by May, and has set up eight traditional handicraft work stations on a provisional basis, as well as 10 pilot sites that make use of intangible cultural heritage to promote rural revitalization.

The projects are expected to raise some 43,000 residents out of poverty, he said.

Training in traditional handicrafts has been provided to 14,700 people, and 600 traditional handicraft shops are up and running.

“Hebei will carry out the blueprint’s requirements, improve policies and explore the implementation of a steady and effective multi-departmental coordination mechanism,” Zhang said.

Li Shiya, who is in her 20s, is one of the program’s beneficiaries.

She signed up for a garment craftsmanship training course that is part of the national program at Jiangnan University’s School of Design in Jiangsu province last July.

The experience gave her the tools to set up her own design studio, where she produces ethnic embroidery using elements of batik, a dyeing technique.

Li’s training also helped her learn a variety of design concepts, and she now better understands how different cultures express themselves through clothing.

“My understanding of clothing design was limited, but I was inspired [by the course] and have really benefited from the program,” Li said.

Li was born in the Qianxinan Bouyei and Miao autonomous prefecture in Guizhou province, which is home to around 30 different ethnic groups.

“I’ve been interested in ethnic culture since I was a child,” she said.

The training showed Li how to draw on her interactions with different ethnic groups while she was growing up in Guizhou.

One of her signature pieces is a long skirt featuring Miao ethnic culture elements — bird totems and abstract geometric images. She used boldly contrasting colors to highlight the patterns and explored the possibilities of embroidery on different materials.

Her dedication impressed Zhang Yi, a professor at the design school.

“We have held 15 intangible cultural heritage training courses for over 520 inheritors,” said Zhang, who has studied traditional and fashion textile design for many years.

Young inheritors, including those from Guizhou and Hunan provinces, are being encouraged to combine traditional craftsmanship and modern designs in their creations.

“Dyeing, weaving and embroidering are traditional skills used by members of various ethnic groups in their daily lives, and areas with ethnic populations have entered a phase of rapid development as modernization is promoted in China,” Zhang said. “Development has brought changes to lifestyles, and so their skills need upgrading to keep up with the times.”

Accomplished embroiderers and colorists have been invited to give lectures to trainees, who also study a variety of art forms at museums during the courses.

“We also have had experts explaining traditional Chinese culture,” Zhang said.

The goal is for young inheritors to use new designs and materials to produce items that customers want to buy, and which are of use.

Studies show that clothes and bags using traditional ethnic designs, especially those priced at 60 yuan (\$8.90) or less, are among the most popular items

in the cultural and tourist markets. “So it’s also necessary to be aware of public preferences before designing and making a product,” Zhang added.

Students go through three learning phases in Jiangnan’s program.

First, they spend a couple of weeks studying basic knowledge and skills on campus before being allowed to return to their hometowns to design their own products. They then return to school with the finished items for critique.

“As long as they are our students, the faculty will keep in touch, and not just during training, but also after it is finished,” Zhang said.

So far, a number of students from the program have returned to their hometowns, mostly in rural areas, where they have started successful businesses.

Li attributed her success to the training.

“It hammered into me the need to first cultivate my own aesthetics as a designer and develop an eye for beauty,” she said. “I now truly understand the way beauty has its origins in life.”

Policy Digest

Pork prices to remain steady for rest of 2022

An official with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs said on July 20 that China’s pork supply in the second half of this year is secure and prices will not see a substantial increase.

Chen Guanghua, the agricultural official, said at a news conference in Beijing that pork prices rose in late June, but have declined recently.

Chen said that seasonal reasons and a spike in demand, largely driven by a significant rise in pork consumption due to the resumption of schools, factories and catering businesses in June, were the main culprits behind the price hikes.

Other contributing factors include farmers holding out to sell at higher prices and the decline in pork imports due to COVID-19’s impact on logistics, he said.

Looking ahead, Chen said the pork supply in the second half of the year will be similar to the same period in 2021, as production currently remains within an appropriate range.

Rural homestays key part of vitalization efforts

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism and nine other departments have jointly issued a guideline on promoting the high-quality development of rural homestays in China in a move to bolster economic growth and promote vitalization in the countryside.

According to the guideline published on July 20, rural homestays are to improve their services to better serve tourism and visitors’ needs by 2025.

The guideline sets out five priority tasks for developing rural homestays, including making them more accessible to tourists, the better use of natural and cultural resources, and urging residents and other players like farmers and cooperatives to participate in the sector by starting their own homestays.

To encourage farmers to take part, the guideline said that subsidies and low-interest loans could be provided for starting homestays or upgrading existing ones.

5,000 retired teachers returning to classrooms

Roughly 5,000 retired teachers will return to classrooms this fall in schools in less-developed areas as China steps up efforts to promote the balanced development of compulsory education and consolidate its poverty alleviation achievements, according to a notice released on July 12.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the notice about the upcoming school year’s Silver Age Lecture Plan, a program launched in 2018 that sends retired teachers age 65 or under to work for at least one academic year in schools located in remote areas and regions recently lifted from poverty.

Authorities are instructed to take note of the opinions of schools and recruit the teachers who are most urgently needed.

According to the notice, the expenses for this year’s program will be shared by the central government and local authorities, except in West China, where the central government will be the sole entity responsible for funding.

MO JINGXI

Thousands nationwide benefit from cultural heritage training

By YANG FEIYUE

A national intangible cultural heritage training program initiated by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Education has yielded positive results since its launch in 2015.

Between 2016 and 2020, about 60 institutes of higher learning and some 20 creative design businesses across the country were involved in the program, with about 100,000 people also taking part. Participants received training on ways to study cultural heritage and apply it to modern life.

In October last year, an updated implementation plan was unveiled by the two ministries in conjunction with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. It called for the participation of 121 education institutions and projected the participation of at least 30,000 people between 2021 and 2025.