

New chapter on ancient book protection

Recent guideline calls for revamped system to make certain old tomes survive for use in the future

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Though silent and in many cases tattered, China's estimated 30 million ancient books are an important chronicle of its history and civilization over the millennia.

Now, more emphasis is being placed on restoring and preserving these historical records.

Last month, the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, China's Cabinet, jointly released the first national-level guideline for decades that is focused on promoting the protection of ancient books.

In China, ancient books are defined as any document, handwritten or printed, that predates 1912, the year monarchical rule ended.

The guideline calls for the establishment of a wider and more scientific system to preserve, study and republish ancient books that involves research institutions and departments at different levels of government, and lays out detailed long-term planning and evaluation criteria for the work.

It also urges increased training, the development of a legal system and stronger support for fiscal expenditure.

During this year's two sessions — the annual meetings of the National People's Congress, the nation's top legislature, and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, its top political advisory body — enhancing the protection of ancient books was written into the central government's annual work report for the first time.

Observers said the guideline elevates the significance of ancient book protection.

"With better coordination and strong support, there is even greater impetus to continue the work that we started more than a decade ago," Zhang Zhiqing, deputy director of the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books, told China Daily.

The move to systemically rescue ancient books kicked off with the center's establishment at the National Library of China in 2007. At the time, there were fewer than 100 professional book restorers nationwide.

A great deal of effort has been made to expand these numbers through training, and currently, there are some 1,000 restorers in China.

About 3.7 million pages have been restored since 2007, and 10,000 conservators have been trained and are working at 2,000 venues housing collections nationwide.

"Preserving the books is no longer just the job of librarians, educators and researchers. It's now a shared mission for society," Zhang said.

Zhang believes the need for protection has been properly emphasized by the guideline, which also noted the importance of sharing experience between public institutions, the private sector and facilities overseas.

For example, in China, many renowned individual collectors of ancient books are also successful entrepreneurs. They have the facili-



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ties and means to better protect these books, and the focus of their collections may be more comprehensive in nature, differing from public libraries, which concentrate more on classics.

"And through academic exchange with overseas institutions, we can refresh our ideas and technical criteria for preservation," Zhang said.

Earlier this month, the research institution of the National Library released a blueprint on more widely adopting better custodial and restoration techniques.

Nevertheless, as the new guideline highlighted, protecting ancient books means more than just prolonging their physical lives. Ways of

making better use of them and of sharing their worth are equally important.

"It shows that our mindset on the protection of ancient books is developing," Zhang said. "They were treated as cultural relics, which can be stored in warehouses for protection. However, if we lock ancient books up in our libraries, their value is lost because books are written to be read."

Digitization is one solution to allowing the fragile pages to be more widely seen. Since a national database for ancient Chinese books was put online for public use in 2016, more than 100,000 digitized versions of ancient books have been

added to it.

The guideline also noted that more work needs to be done to categorize books and arranged for photocopied editions of them to be published.

"In categorizing collections of ancient books, provinces and municipalities can cooperate to compile encyclopedias of these precious ancient documents in digital form," said Zhang Yongquan, a professor at Zhejiang University who studies ancient documents.

"Paper can survive for centuries, but it isn't immortal," he said. "Online databases can be accessed worldwide and enable traditional Chinese culture to be passed on

from generation to generation."

Compared to more visually attractive artifacts like ceramics or bronzes, professionals are aware that ancient books are not as appealing to the public.

Reflecting an initiative in the guideline urging that more TV programs on ancient books be produced, some attempts have already proven popular.

Last year, thanks to adapted stage plays performed in *China in the Classics*, many people were introduced to difficult, ancient texts for the first time. In March, the online documentary *Ancient Books Traveling Through Time and Space* also explored the impact these books have had on modern life.

"Through books, people can see what ancient people wore or ate," Zhang Zhiqing explained. "Many people like to try those fashions or recipes today. We can bring ancient books to life only if we revive what is recorded in them."

Zhang Yongquan agrees. "All these ancient cultural classics, notes, family instructions, histories and other texts can be of benefit to the modern public. Through them, younger generations will be encouraged to appreciate their hometowns and country more."

New projects have already been launched in response to the guideline.

In Jiangsu province, for example, a new program is underway to properly categorize lesser-known ancient books held at universities across the province.

The program is being run by Nanjing University and will double as a think tank for generating more ideas on the protection of ancient books in the culturally-rich province.

"Now that the conservation of ancient books has been recognized as a key component in the work of passing on traditional Chinese culture, it has a stronger foundation and clearer direction," said Shi Mei, deputy director of Nanjing University Library.

"The different departments involved can further support efforts," she said. "For instance, many institutions have digitization programs, but some may not be in use. Through coordination, we can share our achievements and improve efficiency."

Shi also expects the guideline to help solve problems regarding the lack of conservators at universities, insufficient funding and other concerns.

China does not yet have a comprehensive undergraduate major focused on ancient books. This has long been a thorn in the side of the profession, which has struggled to attract young talent.

The guideline clearly urges universities to promote the creation of ancient book-related majors, so this situation may be about to change.

Zhang Zhiqing further anticipates that legislators will draft a national law specifically targeting ancient books in the near future, instead of simply relying on the Cultural Relic Protection Law.

In 2017, Zhenjiang in Jiangsu became the first Chinese city to write its own legislation for protecting ancient books.

"Once written into law, the protection of these books will become compulsory across the country," Zhang Zhiqing said.

Policy Digest

Document targets smart residential compounds



The Ministry of Civil Affairs and eight other government departments issued a guideline recently on bolstering the development of smart residential compounds, it said in a notice on Friday.

Smart residential compounds provide services to residents by utilizing information technology like big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence.

According to the guideline, smart compounds should make it more convenient for residents to deal with matters such as healthcare and elderly care.

The guideline stated that more efforts must be made to improve the organization of power, water, gas and heating networks with the help of smart technologies and to increase access to facilities like convenience stores and smart delivery lockers.

In order to bridge the digital divide, the guideline includes measures to guarantee the rights and interests of the elderly and the disabled during the development of smart compounds.

For example, it states that offline channels for handling frequently needed services, such as payments for medical services or social insurance, must remain in place, and that the elderly and disabled should have access to one-stop services.

Pilot projects aim to ensure fair competition

The State Administration for Market Regulation has carried out several pilot projects to improve fair competition in nine provinces and cities, including Tianjin and Jilin province.

They are part of national efforts to create a more fair, transparent and predictable business environment to stimulate market vitality and development, according to a notice issued on May 19.

The pilot projects cover all aspects related to the implementation of fair competition oversight.

In Tianjin, Shanghai, Jilin, Zhejiang and Shandong, authorities have worked to ensure that no policy or measure that excludes or limits competition is introduced.

The projects in Anhui and Guangdong provinces have focused on promptly responding to the concerns of market entities. Authorities have experimented with creating a mechanism to deal with tipoffs smoothly and efficiently.

Positive experience from the projects will eventually be applied in other regions to ensure fair competition nationwide, thus creating a better environment for the development of companies, particularly small- and medium-sized ones, the administration said.

Entertainment venue rules to be revised

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has decided to revise measures related to entertainment venues to streamline government administration and improve government services, according to a notice issued on May 17.

In recent years, China has revised or introduced a series of laws and regulations, including those related to the protection of minors, administrative punishment and foreign investment.

Current clauses in measures that are inconsistent with these laws will be revised. For example, the revisions include the provision that no entertainment venue shall be set up near kindergartens, as stipulated in the Law on the Protection of Minors.

The measures will also remove restrictions regarding foreign investment in entertainment venues.

Rare encyclopedia's repatriation turns page on restoration efforts

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Coming across a set of the *Yongle Dadian* these days is something of a literary miracle.

First compiled in the early 15th century during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) following Emperor Yongle's edict, this set of handwritten books is often credited as the largest paper-based encyclopedia in the world. The set extends to an estimated 370 million Chinese characters, and consists of 22,937 volumes in 11,095 copies.

A mere 400-odd copies are known to survive, all copied from a 16th-century duplicate, as the whereabouts of the original are unknown.

So when a copy on the Chinese character *hu* ("lake") returned to its home country from Canada to be

housed at the National Library of China in 2013, it triggered tremendous excitement among Chinese librarians.

"Any clue to finding even a page of the *Yongle Dadian* would be big news," said Chen Hongyan, deputy director of the NLC's Ancient Book Department. "That encyclopedia bears crucial witness to the lengthy lineage of Chinese culture."

Unlike modern printed encyclopedias, which may be composed of concise explanations, a single entry in the *Yongle Dadian* could include lengthy citations or even entire ancient texts. As a result, many key books whose original editions have been lost remain accessible today.

Perhaps because its pages were too fragile to be touched, the newly returned entry remained in the library warehouse for several years

as experts pondered the best way to preserve and share the national treasure.

Last year, the National Library, the China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation and internet giant ByteDance — the parent company of short-video platform TikTok, or Douyin in China — jointly announced a plan to restore the document.

About 10 million yuan (\$1.5 million) will be spent not only on the restoration of the text, but also on training restorers, digitizing the work and creating associated public education programs.

With the new national guideline on ancient books highlighting the importance of wider participation, the public is now being encouraged to explore new ways of taking care of old books.

"We want to make use of short-

video platforms to provide the general public another way to grasp the cultural context of the *Yongle Dadian*," Chu Yingxia, deputy secretary-general of the foundation and head of the ongoing project, told China Daily.

Chu noted that online platforms provide new outlets for scholars to explain ancient texts more easily.

"The original texts in ancient books are often obscure," Chu said. "But by using these platforms, we can explore how to apply the knowledge they contain to modern life, which will benefit the young generation in particular."

Since last year, the foundation has amassed 100 stories on the protection of ancient books from across the country to broadcast on short-video platforms. An online video project with the hashtag "Looking for the

custodians of ancient books" has proved popular with netizens. Associated video clips have been viewed 240 million times.

On March 18, *Ancient Books Traveling Through Time and Space*, a documentary featuring the protectors of today's ancient books, was shown online thanks to the project. It attracted 34 million views within its first month of posting.

"The fruits of the protection of cultural artifacts need to be shared," Chu said. "Many conservation institutions are challenged by a lack of staff, capital and publicity. Now, through online platforms, we can explore other ways of supporting their work."

"Only when all of society has grasped the need to protect ancient books will their importance be understood."