

POLICY REVIEW

Yellow River protection prioritized

Guideline calls for safeguarding of ancient waterway's cultural treasures

By WANG KAIHAO
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Snaking through 69 cities in nine provinces and autonomous regions across North China, the 5,464-kilometer-long Yellow River is an age-old witness to the nation's history.

Over the course of around 5,000 years of Chinese civilization, different regions along the river have served as important political and cultural centers. Over 300,000 cultural heritage sites are located along the length of the Yellow River, comprising about 40 percent of the national total, according to the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

Methods for better protecting these sites have been a concern for generations of conservators.

Last month, a national-level guideline on the protection and use of cultural heritage along China's "mother river" was jointly released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration and several other ministries. It outlines a wide spectrum of work that should be carried out, ranging from archaeology and academic studies, to conservation efforts and the exhibition of Yellow River relics.

"From the cities of Chang'an (today's Xi'an) and Luoyang to Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, the middle reaches of the Yellow River bred the 'axis age' of ancient China," said Liu Qingzhu, a veteran archaeologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

"The river created the foundations of Chinese civilization," he said. "By better protecting and understanding Yellow River cultures, we can further trace our origins and enhance our sense of identity."

The guideline also stressed the need to bolster archaeological research along the river, particularly research centered on tracing the origins of Chinese civilization through prehistoric stone cities and core settlements.

For example, the 4,000-year-old Shimao stone city in Shaanxi province is the largest ruined city from the era ever found in China. The Erlitou site in Henan province is widely believed to be the capital of the Xia Dynasty (c. 21st to 16th century BC), the first central dynasty recorded in Chinese history.

According to a statement released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration further explaining the guideline, a series of key archaeology laboratories, museums and warehouses for storing archaeological artifacts will be established in provinces and regions the Yellow River meanders through.

"Professional archaeological institutions in provinces like Shaanxi, Shanxi, Shandong and Henan will be transformed into top-tier institutes of their kind," the statement said.

The conservation of ancient grotto temples, which played a vital role not only in the spread of Buddhism in China, but also in cross-cultural communication along the Silk Road, is another of the guideline's key focuses.

The protection of the grottoes, and other ancient architecture along the river, can contribute to the development of new materials and technologies, the guideline pointed out.

"The conservation and utilization of cultural heritage along the Yellow



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River have long been troubled by the fact that studies lack coordination (between different regions and departments)," said Zhang Binyuan, chief engineer of the Henan Provincial Cultural Heritage Administration. "Furthermore, many grassroots institutions lack the expertise and personnel for management and exhibition, and our explanation of the value of the Yellow River needs to be improved. The guideline is a source of confidence for conservators in the regions along the river."

Systems for better coordination among provinces and government departments concerning the Yellow River were also recently established following the guideline.

In July, an alliance to protect grotto temples was set up in Shanxi to coordinate efforts across six provinces.

In Shandong, a series of archaeological research endeavors and cultural heritage restoration programs will be launched in the lower reaches of the river, joining efforts by administrations overseeing cultural heritage and water resources.

"Yellow River artifacts have been pivotal to our last few years of work," said Wang Lei, director of the Shandong Provincial Cultural Heritage Administration. "Detailed plans are still being drafted, and a comprehensive and scientific system to better protect them in the long term is needed."

Ultimately, the work being carried out to protect heritage should benefit the public. In Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province, an exhibition opened at the Gansu Provincial Museum in June displaying 300 artifacts from prehistoric Yellow River cultures to show how ancient civilizations overcame difficulties and thrived.

In July, another exhibition of artifacts from all nine provincial-level administrative regions along the river was launched at the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an to show the river's lasting influence on the cultures, philosophies and literature it nurtured.

Nevertheless, as the new guideline indicates, more needs to be done to

tell these stories to a broader audience. For example, it encourages regular international cooperation among the institutions of the Yellow River and of those famed waterways such as the Nile, the Indus, the Ganges and the Euphrates.

As the National Cultural Heritage Administration statement elaborated, cooperation would involve the conservation of relics, archaeological efforts and exhibitions to contribute to the study of the origins of the world's civilizations, and the development of an international think tank on heritage conservation. This would also provide more opportunities for cultural heritage from the Yellow River to be exhibited overseas.

Policy Digest

Efforts to give disabled better access to books

The China National Intellectual Property Administration has required that efforts be made to give disabled people better access to published works, according to an interim provision issued earlier this month.

The move is part of national efforts to implement the Marrakech Treaty, an international agreement that gives people with visual or other disabilities greater access to published works protected by copyright.

The treaty went into effect in China on May 5.

According to the interim provision, authorized non-profit entities such as libraries and schools are encouraged to convert published works into accessible versions, including Braille, audio and digital formats, for people who are blind or visually impaired, or who have physical disabilities that hinder their ability to read — for example, people who can't hold a book or turn pages.

The treaty allows for format conversions of copyrighted works without the need to seek permission from owners of the works or having to pay royalties.

However, anyone who violates the provision in ways that affect the normal use of published works or who harms copyright owners' legitimate rights, will be held accountable.

Measures to improve rural public toilets

Chinese authorities will press ahead with a package of measures to tackle problems with the construction and management of public toilets in rural areas.

According to a notice jointly issued on Aug 16 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and six other departments, the improvement of toilets in rural areas is important to the health and quality of life of residents.

The current distribution of toilets in some areas is inadequate, and others are not being properly maintained, the notice said.

It stressed that the number of toilets and how they are distributed should be decided in accordance with local conditions and the sizes of villages and populations, among other factors, to avoid wasting resources.

While public toilets should be built in areas where populations are concentrated, such as markets, tourist sites and along major roads, villages with fewer people should use makeshift or portable toilets to meet their needs.

According to the notice, efforts should be made to encourage rural residents to participate in the construction and management of public toilets, and to properly maintain the facilities.

Ministry urges better care for police officers

China will step up efforts to improve the care and protection provided to police officers, and see that their efforts are properly compensated, a newly released document shows.

The document, released by the Ministry of Public Security, calls for more efforts to safeguard the officers' honor, protect their physical and mental health, and effectively implement relevant preferential policies.

Honorary activities, such as promotion and awarding ceremonies, inauguration oath-taking and retirement ceremonies, should be better regulated, says the document.

It also notes that on special occasions, such as festivals and the Martyrs' Day, regular visits must be paid to police martyrs and their families, as well as model police officers and officers suffering from injuries or disabilities.

Primary-level police officers should be supplied with sufficient equipment, says the document.

Social groups encouraged to help preserve, use heritage buildings

By CHENG YUEZHU
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The National Cultural Heritage Administration recently published a document encouraging social organizations, such as charities or interest groups, to participate more in the preservation and use of heritage buildings.

It is the first policy document from the administration to call for such groups to play a role in preservation. It includes the fundamental principles of preservation work, ways people can contribute and suggestions for local governments on how to support the effort.

According to a statement from the administration, China has more than 760,000 immovable cultural relics, including some 400,000 heritage buildings. Over 95 percent are

either protected at the county level or have not yet been listed as protected sites.

The large number of such buildings nationwide and complex property rights make management difficult. The problem is compounded by insufficient investment from some local governments and a lack of manpower.

Some buildings have not been properly maintained and risk ruin. Therefore, it is necessary to advocate for social groups to participate in the conservation and use of the sites, according to the statement.

Pan Shouyong, a museology professor from Shanghai University, said the guideline's release comes amid a slew of efforts already underway.

"Pilot projects have been launched in many places, including Guang-

dong and Zhejiang provinces, in collaboration with the China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation to preserve historical sites and ancient villages," Pan said. "The idea of getting social organizations involved in heritage preservation has been considered for several years."

In 2019, the administration released a set of guidelines to open up heritage buildings to the public. Social groups were encouraged to get involved, but were mainly limited to providing services as volunteers.

The new document states that groups can now apply for public welfare funds, fundraising, or collaborate with local governments to turn heritage buildings into cultural or tourism venues, such as museums, galleries, inns and tea houses.

"I think this is the greatest high-

light of the document. In the past, we were stressing the preservation of heritage buildings, but not really their reuse," Pan said. "Even after having been restored, many are left empty. But experts from around the world have generally arrived at the consensus that making use of heritage buildings to a certain extent can provide better protection."

The document states that social groups are entitled to make use of heritage buildings for a period of up to 20 years, and cultural heritage authorities should regularly assess the state of the buildings.

Local governments can offer financial and technical support to encourage participation, and outstanding projects could be eligible for heritage conservation funds.

According to Pan, these measures are meant to inject new impetus into

cultural heritage preservation.

First, turning heritage sites into public venues allows them to become a part of the community and people's lives, he said. Furthermore, professionals from various walks of life, including tourism and cultural industries, will be able to get involved in the protection of heritage, bringing with them creative ideas and raising social awareness.

Pan said that local governments should examine heritage sites for safety, allow for certain upgrades to be made and for some facilities to be added, and streamline the application process.

"While adhering to heritage protection principles, local governments are encouraged to explore more flexible and customized ways of protecting local heritage buildings," Pan added.