

Irregularities in excavation of playwright Tang's tomb confirmed

Official confirmation has been given of some issues arising from the excavation of the tomb of ancient playwright Tang Xianzu.

Zhang Ling, deputy head of the archaeology section of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), said the excavation of the main structure of Tang's tomb had not been approved and that archaeologists and the local cultural heritage agency had failed to report their discoveries to the administration in a timely manner.

Late last month, archeologists in east China's Jiangxi Province said that they had found a cluster of tombs believed to belong to the playwright and his family.

However, doubts emerged as to whether the excavation had been conducted in a proper manner.

Zhang said that in April the SACH approved a plan to excavate the cluster, but digging was to be limited to annexes and outbuildings only. However, the archaeologists may have misunderstood the SACH instruction and cleaned up the external structure of the tombs.

More importantly, they did not follow the routine practice of promptly reporting any important findings to the SACH, Zhang said. The administration has the right to stop, direct or support any archaeological work to ensure excavation is conducted in an orderly manner.

The SACH has summoned officials from Jiangxi for talks to ensure proper study and preservation of the site.

Best known for "The Peony Pavilion," the story of the romance between a daughter of a wealthy official and a talented but poor young scholar, Tang is sometimes compared with his contemporaries, William Shakespeare and Cervantes. All three died in the same year.