

# A new way to save heritage houses

Old houses in Huangshan, Anhui province, offer a unique insight into the centuries-old architecture of the Ming and Qing dynasties, but a lack of funding is making protection a challenge.



Traditional lanterns glow near centuries-old residences in Hongcun Village, near Mount Huangshan, Anhui province, in May. [Photo/China Daily]

There are more than 6,000 Ming and Qing houses in Huangshan, a UNESCO cultural and natural heritage site; but, because of limited government funding, fewer than one-fourth – 1,325 – are under State protection.

Yet, all of these old houses, many of which once belonged to important people, are treasures in local residents' eyes. How to effectively protect these examples of cultural heritage has long been a challenge for inhabitants and authorities alike.

Many villagers work in cities as migrant workers, leaving their old houses behind, vulnerable to decay and collapse.

"There is a lack of money for the renovation of these houses, and it is a real shame to have to watch them collapse or fall into ruin. So we are encouraging people who are able to invest capital in repairing the old houses to make good use of them," said Hu Jianbin, Huangshan's culture bureau chief.

Urbanization is a significant factor. Increasing numbers of city dwellers, tired of the hustle and bustle of city life coupled with traffic congestion and air pollution, are turning to the countryside to escape. Preservation of old houses in Huangshan offers such people a glimmer of hope.

## **Clean air**

Huangshan has many advantages to attract people escaping city life. Apart from its natural scenic beauty, the city is one of the cleanest in China. Last year, the number of days that air quality reached the national standards of “excellent” and “fairly good” hit 355 in Huangshan. It is also the cradle of Hui culture, which has inspired unique residential building designs since the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Shu Qing is one of the people attracted to Huangshan.

Born in Yixian county of Huangshan, Shu worked as a journalist in Beijing for eight years before returning to her hometown.

“I liked strolling around the Lama Temple in Beijing, and loved all the small restaurants nearby. I dreamed of opening one in my hometown,” she said.

In 2009, Shu, left the big city and returned to Yixian where she opened her own restaurant – The Hui House – in an old building near the former residence of Sai Jinhua, a woman of note in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The building is located near the townships of Xidi and Hongcun, two UNESCO cultural heritage sites.

## **Dream property**

“The house had been left empty and had decayed wood that had been destroyed by termites,” she said, recalling the first time she saw her dream property.

Five months of reconstruction and interior decoration have turned The Hui House into a cozy and elegant restaurant known for delicious food and attentive service. Only eight groups of diners are served each day.

“We carefully keep the old building in good condition according to government requirements, frequently repairing it,” Shu said.

A lover of old architecture, she started searching for a suitable ancient house to live in with her husband. In 2012, she bought two adjoining Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) houses in a precarious state of disrepair. It took her three years to rebuild and decorate them.

“The project’s plan and blueprint must be approved by the government first to prevent workers destroying any of the original structure. The Hui style of a house must be maintained, including the use of black tiles, high white walls and wall tops shaped like horse heads,” she said.

The restored houses, which were completed in 2016, have eight tastefully designed rooms, equipped with modern amenities such as central air conditioning and heated floors.

“Since 2016, we have lived in the houses. In March this year, we began providing accommodations for travelers,” she said.

## **Personal investment**

Shu spent 1.5 million yuan (\$225,520) buying the two old houses, and another 2.6 million yuan rebuilding and decorating them.

“Buying old houses is costly, and reconstructing them is not only costly but also time-and energy-consuming. If you are not really fond of them, you will destroy the houses,” said Yu Biao, director of the cultural heritage protection office in Yixian.

“So we must supervise buyers’ credit and their economic power, no matter what kind of old houses they want to purchase.”

Fascinated with Hui culture, Huang Hua, president of Beijing Hua Sheng Hang International Cultural Development Co, specializes in Ming and Qing Dynasty furniture. Since 2003, he has made a living trading nanmu, a rare wood often used by Qing royal families.

In 2013, he came across an ancestral hall in Yixian.

“It was almost collapsing and was classified as dangerous. It would have been a shame to allow it to disappear,” he said.

### **Win-win scenario**

Because the hall is listed as a cultural relic, the Yixian government only leased it for 40 years. Huang rebuilt it over a period of two years, spending 3 million yuan. Now it is a museum for Ming and Qing furniture. Huang also exhibits his company’s products.

In recent years, local governments have taken a series of steps to attract private investors like Shu and Huang to renovate the old houses in Huangshan. If the plan goes well, it will prove to be a win-win, sustainable way to preserve cultural heritage.

“We have a set of meticulous rules to ensure that only capable investors can rent the houses. Ownership stays in the hands of the government,” said Hu, the culture bureau chief.

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## **US team wins Chinese language contest**

A team from the United States has won the “Chinese Bridge” language proficiency competition for secondary school students held in Kunming, capital of southwest China’s Yunnan Province.



Contestants take part in the final of the 10th Chinese Bridge the Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Secondary School Students in Kunming, southwest China's Yunnan Province, Oct. 28, 2017. [Photo: Xinhua]

The final round was held on Saturday evening, with the winning team from each continent, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, the United States, Mozambique and Australia, taking part.

A number of participants from countries such as Canada and Austria also won individual awards.

The series of contests, which focuses on spoken Chinese, Chinese culture and art performances, attracted 320 teachers and students from 96 countries and regions.

During their stay in Kunming, the participants visited local families and communities to experience folk arts and traditions.

Since 2002, the headquarters of the Confucius Institute in Beijing has organized a series of Chinese Bridge language competitions.

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**[Parents spend extra to give kids an](#)**

## edge

China's extracurricular education sector for primary school students has developed rapidly, especially in large cities. Piano, painting, chess, skating and other lessons have sprung up in major shopping districts. Expensive summer camps claiming to broaden children's horizons are also popular. Spending on children's education is rising each year.

A survey of Shanghai early education (up to age 6) conducted by the Shanghai Association for Quality found that the parents of 60 percent of children under age 6 had steered them into extracurricular classes. For children between 4 and 6, the proportion exceeded 70 percent.

On average, each child attends two classes for around two hours a week. Average annual family spending on extracurricular classes was 17,832 yuan (\$2,700).

Chen Chen learned that most of the children in her son's kindergarten attend several classes carefully arranged by their parents. "If the children are interested and the parents can afford it, no harm is done," she said.

Born in the 1980s, Chen is a typical parent with a higher education and above-average disposable income. She spends more freely on the next generation's early education than her thrifty parents did.

She grew up in China's exam-oriented system and hopes her children will have more opportunities to cultivate their interests and broaden their horizons.

"Our next generation is facing increasingly harsh and unknown competition. We are prone to anxiety and not likely to adopt a laissez faire approach to raise children," she said.

International market research company Nielsen found that people born in the 1980s are the biggest consumers in China. As most of them are married, spending on family occupies a large share of their outlay – children's education in particular, which accounts for 55 percent.

However, growth in spending on children's education also piles pressure on parents, especially those like Chen, who has two children.

"We have to double the education spending, which means we have to tighten other family spending. So I think twice before enrolling my son in extracurricular classes, which typically cost more than 10,000 yuan a year," Chen says.

Some parents on social media lament that they are not raising children but "cash burners".

According to Liu Chenglian, a family education expert, some parents spend whatever it takes to give their kids an edge, but sometimes they just blindly follow a trend and overschedule their children.

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## Xi encourages Tibetan herders to safeguard territory

President Xi Jinping encouraged a herding family in the Tibet autonomous region to put down roots in the border area, safeguard Chinese territory and develop their hometown.



Tibetan sisters Yangzom (first right) and Zhoigar listen to two government officials relaying an answer from President Xi Jinping to a letter the sisters wrote to him. The sisters live in Yumai in Lhunze county along the Himalayas' foothills. [Photo/China Daily]

Xi, also general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks in a reply delivered on Saturday to Zhoigar and Yangzom – two Tibetan sisters in the township of Yumai in Lhunze county, which sits at the southern foot of the Himalayas.

The two sisters wrote a letter to Xi during the 19th National Congress of the CPC, which ended last week, to report their experiences in safeguarding the country's territory and introducing development and changes in their town, while pledging to make continuous efforts to protect the border. Among their activities is keeping an eye out along the border and reporting suspicious

activities like possible smugglers.

Xi, in his letter, praised the family's safeguarding national territory for two consecutive generations, thanked those who made loyal contributions to safeguarding and strengthening the country's borders, and encouraged the herders to build their hometown into a beautiful one.

There used to be only one family, consisting of the two sisters and their father, in the remote location. The town now has 32 residents in nine families. It's the country's least populous town. Steep slopes and rugged paths make it difficult to access.

"Without peace in the territory, there will be no peaceful lives for millions of families," Xi wrote.

He said he hoped the family would motivate more herders to put down roots in the border area "like galsang flowers", and become guardians of Chinese territory and builders of a happy hometown.

Fresh from the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi told the family that the Party would continue to lead people of all ethnic groups toward better lives.

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## **CPC Central Committee defuses 'major political pitfalls' since 2012**

The Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee had since 2012 "timely detected, decidedly handled, and resolutely eradicated" careerists and conspirators such as Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai and Ling Jihua, a report from the Party's anti-graft body read.

It had defused "major political pitfalls" over the past five years, according to a work report of the 18th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

The report was submitted to the 19th CPC National Congress concluded earlier this week and published on Sunday.

In it, the CCDI said corruption is the biggest threat to the Party's rule.

"Interest groups formed by intertwining political corruption and economic corruption have severely undermined political security of the Party and the country," it read.

"Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai, Ling Jihua and others had seriously breached Party disciplines and political rules and, with ballooning political ambitions, resorted to conspiracy," the report continued.

But the CPC Central Committee “timely detected, decidedly handled, and resolutely eradicated” these careerists and conspirators and defused “major political pitfalls.”

The CCDI, for its own part, ascertained their corruption problems, properly handled all people involved, and eliminated their pernicious influences, it said.

It also deeply analyzed the cases of Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, Sun Zhengcai and Ling Jihua, among others, and asked the whole Party to learn from their mistakes in order to affirm the Party’s disciplines and protect the Party’s unity, it said.