

CULTURAL HERITAGE



The Great Wall, stretching across vast swathes of time and geography, is regarded as a wonder of the world. While standing as a testimony to China's profound history, the winding walls still carry with them stories of the ordinary with a touch of warmth.

Just a 30-minute drive away from its famed Badaling section lies a small village held by the Great Wall in its embrace. Surrounded by the walls on three sides, Shixia village used to be a military stronghold, first established in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

For the villagers, the Great Wall is not a must-visit destination in a lifetime but an everyday sight — they can raise their heads from almost anywhere in the village and see the Great Wall meandering its way along the mountain ridges.

The village features simple and modest buildings with an antique flair, typically single-story with gray brick walls. Yet, these buildings serve various functions that cater to those seeking diverse experiences, including a village history museum, hotels, a brewery, a cafe and a bookshop.

According to Li Handong, director of the village committee, the people of Shixia village have been committed to protecting its section of the Great Wall, and its development and prosperity were made possible by this heritage.

Earlier this year, Li and nine other village representatives wrote a letter to President Xi Jinping, in which they told of their love of the Great Wall, and the village's transformation from an impoverished hamlet to a countryside getaway.

On May 14, they received a reply from Xi, applauding their effort in safeguarding the Great Wall, passing on its culture and leveraging its resources to achieve prosperity.

The president underscored the Great Wall's role as "a symbol of the Chinese nation and an important emblem of Chinese civilization", embodying the spirit of unyielding perseverance and patriotic unity, while encouraging its guardians to pass down "this precious heritage left by our ancestors for generations to come".

Liu Hongyan, a village representative and a dedicated Great Wall protector, says that she and other villagers were overjoyed by the reply, feeling immense pride. In the meantime, reflecting on her role as a protector, she also felt the weight of responsibility.

"We were all thrilled to receive the response. Shixia is just a small, remote mountain village, so I never thought that the president would attach importance to our village, and the work we've done to preserve the Great Wall. It's an encouragement for me and I'll continue to protect the Great Wall and protect my homeland," Liu says.

Her uncle Mei Jingtian, now 80, pioneered the village's Great Wall protection efforts since 1980. As he could not bear to see the wall crumble, Mei regularly patrolled the mountains for the past four decades, trying to prevent damage and safeguard the heritage.

"He started his voluntary patrols in 1980, the year I was born. So ever since I was little, I'd often see him pass by my house after a day of patrolling, and he'd tell me what he saw on the mountains. When I grew



Village steps up for Great Wall mission

Residents protect iconic structure and cater to growing number of visitors, Cheng Yuezhu reports.

up the mountain, the amount of litter has decreased, perhaps because of both our collective efforts and growing public awareness," she adds.

Reciprocating the love and care given by the villagers, the Great Wall also brought the village vitalization and prosperity. While the village used to be very poor, with muddy roads and insufficient infrastructure, it has now become a destination for weekend retreats.

A prominent figure in the village's tourism development is He Yuling from Yanqing district. An entrepreneur in the catering industry in central Beijing, she observed the trend of city dwellers going to the countryside for weekends, and thought of establishing a high-quality countryside getaway. Then, a trip to Shixia in 2014 revealed to her an ideal spot for her vision.

"At the time, the village was full of old houses and courtyards, but the local community was very welcoming, and the aging buildings were well-maintained and clean," she recalls.

"What I saw in it was its rich historical and cultural resources. The Great Wall is visible from almost anywhere in the village, and it has historical remains. The natural scenery was stunning, with lush vegetation and flowers blooming all over the mountains in spring."

She rented 20 courtyards from local villagers and transformed these into her own brand, the Stone Light Hotels. Each of these courtyards has its own characteristics, but overall the designs kept the buildings' original simplicity, coziness and antique flavor.

Along with the guesthouses, her company also set up public spaces such as the cafe and bookshop to enrich the lives of residents and tourists alike, and involved the locals in establishing a brewery, a teahouse and an oil mill, which allows visitors to learn about folk culture and help the villagers sell local specialties.

Since the guesthouses opened in 2015, she has been providing villagers over 65 with an egg and a packet of milk every day, and the guesthouse employees also participate in the village's Great Wall preservation.

"Although my hometown is 30 kilometers away from Shixia, I've always considered myself a local. The entire atmosphere of the village is harmonious. It feels like a big family with the villagers and the visitors," she says.

In her observations for the past decade, what has changed about Shixia is not only the environment, but also the villagers' increasing awareness of the preservation of their historical and cultural resources.

For the next steps, Li says that the village aims to continue to make good use of its natural and historical resources to promote economic development and rural vitalization.

In the meantime, Great Wall preservation remains the most important. "It is an emblem of our Chinese civilization, and living right beside the Great Wall, we have been improving our living conditions because of it. So we will continue to protect the heritage. Even when our generation grows old, the future generations will take up the baton," Li says.

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Top: Liu Hongyan is a full-time protector of the Great Wall at Beijing's Shixia village, which used to be a military stronghold, first established in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Above: Shixia village lies at the foot of the Great Wall in Yanqing district.
Left: The village is a popular countryside retreat with a thriving hotel business.
Above left: The Shixia Pass of the Great Wall was first built in the Ming Dynasty. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY



older, he'd take me along and tell me about the history and legends of the Great Wall. Over time, I developed a deep affection for it," Liu recalls.

In 2006, Mei consulted with the village committee to establish a voluntary protectors' team, which received enthusiastic support, with more than 40 villagers signing up. Since then, the villagers have been regularly going on patrols to the Great Wall to tackle pollution and damage.

Now, the village has a permanent

population of around 130 people, nearly all of whom are involved in the heritage protection efforts, Li says. During these patrols, they'd dispose of litter, remove weeds, pick up and arrange the bricks that became dislodged, and report damage or hazards to cultural heritage authorities.

Liu herself is now a full-time Great Wall protector. In 2019, upon learning about a recruitment drive for Great Wall protectors in Yanqing

district, she immediately signed up. After passing a written exam, an interview and a physical fitness test, she became one of the first six individuals selected as Great Wall protectors in the village.

"I remember that on my first day, we went up to the Great Wall and saw a lot of litter, especially plastic rubbish tourists had left behind. We brought our own trash bags and each one of us collected three to four bags," Liu says.

For five days a week, the team members go on a patrol of nearly 20 kilometers, which takes them five to six hours to complete. During their patrols, they regularly take photos of the walls and the watchtowers, especially areas with cracks or fallen bricks, and upload the images to a specialized app linked to the cultural heritage management office of Yanqing district.

"Since becoming a full-time protector, I've noticed that with each trip

By CHENG YUEZHU

Over the span of around 2,000 years, multitudes of workers contributed to the construction of the Great Wall. Today, countless individuals are still working to continue this endeavor, this time to preserve this icon of heritage.

One of the earliest and most influential preservation projects was the "Love China, Restore the Great Wall" campaign, initiated in 1984 by a number of institutions, including the Beijing Evening News, the Beijing Daily, and the former Badaling Great Wall special zone administrative office.

Xi Zhongxun, then member of the Secretariat of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, and Deng Xiaoping, then director of the Central Advisory Commission of the CPC, produced calligraphy versions of the campaign slogan, which were published in the Beijing Evening News, greatly enhancing its impact.

The campaign pioneered public participation in the country, and drew in individuals and organizations from both China and abroad, who contributed a flood of donations for the wall's preservation.

On Sept 26, an event to celebrate the campaign's 40th anniversary was hosted in Beijing's Yanqing district by the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

In 2016, the administration released a document on the management of the wall's protectors, which institutionalized and normalized public participation in the preservation of the Great Wall.

Giving preservation efforts a priority



From left: A bird's-eye view of the Great Wall's Badaling section. LYU HAOJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY Great Wall protectors step onstage to receive donations by Tencent Foundation at a fundraising event in Badaling last month. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

Li Qun, director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, said in his keynote speech at the celebratory event that according to partial statistics, 72 percent of the fortresses along the wall have subsequently evolved into villages, towns and even cities.

"We want to mobilize and unite a wider range of forces to collectively protect the Great Wall, share in the achievements of its preservation, and infuse new vitality into preservation efforts," Li says.

Future measures will cover three main

aspects — promoting volunteer action to protect the wall, enhancing public education on the importance of the cause, and ensuring that the outcomes of protection benefit the public.

The 2024 edition of the "Protecting the Great Wall, Count Me In" fundraising campaign was launched at the celebratory event. The campaign was initiated by the China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation and the Tencent Foundation in 2016 under the administration's guidance.

According to Liu Yuzhu, chairman of the

China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation, the campaign marked the beginning of the foundation's efforts to increase public participation.

Over the past eight years, it has raised nearly 70 million yuan (\$9.83 million). Liu says the money has been used in restoration projects along the Jiankou and Badaling sections in Beijing, as well as the Xifengkou section in Hebei province. The latest project is the ongoing fifth stage of restoration of the Jiankou section, which started in June. This year, the Tencent Foundation donat-



ed 5 million yuan to purchase 7,481 gear packs for protectors.

"Public involvement is comprehensive and multifaceted," Liu says. "It not only to some extent fills the financial gaps in preservation work, but also includes material support, technological advancement, improving awareness, exhibitions and volunteer services. Regardless of method, all these efforts are aimed at protecting and passing on our shared heritage."

He says that while laws and regulations are encouraging more people to get involved, it is essential to improve participation mechanisms, provide accessible ways for the public to get involved, and strengthen coordination and collaboration among different organizations.

"The practice of Great Wall preservation has proved that it is impossible to complete the task solely by relying on government efforts, or the efforts of a particular institution or organization. Even more than 7,000 protectors cannot cover every corner of the Great Wall. Collective effort is required to protect our cultural homeland together," Liu adds.

College students also play a substantial role in preservation. Recently, the Beijing Cultural Heritage Bureau worked with the Beijing committee of the Communist Youth League of China to establish the Beijing University Student Great Wall Protection Volunteer Service Team. Volunteer teams from the Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, the Beijing Union University and the Beijing City University were certified as volunteer service team subgroups.