Pingyao Ancient City Conservation and Heritage Revitalization Program Backgrounder

Shanxi, China

March, 2010
The Need – Saving China’s Vanishing Heritage

As the world’s oldest continuous civilization, China is facing tremendous challenges in conserving its most important cultural heritage sites. Hundreds of ancient sites, historic cities and cultural landscapes are at risk of destruction by unchecked urban sprawl, encroachment, and pollution connected to China’s rapid development. Protecting China’s remaining ancient treasures without impeding development is a delicate balance.

Many of China’s most spectacular and vulnerable heritage sites are located in some of the poorest provinces in the country’s interior. Well-planned, responsible cultural tourism presents one of the best opportunities for economic betterment of local communities living close to world-class heritage sites and treasures.

The emergence of a newly-rich middle class and ease of transportation have created a swell in domestic Chinese tourism. China’s National Tourist Office recorded more than 1 billion domestic travelers in 2006. The UN World Tourism Organization ranked China as the fourth visited country in 2006, attracting 49.6 million international tourist arrivals, and predicts it will become the number one international tourist destination by 2020.

GHF is working to build a sustainable, nationwide program to save China’s last remaining world-class heritage sites from destruction by the onslaught of mass tourism and unplanned development. GHF’s current projects in China are Foguang Temple and Pingyao Ancient City, both in Shanxi Province. GHF completed a project In Lijiang Ancient Town, Yunnan Province, where it was requested by UNESCO Asia Pacific to undertake a systematic process of planning and model conservation aimed at maintaining the historical integrity of this ancient Naxi tribe town.
GHF’s goal is to save ten endangered world heritage and national treasure sites in China’s least developed provinces over the next ten years. Without private philanthropy, improved planning, zoning, and scientific conservation, many of China’s glorious heritage sites will be lost forever.

Pingyao Ancient City – the First Banking Capital of China

Pingyao Ancient City in central Shanxi province is considered to be the first banking capital of China. Pingyao was the central bank for much of the Silk Road trade during the Ming and Qing dynasties. During those times, there were as many as 20 financial institutions in the city, making up more than half of the country’s total. Located 80 km from Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi, Pingyao is only a 1.5-hour flight from Beijing.

Pingyao Ancient City was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1997 for its exceptional preservation of an intact, classic Han Chinese city from the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911). There are close to 4,000 Ming and Qing era courtyard buildings, along with numerous historic sites, temples and institutions such as China’s first bank, Rishengchang. It is one of only two Chinese ancient cities with UNESCO World Heritage status, the other being Lijiang in Yunnan province.

Its urban fabric shows the evolution of architectural styles and town planning in Imperial China over five centuries. In retaining its features, the city provides a remarkably complete picture of cultural, social, economic and religious development during one of the most seminal periods of Chinese history.

A Growing Destination

Pingyao attracted much attention after the release of Chinese director Zhang Yimou’s acclaimed 1992 film Raise the Red Lantern, which was shot in the Qiao Compound near the ancient city, and prominently featured its distinctive Qing dynasty courtyard architecture. Pingyao’s profile rose again after receiving UNESCO World Heritage designation in 1997.

From a base of 150,000 visitors in 1997, more than 90% of the visitors are domestic...
Chinese, with others made up of Europeans, Americans and other Asians. The provincial capital of Taiyuan is 1.5 hours by flight from Beijing. With new transportation links to the nearby capital, attendance to the Pingyao International Photography Festival growing to more than 300,000, and the passing of the Olympic Torch Route in late June 2008, Pingyao is gaining greater recognition and fast becoming a unique travel destination.

The ancient city is surrounded by a wall that measures more than 10 meters high, with a perimeter of 6,000 meters. Majority of public government funding is devoted to the constant maintenance of the ancient wall, which is built with rammed earth, brick and stone. This leaves little resources or expertise to manage Pingyao’s unprecedented nexus of pressures from 1) the 30,000 low-income residents living within its ancient walls, 2) deterioration of its core historic district and enduring temples, palaces, banks, and ancient residences, and 3) onslaught of mass tourism.

![Pingyao's City Wall](image)

**Balancing Preservation with Development**

GHF and Pingyao County supported a Master Conservation Plan in 2005 as a first step to comprehensively and systematically preserve the ancient city and support its thoughtfully planned development. GHF engaged a team of experts at the National Parks Service to provide guidance in site interpretation, visitor services, historic preservation and park management for Pingyao Ancient City. In 2006 and 2008, GHF sponsored a field study trip for the Chinese team to visit and learn from conservation and museum leaders at Colonial Williamsburg, the Smithsonian and Quebec City, and Yosemite National Park and Golden Gate National Park, respectively.

Under the direction of Professor Shao Yong from the prestigious Shanghai Tongji University’s Urban Planning School, the master conservation plan addresses the most pressing development issues of the Ancient City. Total measurement, mapping, documentation, population survey, and threat assessment of the city have been completed. The final plan includes a comprehensive site conservation plan, budget, and milestones for the protection and restoration of Pingyao Ancient City. New legal and regulatory protection, and innovative private-public conservation and development are imperative outcomes of the plan.
In addition, GHF is co-funding the master planning and authentic restorations the best examples of Qing Dynasty courtyard buildings with local families. In addition, GHF is aiming to establish new artisan complexes with the ancient city’s communities.

Although it was once the banking capital of China, Ping Yao’s current economy is largely agricultural, including products like grains and cotton. The average annual income for Pingyao County residents is less than $100 a month. Responsible tourism development provides compelling opportunities for the Ancient City’s residents to work and live in Pingyao while preserving its heritage, and maintaining the city’s social and family structure.

The Need for Sustainable Tourism Development

A great disparity in development currently exists between the main tourist streets in the core of the Ancient City and those outside the core. While the total visitor figure is significant, many of the residents living in courtyards away from the core area are unable to participate in the growing economic opportunities from increasing tourism activities.

Many tourists who visit the Ancient City only buy a ticket to enter the core area, visit a few sites, eat lunch, buy a few trinkets and then leave. The average stay per tourist is 2 to 3 hours. GHF is working with Pingyao County to reverse this trend, extend the duration of visitation and quality of experience, and attract visitors with deeper interest in arts and culture. This will help increase the level of revenue capture by a broader base of local residents.

Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program

The Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program is part of Global Heritage Fund’s greater China Heritage Program, established in 2005 to help save some of China’s most important historic heritage sites from destruction.

The Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program aims to preserve the vernacular architecture, revitalize and stimulate the traditional arts, and establish special historic areas. The program will
restore Ming and Qing dynasty courtyards for adaptive reuse, conduct classes in traditional crafts and building methods, and provide training for the management of cultural resources in Pingyao Ancient City.

A representative historic area, Fanjia Jie, has been selected, and will be the first cluster of historic residences to be restored for both public and private uses as a model. This is an area with intact traditional streetscape and an ensemble of historic courtyard residences from the late Qing Dynasty to the Early Republic period. This historic area, with its outstanding courtyards, would form a vibrant, inner circle of arts and cultural offerings within the walls of the ancient city. The program would identify other special areas in the Ancient City for preservation and adaptive reuse.

In addition, two courtyards not included in the historic district are being selected as pilot restoration projects. One courtyard will be converted into the official office for the GHF-Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program, and the other will serve as a visitor information center that will provide an overview of the collaborative program and our preservation goals for the Ancient City.

Working with the Pingyao County Government, academic and research institutions, GHF is supporting a comprehensive survey of the tangible and intangible cultural resources. This thorough survey will inform and enrich the Heritage Development Program and identify appropriate adaptive reuse of the historic buildings. Information collected will contribute to the development of a comprehensive interpretation plan.
Coupled with Pingyao’s application for an Asian Development Bank loan, the Heritage Development Program would greatly enhance the overall appeal of the city to tourists, attract a higher caliber of travelers, and increase the quality of life for local residents. GHF is providing technical expertise and assistance to the Pingyao County Government for a $12.5 million loan from the Asian Development Bank to conserve five of the largest and most important temples, excavate the ancient bridge and replenish the lake in the heart of the city, revitalize the South Street business district, and adaptively reuse an old factory for a community center. These two complementary efforts combined would infuse Pingyao with the funding and programmatic expertise to preserve the city’s precious heritage and elevate the quality of infrastructure.

**Preserving Historic Courtyards and the Living Arts**

Based on Dr. Shao Yong’s Master Conservation Plan, the benefits of the Heritage Development Program would be three-fold. The Master Conservation Plan has identified, surveyed and prioritized the most significant and important architectural heritage structures. Investment in these courtyards will be based on the Global Heritage Fund’s UNESCO award-winning, public-private partnership program in Lijiang, Yunnan. Owners of the courtyards will play a significant role in the development of their business.

The courtyards in the Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program will be authentically restored and adapted for public and private uses. Private homes can serve as model residences to inspire other owners to faithfully restore and maintain their courtyard homes. Public uses may include:

- Living heritage workshop
- Artist studio
- Performing arts center
- Museum
- Training school offering courses in foreign languages, heritage interpretation
- Culinary workshops
- Building crafts studios on traditional techniques such as stone, wood and brick carving

Living heritage workshops where visitors can participate in and observe the creation of traditional crafts and specialty products such as lacquerware, artisanal foods, papercutting,
cotton shoemaking, calligraphy and fine arts. In some of the larger historic courtyards, visitors can take beginner workshops or master classes to immerse themselves in the arts and cultures of Pingyao.

The Heritage Development Program will support the training for the remaining skilled craftspeople and artisans to pass on and preserve Pingyao’s unique living heritage of arts, crafts, cuisines and performing arts to the next generation. This integrated, sustainable program addresses the economic imbalance of the current tourism landscape, as well as preserves the last remaining endangered historic courtyards and living arts and cultural heritage, thereby realizing the authenticity and character of Pingyao Ancient City.

Expected Outcomes

The Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program would provide the foundation to preserve and maintain the outstanding vernacular architecture, revitalize the ancient arts and crafts and stimulate the local community. The program would increase the stake for local residents in preservation, attract visitors who appreciate art and culture, and expand the tourism-related economic activities beyond the current limits of 3-4 main streets.

The Heritage Development Program is expected to increase the sales of Day Passes by visitors. It will create new cultural and economic opportunities for Pingyao, meeting the needs and expectations of the next level of tourists, and resulting in extended stays in Pingyao to participate in arts and cultural workshops in the restored courtyard buildings of the special historic areas.

Proven Success in China

GHF has led cultural conservation efforts in Lijiang, Yunnan, and created a new model for heritage conservation in the People's Republic of China. The Old Town of Lijiang was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997 for its dramatic natural setting and harmonious fusion of different cultures within a historic urban landscape of exceptional quality and authenticity.

Working with the Lijiang government and UNESCO, GHF helped produce the first Master Conservation Plan (MCP) for the Old Town, which was approved and achieved legal status. It is a critical tool in ensuring the integrity of development and restoration in the Old Town.
Furthermore, GHF created the first public and privately-funded, Lijiang Trust for Conservation. The Trust provided for scientific conservation and planning tools with a subsidy incentive program for the authentic restoration of historic traditional Naxi tribe homes.

GHF has worked over the past five years to restore more than 174 traditional Naxi homes in partnership with 12 community wards and the Lijiang Ancient Town Management Committee. The 2007 UNESCO Second Award of Merit for this work is significant in its recognition of the public-private effort. The partnership between the residents, management authorities, external conservation experts and donors allow for a broad-based and participatory conservation approach within the framework of the overall World Heritage site conservation management plan.

Similar to the Lijiang Ancient Town project, the Pingyao Cultural Heritage Development Program will enable local communities to build a foundation for sustainable success through conservation training, capacity building, and authentic preservation practice. This process empowers local residents to manage the site, local entrepreneurs to receive and generate funds, and local government to continue with site development and maintenance. The strong foundation of stakeholder involvement and site governance lends itself to the long-term economic viability of the region.

CONCLUSION

This innovative program provides solutions for preserving Pingyao’s exemplary architectural and cultural heritage, revitalizing and stimulating the arts and crafts, spreading the benefits of sustainable tourism development, and maintaining a vibrant, living city for its local residents. We look forward to partnering with supporters in the United States and Asia to preserve the ancient arts and cultural legacy of China.
About Global Heritage Fund

The mission of Global Heritage Fund (GHF) is to protect and preserve humankind's most important archaeological and cultural heritage sites in developing countries.

Founded in 2002 by Dr. Ian Hodder of Stanford University Archaeology Center and Jeff Morgan, GHF is the only non-profit international conservancy working specifically in developing countries, where there are many threatened heritage sites but few financial and technical resources and little expertise to scientifically conserve them. GHF works at major archaeological and heritage sites selected by the Global Heritage Senior Advisory Board, based on thorough due diligence and close working relationships with on-site conservation teams and international conservation experts. We currently have twelve projects in eight countries, including China, India, Cambodia, Guatemala and Turkey.

Our Methodology – Preservation by Design

Working closely with academic and local partners, GHF implements a holistic approach to conservation that integrates 1) long-term planning, 2) community Involvement, 3) conservation, and 4) quality assessment at milestones throughout the life of a project.

GHF works with each project to develop a unique Master Conservation Plan, which provides a comprehensive view of the threats, opportunities and best ideas for design and implementation of long-term conservation, while integrating the political and social realities of the site and its surrounding region. At the end of the multi-year cycle, the project is equipped with a comprehensive plan and is focused on ethical conservation and broad dissemination of economic benefits to the local community.

GHF’s timely investments, global network of experts and integrated methodology work in tandem to create a cycle of sustainable preservation and community development. We save threatened sites by providing matching funding, expert guidance in the early stages of cultural asset development, and addressing many of the coordinating and funding challenges.

CONTACT

Global Heritage Fund
625 Emerson Street, Suite 200
Palo Alto, CA  94301

Tel (650) 325-7520
Fax (650) 325-7511

www.globalheritagefund.org