

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Statue receives a helping hand

Problems created by water seepage, weather corrected by four-year conservation project

By TAN YINGZI in Chongqing
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After four years of restoration, the *Thousand-Hand Goddess of Mercy* statue, which is regarded as the jewel of the Dazu Rock Carvings in Chongqing, will reopen to the public next month.

A team of heritage preservation experts inspected the work on Wednesday and announced that the project was complete.

"This repair work has tackled a series of technical challenges to preserve the cultural relic with modern scientific technologies and new materials to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the statue," said Huang Kezhong, the leader of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage Inspection Team.

The team has also suggested the local government should repair the Great Mercy Pavilion, which houses the statue, as soon as possible.

The Dazu Rock Carvings, 60 kilometers west of Chongqing, date to the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties and comprise more than 5,000 statues. They were opened to Chinese visitors in 1961 and foreign visitors in 1980.

The carvings were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999.

"They are remarkable for their aesthetic quality, their rich diversity of subject matter, secular and religious, and the light that they shed on everyday life during this period. They provide outstanding evidence of the harmonious synthesis of Buddhism, Taoism and Confu-



A team of heritage preservation experts inspect repair work on the *Thousand-Hand Goddess of Mercy* statue in Chongqing on Wednesday. Public viewing will resume on June 13. LUO GUOJIA / FOR CHINA DAILY

“ We found 34 kinds of viruses on the sculpture that have greatly damaged the historical and artistic value of the carving.”

Zhan Changfa, chief scientist of the restoration project

cianism,” the citation said.

The statue of Kwan-yin in Baoding Mountain was carved about 800 years ago during the South Song Dynasty (1127-1276), with 830 hands in an area of 88 square meters in the hillside. It is 7.7 meters tall and 12.5 meters wide, featuring color painting and gold foil. It is the largest of its kind in China.

Water seepage and weather

damage caused the statue to deteriorate, and a conservation project began in April 2011. It was listed as the top restoration project by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. The work was led by the China Cultural Heritage Protection Research Institute. Experts from Dunhuang Research Academy, the Academy of Dazu Rock Carving, Peking Universi-

ty, Tsinghua University and China University of Geosciences also participated.

Three phases

The project went through three phases from inspection, planning and the actual repair work.

The team used X-ray and 3-D laser scanning to collect information needed to effect the restoration.

"We found 34 kinds of viruses on the sculpture that have greatly damaged the historical and artistic value of the carving," said Zhan Changfa, the chief scientist of the restoration project.

They also found that 283 of the statue's 830 hands and arms were damaged. To respect the religious history, the team

consulted reference books and pictures to ensure the restoration was accurate.

The major part of the restoration involved attaching a new layer of gold foil to the statue. The original foil was between 83 percent and 92 percent gold. In some parts the statue had six layers of gold foil as a result of restoration work in the past.

An ancient technique from the Song Dynasty was applied. The gold foil was first separated from the statue, washed in pure water and alcohol before being reapplied. Once in place, it was painted with three coats of lacquer.

The statue is due to reopen to the public on June 13, which is China's Cultural Heritage Day.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Ancient shipyard used by Zheng He may lie beneath construction site

By WANG XIN and CANG WEI in Nanjing

100 tons

Experts estimate that a construction site in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, where hundreds of shipbuilding tools have been unearthed, contains the remains of a shipyard that built vessels for one of China's greatest navigators, Zheng He.

The admiral lived from 1371 to 1433.

Last year, many iron anchors, rudders and shoes made from palm fibers were dug up at Yongning Street in the city's Gulou district.

Other items found at the site include porcelain pieces, weapons and Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) coins.

Zhao Zhigang, an expert on ancient ships and deputy secretary-general of the Jiangsu Zheng He Research Institute, said the construction site's location matches a description in *The History of Longjiang Shipyard*, a book written during the Ming Dynasty.

"The hundreds of palm-fibered shoes found at the site also prove that it was a shipyard," Zhao said.

"The shoes looked and functioned like today's Crocs. Sailors and shipyard workers at the time all wore these palm-fibered shoes."

Wang Shiqing, a relics collector in Nanjing, said on Wednesday that a ship's rudder plate had been found at the site.

"It was made from mahogany imported from South-

estimated weight of a vessel of Zheng He, based on the discovery of a rudder plate

east Asia," Wang said. "Judging from its weight and height — more than 500 kg and 10 meters — it belonged to a ship weighing at least 1,000 tons."

The Longjiang Shipyard was built before the widely known Baochuan Shipyard, or Treasure Shipyard, Zhao said.

"The Longjiang Shipyard was first built during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) and grew to become the national shipbuilding center during the Ming Dynasty.

"But the Baochuan Shipyard, built in the third year of the reign of Emperor Yongle (1360-1424) to construct ships for Zheng He to explore the Indian Ocean, gradually outshined it."

From 1405 to 1433, Zheng made seven expeditions around the Indian Ocean, with some of these reaching South Asia, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

Zhao suggested that a Maritime Silk Road research institute be set up to protect maritime relics in the city.

The local cultural heritage department has sent experts to the construction site.

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