



From left: Workshop members offer tea to their tutors as a show of respect. Emma Dargere (left) and Herwann Rocrou are interviewed by reporters during a break in their work in Houji village. Sara Zuniga (left) and Herwann Rocrou convey bricks at the construction site in Dongquan village. PHOTOS BY ZHANG XIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Global volunteers rebuild ancient Shanxi

Hands-on restoration unites cultures in preserving province's historical heritage

By YUAN SHENGGAO

In early and mid-August, the Shanxi county of Pingyao welcomed a special team of cultural heritage protection volunteers to restore historical buildings in its two villages.

The team included 17 members from France, Mexico and China. They were there to attend a workshop for cultural relics repair, which, running from Aug 1-13, was organized by Shanxi International Communication Center, Shanghai Ruan Yisan Urban Heritage Foundation, and the local Pingyao Urban-Rural Integrated Development Co.

Over the 13-day period, the members, including six French, one Mexican and 10 Chinese, tried their hands at repairing a gate belonging to a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) residence in Dongquan village and the Guandi Temple in Houji village.

The repair of the Dongquan village residence gate marked the first stage of their mission.

Under the instruction of local experienced craftsmen, the members began their work by removing the ramshackle gate and adjacent wall.

The job was relatively easy. However, members learned to improve efficiency through teamwork. While some Chinese members were removing the gate components and bricks using ladders, the others lined up to convey the bricks to a designated site.

On the other side, craftsmen taught members to sort out bricks in better condition for the repair that was scheduled over the following days.

When the removal was finished, all the members sat around the pile of selected bricks, peeling off the solid mortar layers.

Fatoumata Camara, a French member, said he really enjoyed this job. "The teamwork was making things well organized," he said in Chinese.

In several days, the members completed this first phase of the mission — removing the gate and wall and rebuilding part of the structure.

With the experience gained from the first phase, they started the second phase of their job — renovating the Guandi Temple in Houji village — with greater skills.

Indeed, this phase called for higher-level skills, said Herwann Rocrou, a French member of the team.

"We needed to lay wall bricks and pave roof tiles," he explained. "These are essential for an experienced mason but quite challenging for a learner."

He said carefully watching the local masons' demonstration and repeatedly practicing are key to fulfilling the job.

He said they have learned some fundamentals in plastering and walling.



Workshop members take a group photo with tutors and organizers at the opening ceremony of the event on Aug 1.

"When plastering, the hardest thing is to control the thickness of mortar," Rocrou said. "Too much mortar makes the brick layers uneven and too little makes the wall unstable."

When talking about walling, Rocrou said alignment is another challenge, even with the use of level gauges and plumb bobs.

He later said repeated practice is crucial to tackle the challenges. "After days of practice, I felt I've grasped some skills," Rocrou said. "Now I can build walls according to requirements."

The 23-year-old is a student of archaeology. He said he has been aspiring to repair cultural relics in China for a long time.

"Over the 13 days, I've learned a lot of things — not only masonry but also woodworking and firing bricks and tiles," Rocrou said. "I hope to stay in China for a longer time, to learn to repair cultural relics from the master craftsmen here."

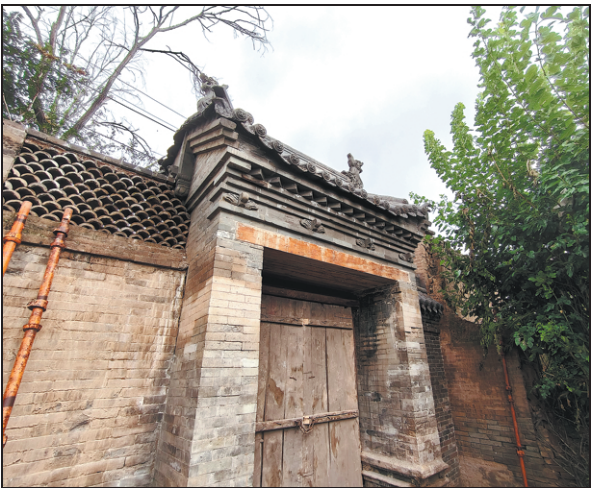
Opportunity to network

Many members of the team said the 13 days had offered a great opportunity to communicate, network and cooperate with people from different cultures.

Aurore Franche, who is the head of the team's French members, showed a picture of people sitting in a row removing solid mortar from the bricks.

"I like the picture very much," Franche said. "We are here doing the same thing, despite our different cultural backgrounds and languages."

He added that the enthusiasm for protecting cultural heritage is the thing that brings them together and



The renovated gate to a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) residence in Dongquan village.

the experience here in Shanxi will be a precious asset in life.

Sara Zuniga from Mexico said this is a great chance for people to learn from each other.

"I've learned a lot of things from our colleagues, who are mostly students of archaeology," Zuniga said. "I'm especially grateful to our Chinese colleagues, who taught me the Chinese language and knowledge about Chinese history."

"I want to bring home all the things I learned here, which should be a useful experience for protecting the cultural relics in Mexico."

Emma Dargere, a student from ENSA Paris-Belleville, a leading architecture college in France, was

unanimously recognized by the Chinese craftsmen as the best learner in walling.

"Many thanks to our Chinese tutors," Dargere said. "We've got the best skills training here."

She added that what impressed her the most is that the tutors used a human-centered approach to training. "They taught us how to get along with each other and the importance of sharing."

Different cultures and ideas were colliding and coalescing during the 13 days.

When proposing a plan for a certain renovation project, the French members insisted on building a model before drawing out a blueprint,

while the Chinese members had a totally different idea.

After an hour of intense discussion, they agreed to draw out a blueprint with precisely marked sizes and specifications and then build a model with structural details.

Dargere noticed the difference in wooden structuring in the practices in China and France.

"We noticed that wooden structures are mostly 'dovetailed' with the use of components like *dougong* brackets," she said. "While in France, the wooden structures are mostly 'fixed' with nails and bolts."

The 13 days had also fostered friendship and attachment among team members.

When the event drew to an end, Chinese member Li Zhaoyi was given an unexpected birthday party.

"They got to know my birthday by reading the list of team members' information," Li said. "After the conclusion of a day's work, I was given a big birthday party at our work site, with cake, barbecue, songs, dances and best wishes."

Cultural treasure trove

Shanxi province was chosen as the site for the relics repair workshop because of its rich resources in cultural heritage.

With a recorded history of more than 5,000 years, Shanxi is one of the cradles of Chinese civilization.

The province is a treasure trove of ancient Chinese architecture. It has 531 nationally protected sites for cultural relics — mostly ancient buildings — ranking it top in the country. The Yungang Grottoes in Datong, Pingyao Ancient City in Jinzhong, and Mount Wutai in Xinzhou have

been inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Cultural Heritage Sites. It is said that Shanxi is home to more than 70 percent of China's well-preserved buildings built before the Song (960-1279) and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties.

In addition, there are a total of 28,027 old buildings scattered throughout the province. Compared with the nationally or provincially protected sites, how to protect these lesser-known ancient buildings is a pressing challenge because of the lack of attention and funding, according to organizers of the workshop.

Shanxi International Communication Center, a leading institution in Shanxi for cultural communication and exchange, recently addressed this concern.

It began collaborating with Shanghai Ruan Yisan Urban Heritage Foundation in 2023 to hold an international workshop to engage global cultural heritage enthusiasts in the protection of these lesser-known ancient buildings in Shanxi.

The Shanghai-based foundation, founded by renowned ancient architecture researcher Ruan Yisan, began to strengthen its presence in Shanxi by establishing a volunteers' workshop for ancient buildings protection in Pingyao county in 2010. The workshop started recruiting international volunteers three years ago.

"Our aim for this international workshop is to increase the awareness of protecting lesser-known cultural relics in Shanxi and across the world," said Ding Feng, secretary-general of the foundation.

The two villages covered by this workshop session, Dongquan and Houji, are typical cases of how to address the challenges facing the lesser-known cultural relics.

Dongquan, for instance, has more than 400 ancient courtyards and more than 10 ancient castles.

However, most of the courtyards and castles are on the verge of dilapidation because they are no longer inhabited, according to Shao Shuai, a craftsman in charge of repair at the workshop.

"The residences we are repairing are facing such problems as the collapse of main structures and foundation subsidence," Shao said. "They can easily disappear if no renovation takes place immediately."

The craftsman said that this workshop is to garner adequate awareness of protecting lesser-known ancient buildings through media communication.

The experience of the volunteers has been shared with the world via Shanxi International Communication Center's media network and other social media channels.

The participants in the workshop, for instance, also used their own accounts on social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, YouTube, X and Facebook to report their stories in Shanxi.

Zhang Xin contributed to this story.



From left: Workshop members line up to convey bricks at the renovation site in Dongquan village. Members peel off the solid mortar layers on bricks to be used in rebuilding walls in Dongquan.