

"Great Wall" of water transport takes on new look

www.chinaview.cn 2006-06-10 09:12:18



BEIJING, June 10 -- The sun slips beneath the horizon, its fiery red glow fading into a soft pink haze. On both sides of a waterway, ancient houses and modern buildings stand side by side, their dark contours bathed in shadow.

The Gongchen Bridge arches overhead while the water beneath flows serenely along its course. Sunset on the Grand Canal.

After more than 700 years as a lifeline to the Chinese people, transporting grain from the Yangtze River Delta to the north and the soldiers defending its territory, the Grand Canal seems to play the role as an integrator of a proud nation's history and culture.

What the Great Wall represents as an architectural fortress of China, the Grand Canal represents as a means of transport.

Only recently has business gradually abated. And now some Chinese scholars are calling for the 1,800-kilometre canal to be honoured as a national heritage site under government protection, just like the Great Wall.

At least 16 cities lie along its banks, but it is Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province in the east, that has done the most work to protect this man-made river.

History

The idea of a waterway to cut across the Chinese mainland sprouted in the late Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), when Fu Chai, duke of Wu (today's Suzhou), travelled north to conquer other kingdoms. He ordered a canal to be constructed, called Han Gou, to transport soldiers.

The canal was first cut near Yangzhou, Jiangsu, to guide the waters of the Yangtze River to the north.

It was lengthened during the Sui Dynasty (AD 581-618) and then again during the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), to become the Grand Canal. It eventually connected five river systems those of the Haihe River (in Tianjin Municipality and Hebei Province in the north), the Yellow River, the Huaihe River (in Central China), the Qiantang River (in Zhejiang Province in the east) and the Yangtze River.

During the Yuan, Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the Grand Canal served as the main artery between northern and southern China and was

essential for the transport of grain to Beijing, said Yu Kongjian, director of Peking University's Institute of Landscape Design.

"Although it was mainly used for shipping grain, the waterway also transported other commodities," he said.

"The area around the Grand Canal eventually developed into an important business belt."

Records show that every year more than 8,000 boats transported 4 to 6 million dan, a unit of weight used in ancient times, of grain to Beijing.

The convenience of transport also enabled the rulers to lead inspection tours to southern China. In the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Kangxi and Qianlong made 12 trips to the south, on all occasions but once reaching the south terminus in Hangzhou.

Many cities found fame because of the Grand Canal. As one of the most important port cities at that time, Yangzhou enjoyed unparalleled prosperity and fame. Many stories and legends are set against it. The hero of "The Dream of the Red Chamber," Jia Baoyu, became a monk in Yangzhou. Dushi Niang, a famous courtesan drowned herself there.

The Grand Canal also bridged the cultural exchanges between the north and south. "Many significant historical events, beliefs, intellectual trends, important works of art, and folk traditions have direct and concrete links with the waterway," Yu said.

The canal even made a distinct impression on some of China's early European visitors. Marco Polo recounted the Grand Canal's arched bridges as well as the warehouses and the prosperous trade in the 13th century. The famous Roman Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci travelled from Nanjing to Beijing on the canal at the end of 16th century.

But by the mid-19th century, the development of maritime transport and the opening of the Tianjin-Pukou and Beijing-Hankou railways reduced the canal's role greatly. Many of its sections fell into disrepair, and some parts became choked with mud.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the need for economic development led the authorities to order heavy reconstruction work on the Grand Canal.

Restoration: past and present

Even so, it was not until the 1990s that work to restore the canal to any sort of useable condition began, and the first issue had to be addressed was pollution.

"We started to tackle the canal's water quality problem in 1993," said Zheng Hanxian, executive deputy director of the Hangzhou Grand Canal Administration

Group.

"Before the 1990s, the water smelled terrible, but after eight years of hard work, we have managed to make the water very clear."

One encouraging sign is that fish, which had long since disappeared, can once again be found in the canal. Many local people have started fishing on the canal's banks to pass the time on weekends.

The landscape became the next focus. Starting in 2000, the Hangzhou government took steps to improve the terrain around the canal's edges.

"We have placed a great deal of importance on the protection of the ancient structures, and on the reconstruction of the old Grand Canal areas," Zheng said. "We are starting to put more emphasis on comprehensive renovation.

"The banks were covered with old pieces of slate that we had gathered from villages and households along the canal."

The slate will be used to cover 11 kilometres of single-lane roads that run along the banks of the Grand Canal, and Zheng said proudly: "We have finished 9 kilometres already."

The use of slate instead of cement for that stretch of road will help revive some of the traditional atmosphere in this area. "This is part of our efforts to return the landscape to its original state," Zheng said.

Further efforts to revive the canal stalled, though, as disagreements cropped up in Hangzhou over what should be done next. Finally, on May 24, more than 40 experts and 200 members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) reached an agreement in the Hangzhou Announcement to both spell out the measures to be carried out in protecting the Grand Canal and to introduce a plan to have the canal listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"As our society continues its economic development, the Grand Canal's traditional role as a shipping lane and a mode of transport has changed," the report said. "The riverbed and the people and landscapes along the banks have undergone profound changes.

"At present, we are faced with difficult challenges posed by the modernization of the urban areas, and the urbanization of the countryside. We have already reached a critical juncture in both the rescue and the protection of the Grand Canal and the promotion of its sustainable development."

Other cities along the canal have also started to become involved in the preservation. The famous Four Pagodas on the Grand Canal are all still standing today. The Liuhe Pagoda in Hangzhou, the Wenfeng Pagoda in Yangzhou, the Sheli

Pagoda in Linqing and the Randeng Pagoda in Tongzhou all used to serve either as beacon towers at important ports or as places of worship.

Stone bridges more than hundreds of years old, ancient steles and old building structures can still be found in many places along the canal, as well.

Refreshing their memories

Although measures have been taken to give the canal and the scenery along its banks a facelift, the bustle, excitement and customs that defined the canal's golden years will never return.

But Zhao Shiquan, a painter and retired official in Tianjin who has lived by the Grand Canal since childhood, decided to recreate history with his brush and has painted scenes from those prosperous years for people to enjoy.

"The landscape of the Tianjin section of the Grand Canal is unique," Zhao said. "It has grain stores, government houses, and temples devoted to the gods of fire and earth. Barges and boats used to stop here at the dock."

It was there that grain from the south was transferred from boats to barges, which would then complete the journey to Beijing.

The "Beicang Landscape," a 11.6- metre-long painting, took Zhao two years to finish. To make sure that the historical details of his painting were portrayed correctly, he said he spent an enormous amount of time poring through a variety of historical books and records.

"Many old buildings and structures were torn down at the beginning of the 20th century," Zhao said. "I had to search through photographs and written descriptions in order to make sure I had not missed anything important."

But more work is to be done. Some sections of the Grand Canal have already dried up. Many cultural artifacts located near the canal have been abandoned or ignored.

The Grand Canal Museum, located near the Gongchen Bridge, is the first museum totally devoted to the canal. It is scheduled to open at the end of this month.

Zhao Shuhua, chairman of Gongshu District's CPPCC, said he hopes the opening of the museum will provide people with more opportunities to learn about the past, present and future of the Grand Canal.

"I believe that if people are better informed about the Grand Canal, they will do more to help us protect the waterway," he said. "It is too much a part of cultural and historical heritage for us to just let it slide into disrepair."

(Source: China Daily)

