

4. Adopting information technology. An information center under the SEAC has been set up for the protection and preservation of ancient ethnic minority classics by using digital technology. The National Classification Standards for Languages and Ancient Classics of Ethnic Minorities provides the basis for the classification, protection and scientific management of minority classics.

Major Achievements

As a result of the efforts, a large number of endangered ancient classics have been salvaged. Scientific treatment and preservation techniques have been applied to books damaged by worms and to those whose paper is deteriorating. The classics range widely: from records kept by knots and oral materials in the form of storytelling and ballad singing to inscriptions on tablets and stones; from scriptures written on silk, patra leaves, and bamboo and wooden slips to loose-leaf and tread-bound books; from writings on Confucian classics, history, philosophy and belles-lettres to books on astronomy, geography and medicine; from scripts in the extinct Tangut language of the Western Xia Dynasty (1038-1227) and the Chagatai language (an extinct Turkic language) to ancient books in extant minority languages.

Data as yet incomplete indicates that ancient minority books salvaged and classified in recent years number 10 million titles (excluding collections in museums or temples), of which 5,000 titles have been

published. A couple of hundred titles have won prizes such as the National Book Award.

It is a major part of the efforts to compile and publish the General Catalogue & Synopses of Ancient Chinese Ethnic Minority Classics. Documenting the country's achievements in the salvaging, collection, classification, translation, publication and research of minority classics over the past 30 years, the General Catalogue & Synopses includes written texts, tablet inscriptions, and oral materials in languages of the 55 surviving ethnic groups and in extinct minority languages.

Comprising 60 volumes, this set of books is structured according to ethnic groups, covering 300,000 titles of classics. The project was launched by the SEAC in 1997, and was listed in the Outline of the 11th Five-year Plan for National Cultural Development in August 2006. Currently, 28 volumes, such as that of the Naxi ethnic group, have been published, containing about 60,000 titles of classics.

Aiming to sort out ancient scripts and oral materials of various ethnic groups, this project will serve as a repository of precious cultural heritage for China, and fill a gap in the history of Chinese culture. It will provide detailed and accurate materials on ancient ethnic minorities for research in the humanities and natural sciences throughout the world.



THE ANCIENT CLASSICS OF CHINA'S ETHNIC MINORITIES



The ancient classics of the ethnic minorities comprise the ancient documents and records, oral materials and tablet inscriptions of China's 55 surviving ethnic minorities and those which have died out. They represent not only the crystallization of wisdom and creativity of the Chinese nation, but also a precious source of cultural heritage for mankind as a whole. The Chinese government attaches great importance to their preservation. For this purpose it has set up special institutions, created specific policies, and trained a multitude of people, all of which has made an outstanding contribution to the protection, salvaging, collection, classification, translation, publication and research of ancient ethnic minority texts.

About the Ancient Classics

The ancient classics of the ethnic minorities cover a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, philosophy, law, history, religion, military affairs, literature, art, language, geography, astronomy and medicine. They can be divided into two categories: written texts and oral materials. The former falls into three sub-categories: (1) historical

documents and records written in extinct ancient characters or extant languages of the ethnic minorities; (2) historical documents and records written in Chinese concerning the ethnic minorities; (3) ancient tablet inscriptions related to the ethnic minorities written in minority languages or Chinese. The latter refers to materials of historical and cultural value that have been handed on by word of mouth.

These ancient classics provide vivid and accurate records of the development of ethnic minorities, documenting their ways of thinking and moral values. Providing practical knowledge of the means of managing community affairs, they have circulated for long ages. They are gems of human civilization. As non-renewable cultural heritage they are especially important. Intensified efforts to preserve the ancient classics of ethnic minorities will benefit both current and future generations: perpetuating minority cultures, strengthening cohesion among different ethnic groups, promoting the spirit of the Chinese nation, and safeguarding national unity.

Measures to Salvage the Ancient Classics

Since the early years of New China, the government has enacted measures to protect the ancient classics of the ethnic minorities. In the 1950s, a nationwide survey was carried out on the histories and languages of the ethnic minorities. During this period, a large number of rare ancient classics were found and collected, laying a solid foundation

for future work. Since China adopted reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the state has directed greater attention to the preservation work, initiating a golden age of activity in relation to ancient ethnic minority classics.

1. Setting up special institutions. In July 1984, a national leading group and office for collecting and publishing the ancient classics of the ethnic minorities was established by the state. In 1989, the office was placed under the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) to be responsible for organizing, coordinating and directing relevant work on ancient ethnic minority classics. Currently, 28 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, and 130 autonomous prefectures and leagues (counties) have established institutions for the same purpose. Concurrently, trans-provincial and trans-regional cooperative organizations have been set up for 14 ethnic minorities. These institutions guarantee the orderly progress of the work of ancient ethnic-minority classics.

2. Defining specific policies. Relevant policies and regulations stipulate that the state makes collecting and publication of ancient classics of the ethnic minorities a major part of the promotion and development of traditional ethnic minority cultures and that governments at higher levels support the protection and salvaging of intangible cultural heritage and such tangible cultural heritage as scenic spots, historical sites and cultural relics, and support the collection, classification, and publication

of these ancient classics. The Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out that "we will explore and better protect the cultures of all ethnic groups, attach great importance to the protection of cultural relics and intangible cultural heritage, and do a good job collating ancient books and records." Since 1986, a plan for the publication of key projects on ancient ethnic-minority classics has been drawn up and implemented, providing an effective driver to the overall development of this undertaking.

3. Training specialized personnel. The state has implemented the policies on minority intellectuals by enhancing the social status of prestigious folk artists and of trustees of ancient classics, such as the Dongba of the Naxi ethnic group and the Bimo of the Yi ethnic group, improving their living and working conditions, and supporting their efforts in protecting and preserving the classics. Special courses on minority classics have been opened at ethnic colleges, in addition to relevant training, to develop high quality personnel. The SEAC has set up a base for personnel training on and scientific research into minority classics and documents. A multi-layer and multi-channel personnel training mode and a mechanism for creating a reserve of talent are in place to solicit and encourage social forces and research scholars to support work on ancient minority classics. Currently, there are over 5,000 people working full-time and part-time on ancient minority classics, constituting a structured team of quality professionals.

