

A Fine Example

By ZHANG ZHIPING

After 10 years of bidding, *Tulou*, the unique residential architecture in southeast China's coastal province of Fujian, has finally made it onto the World Heritage List. This success makes it easier and smoother to protect the centuries-old houses and maintain the ancient civilization of the Hakka people, of which they are an integral part.

There are around 23,000 *Tulous* in Fujian. The unique Chinese rammed earth buildings come in various shapes and are both a living and working environment. When the gate is shut, a *Tulou* becomes a solid fort to defend against enemy invasion. The 46 *Tulous* that have been listed as world heritage sites are just a fraction of the total number that dot Fujian's mountains. They represent the highest level of *Tulou* architecture and the majority remain occupied.

In this respect, *Tulou* differs from many world heritage sites around the globe. It is not just a tourist site or an example of unique architecture; it also remains a living piece of cultural history.

According to the World Heritage Committee, the *Tulous* on its protection list are "exceptional examples of a building tradition and function exemplifying a particular type of communal living and defensive organization, and, in terms of their harmonious relationship with their environment, an outstanding example of human settlement."

The local government has developed a plan to preserve *Tulou*, which includes banning new construction work around them, limiting the construction of concrete roads in their vicinity, encouraging the building of cobbled roads and educating young people about the importance of *Tulou*.

Fujian is expanding its highway networks to link all *Tulou* heritage sites in an effort to encourage tourist traffic. Other preferential policies designed to aid *Tulou* residents include discounted electricity prices.

Families that had moved out of their *Tulou* homes to find work in other parts of China are returning to make a living from the tourist trade and this is helping to preserve *Tulou* communities.

The success in getting *Tulou* added to the World Heritage List is an affirmation of China's efforts to protect its cultural and natural heritage, as well as a starting point for further work.

In an era when economic boom threatens many historical and natural sites, Fujian's *Tulou* serves as an example of what can be done. ■