

IN FOCUS: CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION
STRENGTHENS UNITY P.14

FEATURES: HOW ONE KAZAK LEADER
CULTIVATES VILLAGE GROWTH P.46

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Guarding the Roots of Culture

By Yan Wei

Across the vast deserts and mountains of Xinjiang, ruins and relics whisper stories of ancient exchange and enduring identity. In this region, long a meeting point of civilizations, preserving cultural heritage has become both a technological mission and a civic one: a way to protect not just artifacts, but symbols of the continuity of civilization.

According to the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Cultural Heritage Bureau, the region's cultural treasures now include six World Cultural Heritage sites, over 9,500 immovable relics and roughly 450,000 movable artifacts. Together, they form an expansive archive of China's past, bearing witness to centuries of trade, migration and cultural fusion along the Silk Road. They are both regional and national—expressions of Xinjiang's history and evidence of integration within China's diverse civilization.

At the institutional level, Xinjiang's heritage governance balances central guidance with local responsibility. The message is clear: Preservation always comes first. From the 2007 adoption of regional measures to ensure the implementation of the Law on Cultural Relics Protection to Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture enacting regulations last year to protect the ruins of Beiting Ancient City, a full-fledged legal framework is taking shape. The ancient city was home to the Grand Beiting Frontier Command, one of the two frontier commands the Tang Dynasty (618-907) established to administer Xinjiang, then known as the Western Regions.

Three rounds of national surveys have enabled Xinjiang to gain a clearer picture of its heritage assets. The ongoing fourth survey, starting in November 2023 and scheduled to conclude this June, has uncovered more than 2,500 potential new items to date.

The manpower devoted to cultural heritage protection has also expanded. Since the creation of the first relic management committee in 1958, Xinjiang's conservation corps has evolved to an extensive network including a regional bureau plus 14 prefectural-level bureaus, employing more than 900 profession-

als. Public funding has risen in parallel. Since 2017, almost 1,000 field custodians have received regular stipends to monitor remote heritage sites, a recognition that this effort depends as much on people as on policy.

The results are visible. Since 2012, Xinjiang has carried out more than 1,000 projects involving structural restoration and facility construction at cultural heritage sites such as the Yili (Ili) Commandery, the headquarters of the Yili general, the highest military and administrative official in Xinjiang in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and the ancient city of Loulan, which dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Since 2021, it has completed 18 conservation and restoration projects for movable relics, including excavated manuscripts and textiles, restoring over 7,200 artifacts.

Notably, a digital transformation is underway. For instance, around 2,000 artifacts at the Tulufan (Turpan) Museum are being digitalized using three-dimensional imaging technology so that they can be permanently preserved and displayed. Heritage should not be sealed off behind walls of reverence, but integrated into education, tourism and cultural development.

The importance of this work extends beyond heritage. Archaeological discoveries across Xinjiang chronicle communication and coexistence among many of China's ethnic groups. Objects unearthed speak of synthesis, a testament to the fact that Xinjiang has always been an integral part of the Chinese nation. Each restored monument and deciphered inscription reinforces the truth that unity in diversity has long been essential to the strength of this time-honored civilization.

Xinjiang's evolving model of cultural heritage protection underscores the need to preserve artifacts for identity. Cultural preservation, at its core, is an act of confidence, confidence in the idea that history can inspire a shared sense of belonging. Guarding the roots of culture is not nostalgia for a vanished past. It is an investment in resilience—a belief that a civilization renews itself through memory. **XT**

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*Xinjiang:
Beyond Imagination*

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Cover Photo: Tourists on the slopes in Altay Prefecture (COURTESY PHOTO)

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The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Reclamation Museum is a window to learn about the history of the region and the people behind its remarkable transformation

For those interested in the remarkable development of Xinjiang, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Reclamation Museum is a must-visit. This premier national tourist attraction in the city of Shihezi in north Xinjiang is a vital institution for preserving, studying and showcasing the history of the Corps.

The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) has played a major role in Xinjiang's transformation. It was founded in 1954 with the mission of guarding and cultivating the frontier. Its early members were primarily demobilized military personnel, who were later joined by professionals including technicians. Together with local residents, they established farms, enterprises, towns and cities, driving social progress across the region.

The museum, following several rounds of expansion and renovation, today spans over 9,700 square meters and houses more than 20,000 items. These treasured collections bear witness to the XPCC members' extraordinary efforts in transforming the desolate Gobi Desert into productive farmland.

(Text and photos by Wang Yajuan)



SNAPSHOTS

WINDOW TO A LEGACY



SNAPSHOTS





Recreation of an XPC worker's home in the 1980s

SNAPSHOTS





1	2
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1. A “shared bridal chamber.” The pioneers who built Xinjiang lived in poor conditions with few facilities. Every new couple therefore was allowed to stay in this relatively “luxurious” bridal chamber on their wedding night

2. A reclamation scene recreated based on a photo. It shows soldiers plowing the wasteland manually in March 1950 to make it arable

3. Kantuman, a traditional iron farming tool in Xinjiang, used for digging the soil and excavating ditches. It was an important tool for agriculture in the early 1950s

4. A military coat with 296 patches, donated by an XPCC member. It testifies to the hardship and deprivations endured by the members who contributed their savings to building industries in Xinjiang

FACTS & FIGURES

Cultural Heritage

9,542

The number of immovable cultural relics, such as ancient cultural sites and historic tombs and buildings, across Xinjiang

450,000 pieces (sets)

The number of movable relics, such as artworks, manuscripts and books, housed in museums and other cultural heritage institutions across Xinjiang

World Cultural Heritage Sites

Ruins of the ancient cities of Jiaohe, Beiting and Gaochang, along with the Kizil Caves, Subash Buddhist Ruins and the Kizilgaha Beacon Tower, are part of the Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor. This transnational cultural heritage property, jointly nominated by China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014.

Jiaohe and Beiting Ancient Cities

The Jiaohe Ancient City in Tulufan (Turpan) City once served as the seat of the Grand Anxi Frontier Command. The Beiting Ancient City in Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture housed the Grand Beiting Frontier Command. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), these two frontier



commands functioned as the highest military and administrative bodies in what was then known as the Western Regions, governing areas south and north of the Tianshan Mountains respectively.

Gaochang Ancient City

The Gaochang Ancient City, situated in the Tulufan Basin, was a major entrepôt from the first century B.C. to the 14th century. Its urban layout was modeled upon that of the Tang Dynasty capital Chang'an (present-day Xi'an, Shaanxi Province).

Kizil Caves

Located in Baicheng County, Aksu Prefecture, the Kizil Caves are among the earliest Buddhist cave complexes in China, with origins dating back to the third century.

Kizilgaha Beacon Tower

Standing in Kuche (Kuqa or Kucha) City, Aksu Prefecture, this beacon tower dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Having withstood more than two millennia of weathering, it remains the best-preserved and oldest beacon tower in Xinjiang. Such towers formed part of the ancient military communication system, transmitting signals by smoke and fire.

Subash Buddhist Ruins

Located in the north of Kuche, the Subash Buddhist Ruins were once a major center of Buddhism, flourishing from the Jin Dynasty (265-420) to the Tang Dynasty. Renowned Buddhist figures, including Xuanzang and Kumarajiva, lectured and expounded Buddhist teachings here.

(Compiled by Xinjiang Today)



(Left) Visitors at the Kizilgaha Beacon Tower in Kuche (Kuqa or Kucha), Aksu Prefecture, in August 2024 (VCG)

The Gaochang Ancient City Ruins in Tulufan (Turpan) City in October 2025 (VCG)

IN FOCUS

PRESERVING A RICH HISTORY

Xinjiang protects ancient heritage through archaeology, technology and the law *By Zhang Yage*

X

Xinjiang is home to one of China's most extensive and diverse collections of cultural heritage. Across this vast region, spanning deserts, mountains and grasslands, lie over 9,500 immovable cultural relic sites, including six World Heritage locations and 133 major historical and cultural sites protected at the national level.

Protecting these sites has never been easy. The region's size alone makes comprehensive monitoring difficult. Many sites are remote, accessible only by days of travel across difficult terrain. Natural forces take a constant toll: Wind and rain slowly erode exposed walls, temperature fluctuations crack murals, and shifting riverbeds threaten cave complexes. Human activities such as illegal construction, livestock grazing and industrial pollution add another layer of pressure on protected zones.

For years, the gap between the scale of these problems and

the tools available to address them seemed insurmountable. Manual inspection could only cover a fraction of the territory. When damage occurred, prosecutors and heritage protection officials often lacked the precise data needed to prove liability or justify intervention.

That situation is now changing. Over the past five years, Xinjiang has emerged as a testing ground for new approaches to heritage preservation—approaches that combine cutting-edge technology with novel legal mechanisms and cross-agency collaboration. At the same time, a series of major archaeological discoveries has reshaped scholarly understanding of the region's place in Chinese history. Together, these developments are rewriting both the story of Xinjiang's past and the methods used to safeguard it for the future.

"Xinjiang has been a vital meeting point of Eastern and Western civilizations since ancient times. Protecting and presenting its cultural heritage demands multidisciplinary collaboration and the application of modern technology. We must also interpret the cultural and historical significance of archaeological findings from multiple perspectives and with greater depth. This is not only a pressing need of our time but also the future of heritage preservation," Song Xinchao, Chairman of the Chinese National Committee for the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS China), said at the Symposium on Innovative Development Strategies for Cultural Heritage under the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), held in Shaya County, Aksu Prefecture, last November.

A window into history

Discoveries made at Badamu Cemetery are among the most significant archaeological findings made in Xinjiang. Nestled in the Tulufan (Turpan) Depression, the cemetery is the final resting place of many Tang Dynasty (618-907) officials who administered this far western territory more than 1,200 years ago.

Since 2022, a team from the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural



A rooster-headed human-bodied figurine from the Tulufan (Turpan) Museum on display at the Hunan Museum, Changsha, Hunan Province, in January 2025 (XINHUA)

Relics and Archaeology, working with partner institutions, has excavated 27 tombs dating to the Jin (265–420) and Tang dynasties. Among them, three stand out. The tombs of officials Cheng Huan, Li Chonghui and Yin Gong have yielded inscribed epitaphs that read like chapters of a forgotten history book.

Cheng’s epitaph records his service as deputy commander of the Grand Beiting Frontier Command, a high-level military post in what is today’s Jimusaer (Jimsar) County. Li Chonghui served as a senior official in the Western Prefecture, located in modern Tulufan. Yin, buried in a single-chamber brick tomb of a type reserved for high-ranking Tang officials, held the title of deputy commander of the Grand Anxi Frontier Command, an outpost established by the Tang Dynasty to govern the region.

“These three tombs all date to the mid-to-late Tang period, a time of upheaval following the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), a devastating civil war that weakened the Tang Dynasty,” Li Wenying, Deputy Director of the Qiuci Academy in Xinjiang, told newspaper *China Culture Daily*. “Yet here we have centrally appointed officials, completely unknown from historical texts, serving out their careers and being buried in the land they administered. It is direct, physical evidence that the Tang court’s

governing institutions continued to function in the then-called ‘Western Regions,’ even in times of turmoil.”

The tomb of Yin, discovered in 2025 during the fifth excavation campaign at the Friendship Road Cemetery in Kuche (Kuqa), another key site about 700 km southwest of the Badamu cemetery, is particularly important. Buried in the eighth year of the Zhenyuan era (792), Yin died at a moment when the Tang’s grip on the region was supposedly weakening. Yet his tomb followed central Chinese burial customs to the letter, with bronze coins placed in his mouth, a layout mirroring metropolitan Tang tombs and a ceramic figurine army to accompany him into the afterlife.

“Seeing this epitaph moved me greatly,” Rong Xinjiang, a professor in the history department at Peking University, said while addressing a meeting on the 2025 Xinjiang Archaeology Work Report, held on February 8 in Beijing. “It records Yin’s mission to the Abbasid Caliphate (stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan from 750 to 1258) on behalf of the Tang court. We knew the court had sent diplomats by sea, but here is evidence that officials stationed in the west also traveled the land routes, maintaining connections that spanned the Eurasian continent.”

The tomb also contained coins from Byzantium and ▶

Sassanian Persia, alongside ceramics showing Hellenistic influences. “These finds testify to the dual identity of these frontier communities,” said Guo Wu, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). “They were administratively and culturally part of the Tang, while simultaneously engaged in vibrant exchange with Eurasia.”

Across Xinjiang, a string of major archaeological campaigns is strengthening people’s cultural confidence and earning national recognition.

The Husta site in Wenquan County, nestled in the west Tianshan Mountains, is a sprawling Bronze Age settlement dating back to around 1600 B.C. In its eastern cemetery, however, archaeologists uncovered an unusually large tomb dating back to between 2800 and 2600 B.C., 1,200 years older than the main settlement and featuring burial customs distinct from the later Bronze Age culture that defined the region and is among the oldest of its kind ever found in Xinjiang.

“The discovery proves that even in the Bronze Age, the cultural landscape of the Bortala River valley was far from uniform,” Wang Peng, an associate researcher with the CASS, told newspaper *Xinjiang Daily*. “These early burials may hold the key to tracing the origins of other important archaeological cultures across the Eurasian steppe.”

Then there is Tulufan’s Xipang Jingjiao monastery site, an example of the region’s religious diversity. First established around the mid-eighth century, the site has yielded over 1,300 documents in multiple languages, including Chinese and Syriac, alongside well-preserved murals and organic remains.

“What we’ve found here is remarkable,” Liu Wensuo, a professor at Sun Yat-sen University, told China News Service. “Over 1,300 ancient manuscripts in seven or eight different scripts—Syriac, Arabic, Persian, and more—all coexist at a single site. It paints a vivid picture of how multiple religions and cultures lived side by side along the Silk Road.” The monastery’s architecture also reveals unmistakable influences from the central part of China: Interlocking *dougong* wooden



A wooden coffin front panel painted with a Vermilion Bird motif, unearthed from the Badamu Cemetery, at the laboratory of the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing in February (XINHUA)

*Over 1,300
ancient manu-
scripts in seven
or eight different
scripts—Syriac,
Arabic, Persian,
and more—all
coexist at a single
site*

brackets, a quintessential feature of traditional Chinese construction, have been identified among the ruins.

Further east, in Hami’s Yiwu County, the Jianjiaopo Cemetery tells a different story, one of nomadic splendor and ritual sacrifice. This high-status burial ground from the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) has yielded over 200 horses interred alongside their owners, their bodies adorned with gold and bronze ornaments.

“The horses closest to the main tomb are unadorned, likely intended as food offerings,” Xi Tongyuan, a professor at Northwest University in Lanzhou of Gansu Province, told China Media Group. “But the others are covered in glittering gold decorations. It’s a

striking display of wealth and power.” DNA and stable isotope analyses are now underway to trace the origins of these animals, offering potential clues about ancient exchange networks along the early Silk Road.

Accolades have followed these discoveries. In February, both the Badamu Cemetery and the Husta site were named among China’s top six archaeological discoveries of 2025 by the CASS. The following month, the two sites, along with the monastery in Xipang, were shortlisted for China’s prestigious Top 10 New Archaeological Discoveries of 2025.

Alongside its discoveries, Xinjiang’s museum sector is also earning national acclaim. At the 22nd National Top 10 Museum Exhibitions awards, granted on International Museum Day in May 2025, the permanent exhibition of the Qiuci Wei-Jin Ancient Tomb Site Museum in Kuche, a museum built directly atop the Friendship Road Cemetery where the Yin Gong tomb was found, received a Special Award. The exhibition uses glass walls and multimedia displays to let visitors peer directly into 15 ancient brick-chamber tombs, combining on-site preservation with public engagement.

Meanwhile, in a landmark moment for Xinjiang’s cultural creativity industry, the Five Stars Rising in the East cultural and creative product line, inspired by the pattern of stars on a legendary Han Dynasty brocade arm guard unearthed from Niya, won a Gold Award at the 18th IAI Design Awards in March, the first time a cultural product from a museum in Xinjiang has received international design recognition.

A hard environment

Xinjiang’s geography and environment create novel challenges for those concerned with the preservation of immovable relics. With cultural heritage sites widely dispersed across remote and environmentally complex areas, in the past, it was difficult to carry out regular manual inspections, so key data, such as crack widths and pollution spread, was recorded only roughly. This led to insufficient precision in evidence collection and poorly targeted protection measures.

In 2020, the People’s Procuratorate of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region launched a year-long special supervision campaign titled Protection of Cultural Relics and Historic Sites across the region.

During this campaign, prosecutors discovered significant risks to both the cave structures and murals at the Kumutula Grottoes in Kuche due to two main factors. First, the downstream hub on the Weigan River had been impounding floodwaters and causing sediment buildup, which raised the riverbed and water levels in front of a major grotto cluster. Industrial pollution from nearby coking plants added a chemical assault to this physical threat.

The prosecutors deployed a three-pronged technological ar-

senal: satellite remote sensing to track pollution plumes, drones to model cave cracks, and 3D imaging to digitally document the damage for use as evidence. They also brought in more human resources to tackle pollution problems.

“We had experts pointing at the murals and explaining the damage, and talking about preservation while looking right at the cracks. This kind of on-site work was more effective than issuing prosecutorial recommendations,” Song Xiaoling, Director of the Sixth Prosecution Department at the Aksu branch of the People’s Procuratorate of Xinjiang, told *Guangming Daily*.

In the end, water conservancy authorities and cultural heritage experts jointly developed a solution that included establishing a safe water level and conducting consultations during the flood season. At the same time, the culture and tourism bureau pushed for the coking plant to halt operations and relocate.

A national framework

In June 2023, the High People’s Court of Xinjiang and the Xinjiang Cultural Heritage Administration signed an agreement on judicial protection cooperation, creating five major mechanisms for information sharing, collaborative case handling, joint research and training, public education, and regular consultations.

The agreement operationalizes the principle that heritage protection is not a solo performance. “Procuratorial authorities need to act as ‘glue,’” Song Xiaoling said. “We bring together administrative responsibilities, corporate accountability and expert knowledge, allowing legal supervision to nurture the evergreen trees of cultural inheritance.”

In Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, the procuratorate and the prefecture’s culture and tourism bureau have established long-term mechanisms including joint relic preservation meetings and coordinated case handling. Through public interest litigation supervision, they pushed cultural heritage departments to innovate their public outreach—launching “mobile museum” lectures across townships, educating residents and grassroots officials on the importance of heritage sites.

In 2024, the People’s Procuratorate of Emin County of Tacheng Prefecture spearheaded the signing of a collaboration mechanism with the county’s Bureau of Culture, Sports, Radio, Television and Tourism and the Bureau of Ecology and Environment. The mechanism clearly delineates the protected zones, prohibited acts and allocation of responsibilities. As a result, the protection outcomes have surpassed what any single agency could have accomplished alone.

As a result, the Yemili ancient city site within Emin County has seen annual visitors grow to over 10,000, hosting more than 50 study tours annually.

“Leveraging the resources of Yemili, we established a cultural study and legal education base, allowing visitors to experience▶

the charm of history while receiving legal education during their tours,” He Kangming, Director of the Second Prosecution Department at Emin County People’s Procuratorate, told *Guangming Daily*.

The long march

While courts and prosecutors build their frameworks, another army is already in the field: the 600-plus team members conducting the Fourth National Cultural Relics Census across Xinjiang. Their stories read like adventure novels.

In Hetian (Hotan) Prefecture, team leader Maitikasimu Tumuer led his team into the Taklimakan Desert, searching for ancient sites along the southern Silk Road routes. Their supplies included surveying equipment, extra water, medicine and even camels to carry it all.

“We often hit storms along the way, and we have to be ready for that,” Maitikasimu told *China Youth Daily*.

In Huoerguosi (Horgos), another team battled a different adversary: locusts. “Every meal was a race,” Zhang Huiling, who leads the local census effort, said. “You’d open your instant noodles, take one bite and have to cover it immediately. Otherwise, the locusts would jump right in.”

Despite these conditions, the results are staggering. In the 11 months since Xinjiang’s census fieldwork began in May 2024, teams had surveyed 11,109 immovable cultural relic sites as of April 28, 2025, including 9,165 rechecked from the third census and 1,944 newly discovered.

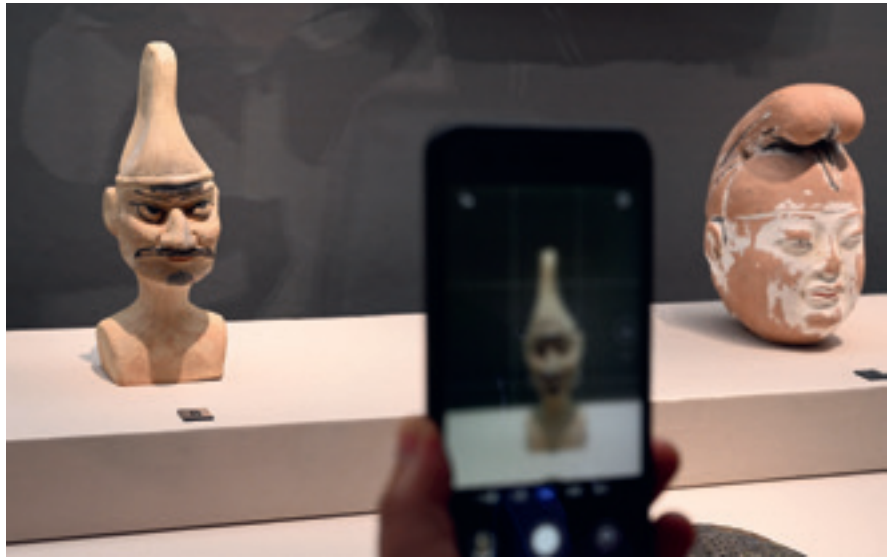
Some of these discoveries come from ordinary people. In Qinghe County, local villagers reported rock carvings on a black stone hillside. The next day, census team members arrived with herder guides and documented 60 petroglyphs, featuring camels, horsemen chasing ibex, and Buddhist mantras and symbols.

“In Xinjiang, we are promoting an atmosphere where everyone is a guardian of cultural relics,” Shamali Mulatibake, Curator of the Qinghe County Museum, said.

A digital future for relics

Technology continues to transform the work of preservation. For Zhang, who has worked in cultural relic preservation for over three decades, the change is almost unbelievable.

“During the third census, measurement and mapping were done manually,” she said. “Accuracy was our biggest headache. Now we have RTK (Real-Time Kinematic, a centimeter-level satellite positioning system), centimeter-level positioning and



A painted clay bust and head from Xinjiang on display at the National Museum of China in Beijing in June 2023 (XINHUA)

drones. Mapping is so much easier.”

Her team now carries subscriber identity module (SIM) cards from every telecommunication carrier. At remote sites with spotty coverage, they swap phones until one finds a signal, upload their data and move on.

In Altay, Zoya Bahit, a deputy to the National People’s Congress, has spent the past year pushing for digital protection of rock carvings. “These petroglyphs are invaluable historical cultural heritage, yet they are also incredibly fragile,” she told *Guangming Daily*. Many are attached to entire mountain faces; traditional “ontological protection” would require reinforcing the geology of entire peaks. Ontological protection means physically preserving the original artifact or structure itself, rather than creating a digital copy.

“First, we need to move their truest form into the digital world,” Zoya said.

Her team spent 2025 surveying representative rock art sites across Altay’s six counties and one city, assessing sun exposure, water erosion patterns and equipment transport routes. They drafted protection plans tailored to each site’s unique conditions.

“When I imagine future visitors experiencing these ancient patterns through immersive digital exhibitions, clearly perceiving the charm of petroglyphs on mountain peaks thousands of kilometers away, all our efforts feel deeply worthwhile,” she said. **XT**

The background of the entire page is a vibrant, blue-toned digital cityscape. Several skyscrapers of varying heights and widths are depicted, each with a grid-like facade of windows. The buildings are set against a backdrop of floating binary code (0s and 1s) and various technical data strings. Some of the visible data includes "TIME: 47.739532%", "CHECKING STAT", "DATA DOCUMENT", "ORIGINAL: 298", "DATA UNITS CO", "TURN: 092783", "PROGRAM: K2387", "IS: OK -12837", and "COMPO". The overall aesthetic is high-tech and futuristic, suggesting a digital or data-driven environment.

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IN FOCUS

NEW TECH FOR OLD RELICS

How cutting-edge technology is reviving the story of ancient Xinjiang *By Lu Yan*



In Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, archaeology has never been a romantic endeavor.

In summer, ground temperatures in the region can soar to 60 degrees Celsius, making you feel like you're being roasted over a fire. In winter, the bitter winds across the Gobi Desert cut like knives at your face. To make matters worse, many sites lie deep in the desert or atop sheer cliffs, with extremely poor accessibility. Once an archaeological team sets up camp, they often stay for months on end, eating and sleeping in tents.

But in the past several years, things have begun to change. Special "digital archaeology teams" have entered this land. Their goal is simple: to race against time using technology, preserving the fading traces of civilizations forever in the digital world.

Digital painter

First constructed in the 3rd century A.D., the Kizil Caves are China's earliest and westernmost large-scale grotto complex. Stretching for several kilometers with 349 grottoes, the remaining some 10,000 pieces of murals record the glory of the ancient Qiuqi civilization in Kuche (Kuqa or Kucha), Aksu Prefecture, and witness the eastward spread of Buddhism and the integration of Eastern and Western cultures.

However, over the long years, natural erosion and looting have left it scarred: Murals in some grottoes are charred beyond recognition by smoke and fire, while others are cut off and stolen, leaving behind a mess and vaguely recognizable information.

More distressing is that from the late 19th to the early 20th century, Western expeditions plundered a large number of exquisite murals from here. Nearly 500 square meters of murals were peeled off, involving 59 grottoes, making many grottoes incomplete and their full features hard to glimpse. These murals are now kept in more than 20 museums and art galleries across eight countries: Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Hungary, South Korea and Japan.

In 2024, under the guidance of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the China Cultural Heritage Information and Consulting Center, together with China's tech giant Tencent and other institutions, launched the Tanyuan Plan, an initiative for cultural preservation through digital solutions. It selected grottoes with incomplete murals and smoke-blackened murals of the Kizil Caves as key restoration targets, starting a journey of digital resurrection of cultural relics through technological means.

The technical team of the Tanyuan Plan first collected high-definition data of all existing murals in the Kizil Caves to build a complete mural style database, and then used AI large models to learn the lines, colors and pattern rules of these murals. For



A cultural relics restorer researches and analyzes the material of a cultural relic at the Science and Technology Conservation Center of the Xinjiang Museum in Urumqi on May 16, 2024 (XINHUA)

incomplete murals, the AI “digital painter” first identified the robe patterns of the figures in them and pigment tones of the remaining parts, then combined the characteristics of the figures’ shapes in the same grotto and contemporary murals—such as the typical Qiuci costume style, gentle facial expression and posture of holding offerings—to accurately complement the missing facial contours, facial details and arm movements of the figure, and even restore the delicate patterns on the robes and the decorative patterns behind.

What’s more remarkable is that the AI restoration fully follows the historical original appearance without adding any modern elements. The restored mural is perfectly connected with the surrounding remaining parts,

The AI restoration fully follows the historical original appearance without adding any modern elements

with harmonious colors and smooth lines.

For the murals covered with thick smoke stains, the project team used terahertz spectroscopy technology—this special light wave is like a “super perspective eye,” which can penetrate the thousand-year-old smoke stains and dust layers without damage, and accurately capture the colors, lines and patterns of the underlying murals. Without touching or cleaning, it makes the hidden thousand-year-old Buddha statues, apsaras and diamond patterns clearly visible, uncovering the dusty artistic code.

Archaeology on wheels

When we think of the ancient Silk Road, we always picture camel bells, yellow sand ▶



A contestant from the Xinjiang Museum competes in a cultural relics restoration competition in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, on May 22, 2025 (XINHUA)

and the integration of civilizations spanning thousands of years. But most of these distant histories are hidden in the ruins, ancient tombs and cultural relics in the deserts of Xinjiang.

In the past, archaeologists had to work hard to excavate in the wild, then carefully transport the unearthed samples back to laboratories far away for research. This not only took a long time but also risked missing the freshest archaeological information. However, the ancient Silk Road scientific and technological archaeology project jointly launched by Fudan University in Shanghai and Kelamayi (Karamay) City in August last year has completely changed this situation. They “packed” top-level laboratories onto wheels and drove them to the archaeological sites along the ancient Silk Road, gently lifting the veil of history with technology.

The core of the project’s archaeology is the fleet of three mobile archaeological laboratories, all equipped with “Made

in China” equipment. Like three “research centers on wheels,” they can complete a series of professional work at desolate archaeological sites without having to travel back and forth.

Among them, the two most special vehicles are a molecular archaeology vehicle and a computed tomography (CT) archaeology vehicle, along with a power supply vehicle, which can continuously support archaeological work in deserts without infrastructure.

The molecular archaeology vehicle is like a “mobile DNA laboratory,” with a clean working space and a full range of testing equipment. After archaeologists excavate samples such as ancient human bones and teeth on-site, they don’t need to transport them long distances. Instead, they put on protective clothing and enter the vehicle to directly complete the entire process of sample processing, DNA extraction and sequencing. The sequencing results can also be transmitted in real-time



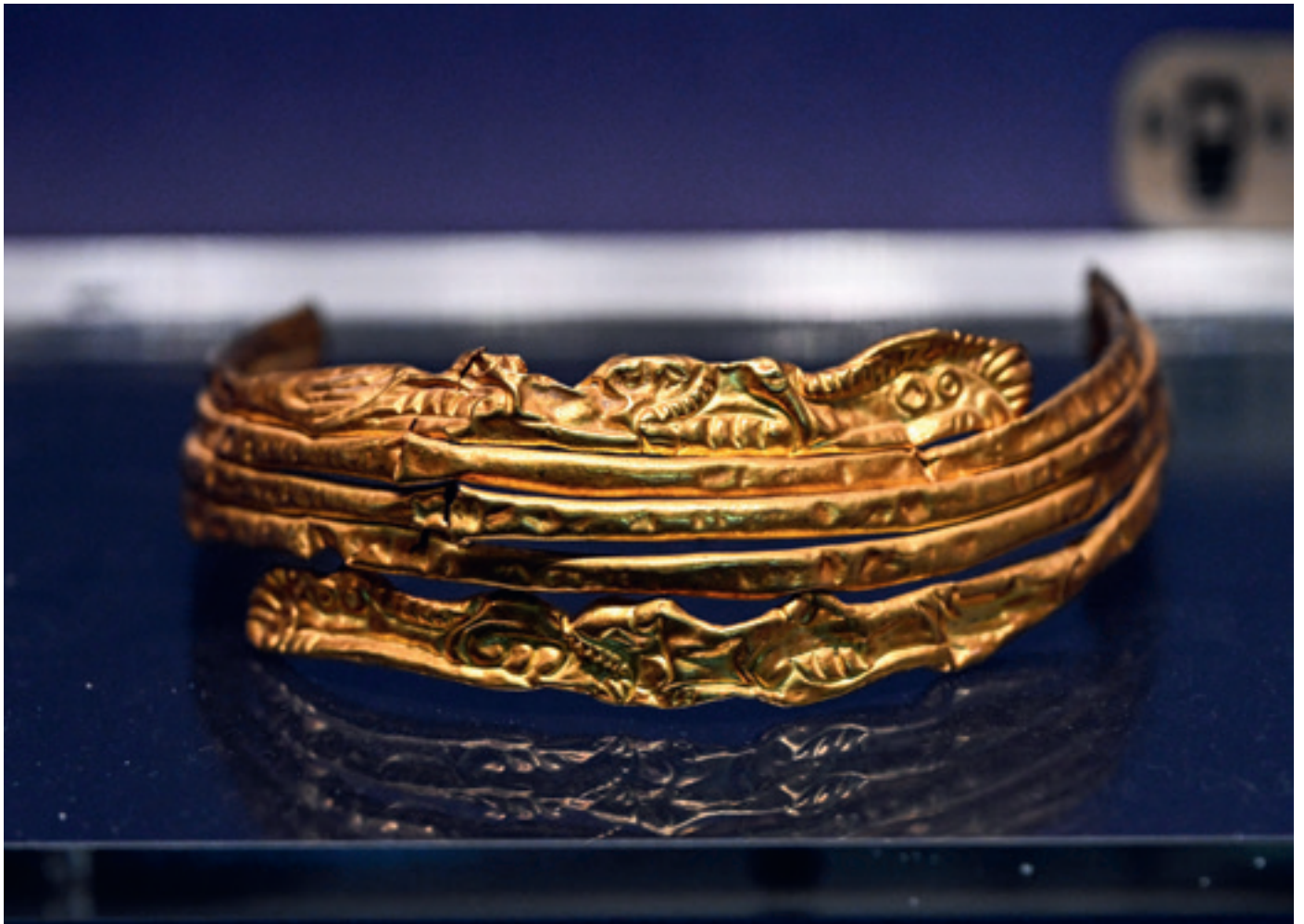
Visitors wear VR devices for an immersive exploration at the Qiuci Wei and Jin Ancient Tomb Site Museum in Kuche (Kuqa or Kucha), Aksu Prefecture, on July 15, 2024 (XINHUA)

to Fudan University’s database for analysis. What used to take several months to get results now takes only about a week to see preliminary answers and a month to complete related tasks, greatly improving archaeological efficiency and allowing timely detection of problems. Through this method, we can clearly understand where the people on the ancient Silk Road came from, how they migrated, and the stories of communication and integration between different ethnic groups.

The other CT archaeology vehicle is like giving cultural relics a “non-invasive physical examination.” The CT in the vehicle is specially customized for archaeology. Without opening the cultural relics or damaging any remains, it can perform 3D scans on mummies, human bones or complete cultural relics to clearly see their internal structures. For example, when facing ancient mummies, we can understand the physical condition and pathological characteristics of the ancients through CT scanning

without damaging the remains; when facing broken bones, we can also restore their complete shape through scanning, helping us restore the living conditions and health levels of the ancients and making the silent cultural relics “speak.”

Spanning for two months, this scientific and technological archaeology was not only professional and efficient but also very down to earth. The archaeological team opened the experimental process to the public throughout, and even through reality shows, documentaries and other forms, allowed ordinary people to see the real face of archaeological work and understand how technology helps people read history. **XT**



A Han Dynasty gold necklace unearthed from the Gouxu Cemetery at the Jiaohe Ancient City in Tulufan (Turpan), on display on September 24, 2025 (VCG)

IN FOCUS

A GILDED LEGACY

Xinjiang continues its millennia-old tradition of using gold *By Ma Xiaowen*



A Han Dynasty gold buckle with eight dragons inlaid with gems at the Xinjiang Museum on February 22 (VCG)

G

Gold has always been more than a precious metal. It is a shimmering record of human movement, power and cultural synthesis.

Archaeological evidence reveals that Xinjiang's fascination with gold dated back to the Chemurchek culture, a Bronze Age archaeological culture prevailing from 2500-1800 B.C., making Xinjiang one of the earliest areas in present-day China to craft golden ornaments.

During the later centuries, particularly the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), gold became a sophisticated language of diplomacy and status, bridging the traditions of the nomadic steppes with the imperial majesty of the Central Plains, the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River in ancient China, the birthplace of Chinese civilization.

The buckle of power

One of the most stunning gold pieces found in Xinjiang is a belt buckle carved with eight dragons inlaid with gems. Unearthed at the Heigeda tomb site ▶



An iron-grid gold belt in the Pre-Qin Period Gallery of the Xinjiang Historical Relics Exhibition at the Xinjiang Museum on September 3, 2025 (VCG)

in Yanqi (ancient Karashahr) in 1975 and crafted during the Han Dynasty, this horse hoof-shaped buckle is a marvel of ancient metallurgy. Using techniques such as repoussé (hammering from the reverse) and granulation (soldering tiny gold spheres), craftsmen depicted a primary dragon surrounded by seven smaller ones, weaving through a sea of golden filigree clouds.

In traditional Chinese culture, the number nine represents the pinnacle of *yang* (masculine/heavenly) energy and was reserved strictly for the emperor—the Son of Heaven. The buckle with eight dragons identifies its owner as a figure of immense power, likely a local king or high-ranking chieftain, one step below the emperor himself.

Historically, Yanqi was a vital hub on the Silk Road; this buckle was almost certainly a Han imperial gift, designed to secure the loyalty of a strategic border ally.

The iron-grid technique

In the northern reaches of Xinjiang, gold reflected a different kind of ingenuity. In 2014, excavations at the Karasu Cemetery in Habahe County revealed a unique “iron-grid” gold belt, a structural feat. Artisans stamped floral patterns onto gold sheets, overlaid them with a protective iron lattice to create a textured, compartmentalized look, and then backed the entire piece with iron and leather for durability.

According to Yu Jianjun, a researcher at the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, the iron-grid gold belt unearthed from the Karasu Cemetery demonstrates a fusion of local technology and cultural influences from the Central Plains.

Animal style and power

Other finds from Xinjiang pulse with the raw energy of the



A gold belt ornament with a tiger motif in the collection of the Xinjiang Museum on display at the Splendid Western Regions special exhibition at the Jinsha Site Museum in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, on June 7, 2024 (VCG)

Eurasian steppes. In the Alagou burials, early Iron Age graves (third to second century B.C.), and the Dongtaledede site in the southern Altai Mountains, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of “animal-style” gold appliques featuring snarling tigers, coiled leopards, and animal combat, such as a tiger hunting a deer.

In 1977, archaeologists unearthed a trove of gold ornaments from Tomb 30 of the Alagou necropolis. Among the most striking finds is a pair of tiger-motif gold belt plaques, designed to be fastened onto leather. These elongated pieces feature two tigers in mid-roar confrontation, meticulously crafted using the repoussé technique.

The Dongtaledede Cemetery has yielded a staggering collection of approximately 800 gold funerary objects. Predominantly decorative ornaments, these pieces feature a steppe menagerie: wild boars, snow leopards, deer, tigers, wolves and mountain sheep.

A gold necklace discovered in the Goubei burials in the Jiaohe Ancient City, Tulufan (Turpan), is another remarkable find. Composed of four semi-circular, hollowed flat tubes, it is intricately engraved with a high-tension scene of three beasts in a frantic cycle of pursuit and combat.

According to Yu, to the nomadic tribes of the Altai and Tianshan mountains, these animals were totems of strength and spiritual intermediaries. For a tribal chieftain, wearing these gold beasts was a way to channel the primal power of the wilderness into their own political authority.

A modern renaissance

Today, these artifacts, housed in Xinjiang Museum, tell the story of a world that was interconnected long before the modern era. Xinjiang was a vital crossroads on the Silk Road, where the dragon of the East met the beasts of the North. These golden relics are the fingerprints of a civilization that thrived on exchange and a reminder that Xinjiang has always been a place where human ideas blend.

To understand why Xinjiang gold looks so delicate, one must understand the “soul” of its craftsmanship: the cumin technique. Though it shares its name with the region’s favorite spice, this is actually a master class in ancient metallurgy.

A master goldsmith pulls solid gold into filigrees—threads finer than a human hair—and creates microscopic gold beads. These tiny elements are then sprinkled onto the surface, much like a chef seasoning a dish with cumin, and fused to the surface using a high-temperature borax soldering method. The result is a texture so intricate that it captures light from every angle, a tradition that modern Xinjiang jewelers continue to uphold with pride.

Gold has shed its image as “grandmother’s heirloom.” Young Xinjiang designers are blending ancient cumin techniques with contemporary aesthetics, bringing gold into daily wear. Whether it is a pair of earrings shaped like delicate cumin leaves or a bracelet featuring Silk Road motifs, with these pieces young people carry their heritage with a modern edge.

From the nomadic chieftains of 1000 B.C. to the modern couples celebrating their weddings today, across 3,000 years gold has remained a shimmering witness to Xinjiang’s evolution. The metal’s luster reflects the diverse cultures that have hammered, spun and lovingly transformed it into a living legacy. **XI**

Celebrating the Launch of *Xinjiang Today*: Voices From Across China and Beyond



Kurban Niyaz, a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) and Principal of the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language Primary School in Yimamu Township, Wushi County, Aksu Prefecture

“I wish *Xinjiang Today* continued success.”



Pablo Mendoza, an academic and cultural coordinator at the China Center of the National Autonomous University of Mexico

“I wish *Xinjiang Today* continued success.”



Shu Yong, a member of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Vice President of the Kaiming Painting Institute in Beijing

“I particularly like the title *Xinjiang Today*. I believe we should view Xinjiang in a contemporary context.

*Xinjiang today is different from what it used to be. I hope *Xinjiang Today* can convey the spirit of the times and present the great beauty of Xinjiang in the new era.”*



Asghar Muhammad, a special correspondent for the Associated Press of Pakistan in Beijing

“People in Xinjiang are enjoying social, economic and religious belief freedom and stability, and I congratulate your magazine for highlighting good stories about Xinjiang and its people.”



Zoya Bahit, a deputy to the 14th NPC and an archaeologist in Altay Prefecture

“I hope *Xinjiang Today* becomes a warm home for writers, artists and cultural workers of all ethnic groups. I expect it to tell stories of unity and shared prosperity in Xinjiang, present Xinjiang to the world, and write a splendid chapter to reinforce the sense of the Chinese nation as one community.”