

LCQ17: World Heritage List

Following is a question by the Hon Lau Kong-wah and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, in the Legislative Council today (November 15):

Question:

As the Macao Special Administrative Region Government, under the auspices of the Central Government, succeeded in 2005 in its bid to have the Historic Centre of Macao inscribed on the World Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, will the Government inform this Council whether it has considered seeking support from the Central Government to strive for some valuable cultural or natural heritage in Hong Kong to be inscribed on the list; if so, of the details of its consideration; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

Madam President,

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage ("Convention" hereafter), adopted by the General Conference of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) at its 17th session in 1972, established a permanently effective system with modern and scientific methods for the preservation of cultural and natural heritage having outstanding universal value. The UNESCO is responsible for compiling the World Heritage List according to the Convention, in which World Heritage is classified into cultural and natural heritage.

The application procedures for inscription on the World Heritage List are - a State Party of the Convention has to prepare a Tentative List, providing an inventory of the natural and cultural heritage sites with outstanding universal value within its boundary. Then the State Party can prepare a Nomination File. The nomination will be submitted to the World Heritage Centre for review, and the International Council on Monuments and Sites and the World Conservation Union for evaluation.

After a site is nominated and evaluated, the World Heritage Committee will make the final decision on whether the site should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Cairns Decision, made by the World Heritage Committee in 2000, has set the limit of one new nomination per State Party each year. Since Hong Kong is not a State Party, application must be submitted under the auspices of China.

By November 2006, the World Heritage List includes 830 properties in 138 States Parties, of which there are 644 cultural, 162 natural and 24 mixed properties. China is one of the States Parties of the Convention since 1985. To date, it has 33 properties on the World Heritage List, including 24 cultural, five natural and four mixed properties, being the third largest State Party in terms of the number of World Heritage sites within its boundary.

The properties in Beijing and Sichuan province account for one-third of the 33 World Heritage sites in China (11 properties). However, one-third of the provinces, cities and districts in China have yet to inscribe heritage sites on the World Heritage List. At the moment, over 100 items are included in the Tentative List of China, in which no items are from Hong Kong. World heritage sites are selected on the basis of very stringent criteria and there is keen competition amongst the States Parties, as well as the various provinces, cities, and districts within China. Specifically, the cultural sites nominated should -

- (i) represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; or
- (ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; or
- (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared; or
- (iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history; or
- (v) be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change; or

(vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. [Note: The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria].

The natural sites nominated should -

(vii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance; or

(viii) be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; or

(ix) be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals; or

(x) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Taking into account the selection criteria, the Government has yet to have any plan to submit any nomination of cultural or natural heritage sites in Hong Kong for inscription on the World Heritage List. We would, however, in the course of heritage conservation, closely monitor and carefully assess the cultural significance of heritage sites, so that we could consider whether any of the sites warrants nomination as a World Heritage site under the auspices of our national government in future.

Ends/Wednesday, November 15, 2006

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