

A Mighty River That Nourishes a Great Nation

—— Achievements, Insights, and Global Significance of
Yangtze River Governance in the New Era

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Preface

Every human civilization has been nourished by great rivers.

The Yangtze River, cradle of the Chinese nation, originates from the Roof of the World, carves through towering mountains and deep gorges, gathers tributaries from across the land, and flows into the sea—sustaining the long and continuous course of Chinese civilization and nurturing generations of industrious and resilient Chinese people.

For millennia, water has bound together the upper and lower reaches, the left and right banks, the main stem and its tributaries—forming a vast and integrated natural, economic, and social system across the Yangtze River Basin. The river has not only sustained communities from Ba mountains and Shu waters (Chongqing and Sichuan) to Jiangnan water towns (the Yangtze River Delta), but also connected and nourished north and south through hydraulic engineering, contributing immensely to agriculture, transportation, industry, and hydropower. Today, it remains a vital link between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

Since the inception of reform and opening-up, remarkable economic and social progress has been achieved in the Yangtze River Basin. The 11 provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze Economic Belt account for nearly half of China's population and GDP. With its prominent ecological status and immense development potential, the Belt has become a core driver of national vitality. Yet the river has also borne heavy costs of ecological degradation.

As China entered the new era, President Xi Jinping's attention remained firmly fixed on the majestic Yangtze River. From inspecting dams and ports to visiting villages, enterprises, and cities, he conducted extensive field research across the river's upper, middle, and lower reaches—diagnosing the condition of the "mother river." With piercing clarity, he diagnosed the problem, "The Yangtze River is sick—and seriously so."^①

With the long-term sustainability of the Chinese nation in mind, President Xi has explored the dialectics of harmony between humanity and nature, and charted a path to restore vitality to the Yangtze, ensuring the lasting thrive of this lifeline of Chinese civilization.

A broad strategic vision ensures comprehensive coordination, and grand thinking guides development direction. With careful deliberation and steadfast action, the General Secretary has proposed the principle of "Planning for the long run, acting with enduring strategies, and building a

^① Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Symposium on Deepening the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, June 13, 2018.

foundation for lasting stability."^①

In January 2016, a symposium on promoting the development of the Yangtze Economic Belt was held in Chongqing. "To promote the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, we must consider the long-term interests of the Chinese nation" and "give overriding priority to restoring the Yangtze's ecological environment, working together on protection but not on excessive development,"^② President Xi Jinping's words were resounding and impactful.

Over the following eight years, President Xi convened three symposiums in Wuhan, Nanjing, and Nanchang. From "advancing the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt" to "deepening the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," from "comprehensive promotion of the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt" to "further advancing the high-quality development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," he has shaped the strategic blueprint for the Belt with historical depth and systemic insight.

At present, a symphony of acceleration and restraint, addition and subtraction, dismantling and establishment, short-term action and long-term vision is resonating across both banks of the river. The regions along the Yangtze River have continuously promoted the protection and restoration of the ecological environment, facilitating a comprehensive green transformation of economic and social development. The scale, intensity, and impact of these efforts are unprecedented, yielding significant results.

The Yangtze River stretches like a jade ribbon across thousands of miles, as mighty tides surge toward a grand future.

The Yangtze River today boasts a thriving ecosystem, with clear waters flowing east and finless porpoises leaping in joy. In the new era, propelled by innovative development and coordinated progress, the high-quality development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt has yielded tangible results: improved livelihoods, flourishing cities, and revitalized rural areas.

Spanning past and present, the Yangtze River is characterized by the spirit of advancing with the times. Surging toward the sea, it embraces openness and inclusiveness. As China advances along the path of modernization, the Yangtze River is composing a powerful new chapter.

① Xi Jinping Chairs Symposium on Further Promoting High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Emphasizing Further Promoting High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt to Better Support and Serve Chinese Modernization, Xinhua News Agency, Nanchang, October 12, 2023.

② Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Symposium on Advancing the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt: Prioritizing Ecology and Pursuing Green Development to Keep the Mother River of the Chinese Nation Full of Vitality," Xinhua News Agency, Chongqing, January 7, 2016.

Chapter One: Historic Achievements in Yangtze River Governance in the New Era

"To govern a country well, one must first control the waters." Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping has planned, deployed, and promoted the protection of the Yangtze River and the high-quality development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt with a comprehensive, long-term vision for the sustainable future of the Chinese nation. Today, along the Yangtze River, as its clear waters surge eastward, people enjoy greater well-being, and the region has witnessed a historic transformation in environmental protection and socioeconomic development.

1.1 Historic Shift in Ecological Protection

The Yangtze River, as a unique ecological system, serves as one of China's most vital ecological treasure troves^①. In recent years, drawing on traditional water management wisdom and the accumulated experience of past generations, China has made ecological restoration of the Yangtze River an overriding national priority. By accurately identifying the principal challenges at different stages of development, the country has achieved a historic shift from extensive development to comprehensive protection.

Campaigns against Pollution: Curbing the Trend of Environmental Degradation

At Yujiatou along Wuhan's riverfront, the Yangtze River stretches wide and serene, with smooth wetlands, blue skies, and clear waters. Just a few years ago, this area was crowded with docks and sand yards, where residents fished with nets, raised pigs, and cultivated vegetables. For decades, an extensive and unregulated development model brought severe pollution and ecological degradation to the river. The Yangtze River's "kidneys," Dongting Lake and Poyang Lake, frequently dried up, and nearly 30% of lakes and reservoirs remained in a state of eutrophication. The river's biological integrity index once fell to its lowest level—classified as "no fish."

Industrial inertia along the river remained strong, with a high baseline of pollutant discharge: wastewater, chemical oxygen demand, and ammonia nitrogen emissions accounted for 43%, 37%, and 43% of the national total, respectively. Misuse and over-occupation of riverbanks and ports remained prominent issues, including idle land, excessive allocation, and inefficient utilization.

① Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Symposium on Advancing the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt: Prioritizing Ecology and Pursuing Green Development to Keep the Mother River of the Chinese Nation Full of Vitality," Xinhua News Agency, Chongqing, January 7, 2016.

Environmental risks across the basin were acute: 30% of high-risk enterprises in the Yangtze River Economic Belt were located within five kilometers of drinking water sources, with production and storage/transportation zones often interwoven.

The 2016 Symposium on Advancing the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt marked a turning point, sounding the clarion call for large-scale ecological protection. Along the river, targeted campaigns were launched to remediate shorelines, trace pollution sources, and upgrade wastewater systems.

In August 2024, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment reported that 140,000 kilometers of river and lake shorelines across 11 provinces and municipalities had been surveyed, identifying 140,000 discharge outlets into the Yangtze River. Urban black and odorous water bodies were largely eliminated, with nearly 80% of county-level cities achieving full remediation. Among 1,235 provincial-level and above industrial parks, 1,769 wastewater treatment facilities were completed, and 1,403 tailings ponds were rehabilitated.^①

Once "seriously ill," the Yangtze River has now entered a phase of recovery. The iconic image of "clear waters flowing east" has reemerged. The proportion of high-quality water sections in the Yangtze River Basin rose from 82.3% in 2016 to over 98% today, with the main stem maintaining Class II water quality for five consecutive years.

Riverbank Ecology Restoration: Improving Environmental Quality

The ten-year fishing ban across the Yangtze River has been fully implemented. A large number of projects integrating the protection and restoration of mountains, rivers, forests, farmland, lakes, grasslands, and deserts have been launched. Aquatic biological resources and biodiversity are showing signs of recovery, and the ecological environment of the Yangtze River Basin is gradually improving.

On the eastern wetlands of Chongming Island in Shanghai, flocks of migratory birds gather—earning the site the nickname "international refueling station" for migratory birds. In recent years, thanks to accelerated ecological restoration, bird populations have steadily increased, in stark contrast to the previous ecological crisis caused by illegal hunting and industrial pollution. In 2023, Chongming Island was selected as one of China's first batch of "Harmonious and Beautiful Islands."

Along the Yangtze River, more and more iconic species are returning to public view. The population of Yangtze finless porpoises rose to 1,249 in 2023, a 23.4% increase compared to

^① Ministry of Ecology and Environment, August 2024 Press Briefing, the Official Website of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

2017,^① marking a historic reversal of decline. The once-vanished *Ochetobius elongatus* is now frequently observed, and the *Coilia nasus*, one of the "Three Delicacies of the Yangtze," has returned to spawn in Dongting Lake. Between 2021 and 2024, 344 native fish species were recorded in the Yangtze Basin, 36 more than the 2017–2020 period^②.

Shift from Spontaneous Action to Conscious Governance: Forming a Comprehensive Protection Framework

Since the launch of the Yangtze River Protection initiative, provinces, municipalities, and relevant departments have shifted from spontaneous action to conscious, coordinated governance in line with the ecological integrity and systemic nature of the river basin.

Protection efforts are increasingly governed by law. China's first basin-specific legislation, the *Yangtze River Protection Law*, is now fully implemented. *Measures for the Joint Dispatch of the Key Water Projects in the Yangtze River Basin (Trial)* has been officially issued, continuously promoting legislation for the protection of the Danjiangkou Reservoir area and its upstream watershed.

Collaborative mechanisms have become more streamlined. The Yangtze River Water Resources Commission has established a coordination framework with provincial-level river chief offices across the basin. The Yangtze River Shipping Public Security Bureau has joined forces with local police departments to conduct multi-regional, multi-agency crackdowns on environmental violations. Hubei, Jiangxi, and Hunan have jointly launched integrated governance of the "One River, Two Lakes" system, exploring cross-departmental and cross-regional cooperation mechanisms.

An ecological compensation system is gradually taking shape. Zhejiang and Anhui have jointly developed the Qiandao Lake–Huangshan Ecotourism Cooperation Zone. Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan have signed a horizontal ecological protection compensation agreement for the Chishui River Basin, establishing a 200 million yuan compensation fund.

1.2 The Rise of World-Class Industrial Clusters

Leveraging the Yangtze River's "Golden Waterway," the Yangtze River Economic Belt is undergoing continuous upgrading and quality enhancement, emerging as a vital inland waterway economic corridor that spans China's eastern, central, and western regions. This zone serves not only as a pioneering model for ecological progress but also as a national engine for innovation-driven transformation. It is steadily evolving into a globally influential inland waterway economic belt and a

① "Significant Progress Made in Water Ecological Environment Protection in Key River Basins," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 30, 2024.

② "From Recuperation to Thriving Vitality — Five Years of Observation on the Yangtze River Fishing Ban," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, May 11, 2025.

coordinated development zone that fosters dynamic regional collaboration.

Green Development: Fueling Great Momentum

Accounting for nearly half of China's economic output, the Yangtze River Economic Belt has achieved a profound shift toward "development through protection, and protection through development."

As the ecological environment continues to improve, the Belt's contribution to national economic growth has become increasingly prominent. The combined GDP of the 11 provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River as a share of the national total, as well as their contribution to overall economic growth, has steadily increased.^① The Yangtze River Basin now hosts the world's largest clean energy corridor, comprising six major hydropower stations: Wudongde, Baihetan, Xiluodu, Xiangjiaba, Three Gorges, and Gezhouba. Together, these facilities have generated over 3.5 trillion kilowatt-hours of electricity, equivalent to saving more than 1 billion tons of standard coal and reducing carbon dioxide emissions by over 2.8 billion tons.^②

At the New Materials Industrial Park of Hubei Xingfa Group, China's largest fine phosphorus chemical enterprise, the lush riverside greenery evokes the feel of a public garden. Following the launch of the Yangtze River Protection Initiative, Xingfa voluntarily dismantled 32 production facilities worth 1.3 billion yuan. After enduring the "pain of amputation," the company transitioned from single-sector phosphorus chemicals to an integrated multi-sector model encompassing phosphorus, silicon, sulfur, and fluorine. Its products have shifted from bulk sales by the ton to premium offerings priced by the gram.^③

Innovation-Driven Growth: Catalyzing a Mega Science and Technology Corridor

Harnessing its abundant scientific and educational resources, the Yangtze River Economic Belt has surged forward through innovation, giving rise to five world-class industrial clusters: electronic information, high-end equipment, automobiles, home appliances, and textiles and apparel.

In Anhui, the emerging display industry has built a full-spectrum supply chain "from sand to screen," with annual output exceeding 100 billion yuan. Its main business revenue from display components now accounts for more than one-fifth of the national total. In Wuhan's Donghu New Technology Development Zone, known as "China's Optics Valley," the world's largest fiber optic cable manufacturing base has taken shape. The optoelectronic information industry has surpassed

① "Safeguarding the Yangtze River's Clear Waters and Mighty Flow to the East: A Review of Central Environmental Inspections," *People's Daily*; First Page, July 9, 2022.

② "By the Numbers: The World's Largest Clean Energy Corridor," *People's Daily*; Second Page, May 15, 2024.

③ "China's Economic Case Studies (Enterprise Edition): From Ton-Based to Gram-Based Sales — The Secret Behind the Transformation of Xingfa Group," Xinhua News Agency, Wuhan, November 17, 2024.

500 billion yuan in scale, with a stream of original and disruptive technologies transforming into industrial accelerators,^① becoming a key force shaping global industrial development.

Integrated Linkages: Forging a New Pattern of Land–Sea Opening–up

By deepening eastward opening-up and accelerating westward opening-up, the Belt is coordinating land-sea opening-up and expanding border-region connectivity. It is building a transregional corridor that spans east, central, and west China while linking the north and south, positioning itself as a vital channel for domestic and international economic flows.

The "Golden Waterway" of the Yangtze River ranks first globally in inland shipping volume. The number of mega ports handling over 100 million tons has risen to 16, and total cargo throughput has surpassed 4 billion tons, marking the full emergence of a modernized inland shipping artery.^② In 2024, foreign trade across the 11 provinces and municipalities of the Yangtze River Economic Belt reached a record 19.85 trillion yuan. Trade with Belt and Road partner countries totaled 9.68 trillion yuan, up 6.6% year-on-year, while imports and exports of high-tech products hit 5.61 trillion yuan, a 7% increase.^③

Regional Coordination: Expanding Pathway Toward Integrated Development

By opening new tracks and cultivating fresh competitive edges, the Belt's 11 provinces and municipalities are achieving deep industrial integration and significant regional synergy.

Upstream: The Chengdu–Chongqing Twin-City Economic Circle, the "tail of the dragon," is gaining momentum, while urban clusters in central Yunnan and central Guizhou are maturing, turning inland regions into rising hubs of opening-up.

Midstream: The "body of the dragon" is soaring, with strategic emerging industrial clusters and advanced manufacturing clusters steadily expanding.

Downstream: The Yangtze River Delta, the "head of the dragon," is forging ahead in unified action. Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui are working in concert, aligning strategies and accelerating the formation of a new model for integrated regional development.

According to the Yangtze River Economic Belt Coordinated and Balanced Development Index

① "President Xi Jinping's Concerns: Persevering for the Future—Stories from the Frontlines of Technological Innovation," Xinhua News Agency, February 5, 2025.

② "The Throughput of the Ports along the Main Stem of the Yangtze River Expected to Exceed 4 Billion Tons in 2024," Xinhua News Agency, Wuhan, December 26, 2024.

③ "Yangtze River Economic Belt Foreign Trade Hits Record 19.85 Trillion Yuan in 2024," CCTV News App, January 21, 2025.

Report (2023–2024), regional coordination has steadily optimized since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The median development index rose from 0.8325 in 2019 to 0.8512 in 2022, reflecting an overall positive trajectory.

1.3 Flourishing Culture as a Defining Symbol

The Yangtze River has nurtured a millennia-old cultural heritage spanning from Ba mountains and Shu waters (Chongqing and Sichuan) to Jiangnan water towns (the Yangtze River Delta). It is the icon of the Chinese nation and the symbol of Chinese civilization.^① In the new era, the protection and preservation of Yangtze River culture has been elevated to a new strategic height. With the full-scale launch of the Yangtze National Cultural Park, cultural relics and heritage sites are being systematically preserved, while the integration of culture and tourism is advancing civic education, public benefit, and cultural accessibility.

Systematic Preservation: The Construction of a National Cultural Park in Full Swing

Where the great river surges, civilizations have flourished for millennia. Stretching over 6,300 kilometers, the Yangtze River traverses seven distinct cultural zones: Tibetan-Qiang, Ba-Shu, Dian-Qian, Jing-Chu, Hu-Xiang, Gan-Wan, and Wu-Yue. Along its course, provinces and municipalities are conducting systematic surveys of cultural resources, advancing heritage protection, and tracing the cultural veins of the Yangtze to reveal the secret codes of Chinese civilization embedded in its enduring waterways.

As night falls, the riverfront in Jiujiang, Jiangxi comes alive. Tourists dressed in traditional Hanfu recite classic verses from the classic poem "*Song of the Pipa Player*" while capturing stunning views along the riverbank. The once "dirty, chaotic, and poor" city has been transformed into a picturesque destination, seamlessly blending natural beauty with cultural vitality and ecological preservation with heritage protection, thanks to the momentum of the Yangtze National Cultural Park initiative.

From Sichuan and Chongqing's efforts to preserve and utilize the Sanxingdui archaeological site and develop national grotto temple parks, to Jiangsu's creation of a distinctive cultural spatial system centered on the Yangtze River's main stem, and Hangzhou's successful inscription of the Liangzhu Ancient City as World Heritage, a well-planned, functionally integrated, distinctive, and accessible framework for the Yangtze National Cultural Park is taking shape.

① "Xi Jinping Stresses Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee to Promote the High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt at the Symposium on Comprehensively Advancing the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," Xinhua News Agency, Nanjing, November 15, 2020.

Holistic Preservation: From Keeping Culture Alive to Making It Thrive

Within the scope of the National Yangtze River Cultural Park, there are 30 World Cultural and Natural Heritage sites, 28 entries on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, 2,111 nationally protected cultural relics sites, 1,666 national-level intangible heritage items, and 70 nationally recognized historic and cultural cities. Together, these account for nearly half of China's cultural heritage assets under systematic and holistic protection.^①

Local governments are actively mining the rich vein of traditional culture, interpreting and revitalizing heritage to bring it to life. During holidays, the "museum boom" continues to intensify, with surging visitor numbers becoming a "happy headache" for many cities. In Hubei, the Yangtze Cultural Arts Season features choral performances, films, visual arts, theater, and literature, blending intangible heritage with contemporary life. Through in-depth exploration of the cultural essence of the Yangtze River, the enduring charm of riverine civilization is being awakened. Today, Yangtze River heritage is entering daily life in more vibrant and accessible forms, increasingly embraced by younger generations.

Innovative Expression: A Vibrant Golden Tourism Belt

Leveraging emerging technologies and digital platforms, the Yangtze River International Golden Tourism Belt is connecting cultural nodes into corridors, forming a coordinated layout led by a central axis and supported by seven cultural zones, showcasing the unique charm of Yangtze culture in full dimension.

At the Lingjiatan National Archaeological Site Park in Hanshan County, Ma'anshan City of Anhui Province, visitors "travel back in time" via VR and AR experiences to witness ancient jade crafting and ceremonial rituals. The spectacular performances elicit frequent exclamations of amazement from visitors. Shanghai is shaping a grand cultural framework centered on the Huangpu River, Suzhou River, and Chongming Island. In collaboration with Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui, the city has launched the "Tracing the Origins of Chinese Civilization" boutique route across the Yangtze River Delta, cultivating an atmosphere where "those nearby enjoy it and those afar are drawn to it." The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has tapped into the cultural and tourism resources along the Yangtze River, and designated key cities with prominent significance, important influence and major themes as anchor points to launch 10 Yangtze River-themed travel routes, greatly enhancing recognition of the Yangtze River tourism brand.

① "Construction of the Yangtze National Cultural Park is in Full Swing," *Guangming Daily*, 7th page, May 31, 2025.

1.4 River Safety and Human–Water Harmony: Advancing Public Well–Being

The key to water governance is prioritizing people's well-being. In the practice of Yangtze River governance in the new era, provinces and municipalities along the river have seen steady economic growth, ongoing structural optimization, and marked improvements in living standards. From source to estuary, disaster prevention and mitigation capabilities have been strengthened, distinctive industries have steadily emerged, and the beauty of rivers and lakes is tangibly enriching everyday life. As the Yangtze River becomes more beautiful, the lives of its people become better. High-quality development is continuously creating tangible benefits for the people.

Sense of Security: Flood Control and Disaster Mitigation Bring Peace of Mind

In July 2024, the surging waters of Yangtze River Flood No. 1 roared down. Located in Ezhou, Hubei Province in the middle reaches of the Yangtze, the Guanyin Pavilion—with its white walls, gray tiles, double eaves, and flying rafters—stands majestically in the heart of the river. The floodwaters had submerged more than half of its second-story attic, leaving only portions of the walls and eaves exposed above the surface. Yet within the Yangtze River embankment, the city bustled with traffic, and daily life of the residents continued undisturbed.

In recent years, China has been committed to building a secure and stable Yangtze River, scientifically monitoring changes in the river's water conditions, adhering to integrated prevention and management of both droughts and floods, promoting the modernization of water infrastructure in the Yangtze River Basin, continuously strengthening flood control and disaster reduction capabilities, and fortifying the protective barrier for the safety of people's lives and property.

The Yangtze River Basin now hosts the world's largest and most spatially adaptive reservoir system. Since the launch of major projects like Xiangjiaba, Xiluodu, Wudongde, and Baihetan, the basin has built over 52,000 large, medium, and small reservoirs, along with 46 planned national flood storage and detention areas in the middle and lower reaches, with a total reservoir capacity of approximately 400 billion cubic meters and a flood storage capacity of about 59 billion cubic meters.^① In July 2024, when a levee breach occurred at Tuanzhouyuan Embankment in Huarong, Hunan, the upstream and midstream reservoir system intercepted 2.3 billion cubic meters of

① "Xinhua Insight | Yangtze River Flood No. 1 of 2024 Reaches Peak Levels in Various Regions: What Is the Situation? Can It Be Safely Responded?" Xinhua News Agency, Wuhan, July 5, 2024.

floodwater, significantly easing pressure on frontline defenses.^①

Technology has played a vital role in enhancing flood and drought preparedness. Water authorities along the Yangtze River have accelerated the development of modern rain and water monitoring and forecasting systems. Around 50,000 automated monitoring and forecasting stations now provide real-time data, supported by meteorological satellites, radar, rain gauges, and hydrological stations—forming an integrated "sky-ground" observation network.

Sense of Gains: People-Centered Development Delivers Gains to All

Provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River are leveraging abundant water resources to develop distinctive industries that enrich local people. The river has also become a strategic source for optimizing national water allocation, enabling the delivery of "a reservoir of clean water to the north," benefiting broader regions.

At Xujiachong Village, known as the "first village at the head of the reservoir," near the Three Gorges Dam, tea tourism has transformed a former resettlement community into a nationally recognized key rural tourism destination. The village now attracts over 100,000 visitors annually, and per capita disposable income has risen by nearly 20,000 yuan since 2018, with more residents finding employment close to home.^②

Distinctive industries are becoming key drivers of income growth across urban and rural areas along the river. In Fuling, Chongqing, the pickled mustard industry has surpassed 15 billion yuan in output. In Wangjiang, Anhui, a textile and apparel supply chain with annual output over 18.1 billion yuan is taking shape. In Hubei, the "Jiangnan Rice" brand, supported by 153 leading enterprises at provincial level and above, has developed 9.24 million mu of contract farming, benefiting over 1.068 million households.

Over the past decade, the South-to-North Water Diversion Project has transferred more than 80 billion cubic meters of water from the Yangtze River Basin to northern China via the first phase of the Eastern and Middle Routes.^③ The project has directly benefited 45 large and medium-sized cities and 185 million people,^④ contributing significantly to the optimization of water resource allocation, drinking water safety, ecological restoration of rivers and lakes, and economic connectivity between north and south.

① "Coordinated Regulation and Unified Efforts: Remarkable Achievements in the Joint Operation and Scheduling of Water Projects in the Yangtze River Basin," China Water Resources News, December 18, 2024.

② "Xi Jinping's Affection for the Yangtze River," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, September 5, 2023.

③ "Winning the Final Battle of the 14th Five-Year Plan | Advancing Water Infrastructure for the People: Accelerating the Modernization of Water Conservancy Systems," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 16, 2025.

④ "Governance Chronicles | Ensuring the Sustainable Flow of Clean Water Northward," *Outlook Weekly*, 2025 (5).

Sense of Happiness: Harmonious Coexistence with the Beautiful Yangtze River

Humanity must coexist harmoniously with water. Today, the Yangtze River Basin has abandoned short-term exploitative development, embracing a long-term, sustainable model that benefits the people. A vivid tableau is unfolding: tranquil rivers and serene lakes, clear waters and leaping fish, green banks and scenic vistas, livable communities and thriving industries—all in harmony between people and water.

The implementation of the Happy Rivers and Lakes Initiative has become a crucial strategy in the Yangtze River Basin to benefit the people through ecological restoration. In Ma'anshan, Anhui, the local government has made the comprehensive protection of the Yangtze River an overriding priority, pushing forward with the integrated remediation and ecological restoration of 79 kilometers of riverbank on both sides. In the first half of 2024, water quality indices at national and provincial monitoring sites improved by 5.83% year-on-year, and the water quality compliance rate for drinking water sources reached 100%. Provinces like Hubei and Sichuan have issued policy guidance to support the development of happy rivers and lakes.

Nearly halfway through the ten-year fishing ban on the Yangtze River, the number of fishery-related administrative cases dropped by 24.7% in 2024, while resource density at monitored sites along the main stem rose by 9.5%. A total of 145,000 former fishermen with employment capacity and willingness have transitioned to new jobs, 220,000 eligible individuals have joined the national pension system, and 12,000 vulnerable fishermen have been included in social assistance programs, ensuring that "all who need assistance are assisted" and "all who are eligible are insured."^①

^① "From Recuperation to Thriving Vitality — Five Years of Observation on the Yangtze River Fishing Ban," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, May 11, 2025.

Chapter Two: A Scientific Strategy for Yangtze River Governance in the New Era

President Xi Jinping emphasized that we must plan for the long run, act with enduring strategies, and build a foundation for lasting stability.^① Guided by President Xi's series of important statements on the comprehensive protection of the Yangtze River and the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, China has, over the past decade, developed a comprehensive, coherent, and systematic strategy for Yangtze River governance. This approach has continuously advanced high-level ecological protection and high-quality development along the Yangtze River Economic Belt, serving and supporting the broader goal of realizing Chinese modernization.

2.1 Prioritizing Ecology

The Yangtze River is the "mother river" of the Chinese nation and a vital pillar of its development.^② Pursuing a path of ecological priority and green development is a strategic arrangement for the governance of the Yangtze River in the new era, rooted in the long-term interests of the Chinese nation and aligned with respecting natural, economic, and social laws.

Forging Consensus Through Unified Thinking

Thought guides action, and strategy shapes the future. In the past, a "rush to develop" approach led to pollution and ecological damage to the "mother river," threatening the long-term development interests of the Chinese nation. President Xi Jinping emphasized that advancing the green development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt first requires addressing issues of mindset and understanding.^③ Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China has established the 18-character guideline for the governance of the Yangtze River: "ecological priority, green development, joint protection, and no excessive development." This sets clear rules, boundaries, and directions for the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

Over the past decade, the provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River, have earnestly shouldered the political responsibility of comprehensive protection. They have deeply understood the principles of "working together on protection but not on excessive development" and "ecological priority, green development," making the restoration of the Yangtze's ecological

① Xi Jinping Chairs Symposium on Further Promoting High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Emphasizing Further Promoting High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt to Better Support and Serve Chinese Modernization, Xinhua News Agency, Nanchang, October 12, 2023.

② "Xi Jinping's Affection for the Yangtze River," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, September 5, 2023.

③ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Symposium on Deepening the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, June 13, 2018.

environment an overriding priority. They have correctly balanced the dialectical relationship between environmental protection and economic development, actively abandoning practices that sacrifice the environment for short-term, localized economic growth. The concept that "protecting the environment is protecting productivity, and improving the environment is developing productivity" has taken root, with "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" becoming a widely accepted social consensus along the Yangtze River.

Identifying Problems Accurately and Applying Scientific Solutions

Problems reflect the voice of the times. Upholding a problem-oriented approach and applying comprehensive, scientific measures are defining features of the CPC's governance of the Yangtze River in the new era. At the symposium on comprehensively advancing the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt held in Nanjing, President Xi Jinping emphasized the need to conduct in-depth research on the pressing, challenging, and critical issues that currently constrain the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, to understand the real situation, identify the root causes, and propose effective solutions.^①

To address the longstanding issues and new situations in the Yangtze River Basin, such as fragmented governance, local protectionism, pollution transfer, and cross-regional waste discharge, it is essential to scientifically understand the relationships inherent in development. In advancing the Yangtze River's ecological protection and the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, the entire basin has adopted a problem-oriented approach, implemented systematic and integrated solutions, and addressed both symptoms and root causes. By coordinating ecological conservation with restoration efforts, and upholding the principle of protecting through development and developing through protection, China has resolved a number of historically persistent and publicly sensitive environmental issues. This has enabled a more balanced relationship between economic and social development, population, resources, and the environment—allowing lucid waters and lush mountains to generate substantial ecological, economic, and social benefits.

Strengthening Systems and Improving Mechanisms

On March 1, 2021, after three rounds of deliberation, China's first basin-specific law, the *Yangtze River Protection Law of the People's Republic of China*, came into effect. The principle of "working together on protection but not on excessive development" was enshrined in law, providing

① "Xi Jinping Stresses Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee to Promote the High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt at the Symposium on Comprehensively Advancing the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," Xinhua News Agency, Nanjing, November 15, 2020.

legal support for the scientific, green, and high-quality development of the Yangtze River Basin.

From enacting basin-specific legislation and formulating national special plans to establishing a management system with central coordination, provincial responsibility, and local implementation; from creating robust ecological compensation mechanisms to continuously leveraging the negative list management system, China's Yangtze River governance in the new era has consistently emphasized the rule of law and the support of the system. The blueprint for ecological priority and green development in the Yangtze River Economic Belt is being steadfastly implemented, with measures and tasks carried forward with sustained efforts, ensuring that the clear waters of the river continue to benefit the people and future generations.

2.2 Upholding Dialectical Unity

For thousands of years, the Yangtze River Basin has evolved into a vast socio-economic system bound together by water. In the new era, applying a holistic perspective, considering worst-case scenarios, and upholding dialectical unity to address various contradictions and challenges has become the practical logic of Yangtze River governance.

Applying the Holistic Philosophy of Traditional Chinese Medicine

The classic medical text *Huangdi Neijing* (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic) states, "To treat a disease, one must seek its root." This holistic philosophy from traditional Chinese medicine has been creatively applied to the "illnesses" of the Yangtze River. In response to long-standing issues such as ecological degradation and unregulated extensive development, the principles of root-cause diagnosis, targeted treatment, and systemic healing have informed a new therapeutic approach to Yangtze River governance.

Starting from the integrated nature of ecosystems and the systemic complexity of the Yangtze River Basin, a scientific investigation akin to the traditional Chinese medicine practice of "observing, listening, inquiring, and palpating" is being undertaken. This involves conducting a comprehensive "health check-up" for the Yangtze River Basin to identify various ecological risks and environmental hazards, and to assess its resource and environmental carrying capacity. Once the "pathologies" were located, tailored interventions were applied: ecological restoration efforts now emphasize coordinated action across upstream, midstream, and downstream regions, akin to dispelling wind and cold, relaxing muscles and activating blood circulation, regulating the internal organs, and unblocking the meridians. Measures are designed to be interlinked and synergistic, ensuring that the treatment is effective. For sustainable economic development, spatial zoning has been clarified into categories of optimized, prioritized, restricted, and prohibited development. A long-term

monitoring and early warning system for resource and environmental carrying capacity has been established, ensuring that governance addresses both current and potential future risks.

Grasping Dialectical Relationships with Scientific Precision

Dialectical policymaking and systematic advancement are key principles for ecological protection in the Yangtze River Basin and the high-quality development of the Yangtze Economic Belt. Five key relationships must be carefully balanced: holistic advancement vs. targeted breakthroughs; environmental protection vs. economic growth; overall planning vs. long-term perseverance; phasing out outdated drivers vs. cultivating new ones; and self-driven development vs. coordinated regional progress.

By applying dialectical materialist theory and methodology, China has moved beyond the fragmented thinking that once plagued river governance, such as prioritizing short-term gains over long-term sustainability, or local interests over regional coordination. A basin-wide approach strengthens the alignment of objectives for ecological protection and economic development, coordinates the control of multiple pollutants, and fosters collaboration across departments, regions, and policies. This integrated approach has enhanced the systemic, integrated, and collaborative nature of the measures for Yangtze River governance.

With the resolve of "cutting off a poisoned limb to save the body," outdated development models driven by investment and resource inputs have been decisively abandoned. Obsolete capacity has been steadily phased out, while advanced and green industries have been cultivated, forming clusters of green and high-tech sectors. These efforts exemplify how contradictions between "near and far," "old and new," and "tree and forest" are being effectively resolved.

Coordinating Development and Security

The Yangtze River Economic Belt spans eastern, central, and western China and links the north and south. The 11 provinces and municipalities along the river account for over 40% of China's grain, cotton, and oil production, with a population of 607 million and nearly half of the national GDP. As China's longest and most expansive economic corridor, the Yangtze River Economic Belt plays a pivotal role in China's national development and security.

From the perspective of integrated development and security, the basin continues to strengthen farmland protection and the conservation of agricultural germplasm resources and promote various forms of appropriately scaled operations to safeguard food security. Energy cooperation between upstream and midstream and downstream regions has deepened, with enhanced capacity to ensure baseline supply of coal and other fossil fuels, reinforcing energy security. Modern industrial systems centered on smart equipment, new energy, and electronic information are being developed to ensure industrial security.

Efforts to coordinate flood and drought control have been sustained, with improved disaster prevention and mitigation capabilities. The high-standard construction of a flood-safe Yangtze River is enhancing water security, contributing regional stability to national security.

2.3 Advancing Regional Coordination

As an integrated system, the Yangtze River Basin's high-level ecological protection and high-quality socio-economic development depend on coordinated regional collaboration. Anchored in the national "one chessboard" approach, Yangtze River governance has achieved historic progress through vertical administrative integration and horizontal regional cooperation, ensuring rule-based protection, synergistic basin-wide governance, and smooth, effective inter-regional collaboration.

Top-Level Design: Guiding Development Planning

Promoting the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt spans all sectors of economic and social progress. It is a complex, long-term undertaking that cannot be accomplished overnight. Strong top-level design and persistent, long-term effort are essential to translating the grand blueprint of Yangtze River governance into reality, task by task.

In recent years, a series of strategic plans and policies have been introduced, including the *Outline of the Yangtze River Economic Belt Development Plan*, the *Territorial Spatial Plan for the Yangtze River Economic Belt*, the *Policy Measures for Further Promoting High-Quality Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt*, and the *Opinion on Unwaveringly Advancing the Ten-Year Fishing Ban on the Yangtze River*. Annual work priorities and five-year implementation plans have provided clear timelines and roadmaps for ecological protection and coordinated development across the region.

Under the guidance of these top-level frameworks, planning has played a leading role in shaping regional integration. The Yangtze River Basin has accelerated coordinated development across upstream, midstream, and downstream areas, and fostered interactive cooperation between eastern, central, and western regions, forming a pattern of deeply integrated development.

Inter-provincial Cooperation: Enhancing Regional Integration

The rampant illegal sand mining in the Yangtze River was once a serious problem, exacerbated by an inefficient management system and the high profits associated with the illicit activity. However, with the introduction of the Regulations on the Administration of Sand Mining in the Yangtze River and related laws and regulations issued by various provinces and municipalities, water administrative authorities at all levels have diligently fulfilled their responsibilities, closely coordinating with public security and transportation departments, and implementing joint governance in boundary waters, fundamentally improving the order of sand mining management in the Yangtze River.

By embracing the "one chessboard" mindset, provinces and municipalities along the river have formed a unified force. Through basin-wide coordination, regional collaboration, departmental linkage, and multi-stakeholder engagement, they have jointly advanced ecological protection and restoration. In regional strategies such as the Yangtze River Delta integration, the mid-Yangtze urban cluster, and the Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle, localities have consciously aligned their development with broader regional goals. By leveraging differences in geographic location, resource endowment, and economic foundations, they have pursued differentiated and synergistic development.

Coordinated industrial planning along the river has facilitated the orderly transfer of capital-, technology-, and labor-intensive industries from eastern China to central and western regions, optimizing the productivity layout of the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

Oversight and Inspection: Safeguarding Governance Targets

In May 2024, the second batch of the third round of central inspections on ecological and environmental protection was launched. Seven inspection teams conducted month-long basin-wide and provincial-level assessments in Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, and Yunnan. The teams addressed prominent issues in Yangtze River protection and restoration, such as the unchecked launch of high-energy, high-emission projects and the improper disposal of construction waste, urging local governments to implement corrective measures and deliver tangible results.

China continues to refine its central ecological and environmental protection inspection system and strengthen democratic oversight by non-CPC political parties and non-party personages on the ecological protection of the Yangtze River. Basin-wide and cross-regional coordination and supervision have been enhanced to evaluate plan implementation and identify and analyze existing problems and shortcomings. Through vertical, sector-specific, rigorous inspections and horizontal, inter-departmental, and inter-provincial collaborative checks, behaviors that damage the ecology, pollute the environment, or otherwise hinder the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt are exposed and held accountable, ensuring the smooth achievement of governance targets.

2.4 Upholding the Principle of Collaborative Construction and Shared Benefits

"You live at the head of the Yangtze, I live at its tail." The upper, middle, and lower reaches advance and retreat together with a common stake."^① Adhering to the principle of collaborative

① "For a River of Clear Water Flowing Mightily Eastward: Record of President Xi Jinping's Inspection and his Speech at the Symposium on Deepening the Development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt," Xinhua News Agency, Wuhan, April 27, 2018.

construction and shared benefits is one of the most distinctive features of Yangtze River governance in the new era, fully demonstrating the significant strengths of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics in the governance of the Yangtze River.

Interconnectivity: Building Strong Regional Linkages

Coordinated development across the Yangtze River Basin relies on the interconnectivity of transportation infrastructure and social public services. Leveraging regional transport networks, the basin is accelerating the construction of a comprehensive multidimensional transportation corridor, improving cross-regional, cross-departmental, and cross-level data sharing and connectivity, and deepening cooperation in public service delivery. These efforts are steadily enhancing the integration of transportation and social service networks across the region.

By 2035, the Yangtze River's main stem is expected to host up to 240 bridges, tunnels, and other river-crossing corridors, enabling rapid connectivity between both banks. Social security, healthcare, and other public services will be accessible via Internet across jurisdictions, further advancing the "urban clustering" and "regional integration" of the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

Collaborative Governance: Creating a Beautiful Home

Broad public participation is essential to Yangtze River governance. By mobilizing the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of the people, a diverse and collaborative governance model is taking shape, generating powerful momentum for comprehensive ecological protection of the Yangtze River and high-quality development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

Central enterprises such as the China Three Gorges Corporation have invested in environmental protection projects, starting with urban sewage treatment. They have not only improved water quality in riverside cities but also facilitated local economic transformation. In Nantong, the Aishang Environmental Public Welfare Development Center has coordinated with social organizations across 11 provinces and municipalities, mobilizing nearly 20,000 volunteers for ecological protection activities totaling over 30,000 service hours. In Jiangjin District, Chongqing, a retired serviceman named Liu Hong established the "Honghu Fishery Protection Volunteer Team," encouraging former fishermen to become river patrol volunteers.

In the governance of the Yangtze River in the new era, enterprises contribute market and technological expertise, social organizations serve as bridges connecting diverse stakeholders, and the public plays an active and dynamic role in participation. With increased investment of human, material, and financial resources, the basin has achieved harmonious coexistence between water and people, cities and rivers, and humanity and nature, as well as the mutual prosperity of production, living, and ecological spaces.

Shared Benefits: Benefiting the People along the River

"The people protect the Yangtze, and the Yangtze rewards the people."^① This people-centered philosophy runs through every aspect of Yangtze River governance in the new era. Former industrial sites along the riverbanks have been transformed into waterfront parks and fitness trails, offering residents new spaces for leisure and improving the livability of urban environments. Shifts in development models have also attracted capital, talent, and other resources to riverside towns and villages, turning lush mountains and lucid waters into invaluable assets, boosting urban employment, and driving rural revitalization.

Residents of the Yangtze River Economic Belt have seen steady income growth and rising living standards, delivering a tangible sense of gain. According to the *Yangtze River Economic Belt Development Report (2023–2024)* by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the average per capita disposable income of urban residents across the 11 provinces and municipalities in the belt reached 53,992 yuan in 2023, an increase of 3,181 yuan over 2022, representing a year-on-year growth of 6.26%.

2.5 Integrating Heritage and Innovation

The culture of the Yangtze River embodies centuries of Chinese wisdom in water governance and distills the essence of China's outstanding traditional cultural heritage. In the Yangtze River governance in the new era, provinces and municipalities along the river continue to inherit, develop, and promote Yangtze culture, creatively transforming and innovating to sustain historical continuity and reinforce cultural confidence.

Drawing from China's Enduring Wisdom in Water Governance

Throughout history, the Chinese people have governed the Yangtze River by adapting to local conditions and seasonal variations, leveraging strengths and mitigating weaknesses, and employing diverse strategies to minimize the impact of natural disasters on production and daily life. This long-standing practice has promoted the socio-economic prosperity and development of the Yangtze River Basin, accumulating rich wisdom for harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Especially since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party of China has led the Chinese nation in controlling floods, developing water infrastructure, promoting development, and improving people's livelihoods in the Yangtze River Basin, creating remarkable miracles recognized worldwide.

From the method of "dredging rivers and guiding stagnant waters" employed by the ancient

① *Selected Works of Xi Jinping on Ecological Civilization*, vol. I, p. 94.

Chinese sage Yu the Great in flood control, to the Dujiangyan irrigation system built by Li Bing and his son, which harnessed the natural curvature of the river to divert water without a dam, ancient Chinese approaches reflect earnest respect for nature. Today, urban planning and water infrastructure along the Yangtze River fully respect the original topography, water systems, and vegetation, avoiding large-scale mountain leveling, lake filling, or straightening of river bends, ensuring that the relationship between water and cities aligns with the natural landscape.

Building on 5,000 years of water governance wisdom, the CPC since the 18th National Congress has integrated the basic tenets of Marxism with China's river governance practices and the best of Chinese traditional culture. This enduring commitment has advanced ecological protection in the Yangtze River Basin and high-quality development across the Yangtze River Economic Belt, continuously deepening and refining the theory and practice of Yangtze River governance.

Protecting, Inheriting, and Promoting Yangtze Culture

From resplendently illuminated Bund with its array of international architecture to the meticulously restored Wukang Building, Shanghai's 44 historic cultural districts are being revitalized through protection and restoration efforts. Night tours of the Yellow Crane Tower and other cultural tourism projects in Wuhan have gained popularity, with citizens and tourists flocking to "check in" and recite classic lines such as "The sage on yellow crane was gone amid clouds white. To what avail is Yellow Crane Tower left here?" At the Former Residence of Su Xun, Su Shi, and Su Zhe in Meishan, Sichuan, the gate opens at 9 a.m. to a bustling flood of visitors, with tourists strolling through the ancient house, immersed in the profound family values of "filial piety, kindness, benevolence, love, generosity toward others, and modesty in oneself."

Plans such as the *Yangtze River Cultural Protection, Inheritance, and Promotion Plan* and the *National Yangtze River Cultural Park Development Plan* guide cities along the river to integrate historical and ecological heritage with urban and rural development, emphasizing local distinctiveness and fostering systematic cultural protection, inheritance, and promotion.

In Jingzhou, Hubei, over 600 primary and secondary school students have been trained as inheritors of the national intangible cultural heritage of Mashan folk songs, reviving this "living fossil" of Chu culture dating back to the Spring and Autumn period. Through creative transformation and innovative development, Yangtze culture is entering daily life, and enriching the spiritual world of the people living along the river.

Nurturing a New Riverine Civilization

The culture of the Yangtze River is a product of its historical evolution and a vessel of Chinese national identity and profound wisdom. As Yangtze civilization continues to evolve, it integrates ecological protection, cultural inheritance, economic development, and social governance,

nurturing a new form of riverine civilization.

In the new era, China's strategy for Yangtze River governance emphasizes harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, the interplay of historical and modern cultures, and the synergy between high-quality development and ecological civilization. Through reconstructing the "water-land-people-culture" framework of civilization, which embodies respect for nature, sustainable development, inclusive mutual learning, collaborative governance, and a global perspective, China offers innovative solutions for river basin governance and the progress of civilizations worldwide.

Chapter Three: The Global Significance of Yangtze River Governance in the New Era

Every nation has its own great rivers. Rivers have played vital roles in shaping economies, politics, cultures, societies, and ecosystems. Today, the Yangtze River is undergoing a profound and enduring transformation. The story of the Yangtze is not only a Chinese story but also a global story of humanity reconciling with nature and co-creating a sustainable future. The Eastern wisdom of water governance, rooted in respect and sharing, provides a systematic approach to ensuring security, charts a path toward the harmonious unity of humanity and nature, and embodies a people-centered value orientation. It contributes a viable pathway for ecology-driven economic development, and strengthens global exchange and mutual learning among riverine civilizations through water-linked relationships. The Yangtze River, as a super river, holds super global significance in its governance and development achievements and experiences.

3.1 Security: Proving a New Model for Global River Governance

Ecological and environmental challenges are complex, diverse, and transboundary, often beyond the capacity of any single nation or region to address alone. The historic achievements of Yangtze River governance in the new era stem from a systemic approach that safeguards ecological security and promotes sustainable development across the entire basin. It breaks away from fragmented, isolated models and embraces an all-encompassing, full-chain, and holistic perspective on security.

Systemic Integration: Bridging Factor Boundaries

Traditional model of river governance often treated symptoms in isolation, "treating the head for a headache, the foot for a foot sore," focusing solely on pollution or flood control. Yet, as the Chinese saying goes: "The lifeline of people lies in the fields, the lifeline of fields lies in water, the lifeline of water lies in mountains, the lifeline of mountains lies in soil, and the lifeline of soil lies in trees." President Xi Jinping has emphasized prioritizing protection and pursuing integrated conservation of mountains, rivers, forests, farmland, lakes, grasslands, deserts, and glaciers in strengthening the protection and restoration of the ecological environments of major river basins.^① This ecological philosophy, which views the ecosystem as living organism, is key to guiding river

^① Xi Jinping stresses fully implementing the guidelines of the CPC for governing Xizang in a new era and writing a new chapter of lasting stability and high-quality development for the snowy plateau region during his inspection of Xizang, Xinhua News Agency, Lhasa, July 23, 2021.

governance shifts from addressing symptoms to tackling root causes. Applied to the governance of the Yangtze River, this approach not only ensures the river's security but also saves endangered species like the Yangtze finless porpoise, reshapes the entire aquatic food chain, and accelerates the revitalization of the ecosystem of the entire basin.

Regional Integration: Bridging Regional Boundaries

Major rivers often span multiple administrative regions. The outdated governance model marked by "regional fragmentation and departmental silos" often manifests as the "fragmentation" of governance authority, policies, and actions, coupled with low governance efficiency. Through top-level design and high-level promotion, the Yangtze River Basin Coordination Mechanism has been established, strengthening unified planning, governance, coordination, and management across the basin, transcending geographical boundaries and administrative barriers. The establishment of mechanisms such as cross-provincial and cross-departmental collaborative protection, horizontal ecological compensation, and the river chief system ensures comprehensive governance from source to estuary. This shift from "each managing their own stretch" to "managing together" offers a new solution to the global dilemma of upstream development harming downstream areas.

Smart Governance: Empowered by Technology and Rule of Law

River governance must move beyond traditional methods, embracing frontier scientific theory and technological innovation. In China, tools like satellite remote sensing, IoT, bioinformatics, and aquatic ecosystem assessments are widely used for water quality monitoring, pollution tracking, ecological evaluation, and disaster early warning, forming a multidimensional "sky-space-ground" smart monitoring network. From a long-term perspective, legal frameworks such as the *Yangtze River Protection Law* provide binding mechanisms for safeguarding the "mother river." The Supreme People's Court, along with 11 other central and state agencies, jointly issued a directive, systematically establishing a collaborative governance system that spans the entire Yangtze River Basin and covers the full process of law enforcement and judicial administration. This signifies that Yangtze River governance is not a short-term campaign but is supported by a comprehensive, long-term operational institutional framework to ensure "efficient governance, sustainable outcomes, and safer livelihoods."

3.2 Unity: Injecting New Impetus for Global Green Transformation

Development or Protection? The two seemingly opposing objectives have been reconciled in

the governance of the Yangtze River, demonstrating a viable path toward harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Reconsidering the Relationship Between Humanity and Nature

Since the advent of industrial civilization, humanity has often indulged in conquering nature, treating rivers as objects for unlimited exploitation and subjugation, frequently resulting in the fragmentation and degradation of ecosystems. France's *Les Échos* reported on Wushan County in Chongqing, which invests millions of yuan annually in specialized funds for Yangtze River protection. Since 2003, Wushan has deployed a fleet of dozens of debris-clearing vessels that set out daily to "fish" for garbage polluting the Yangtze River. Twenty years after launching this ambitious project, Wushan is beginning to reap the rewards of its efforts. "According to China's water quality standards, the main stem of the Yangtze River in the Wushan section has maintained Class II water quality for 8 consecutive years, with total phosphorus concentrations declining for 11 years in a row."^①

The governance of the Yangtze River transcends the exploitative development model of industrial civilization, shifting toward an ecological civilization that pursues harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, embodying a vision of sustainable development. Shifting from confrontation and conquest to respect, adaptation, and cooperation, humanity's relationship with rivers has changed. Rivers are no longer seen merely as tools for achieving human economic goals, but are now recognized as having intrinsic value worthy of protection. The relationship between humanity and rivers is no longer one of "exploitation and utilization," but rather an inseparable, organic unity.

Reconsidering the Relationship Between Development and Protection

John B. Cobb, Jr., a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has noted that many in the West view economic development and environmental protection as sharply opposing forces, whereas China strives to harmonize the two, reflecting their profound wisdom.^② Brazil's *Leitura Weekly* published an article titled "The Power of Water Transport: How the Yangtze River Drives China's Economic Juggernaut," which argues that as China seeks to lead the global ecological transformation, the Yangtze River is expected to serve as a green corridor for sustainable growth.^③

Yangtze River governance adheres to the principle of ecological priority and green

① "China Achieves Remarkable Results in Improving Yangtze River Water Quality," *Reference News*, June 19, 2025.

② "Special Report: The Two Mountains Theory Belongs to China and the World—China's Inspiration and Contribution to Building a Clean and Beautiful World," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 15, 2024.

③ "How Does the Yangtze River Drive China's Economic Juggernaut?" *Reference News*, June 27, 2025.

development, aiming to resolve the conflict between protection and development. While the ecological quality of the Yangtze River Economic Belt continues to improve, its economic structure has become more optimized, and its development momentum has strengthened. Practice has shown that protecting the environment is tantamount to safeguarding productivity, and improving the environment equates to advancing productivity. This reveals that environmental protection is neither a burden on growth nor an excuse for halting development. When viewed as a new development opportunity, it can lead to a "win-win" scenario of ecological improvement, economic prosperity, and enhanced public well-being.

3.3 People: Creating a New Paradigm for Humanity's Livelihoods

The goal of "realizing the people's aspirations for a better life" runs through the efforts of Yangtze River governance. The health of the Yangtze River is the foundation of people's well-being, and the people's stewardship is the source of the river's vitality. They form a life community of mutual dependence, shared benefit, and harmonious coexistence.

People-Centered Approach

Clean water, safe food, and a healthy environment are shared aspirations of people in all countries. Egyptian climate and environmental expert Magdy Allam has stated, "China's strong emphasis on ecological civilization has significantly enhanced the well-being of its people." Improved water quality ensures safe drinking water for hundreds of millions of residents along the river, while large-scale ecological restoration creates high-quality public recreational spaces. Yangtze River governance provides people with a safer and more ecological-friendly environment, profoundly reflecting a "people-centered" development philosophy. For countries and regions undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization, this serves as a valuable reminder: the ultimate goal of development should be to enhance the quality of life for all, with economic growth serving as a means to achieve this end.

Shared Prosperity

International observers note that for communities transitioning to a green economy, the focus is on whether they can access equitable development opportunities and sustainable livelihoods. Yangtze River governance does not come at the expense of certain groups' livelihoods. Instead, it actively explores a new path that benefits protectors and enables people in transition to thrive, aiming for shared prosperity for all. Following the comprehensive protection of the Yangtze River, the government has provided skills training and created public welfare jobs, turning "fishermen" into

"fish protectors." By supporting the development of ecological tourism, it has facilitated livelihood transitions for riverside residents. This approach prevents environmental protection from becoming a burden borne by a few, instead transforming it into an opportunity to create new, more sustainable jobs. It ensures fairness and justice during the shift from extensive to green development, striking a balance between environmental policy and social equity.

3.4 Economy: A New Reference for Modernization in Developing Countries

How to build a modernization of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature? President Xi Jinping has profoundly elaborated, "In building a modernized nation, following the old path of the United States and Europe is not viable."^① For many developing countries, the governance of the Yangtze River offers a new philosophy and practical pathway for economic development.

From Binary Opposition to Dialectical Unity: Breaking the Mold of "Pollute First, Clean Up Later"

Japanese documentary filmmaker Ryo Takeuchi, whose film *The Yangtze River* premiered in 2024, was astonished by the scale of changes in the Yangtze River. He said, "These changes are surprising. Ten years is not a long time, as environmental changes take time, but China's pace is much faster than other countries."^② China has taken the Yangtze River as a starting point, transforming ecological constraints into new drivers of innovation and development. The improvement of the ecological environment has become a "magnet" attracting talent, capital, and industries, realizing the transformation of "lucid waters and lush mountains" into "invaluable assets." Currently, the Yangtze River Economic Belt is being developed into a pioneering demonstration zone for China's eco-environmental progress, an innovation-driven zone, and a coordinated development zone. This practical action by China dismantles the "ecological fundamentalism" discourse constructed by Western countries, offering developing nations an alternative to the old path of "pollute first, clean up later" or "prioritizing growth over ecology." It presents a greener path to modernization.

From "Short-Term and Local" to "Long-Term Vision":

Harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature focuses not only on immediate

① "Xinhua Commentary: A Fundamental Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Chinese Nation—On the 20th Anniversary of the Concept of Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains Are Invaluable Assets," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 15, 2025.

② "The Yangtze River: Documentary Director Ryo Takeuchi: Many Japanese Viewers Booked Three Gorges Cruises After Watching the Film," Xinmin Evening News, August 17, 2025.

development but also on long-term sustainability.

In the governance of the Yangtze River, policies like the "ten-year fishing ban" demonstrate strategic resolve and historical patience, with effects that will take years, or even longer, to fully materialize. This requires policymakers to have a long-term perspective, embracing a mindset that "success does not necessarily have to be achieved by us, but success must have our contribution."^①

This approach transcends global short-termism and the pressures of political cycles, striving to protect our shared planetary home and leave a greener, more livable environment for future generations, where skies are bluer, land is greener, and waters are clearer. Only through the sustainable development of rivers can we nourish long-term economic growth, cultural vitality, and ecological security, ensuring lasting benefits for generations to come.

3.5 Relationship: New Contributions to the Convergence of Global Riverine Civilizations

The story of Yangtze River governance is, at its core, a story of relationship between humanity and nature, between regions, and between China and the world.

Creating New Global Public Goods

The Yangtze is the river that sustains the largest population and supports the greatest economic output on Earth. China's exploration of achieving high-quality development through the governance and protection of the Yangtze River represents a pioneering practice in managing and protecting major rivers globally while transforming and upgrading development models. The ideas, technologies, and experiences accumulated in this process are becoming public goods benefiting all humanity through various international exchange channels. China has shared its experience in environmental public interest litigation with countries like Brazil, promoted ecological restoration technologies such as "nature-based solutions" overseas, and actively participated in the "UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration" action plan. These efforts reflect China's commitment to open, inclusive solutions for challenges faced by all humanity.

Accelerating Exchange and Mutual Learning between Civilizations

As Prof. Shahbaz Khan, director and representative of UNESCO's East Asia Office, noted, "Water has always been the cradle of civilization throughout humanity's grand journey." The

^① "Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Training Program for Young and Middle-Aged Officials at the Central Party School (National Academy of Governance), Emphasizing Strengthening Theoretical Cultivation Through Continuous Learning and Taking Proactive Responsibility Through Unity of Knowledge and Action," Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, March 1, 2019.

world's four great ancient civilizations all emerged along great rivers. Rivers are global bonds that connect human emotions and showcase the characteristics of civilizations. The Yangtze River, as a vital representative of global riverine civilization, has shaped the vivid image of the Chinese nation's pursuit of peace, harmony, and amity. It is increasingly becoming a bridge for promoting exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations. In recent years, China has actively focused on the research and protection of great river basin cultures, organizing events like the dialogues and seminars on major river civilizations to facilitate exchanges between world great riverine civilizations and mutual learning of their governance experiences. This exchange goes beyond simple technical sharing, elevating to cultural and philosophical heights, guiding countries to jointly address global challenges. Despite differing national contexts, we share a common destiny and are interdependent in the governance of great rivers, in pursuing harmony between humanity and nature, and in seeking sustainable development.

Conclusion

The great river flows day and night, carrying the affections of a great nation and its people.

Once in the past, the ancient banks of the Yangtze River echoed with the chants of boat trackers and were lined with factory chimneys. Today, an increasing expanse of blue skies, clear waters, and lush greenery unfolds in an increasingly beautiful picture of harmonious coexistence between humanity, nature, and cities.

Rooted in history, grounded in the present, and oriented toward the future, China has elevated the Yangtze River Economic Belt to the level of a national strategic priority. This economic belt, spanning the eastern, central, and western regions of China, carries not only the vivid practice of Chinese modernization but also the contemporary answer to the question of how humanity and nature can coexist harmoniously.

The song of the Yangtze River in the new era is echoing on both banks of the great river.

In the governance of the Yangtze River in the new era, China adheres to principles of people-centered development, self-confidence and self-reliance, upholding fundamental principles and breaking new ground, problem-oriented thinking, systems-based approaches, and a global perspective. The transformation of the Yangtze River Economic Belt stands as a living testament to Xi Jinping's thoughts on ecological civilization, economic development, rule of law, diplomacy, and culture.

When the people protect the rivers, the rivers nourish the people. To safeguard the rivers is to safeguard the lifeblood of civilization, the well-being of the people, and the future of humanity. In the process of building a community with a shared future for humanity, the story of the Yangtze River is becoming a green footnote for the world to listen to the East and understand China. This river of civilization, of life, and of development is growing ever broader.

With interconnected rivers and seas, world becomes a unified and dynamic whole. The governance of the Yangtze River in the new era embodies philosophical wisdom that respects nature and its laws, demonstrates a historical responsibility that benefits the present and future generations, and showcases a people-centered, sustainable civilization. Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the concept of ecological priority and green development is flowing from the Yangtze River to the entire nation and the world.