



Tai'erzhuang in Shandong province is renowned for its traditional architecture and water culture.

PHOTOS BY GAO QIMIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Grand Canal lives on in Tai'erzhuang

Flow of history still evident in time-honored trade stop, Wang Qian reports.

The ancient water town of Tai'erzhuang alongside the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal is an alluring tourism destination, a rare site where the original beauty and cultural legacies of the world's oldest manmade waterway remain alive today.

The 1,794-kilometer-long Grand Canal, nine times longer than the Suez Canal, linked northern and southern China and served as a lifeline for dynasties for 14 centuries. It joined the list of World Cultural Heritage sites on June 22.

Located in Zaozhuang city of southwestern Shandong province where a significant section of the canal still functions, Tai'erzhuang has spectacular canal legacies, said experts, including ancient sluices, wharfs and revetments, making it an important part of the application for the World Cultural Heritage list.

The ancient town of Tai'erzhuang was established in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), but didn't really come alive until the Jia Canal was built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Colloquially known as the "canal of pounded locks", the Jia had eight locks to control water levels.

Tai'erzhuang had the first lock for barges to pass through, sited where the water enters Shandong from the south.

"In ancient times, passing through a lock took

several weeks and sometimes up to one month," said Wang Guangjin, director of the town's managing committee. "So merchants had to stay in Tai'erzhuang, which boosted the town's economy and made it prosperous overnight."

According to the Annals of Yi County published in 1904, around 10,000 boats passed through Tai'erzhuang on the canal every year, making it an important transport and trading hub during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Because of the canal, businessmen from around the country and even the world converged at Tai'erzhuang.

They left behind great legacies including more than 6,000 houses and buildings with different architectural styles — some in classical building styles from both the north and south of China, and others of European design. The beauty and prosperity of the town even beckoned the Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

The emperor once called Tai'erzhuang "the most affluent town in the world" and created many legends when he stopped by on his way south via canal, according to the Annals.

Today, tourists can tour the town by boat along the 3-kilometer-long section of the canal, said to be the only stretch unchanged and still functioning since the Ming Dynasty.

"Most docks and mooring points along the canal have



The 1,794-kilometer-long Grand Canal served as a lifeline for dynasties across 14 centuries.

been changed or renovated by modern development, but Zaozhuang has a passage along which 13 docks made of natural stone and mooring points are original," Wang says.

Some of them are now used by tourists to reach their destination by boat. After visiting the waterway and docks in 2005, Eric Peterson, an expert from World Tourism Organization, was especially impressed because he daydreamed about China's Grand Canal.

When he finally saw it, he found it was as amazing as he imagined.

Expo park

Wang Hui, chief executive of Tai'erzhuang district, said "the canal caused the country's merchants to converge in the ancient town, bringing diverse traditional cultures, folk arts, customs, and beliefs."

"They are the soul of the town

and what most attracts tourists."

To show and protect the cultural resources, a 10,000-square-meter national expo park for intangible cultural heritage, the only one of its kind in China, was built along a boat-shaped street in the town. Wang said 156 national and provincial-level heritage items from across the nation are on display, ranging from clay sculpture from Beijing and oilpaper umbrellas from Luzhou to traditional New Year woodprint painting from Weifang, Shandong province.

Tourists can see how the crafts are made or try their hand at making their own.

Folk artists are invited to perform in the town every day. Most are inheritors of centuries-old traditions now at risk of vanishing.

They include Liuqin Opera, storytelling in local dialect with drum accompaniment, and Zaozhuang shadow puppetry.

For history buffs, more than 40 museums in the town display diverse traditions such as Chinese traditional medicine and liquor. At the head of the boat-shaped street stands China's first museum of shop signs. It showcases more than 500 shop signs ranging from the Ming Dynasty through to the Republic of China period.

Visitors can also hear 60 calls used by shop owners to attract the attention of customers. "We want to show a miniature of Chinese culture by these museums, intangible cultural heritage items and folk art performances," Wang said.

That was validated when Rieke Caroline, a Bolivian candidate for Miss Tourism World, visited Tai'erzhuang in 2010. "To know Tai'erzhuang is to know China," she said.

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Ancient-style stone bridges are a big attraction.



Tianhou Temple is recreated by craftsmen from Quanzhou with exquisitely carved stone pillars.



An ancient arch in the historic town Tai'erzhuang is well-known for its exquisite and complicated stone carves.

JU CHUANJIANG / CHINA DAILY

Town of relics and remembrance in Shandong

By ZHAO RUIXUE

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Despite its small size, Tai'erzhuang in Shandong province is famed for its number of traditional temples, waterways and museums.

Subject of a recent CNN Travel report said Tai'erzhuang is among the most beautiful five water towns in China. It is also known for a fierce battle between Kuomintang and Japanese troops in 1938.

Established in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), Tai'erzhuang became prosperous in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties as the result of a canal built through the town as part of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal.

The Annals of Yi County recorded that Tai'erzhuang had around 6,600 houses at its heyday in Ming and Qing dynasties.

Some were built in classical Chinese styles and others had European designs.

The ancient town is a place where Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Taoism co-existed harmoniously.

But most of the town was destroyed during the Battle of Tai'erzhuang, an important victory for the Kuomintang during the World War II.

Before reconstructing the town, the local government spent three years collecting more than 380 pictures and photos, as well as 1,130 documents and films, to learn what the town was like before the war. "We tried our best to restore its classic architecture," said Wang Guangjin, the town's management committee director.

"To ensure genuine work, native craftsmen were invited to join us," says Wang. One example is Tianhou Temple originally built in the early Qing Dynasty by businessmen from Fujian province. "Many craftsmen were over 70 years old when they rebuilt the town.

Most of these old craftsmen haven't found the right people to hand down their skills, so some work in the town might be their last," Wang says.

When he worked as the head of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, Shan Jixiang praised Tai'erzhuang as a pioneer for its work in protecting cultural heritage.

He said the town is a perfect com-



Fuxing Mansion is built for cross-Straits communication.

ination of tangible landscape and intangible culture.

Leisure life

Li Jilie, president of China Comfort Travel, predicts that as a place where tourists can enjoy both natural and manmade beauty, Tai'erzhuang will become an international tourism destination.

Shu Yi, son of the noted writer Lao She, visited Tai'erzhuang four times in a month.

He praised how the ancient town

integrates classic and modern elements.

In addition to 72 temples of different religions, tourists can visit museums with legacies on show such as shop signs from the Ming Dynasty through to the Republic of China period. Tourists can also practice around 100 kinds of folk arts, such as paper cutting and shadow plays. The ancient town has 18 pools along a 15-kilometer waterway. Ancient piers and wharfs that still stand at water-

ways are now used by tourists to reach their destination by boat. Site of a huge battle between China and Japan in April 1938, the CNN Travel said the town's war elements add to the interest. Tourists can see 53 buildings that survived the war, some bearing bullet holes from the fighting. The town's status as a place to commemorate the World War II is enhanced by special visits by Taiwan officials including Lien Chan, the honorary chairman of the Kuomintang.

Another Kuomintang honorary chairman, Wu Boxiong, praised the

IF YOU GO

There are high-speed trains to Zaozhuang city where the town is located from Beijing and Shanghai every couple of hours. Entrance tickets are 160 yuan (\$26.08). There are inns, hotels and restaurants in the town. You can pass in and out of it with your room key.

town as a base for cross-Straits communication during his visit in 2011.

"In every corner of the world, those who fight for freedom, children and peace are all heroes," Polish Ambassador to China Tadeusz Chomicki said.

After visiting the town, he said "in wartime, buildings in Tai'erzhuang were ruined just as in Warsaw in 1939".

"Such similarities forever secure friendship between Polish and Chinese people."

