

Storied history flows through ancient village

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Several hundred meters to the north of the famed Jinci Temple, Chiqiao is one of the most scenic villages in the Shanxi provincial capital city of Taiyuan, with attractions including a clear stream, an ancient bridge, a mountain of lush vegetation resembling a crouching tiger, ancient streets and temples and old residences and mills.

What makes it stand out among the many ancient villages in Taiyuan, which was known as Jinyang more than two millennia ago, is its remarkable history.

Locals said Jinci Temple and the village of Chiqiao are the silent witnesses to the rise and fall of the ancient Kingdom of Jin during the Western Zhou Dynasty (C.11th century-771 BC) and the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). The Kingdom of Jin, a vassal state which was founded in Western Zhou, had developed into one of the most powerful states in the early and middle Spring and Autumn Period. And Jinci was the family temple to worship the royal ancestors of Jin.

In the latter part of the Spring and Autumn Period, the Kingdom of Jin was dominated by the four powerful noble families of Zhao, Wei, Han and Zhi. Ignoring the authority of the royal family, the families had been engaged in wars spanning decades.

The clear stream running through the village is called Jinshui, originating from the neighboring Jinci. During that conflict, it was used as a fatal weapon.

Zhao Xiangzi, head of the Zhao family; and Zhi Bo, head of the Zhi family, were arch rivals during the conflict. As there seemed to be no end to the war, Zhi decided to divert the Jinshui Stream to flood the barracks of Zhao. Knowing the information in advance, Zhao gave the order to break the embankment near Zhi's barracks, letting the torrential water wash the enemy soldiers away and Zhi was killed during his retreat.

Local researchers stated that the section of the stream that Zhi wanted to cut, and Zhao eventually breached, was in Chiqiao village.

Several years after the battle, the three families of Zhao, Wei and Han announced the founding of their own independent kingdoms by splitting the land of Jin. That marked the end of the Spring and Autumn Period and the beginning of the more turbulent Warring States Period (475-221 BC).

But the account of water-based

warfare is not the only story to be told. One tale that is often remembered by locals is about failed assassination attempts, with the village being named after such an incident.

After Zhi Bo's death, Yu Rang, one of his diehard followers, tried to assassinate Zhao Xiangzi twice. Zhao set him free after his first attempt.

The second time he hid himself under the stone bridge in the village as he learned that Zhao would pass by. Being captured again, Yu was brought to the deck of the bridge and was asked his last words before his execution.

"I stayed true to my faith and mission.

And I know failure is part of my fate.

If you are a true gentleman, please give me a knife and take off your robe.

After three stabs into the robe, I will kill myself to be reunited with my deceased lord," Yu said.

Zhao did so and Yu cut his throat after stabbing the robe and the bridge was stained red with his blood. That's why the village is named Chiqiao, or Red Bridge.

After two and a half millennia, the Jinshui Stream is still flowing through the village with the Red Bridge spanning its waters. They have become landmark attractions in the village.

But there is no more blood on the bridge. The water in the stream is used for irrigation and running papermaking mills. The bridge reaches across the water linking hundreds of residences on both sides.

Where a street ends at the foot of the crouching tiger mountain, there is an ancient Buddhist temple called Lanre, which is said to have been built in the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577).

Lanre is the Chinese pronunciation of a Buddhist term, which literally means a place of supreme serenity.

The village was listed as one of the famed traditional villages in China by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Construction in June 2019. That status has helped it attract more tourists.

Visitors to Chiqiao can easily find enthusiastic locals who love to tell stories about the village.

Lao Li, a retired teacher, is one of the enthusiasts. The well-educated old man likes to use a quote of William Shakespeare to conclude his narration: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury."

Xing Aitian contributed to this story.



Old residences can be seen everywhere in the village of Chiqiao. XING AITIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Swordplay



As the weather becomes warmer in spring, two women practice martial arts in a park in the southern Shanxi city of Yuncheng. To improve the local environment and offer more places for tourists and residents to relax, Yuncheng has built or renovated a number of parks. Local statistics show that the city boasts nearly 30 parks and public gardens. XUE JUE / FOR CHINA DAILY



A farmer operates a farming machine to weed an orchard in Shanxi province. LI LIANJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Farmers mastering new skills to revitalize Shanxi agriculture

More than 750,000 rural workers have received training to modernize and upgrade practices



By YUAN SHENGGAO

Skills training is crucial to agricultural modernization and rural revitalization, said farmers and rural officials in Shanxi province.

Taigu, a county in the central Shanxi city of Jinzhong, is one of the pioneers of agricultural modernization in the province. It is home to the Shanxi Agricultural Valley, a pilot industrial base for modernizing the whole agricultural value chain, from research and development, seedling cultivation, farming, agricultural product processing and sales, through the use of modern machinery, technologies and operations.

While modern machinery and technologies can be readily put in place, local officials said farmers who can skillfully use them are more important in the agricultural modernization process.

That's why Taigu launched a farmers' vocational school four years ago. The school's curriculum covers 64 subjects across 17 categories, aiming to create high-quality farmers.

The school's operations are not limited to a certain campus. Farmers throughout the county can receive training at sites near to their homes.

A vegetable farm in the village of Rencun in Taigu is one such training site. About 60 local farmers, for instance, took part in a five-day training class in August last year for growing novel crops like colorful chili.

Jia Jin'er, a local farmer, was one of the trainees. She said most of the trainees are farmers experienced in growing vegetables in greenhouses.

"We mainly grow vegetables that can be commonly seen on dining



Farmers work in a greenhouse farm in the Shanxi Agricultural Valley. The smart farm that covers 4,000 square meters is also a training site of a farmers' vocational school in Taigu county. LI QUANHONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

tables," Jia said, adding that their prices are much lower than those novel varieties like the colorful chili.

"When we heard that there would be an opportunity to learn to grow these novel varieties, we signed up for the training class," she said. "Five days is enough for us to master the basics and our skills can be further enhanced as some teachers will stay with us to offer follow-up services."

A strawberry greenhouse farm in the Shanxi Agricultural Valley is another site for training.

Farmers who graduated from the training classes say they are happy to have mastered modern methods.

One of the farmers who had just finished training said he was amazed by the combination of beekeeping and strawberry farming in greenhouses.

"We are told that pollination is crucial for growing berries and bees are among the best pollinating media," the farmer said. "Beekeeping in greenhouses can boost strawberry output and honey as a byproduct can also add to revenue."

In Shanxi, some frequent students have become experts. They are now using their expertise and know-how to train their fellow farmers.

This is the case with Wu Zhongding, head of an apple farming cooperative in the county of Linyi in Yuncheng city.

He compiled a 50,000-word guidebook for apple farming based on the notes he took at various training classes. He later used the new techniques and technologies to upgrade the farms in his cooperative and has trained hundreds of local farmers.

Training farmers to skillfully operate various machines is another important part of the agricultural modernization of Shanxi.

Li Yaping, a farmer in Qiaotou village in Ruicheng county, for instance, can use multiple farming machines thanks to various training sessions.

On a warm spring day in March, Li drove a tractor to water his wheat farm. "This is not a conventional tractor," Li said. "It can be turned into a multipurpose farming machine with modifications."

Li used the tractor as a spraying machine after he mounted a water tank and a spray nozzle mast onto it. He said it can also be turned into a machine for plowing or harvesting.

"We used flood irrigation in the past, which consumed a lot of water," the farmer said. "Now we are taught

to use the more economical way of spray irrigation with a modified tractor."

He estimated spray irrigation can save more than 600 yuan (\$95) for each hectare of land compared with flood irrigation.

Shanxi has placed equal emphasis on training farmers to become familiar with e-commerce, which is playing an increasingly important role in the sale of agricultural products.

Pingshun in the city of Changzhi is one of the pilot counties in Shanxi in rural e-commerce. In 2019, the county began to hire e-commerce experts to train its farmers.

More than 3,500 rural residents took part in various training courses that year. As a result, the number of online stores selling farm produce increased from about 30 to nearly 400 that year.

Liu Zhijie, head of the Shanxi Department of Agricultural and Rural Affairs, said the training for farmers features multiple forms and various links of the value chain.

"While training farmers to master modern farming skills, we also highlight nurturing rural business leaders, including entrepreneurs and operators of rural cooperatives and modern farms," Liu said. "We are fostering a strong force for rural governance as well."

According to the department, Shanxi has trained more than 750,000 farmers since 2014 and awarded them various skill certificates. Training programs cover more than 20 subjects including crop and vegetable farming, aquaculture, husbandry, farming machine operation and e-commerce.

Farmers with certificates are being called a new type of professional farmer in Shanxi, setting a role model for many regions in China to learn from, according to the department.

Han Linfang contributed to this story.

Baijiu brand boasts millennium-long lineage

By YUAN SHENGGAO

In the history of alcoholic beverage production, distilling is a technique developed later than fermenting, but it marked a revolution in the industry, as it led to the production of liquor, which contains a higher purity and is easy to preserve.

Many believe the production of liquor can be traced back 800 years ago. But researchers in Fenyang, the Shanxi city known for the white liquor — or *baijiu* — producer Xinghuacun Fenjiu, said that the history can be pushed back 600 years earlier.

Referring to historical records, they discovered that distilled liquor was first mass produced in Fenyang and its neighboring areas during the early period of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

It is said famed Tang Dynasty official Wei Zheng introduced the distilling technique to make liquor from grapes. Grape liquor is different from wine, which is made from grapes using fermenting technique and has a history of more than 2,000 years both in the West and China.

This speculation was justified with a poem by the then emperor Li Shi-



The technique of dry mixing of ingredients is used at a plant in Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group. WEN ZHAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

min, which described the quality of the grape liquor made by Wei; and an essay by famed Tang Dynasty poet Liu Zongyuan, which gave a detailed account of the production process.

According to local history books, mass production of distilled grape liquor started in Fenyang in the decades following Wei's introduction. Before that, the Chinese alcoholic beverage industry was dominated by fermented cereal wines, which featured a higher content of impurities and were sensitive to decay.

The distilling technique evolved from grape liquor and cereal liquor to white liquor production in the centuries that followed.

The village of Xinghuacun, where today's Xinghuacun Fenjiu is based, has been a hub for liquor production since the Tang Dynasty, according to researchers.

They said the liquor products from Xinghuacun became popular in the markets because of its purity, clear-as-water quality and unique mellow taste.

It is known that the production of liquor involves distilling a mixture that is produced through fermentation. The process of distillation removes diluting agents like water from the mixture, increasing the alcohol content.

Executives at Xinghuacun Fenjiu, which is deemed a representative inheritor of this millennium-long liquor-making tradition, revealed that three techniques can greatly contribute to the excellent quality of liquor.

One of the techniques is the dry mixing of cereal ingredients and yeast, which can further remove the diluting agents and impurities from the mixture. The second is fermenting in casks buried in earth, using the soil as an insulating layer for temperature stabilization and the third is to distill the mixture twice to further improve purity.

They said Xinghuacun Fenjiu has stuck to these techniques for hundreds of years and that's why its products have been well received by consumers.

Wang Pei contributed to this story.