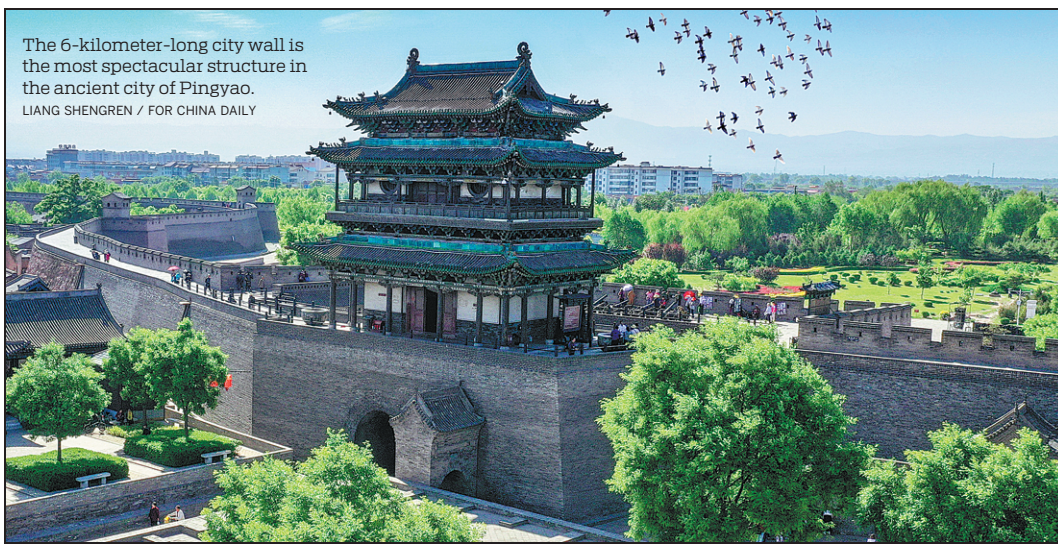


DISCOVER SHANXI



The 6-kilometer-long city wall is the most spectacular structure in the ancient city of Pingyao.
LIANG SHENGREN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ancient city takes visitors to a time of former dynasties

Hundreds of buildings dating back centuries draw millions of tourists to Pingyao in Shanxi

By YUAN SHENGGAO

In today's China, where cities are dominated by modern high-rise buildings, it is rare to find an ancient city or town like Pingyao.

The city of Pingyao in Jinzhong, Shanxi province, is said to have one of the best-preserved historical townscapes in China. It looks much the same as it did during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

The ancient city of Pingyao, established in 1368, is a prototype of Chinese cities and an excellent example with which to explore the socioeconomic system of late imperial China. Its prosperity in history was associated with the renowned Shanxi merchants, or Jinshang, in Ming and Qing dynasties.

It is said that Jinshang merchants dominated commercial circles in North China for about 500 years starting from the Ming Dynasty.

Many of these successful merchants began as small vendors selling products like tea and silk to overseas regions. Over generations, they made their fortunes through hard work.

Pingyao was then a renowned commercial hub and financial center supporting the Jinshang merchants' business. It was also a large residential community for businesspeople.

To this day, Pingyao is home to nearly 4,000 ancient buildings.

Surrounding these buildings and streets is a 6-kilometer-long city wall,

which is said to have been built in 1370.

For its large number of ancient buildings and rich historical and cultural heritage, Pingyao was designated a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1997. This recognition has helped the city develop into a famed domestic and international tourism destination.

The city is home to more than 10,000 residents, who benefit from and take pride in Pingyao's status as one of the top tourist destinations in Shanxi.

Realizing that the rich historical and cultural heritage is the soul of the city, many residents said they are willing to protect this ancient city as they protect their own lives.

Jia Weiping, 62, is a native of Pingyao and a remarkable figure among tourists. He is the actor of an old-time county magistrate in a theatrical performance staged regularly in front of the Pingyao Old County Government Museum.

Jia said the most spectacular structure of Pingyao is the ancient city wall. "The city wall has 72 watchtowers in its length of 6 km," Jia said. "The number is of great cultural significance as it represents the 72 famed disciples of Confucius."

He said another cultural highlight of Pingyao is the Kuixing Pavilion built on the southeast section of the wall. In Chinese mythology, Kuixing is a constellation governed by a deity in charge of culture and education.

He said that protection of the ancient city wall was challenged several decades ago. "In the 1970s, the city wall was almost in a state of dilapidation," Jia said. "Among the 72 watchtowers, there were only three left intact."

He said people back then lacked the awareness of historical heritage preservation. "People would pull out the bricks of the wall to repair their own houses," Jia said. The city wall is a structure of rammed earth, covered by bricks on its exterior.

Jia's account of the past was agreed by Wang Guohe, a retired urban planning official in Pingyao.

"We met an even greater challenge in the 1980s when there was a trend throughout the country to tear down old buildings and build new ones for urban development," Wang, 73, recalled.

Fortunately, the local planners were among the more sober-minded who knew the importance of preserving historical and cultural heritage.

"Bucking that trend of modernization, we were among the first in the country to have a plan to preserve and protect the ancient city," Wang said.

The preservation plan started by repairing the city wall. Officials called on residents to return the wall's original bricks to complete the repair.

"We told residents that Pingyao was among the very few cities in Chi-

na that had a complete city wall," Wang said. "This was something they should take pride in."

They added that a well-preserved ancient city would be beneficial to them, as it could draw in tourists and help to increase revenue.

"The response from residents was overwhelming at the time," Wang said. "They returned more than 10,000 bricks in two months."

The preservation of Pingyao also attracted the attention of the country's top experts in planning and heritage protection, according to Wang. "They came to Pingyao to conduct field research and proposed plans for protection."

The protection program led to Pingyao's fame as one of the nation's best-preserved ancient cities and it became recognized throughout China. In 1986, it was rated as a national-level historical and cultural city. By 1988, the ancient city wall was included in the national list for cultural heritage protection.

The renovation and repair project of the whole city was completed in 1993. Four years later, it made the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites.

"We have seen a rapidly growing number of tourists since 1997," Jia said, citing local statistics. "There were only 50,000 visits in 1997 and the number was more than 17.65 million in the peak year of 2019."

Peng Ke'er contributed to this story.

Technology helps open up access to artifacts



By YUAN SHENGGAO

Compared with traditional museum displays featuring static exhibits in glass showcases, a digitally empowered exhibition can offer a lot more to visitors. An intelligent exhibition at the Shanxi Provincial Museum demonstrated this to visitors recently.

Zhang Shuyue, a primary school student in the Shanxi provincial capital of Taiyuan, was first attracted to an array of electronic displays at the main hall of the museum when she visited the intelligent exhibition on May 28.

Each touch screen display links to the museum directory of each exhibit according to its category.

Zhang is an enthusiast of history and a frequent visitor to museum exhibitions. She said the electronic displays are of great help to visitors if they want to have a glimpse at the exhibits before visiting.

"You can immediately know where the most valuable exhibits are located and you are informed of the new arrivals at the museum," Zhang said. "It makes a visit much easier and more convenient."

She added: "What the display brings you is not a rough introduction. It can give you the details of every exhibit."

She then closely examined a 3D picture of bird-shaped bronze utensil. "I have seen this ancient bronzeware many times but I couldn't have a close view because it was behind glass," Zhang said.

She can now carefully examine the exhibit by touching the zoom-in button. She noticed that there was an introduction in both vocal

“Online shows are a great chance for museum enthusiasts, especially in a time of COVID-19 outbreaks.”

Hou Yanfang, an official at Taiyuan Museum

and written forms when a detail was highlighted.

"You can use the display beforehand as a warmup to the visit, afterward you can use it to enhance your memory and understanding of the exhibits," Zhang said. "This digitally strengthened exhibition is a great collection of history and culture."

According to Bo Chunyan, an official for information technology at the museum, said it is using various digital platforms to enhance the visitor experience.

"We have a WeChat account to inform visitors of the latest updates and share experts' insights into the exhibits and the stories behind them," Bo said.

Intelligent and digitalized exhibitions are a new trend in Shanxi's museums, which house some 3.1 million exhibits in total.

In addition to the use of virtual reality, augmented reality and 3D technologies to enhance visitor experiences, museums are using online shows to make exhibitions accessible to more residents.

"Online shows are a great chance for museum enthusiasts, especially in a time of COVID-19 outbreaks," said Hou Yanfang, an official at the Taiyuan Museum in the capital city of Shanxi.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.



Visitors use interactive displays to search for exhibits at Shanxi Provincial Museum. WANG RUIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Private sector an option for dynamic graduates

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Working for a multinational, an industry-leading company or a government institution in a first-tier city is a popular career development path for students graduating from China's top universities or those overseas.

But this was not the case with Gao Peng, a Shanxi native, despite having both educational backgrounds.

Gao is now the deputy general manager of Hongyi Jiecheng, a private business near his home village of Gulian in Qixian county, Shanxi province.

After each of his graduations, he made the choice to locate employers in Shanxi province.

In 2010 when he graduated from Beijing-based Tsinghua University with a master's degree in electricity and automation, he chose to work with the Shanxi branch of State Grid.

When explaining why he made the choice, Gao said: "Shanxi is one of the top electricity production provinces in China and I hope to integrate my career development with the growth of the industry."

Gao went on to study energy and economy in a university in Germany in 2019. He returned to Shanxi one year later.

This time he chose Hongyi Jiecheng as his new employer.

Gao said his association with

Hongyi Jiecheng dates back two decades.

"Hongyi Jiecheng has been a great patron of education," Gao said. "It has offered financial assistance to more than 50 students studying in Tsinghua and Peking universities over the past two decades and I was one of them."

He said that his decision to work with the company was driven by his willingness to pay back the help he received and was based on his understanding of the local culture and the company's development potential.

His home county of Qixian is the birthplace of the famed Jinshang, or Shanxi merchants. The merchants, according to Gao, who were said to dominate the business circles of North China for more than 500 years since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), were renowned for their enterprising spirit.

"Jinshang merchants always started from small vendors. They made their fortunes through their hard work and entrepreneurship," Gao said.

He said he also sensed an enterprising spirit in Hongyi Jiecheng and this inspired him to work there.

The company was founded in 1994 as a small glassware producer with only 60 employees. Over the nearly three decades since, it has branched out into various industries including natural gas production, clean energy develop-



Gao Peng supervises production at Hongyi Jiecheng's glassware plant. LI LIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

ment, electricity facility construction and agricultural technology, with a total of 2,000 staff members at present.

Li Jiecheng, board chairman of Hongyi Jiecheng, said Gao has made contributions to the company's transformation toward diversified operations, although he has only been working there for two years.

"Gao is a versatile specialist in technology and management," Li said. "He has introduced a modern management system to our company and has proposed and designed intelligent operations for our plants."

Gao said he hopes his success can encourage more university graduates to work with private enterprises and his efforts in promoting corporate development can create more job opportunities for locals.

Wu Jia contributed to this story.

Baijiu brand the pinnacle of quality and heritage

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The township of Xinghuacun in the Shanxi city of Fenyang has been a benchmark of China's alcoholic beverage industry for millennia with its long history of production and products with distinctive quality.

Archaeological excavations in Xinghuacun, which started in 1982, have provided much evidence to show that this ancient township was the birthplace of the Chinese alcoholic beverage.

One of the remarkable findings was a waving spindle-shaped bottle with a distinctive feature of Yangshao Culture, an ancient civilization in the middle reaches of the Yellow River between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago. Researchers believe that the bottle was China's earliest utensil discovered for brewing alcoholic beverages some 6,000 years ago.

Xinghuacun, as well as its neighboring areas, is one of the pioneers in making high-purity cereal wine in China, with a production history dating back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-581).

During that time the renowned high-purity cereal wine was called Fenqingjiu, or clear wine of Shanxi. With Xinghuacun as the center, Fenyang was the major production base for Fenqingjiu.

Fenqingjiu had been a favorite of royal families during the

Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577), according to historical records.

The quality of the Fenyang-made alcoholic beverages was further improved during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) with the emergence of distilled, higher-purity liquor, or *baijiu*. Xinghuacun, where today's Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group 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 their purity, clear-as-water quality and unique mellow taste.

The quality and popularity of Fenyang-made liquor, or Fenjiu, have lasted to the modern times. It

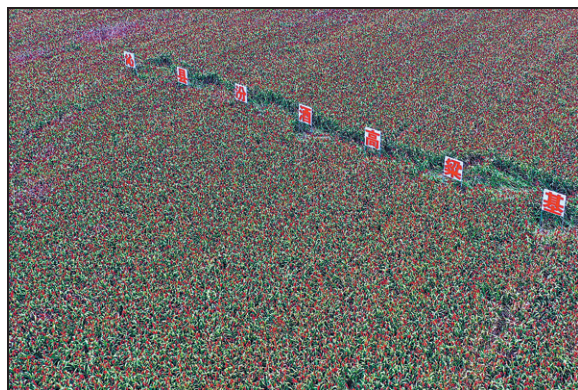
also reached its peak of international recognition in the early 20th century when it won a gold medal during the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, the United States.

Executives at Xinghuacun Fenjiu, which is deemed a representative inheritor of this millennium-long liquor-making tradition, revealed the secrets behind the excellent quality of local liquor.

These include centuries-old techniques such as fermenting in casks buried in earth for temperature stabilization and double-distilling for improved purity.

The executives said growing cereals in its own farms is a unique practice at Xinghuacun Fenjiu for quality control. The company now operates cereal farms totaling 74,000 hectares.

Liu Jiarui contributed to this story.



Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group has about 74,000 hectares of cereal farms to ensure the quality of ingredients. LIU TONG / FOR CHINA DAILY