

CHINA

BUILDING THE NEW ERA | BASES OF HOPE

Editor's Note: China Daily is running a series of stories on old revolutionary bases with profound history and heritage that are striving to lead local people on the road to prosperity in the new era.

Supple but strong, Linyi's willows bring work and wealth

Wickerwork has been a tradition in mountainous area for almost 1,500 years



Right: A panoramic view of Linyi city, Shandong province. LIU DULONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

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In a memorial hall commemorating the heroic mothers of Yimeng, the women who voluntarily cared for soldiers and their children in this mountainous part of Shandong province during the liberation struggles of the 1930s and 40s, an old wicker basket occupies a place of pride.

Its handles are smooth and shiny from long use carrying supplies for the soldiers. It is a reminder to visitors of the Yimeng Spirit, characterized by the Communist Party of China and the Chinese people fighting for a better life together, combined with hard work, self-improvement, selflessness and dedication cultivated during the war.

Since then, this same spirit has inspired generations and continues to shine through today, including in efforts to create a better life.

In Linyi city's Linshu county, wickerwork has been turned into a way to make a living.

Yang Jinbang, a resident of Yangshabu village, has been involved in the trade for over four decades. Most of the furniture in his home, including chairs, cases and desks, is made of willow or rattan.

"Wickerwork is a major source of income, and most people in our village can make good quality products," the 68-year-old said.

People in Linshu have been using willow to make containers for grain and carry food for over 1,400 years, according to historical records.

"The willow that grows around our village is tough and pliable, and has good coloring. It's perfect for wickerwork," Yang said.

Yang began learning to work with willow from his parents when he was 7, and by the time he was 13, he could already make good quality baskets.

"A lot of villagers use willow to make baskets and furniture and then sell them at the market," Yang said.

Wickerwork was placed on a fast development track during reform and opening-up in the 1970s.

Over the years, the county government has released a series of policies to promote the development of wickerwork, including help with brand-building, marketing and promotion.

An annual county competition is also held to promote exchange and improve wickerwork skills.

Linshu wickerwork was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage last year.

Seven of the nine towns in the county are working on developing the trade, according to the local government, and some 390 wickerwork companies currently provide work for thousands of farmers.

Over 2 billion yuan (\$294 million) worth of Linshu wickerwork was exported last year, a year-on-year increase of 41.2 percent.

"It has become a basic way for people in the county to make a living. Both young and old are able to make very good wickerwork," said Zhang Zhiquan, general manager of Linyi O. Ivy Company, which is based in the county.

The company works all the way along the wicker chain, from planting willows to production and foreign trade and employs 8,000 farmers.

Linshu has developed hundreds of willow items, including products woven with cloth and wood, to keep up with changing demands.

The county has also been encouraging young people to expand the market by developing e-commerce and cross-border e-commerce, as Linyi has a well developed transportation network.

Close to the Beijing-Shanghai Expressway, the city has become a major hub connecting northern and southern China and now has 31 logistics centers.

"As a result, we're now able to send our products to more families," Zhang said.



Craftspeople make wickerwork in a workshop in Linshu county, Linyi, Shandong province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Visitors enjoy flowers in a park in Xintai, a county-level city that was part of the Yimeng Mountains Revolutionary Base.



A panoramic view of the Yimeng Mountains. LIU DULONG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Shandong base key during battles with KMT, Japanese

Centered around Yishui county in central Shandong province, the Yimeng Mountains Revolutionary Base was one of the main Communist Party of China revolutionary bases during the late 1930s and 1940s.

Sometimes referred to as "Shandong's little Yan'an" (the wartime stronghold of the CPC), it became home to the CPC's Shandong branch during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) in 1938, and was later the site of a critical battle that paved the way for success in eastern China during the War of Liberation (1946-49).

The CPC's Yishui branch was first established in 1927, but it remained mostly underground with few members, especially in the late 1920s after fighting broke out with the Kuomintang, or Chinese Nationalist Party, which led to the destruction of most of the Party's network in Shandong.

In 1936, the CPC sent a representative named Li Yu (1906-86) to rebuild its network in the province. When the Japanese invasion entered full swing in July 1937, leading to the capture of major cities in Shandong, Li helped form a guerrilla detachment under the Eighth Route Army in January 1938 and led uprisings against the invaders.

Following a directive from the leadership, a plan to establish a revolutionary base was tabled at a provincial Party meeting in May, which was headed by Guo Hongtao (1909-2004), the then secretary of the CPC branch in northern Shaanxi. Guo arrived in Shandong from Yan'an, Shaanxi province, where the CPC had assembled after the Long March.

Several locations in the province were chosen as places to push forward the cause over the following months, including Yishui in the Yimeng Mountains. Meanwhile, the regional CPC committee relocated to a Catholic church in Wangzhuang town in November, as the Party enjoyed local popularity in the town and its German-built church was more likely to be spared in the event airstrikes were ordered by the Japanese.

In December 1938, CPC guerrilla forces in the province regrouped as the Eighth Route Army Shandong



Visitors view a picture wall in the Yimeng Revolutionary History Memorial Hall in Linyi, Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Column, which had some 24,500 soldiers. In March, part of the Eighth was sent to Shandong to help establish the base. The War of Resistance reached a strategic stalemate in October 1938, when the Japanese slowed military operations and increased their attempts to get KMT officials to surrender. The Japanese also shifted some of their focus to wiping out resistance forces in the occupied territories,

launching a "cleanup" campaign in Yimeng in June 1939. The KMT passively resisted the Japanese while actively restricting and blockading the CPC.

Faced with a difficult situation, the Party chose to continue to fight by uniting the people and establishing regional governments. In July 1940, an area-wide congress was held and a wartime work committee was elected

to act as the highest regional government, marking the official establishment of the Yimeng Mountains Revolutionary Base.

From 1939 to 1941, the Japanese and their puppet armies organized dozens of "cleanup" campaigns against the base. At the same time, severe famine was afflicting many parts of China, including Yimeng. The base shrank in the face of blockades, but the CPC launched a round of guerrilla warfare and managed to survive by relying on the public for support.

The Ditty of Yimeng Mountains, a song composed at the time that celebrated the area's natural beauty and boosted morale by revealing KMT-backed plots against the CPC, has subsequently become one of the most well-known folk songs in the country.

The CPC sent Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969), who would later become chairman of the People's Republic of China, to oversee operations in April 1942. Rent and interest relief policies were adopted, and training sessions were organized for new Party members. By autumn 1943, the base's most difficult times

were behind it as production began to recover.

In March 1944, the Yimeng base launched an offensive against Wu Huawen (1904-62), a former KMT general who, like many of his troops, surrendered to the Japanese in 1943, which led to the KMT government being forced out of Shandong later that August. The offensive marked the start of a counterattack organized by the base, which was gradually able to link together separate CPC-controlled areas in Shandong.

By the time Japan surrendered in August 1945, a major swathe of Shandong was under Party control.

Yimeng also played a crucial role in the War of Liberation, as CPC military commander and later foreign minister Chen Yi (1901-72) and Su Yu (1907-84), who later served as PLA Chief of General Staff, oversaw the Menglianggu Campaign, the battle that turned the tide in eastern China, from the base. During the campaign, the 74th Division, one of the best in the KMT and equipped with advanced American weaponry, was wiped out in Menglianggu, some 30 kilometers south of the base's core area in Wangzhuang.