



The Taiyuan section of the Fenhe River has become an attractive scenic belt after decades of improvement. LI ZHAOMIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Environmental policies help renew polluted and arid areas

Fenhe River in Taiyuan now the pride of residents with flocks of birds nesting and breeding there

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Wang Liming, a photographer with a passion for birds, has developed a hobby of walking the banks of the Fenhe River in Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi province, every weekend over the past two years.

Fenhe is the second-largest river in Shanxi and the second-largest tributary of the Yellow River. The Taiyuan section of the Fenhe River stretches 188 kilometers, with 43 km passing through the urban area.

"I noticed that the number of birds has increased steadily along the Fenhe River over the recent years," Wang said, noting that birds such as kingfishers, spot-billed ducks, red terns and egrets are the most commonly seen in the area.

He said he has seen large numbers of egrets there since December 2021. "Egrets are among the most sensitive to water and air quality," Wang said. "So the increasing number of such birds is proof of the river's improving environment."

Wang Xiaoyan, another Taiyuan resident, said the Fenhe River is now the pride of people in the city.

"When asked by my guests from afar where to go in Taiyuan, I will recommend the scenic area along Fenhe," Wang Xiaoyan said. "The area, with beautiful sights and excellent environment, is a draw to tourists."

She said things were different two decades ago. "Living near the river was unpleasant in the past. No one would like to walk along the river," Wang Xiaoyan said. "Fenhe was almost a dry river throughout the year. If there was some water, it stank"



Taiyuan launched an environmental improvement project for the river in 1998, according to an official at the administrative committee of the Fenhe River Scenic Area.

Fenhe was initially revitalized when water from the upper stream was diverted to supply the water course in Taiyuan in 2000.

Efforts have since continued in pollution control, ecological restoration and landscaping. These have turned the region along the river into a pleasant habitat for both wildlife and people and an attractive scenic belt for visitors and locals, according to the official.

The latest move for Fenhe's development was the launch of the fourth-phase river improvement project in June 2020. It included enhancing embankments to control floods, developing wetland parks and adding other infrastructure.

The fourth-phase project was completed in September 2021. About 1.9 million square meters of green land, sightseeing paths stretching 43 km, and a water body with a surface area of 1.6 million sq m were added to the Fenhe River Scenic Area.

Also contributing to the Fenhe River's revival are the strict emission standards for local enterprises and the construction of more industrial and domestic sewage treatment

facilities, according to the official.

The improved Fenhe River is only one example of the decadeslong efforts for environmental protection in Shanxi province.

Another case of environmental success is the greening campaign in the northern Shanxi county of Youyu, which began in the 1950s.

At the southern edge of the Mu Us Desert, the natural environment of Youyu was among the worst in Shanxi province seven decades ago.

Li Yunsheng, a resident, recalled that as most parts of the county were arid, sandstorms presented the biggest threat to life in the 1950s, when he was a primary school student.

"When a sandstorm came, it turned the sunny day into dark night," Li said. "We needed to use lamps to illuminate the classroom."

Historical records show that arid, sandy land accounted for about 76 percent of the county's total area in the 1950s and the forest coverage was only 0.3 percent, or about 530 hectares.

Li said his father was one of the pioneers in Youyu's greening campaign who started to plant trees in the 1950s.

"He told me that it was a consensus among Youyu residents that controlling desertification is the only way to improve the local environment and livelihoods," Li said. "And planting trees and grasses is the best way to curb desertification."

He added that planting trees has become a tradition across several generations in Youyu. "Influenced by my father and his peers, I have operated a tree farm in my neighborhood,

turning barren hills into forests," Li said.

According to the Youyu forestry and grassland administration, the forest coverage in the county has now reached 57 percent.

The increased forest and grassland coverage has substantially improved the local environment and even local weather. After sandstorms and soil erosion were curbed, the arid land has been turned into fertile farms. Meanwhile, river and stream runoffs have grown because of increased rain.

Tourists have flocked to Youyu to witness the miraculous environmental changes that have taken place. Forest plantations and wetland parks near rivers are among the most popular tourist destinations in the county.

The Nanhewan Wetland Park along the Cangtuo River near the county seat is one such destination.

Jia Yu, a Youyu resident who was exercising in the park on June 10, said he didn't expect there would be a beautiful wetland park like Nanhewan decades ago.

"Despite flooding in summer, the Cangtuo River used to be a dry, sandy valley and a source of sandstorms for most parts of the year," Jia said. "Thanks to the increase of vegetation and rainfall, there is constant runoff in the river nowadays."

With a growing water supply and increasing vegetation, the park is now a pleasant habitat for birds and a destination for both tourists to visit and locals to relax in, Jia said.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.

Cliffside road opens up secluded village's charms to the world

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The village of Xiyagou in the southeastern Shanxi county of Lingchuan, which is located at the junction of the Taihang and Wangwu mountains, is a perfect example of a typical Chinese secluded habitat as described by Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) poet Tao Yuanming in his *Peach Blossom Spring*.

Peach Blossom Spring is a fable that tells readers of the chance discovery of an ethereal village where the people led an ideal existence in harmony with nature. The village, featuring farmhouses and farmlands along a stream, was surrounded by mountains with no road connectivity to the outside world, allowing the villagers a tranquil life.

Indeed, the residents of Xiyagou had lived in this secluded village peacefully for many centuries. However, such a sheltered life is not what the villagers desired. They had a strong aspiration to be linked to the outside world and the aspiration is shown in another famous Chinese legend of *The Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains*, which is also said to have happened in the region.

The story goes that an old man called Yugong, or the foolish old man, pledged to remove the mountains that isolated his village and called for great efforts of many generations of his descendants to complete the mission.

Over thousands of years, the legend has become a precious cultural legacy among Shanxi residents. Similar attempts at improving access to isolated villages have frequently occurred in the province.

This was especially true in the case of Xiyagou village, where people had been isolated from the out-

side world for centuries.

A change took place in the early 1980s when local officials and residents agreed to build a road to link it to the outside world.

Song Zhilong, 67, was the former Party secretary of the village. He recalled how the road was built.

"We had mobilized almost all the resources of the village. In addition to investment from the county government, many families contributed their savings to the project.

"The job to build a road on and through the cliffs was by no means easy. As the natural conditions didn't allow the use of explosives, we cut through the cliffs inch by inch.

"The total length of the road is only 7.5 kilometers but it took us about 10 years to complete," Song said.

After its completion in 1991, the road was listed as one of China's top 60 new landmarks by the then National Administration of Tourism.

The road, which is known as "cliff-hanging road" among tourists, immediately turned the village into a popular attraction in Shanxi.

"Many tourists came to see the new engineering miracle. When they ventured far into the valleys and mountains of Xiyagou village, however, they would experience additional wonders," Song said.

The village's offerings to tourists include rising cliffs as high as 1,000 meters, streams, waterfalls, deep ponds and caves, as well as a peach blossom spring-style village featuring ancient stone houses, stone bridges, flagstone pavements and old folk traditions that have disappeared in many parts of the country, according to Song.

Wu Jia contributed to this story.



It takes about 10 years of carving through cliff faces to complete a road to Xiyagou village. TAIHANG YUNDING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Versatile liquor loved by many across globe

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The seven voyages by renowned Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) navigator Zheng He marked the peak of international commercial and cultural exchanges in ancient China.

These expeditions also marked the first peak time for Shanxi-made liquor, or Fenjiu, to go global.

According to historical records, Fenjiu was first used to meet the demand of sailors during their lengthy journeys.

Later, the fleet members found additional functions of the liquor. It could be used as the earliest version of the Molotov cocktail, because of its high purity, to fend off and scare away pirates, and also as gifts to guests in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. They later found the liquor was well-received on the markets along the voyage routes so they brought with them a larger quantity of Fenjiu for sales in later voyages.

Records from the royal archive institution of the Ming Dynasty particularly mentioned the popularity of Fenjiu among the noble families and ordinary consumers in the region of Cape Comorin, the southern tip of India.

The records are also proved by the exhibits at a museum in Cape Comorin — jars and bottles for Fenjiu as gifts to the local king and nobles. There are also similar exhibits at museums in the Maldives.

Despite its glorious history, Shanxi-made liquor began its large-scale expedition overseas in the early 20th century.

It reached its peak of internation-



The jar is said to be used by Zheng He's sailors to carry Fenjiu during their journeys. WEN ZHAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

al recognition when Fenjiu, a brand owned by Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group, won a gold medal during the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, the United States. Since then, it has become one of the representatives of Chinese liquor products in the international market.

In recent years, Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group has accelerated its pace of globalization by forging partnerships with more overseas dealers and opening more sales outlets.

To further increase its brand recognition, the group organized more than 200 experience and promotion events in 2021 in dozens of countries including Singapore, Thailand, the US and France.

Wang Pei contributed to this story.

Caring for the youngest and eldest in society

By YUAN SHENGGAO

As part of its efforts to establish a wide-ranging social welfare system, the North China province of Shanxi is shifting emphasis to the care of elderly people and children.

The continually improving care of elders is an active response to an aging society, according to local officials.

The latest census shows that Shanxi has a total of 6.6 million residents aged over 60 and 4.5 million aged over 65, accounting for 18.92 percent and 12.9 percent of the province total population, respectively. The ratios also represent increases of 7.39 percentage points and 5.33 percentage points from those in the previous census.

To cope with an aging society, more elder care facilities have been established in Shanxi in recent years.

The Nanguanfang community in the provincial capital of Taiyuan, for instance, is home to one such facility.

Covering a floor space of 2,600 square meters, the Nanguanfang Elder Care Center is the largest of its kind in Shanxi province. In addition to full-time care services, it offers dining, cultural, healthcare and entertainment services to

seniors in the neighborhood.

An old man surnamed Liu, who lives in the neighborhood, said he and his wife are frequent visitors to the elder care center.

"We eat our meals at the center's canteen, which has freed us from the labor of cooking," Liu said. "You can spend a whole day in the center with your friends here as there are also facilities for reading, games, exercise and entertainment."

Since 2020, Shanxi has made huge investment in developing community-level elder care facilities, according to Wang Li, an official of the Shanxi provincial government.

"We have built 60 community elder care centers since 2020," Wang said. "And the number is expected to reach 200 by the end of 2025."

Shanxi's other efforts in serving seniors include fostering more elder care entities, and combining elder care with medical and tourism sectors, according to the official.

While strengthening the elder care sector, Shanxi province is placing similar emphasis on universal care services to children, especially those aged under 3.

Since 2020, the province has



Preschool-aged children learn the folk art of paper-cutting at a day care institution in Shanxi province. LIU TONG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Offering universal day care services to children under 3 is a new extension of our social welfare system, which is expected to greatly address the concerns of working parents."

Wang Li, an official of the Shanxi provincial government

invested about 27.8 million yuan (\$4.14 million) to help build 24 new day care facilities for children under 3, according to Wang.

The official said there were a total of 127 registered children day care institutions in Shanxi by the end of 2021.

"Offering universal day care services to children under 3 is a new extension of our social welfare system, which is expected to greatly address the concerns of working parents," Wang said.

Han Linfang contributed to this story.