



LANDSCAPE
LEGACIES

Editor's note:

China is home to 56 UNESCO World Heritage sites. To find out how these natural and cultural gems still shine and continue to inspire the nation in this new era of development, China Daily is running a series of reports covering 10 groups of selected sites from across the country. In this installment, we travel back in time to the bustling, crisscrossing lanes of the ancient town of Pingyao in Shanxi province.

Path of history

Pingyao is a fine example of the well-preserved Han civilization. Plans are afoot to further protect local heritage, report **Yang Feiyue** in Beijing and **Sun Ruisheng** in Taiyuan.

Guo Chengxian is ecstatic. His ancestral home in Pingyao — a small, two-story building that is more than three centuries old — has received a new lease of life. The county government has offered a subsidy of 67,000 yuan (\$9,990) to help restore the parts of the property most desperately in need of repair.

"Now, I can continue to live here without worries," says Guo. He is among many locals who have benefited from the county's restoration and renovation drive for traditional dwellings since 2012. The government offers two-thirds of the renovation costs while the owners bear the rest.

By conservative estimates, the local administration has invested 15 million yuan over the past decade to fix more than 100 historical buildings.

The walled town of Pingyao is tucked away in the city of Jinzhong in North China's Shanxi province, half an hour by high-speed train from the provincial capital of Taiyuan.

See *Transformation*, page 16

A maze of gray-tiled rooftops is an iconic sight of the ancient town of Pingyao in Shanxi province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Left: Buddhist statues are the biggest draw of Shuanglin Temple in Pingyao. **Center:** The Rishengchang museum offers a view of the prototype of China's early financial system. **Right:** Museum guide Jia Weixing, in traditional attire, answers queries by visitors. PHOTOS BY LIU ZHAOMING AND SHI YAOCHEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Wall Street of the empire

The first draft bank of China offered the world a template for the modern bill of exchange. Its merchant culture memorabilia now draw a million visitors to Rishengchang museum every year, report **Yang Feiyue** in Beijing and **Sun Ruisheng** in Taiyuan.

AS UNESCO World Heritage Site today, the ancient town of Pingyao in Shanxi province formed the economic backbone of China during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The town was home to the country's first *piaohao* (money exchange house) that bankrolled the empire during a period when all bookkeeping was on paper, and the only way to crunch numbers involved the abacus.

In 19th-century imperial China, business-savvy merchants from Shanxi were making their presence felt in Japan and Korea in the east, Russia in the north and other nations in the south. They had to rely on security guards for transferring their financial wealth, measured in gold and silver, from one place to another. The method was hardly safe and led to the inception of the *piaohao*.

The bank of Rishengchang, which literally means "sunrise prosperity", was established in 1823 and it became the prototype of China's early financial system, offering remittance services and loans, and accepting deposits. It even boasted a high-capacity underground vault.

At its peak, the Rishengchang bank had more than 30 branches across the country, with business expanding overseas and reaching as far as Europe and the United States. More than a century later, in 1932, the exchange house halted its operations, but its preserved antiquity on public display today continues to fascinate all and sundry.

The erstwhile Rishengchang building was traditional in style, comprising halls and open courtyards. Jia Weixing, a local guide, sits at a desk in a corner of a courtyard, which has now evolved into a museum.

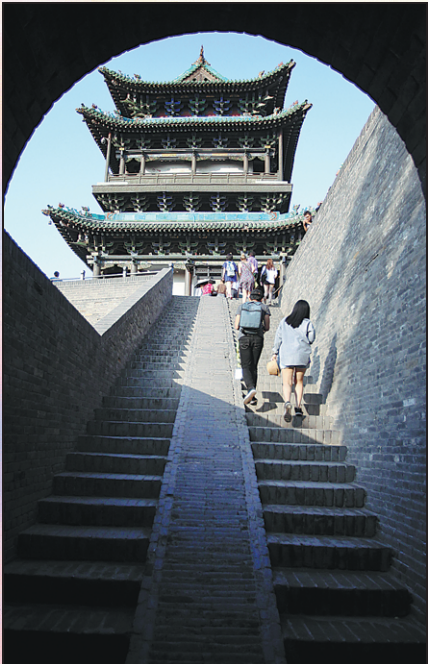
For a decade, it has been Jia's job to jot down the name, address, "silver exchange" and other details of visitors on a yellow tinted bill, which is then folded neatly into an envelope in an impression of how serious transactions were conducted some 200 years ago.

"The idea is to show people how banking was done in the past. I love the *piaohao* culture of Pingyao. ... As we travel back in time, I love playing my part, writing a few 'bank drafts' to entertain visitors from across the country," Jia says.

Stories about the antique bank of Shanxi have enthralled residents, tourists, filmmakers and economists alike. The 2009 historical epic film, *Empire of Silver*, is a riveting drama on the wealthy banking clan of Pingyao. It won awards at the 29th Hawaii International Film Festival and the 12th Shanghai International Film Festival.

In his book *Chinese Currency and Banking*, published in 1915, Indian scholar Srinivas Ram Wagle wrote that the modern bill of exchange and discount methods were first proposed by the draft bank in Shanxi. People didn't need to carry around silver anymore, he wrote, as the bill of exchange from Pingyao could not be counterfeited.

According to Jia, there were at least five marks on the bill of exchange to guarantee authenticity, just like patterns on currency notes today. There were seals and handwriting proofs. The Chinese characters for Rishengchang were printed as watermarks on four



Visitors negotiate the steps up to the city walls of Pingyao. ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

corners of the bill for added authentication.

"The *piaohao* also encrypted its bills with codes made up of Chinese characters, which were changed on a regular basis to enhance security," Jia says.

The Rishengchang museum today preserves the only original bill of exchange from the past. It was these bills that allowed the exchange house to control more than half of the Chinese economy for a century.

The rise of modern banks since 1910 began to eat into the market share of the Rishengchang *piaohao*. "Their operation models were more advanced, and the big banks had foreign capital support, too," says Li Chao, a member of staff at the museum.

Also, the exchange house depended heavily on the Qing administration, which was overthrown after the Revolution of 1911, better known as the Xinhai Revolution, launched by Sun Yat-sen.

"Boom turned into bust and the *piaohao* was eventually replaced," says Li.

In 1956, whatever was left of the Rishengchang building became the office of Pingyao's supply and marketing cooperative. Major changes weren't made; money was only spent on fixing some doors, windows and walls.

"The front area was used for writing bills and invoices while office operations were conducted at the back," Li says.

The cooperative made way for the museum in 1995. The move was a part of the protection and development strategy for Pingyao, and the Rishengchang began welcoming guests who wanted to learn about its remarkable history.

During renovation of the site, the museum staff discovered to their horror that letters and business books, which bore ample testimony to how the ancient bank functioned, were used to cover the ceiling. "There were like four or five layers of paper stuck together. Each layer had to be meticulously separated," Li recalls.

The staff used water to gently salvage the documents, which were then dried, sorted by category and pasted onto 36 register books for public display.

Over two decades, the Rishengchang museum witnessed six large-scale restoration projects and a dozen for maintenance. The efforts finally paid off. Footfall increased in leaps and bounds, especially after it was named a "major national cultural relic" under protection by the State Council in 2006.

"Rishengchang's name has made its way across the country and abroad," says Yan Ruiping, deputy curator of the museum. It welcomes more than 1 million visitors every year, including heads of states, scholars and business leaders.

The museum has preserved original account books, letters, bills of exchange and seals, all of which mirror the spirit and wisdom of the Shanxi merchants, experts say.

"The seal was a key tool to ensure credibility of the bills," says Lei Yaxian, head of the Pingyao cultural relic bureau. The transactions between individuals and the *piaohao* were not legally protected at the beginning, so the value of paper money given to clients who deposited gold and silver relied purely on the credibility of the exchange house, Lei explains. The seal served as an anti-counterfeiting measure and laid the foundation for risk control, she adds.

During his visit to the Rishengchang museum in January, President Xi Jinping said the fine Chinese culture should be promoted to boost economic and social development, and to augment the quality of life of the people of China.

Lei says the local authorities are stepping up efforts to protect collectibles. An endeavor is also being made to trace descendants of people who ran or worked at the exchange house.

Exhibition content and guided tour schedules will be upgraded soon to promote the history of Shanxi merchants and the *piaohao* culture.

Come 2023, the Rishengchang will turn 200 and several events are being planned to commemorate the anniversary, says Lei.

"The museum guards the essence of the Shanxi merchant culture. We will continue to strive and enrich the lives of those who pay a visit," she adds.

Peng Ke'er contributed to the story.

Contact the writers at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

Transformation: How Pingyao rose like a phoenix

From page 15

Pingyao is famous for its urban planning and well-preserved architecture from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Ancient temples, along with old-fashioned streets, shops and houses, grant a fascinating insight into the architectural style of cities built by the Han people in central China from the 14th to the 20th centuries. The nearly 4,000 quaint shops and homes are not just visually pleasing, but also bear testimony to the town's economic prosperity throughout the 19th century until the early 20th century, when it was the financial nerve center of the country.

Founded in the 14th century, Pingyao reached the peak of its prosperity with the rise of the Shanxi merchants. "It became the country's economic lifeline under Emperor Xianfeng (1831-61)," says Lei Yaxian, head of Pingyao's cultural relics bureau.

Unfortunately, the town didn't have what was required to develop lasting industries. An acute shortage of water was its biggest hurdle. Its regional trade advantage was also undermined by the development of modern transportation.

By the 1970s, Pingyao had been reduced to ruins, with only three of its original 72 watchtowers standing. Run-down dwellings, vehicle bone-yards and a thick layer of charcoal covering everything didn't help in painting a pretty picture either.

By the early 1980s, the ancient town was on the verge of disappearing from the map when the authorities decided to raze everything to the ground. However, the plan was called to a halt by experts, including Tongji University professor Ruan Yisan, who believed it would be a terrible injustice to bulldoze such a colossal amount of history.

In 1986, the State Council labeled Pingyao "a Chinese historical and cultural city" and a comprehensive preservation plan was drawn up.



Performers parade down the main street of Pingyao, offering visitors a taste of history. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Subsequently, the local administration divided historical buildings into four categories, says Cao Changzhi, deputy director of the historical and cultural city committee of the Chinese Society for Urban Studies.

According to Cao, some buildings were preserved to become visitor attractions, while others were adjudged to have practical uses. Traditional residences were turned into hotels, tea rooms and wine houses to offer tourists a taste of the distinctive local lifestyle, while homes of historical figures, such as that of financial legend Lei Lyutai, became memorials or museums.

In December 1997, Pingyao was named a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. A string of international events followed, such as the Pingyao International Photography Festival, which debuted in 2001. The inaugural event drew 40,000 visitors. The annual festival has since evolved to become a cultural bond between the ancient town and the rest of the world.

In 2013, director Wang Chaoge produced a gala, *Encore Pingyao*, where audiences were invited to walk around, enjoy live performances and interact with actors. The stage show was performed three to four times a day, and its

annual income soon surpassed 100 million yuan.

In 2017, film director Jia Zhangke rolled out the Pingyao International Film Festival. Tourist footfall surged from 50,000 in 1997 to 17.65 million in 2019, says Guo Xiaoyun, head of the Pingyao culture and tourism bureau.

Lei Cailling has got the full measure of the significant changes in local tourism. She turned a former Shanxi merchant's courtyard into a homestay in 2001. Decorative balls made of red silk, beautiful lanterns, paper patterns on wooden windows and bright quilts on wood-framed beds come together to offer a quaint charm.

Lei Cailling has several patrons who come and stay in Pingyao for a few days every year. Exploring the ancient town on foot, getting to know its intangible cultural heritage, chatting to locals and enjoying some leisure time at bars in the tight network of alleys, never loses its appeal for them.

Lei Yaxian says that more than 35.5 million yuan has been spent to repair more than 10 sections of the inner wall of the town since 2016.

The internal part of the wall features a rammed earth construction — using compacted earth, chalk, lime and gravel — with an outer layer of brick. "The rammed earth will be replenished (during restoration) so that the town can retain its original look," says Shao Shuai, an architect who has been maintaining Pingyao's wall for a decade.

Beneath the boundary wall, an ambitious infrastructure project is underway to upgrade power, telecommunication, sewage and gas lines. This year, the local authorities have also prepared a blueprint for Pingyao's future. All damaged sections of the wall will be renovated by September, a law to protect the local lacquer art will be drafted and an exhibition hall for the town's intangible cultural heritage will be built.

Contact the writers at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn



The sentinels of Shuanglin

“The sculptures have been more than a study in art for generations. The clothes and accessories are a valuable source for modern research on the evolution of attire.”

Chen Lin, an inheritor of the Pingyao art of painted sculpting

By YANG FEIYUE in Beijing and SUN RUISENG in Taiyuan

Home to more than 2,000 incredibly rare and sublimely carved Buddhist painted statues, the fascinating Shuanglin Temple in the ancient town of Pingyao, Shanxi province, made it to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1997. Behind the coveted glory, however, lies the arduous efforts of curators and preservationists who went beyond their call of duty to protect the over 1,400-year-old edifice from crumbling.

Some six kilometers to the southwest of Pingyao's central area, the temple is a picture of serenity, its quiet grandeur a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the town.

Rebuilt largely under the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the most mesmerizing section of the temple is its Eastern Art Gallery of Painted Sculptures. While a majority of temples worldwide narrate stories through paintings, the artisans of Shuanglin used 3-meter-tall statues to weave engaging tales that have stood the test of time.

Experts say the statues stand out by the sheer virtue of their "rarely seen large numbers, extensive content and highly artistic expressions". No surprise that these were labeled "major cultural relics" under provincial protection in Shanxi in 1965.

Chen Lin, an inheritor of the Pingyao art of painted sculpting that was named a provincial cultural heritage in 2013, says Shuanglin's walls feature techniques of bas-relief (barely protruding motifs), high relief (half-way protruding motifs) and circular engravings (inside a circle). The themes are generally religious in nature or relate to the daily life against the backdrop of buildings, mountains, clouds, rivers and forests.

Visitors often wonder why the sculptures "lack luster," Chen says it is because they are meant to retain their time-honored appearance. "The painted statues have not undergone any large-scale repairs over the years. They are in good shape under preservation efforts. We take care of daily maintenance, which is mostly dusting," says Chen.

Bodhisattva Skanda, regarded as a devoted guardian of Buddhist monasteries, is commonly seen in temples across the country, but the one at Shuanglin boasts a stern disposition like no other. The brawn beneath the armor, the broad belt and the flapping rope together lend both grandeur and gravitas.

"You feel as if the guardian is alive and moving, not static," says Chen, extolling the exquisite craftsmanship. Among other salient features of the shrine, the prominent presence of female sculptures, more than half in number.



Sculptures (above) and the rooftop (top) of the main hall in Shuanglin Temple feature exquisite craftsmanship. PHOTOS BY YI HONG AND XIAO JINGWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

"Many stay here for at least half a month," says Li Qixu, the curator of the Shuanglin Temple Painted Sculpture Art Museum, which was founded in 1987. "Some of them replicate the sculptures

on the spot, thus demonstrating the craftsmanship to curious travelers."

The unassuming charm of Shuanglin is the result of continuous and concerted efforts of cultural relic protectors for decades, Li admits. On March 20, 1979, the temple was among the first tourist attractions opened to the public.

When he started working on the temple in 1992, some halls had leaking roofs and there were cracks on the walls. In 1994, the Hall of Heavenly Kings, which was in the worst state, underwent a major revamp.

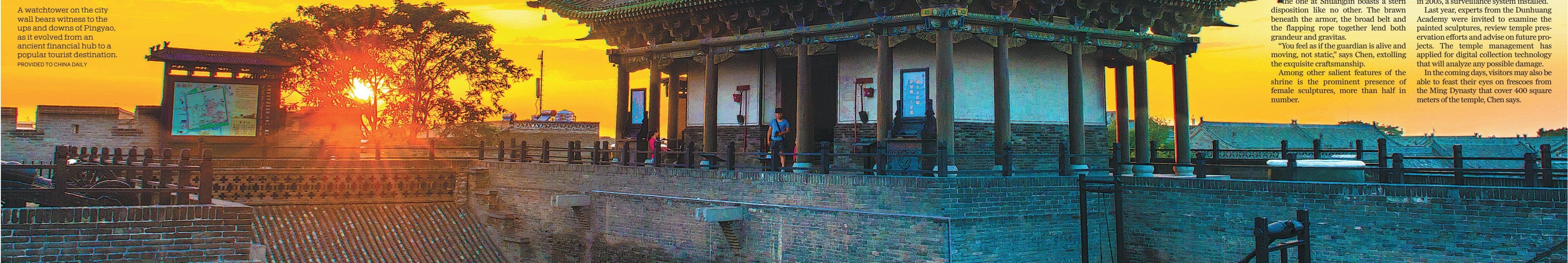
With recognition from UNESCO, things took a turn for the better in 1997. Funds poured in and continue to do so. To date, 10 halls have undergone restoration work. Wooden frames have been installed to protect the painted sculptures. "These come from our ancestors and cannot be compromised in any way," emphasizes Li.

No damage or theft has been reported at Shuanglin under the watchful eyes of Li and other guardians since 1979. Before modern security measures kicked in, manual patrolling was conducted at regular intervals every day and night. In 1998, an underground water supply system for fire control was put in place and in 2005, a surveillance system installed.

Last year, experts from the Dunhuang Academy were invited to examine the painted sculptures, review temple preservation efforts and advise on future projects. The temple management has applied for digital collection technology that will analyze any possible damage.

In the coming days, visitors may also be able to feast their eyes on frescoes from the Ming Dynasty that cover 400 square meters of the temple, Chen says.

A watchtower on the city wall bears witness to the ups and downs of Pingyao, as it evolved from an ancient financial hub to a popular tourist destination. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY





Pingyao glazes a trail

For a bride-to-be in the ancient town of Pingyao, having a shining lacquer dresser in her trousseau is a must, its value no less than a coveted diamond ring or a family heirloom. Often painted with peonies or happily-ever-after tales, the lacquer dresser is meant to bless the newlyweds with marital bliss and prosperity.

Making the item an integral part of weddings shows people's appreciation of Pingyao's lacquerware, an art form that dates back more than 1,200 years to the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

As the ancient town in North China's Shanxi province became a national financial center under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Pingyao's hand-polished lacquer art, fueled by the huge demand from wealthy bankers, reached its peak. The craft was among the first to be named a "national intangible cultural heritage" by the State Council in 2006.

Pingyao's lacquer art is known for its jade-like luster that comes from repeated hand-polishing. When the wood is manufactured into furniture, folding screens and tableware, it is first wrapped in linen and covered with a mixture of parget and pork blood for anticorrosion effects. It is then polished with sandpaper and covered with the mixture again. The process is repeated several times to create a surface smooth enough for later procedures.

Dexterous artists use lynx hair brushes to paint on the refined surface. The paintings are outlined with gold powder. Once done, the surface is covered with varnish, and hand-polished with sesame oil and brick dust over and over until a distinct sheen appears. A piece of lacquerware can take months or even years to finish.

"Lacquer art is the marriage between natural materials and intricate techniques," says Xue Shengjin, a master artist who has navigated the field for over six decades.

One of the 85-year-old's masterpieces, a lacquered decorative screen, features young women playing musical instruments while cranes kiss the clouds above a towering palace. The image is painted on smooth black lacquer, which is applied on an oak wood base for more than 100 times, rendering the work rich in color and gloss. It took Xue a year and a half to finish the screen that is 5 meters long and 3 meters tall.

Road to success

Xue was introduced to lacquer art by his father. "My dad began making lacquerware from a very young age. He worked his way up from being an apprentice to the shopkeeper of a time-honored store in Pingyao," Xue says.

In 1953, at the age of 16, Xue started painting, inspired by local artists who created theatrical backgrounds at the Pingyao Cultural Scenery Society. Two years later, he had mastered the skill and was making a living out of it, and that was when he decided to seriously pursue the handicraft trade.

Opportunities came knocking in 1958, when a polished lacquer factory was founded in Pingyao. Xue was among the first artists to be recommended to work at the factory, where he was under the tutelage of lacquerware master Qiao Quanyu.

"Qiao held nothing back when he taught me, but the learning curve wasn't smooth," Xue says. Before they realized, the plant was on the verge of bankruptcy. "We had overstocked lacquerware and the going got really hard," he recalls. Everyone at the factory was scraping by on rustproof lacquer and glass painting they had produced.

It was not until 1964, when a Beijing company in foreign trade came along, bought all the lacquerware and placed new orders, that things turned around. The renewed appreciation of local lacquer art put the factory back on its feet.

By then, Qiao's health had deteriorated and Xue was at the helm of design and research. He referred to his erstwhile experience in painting and adopted critical innovation ideas to improve lacquerware designs. Not only did Xue restore lost lacquer art techniques, he also came up with a dozen new methods.

With the rise of local merchants under the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing rulers, Pingyao lacquer products were sold in Russia and Southeast Asian countries.

In the 1970s, polished lacquerware from Pingyao

became a major contributor to Shanxi's foreign-exchange income and made its way to 20 countries and regions.

"Sales in France were the largest. The French liked distinct Chinese designs, particularly historical figures and rural scenery," Xue says.

An art as delicate as lacquerware-making can be very demanding. Aspiring artists need to train for at least three years to grasp basic polishing and painting techniques. According to Xue, more than eight years of practice is necessary to become proficient in the craft.

The complex process that covers wood selection, lacquer application, painting and polishing usually calls for joint efforts by multiple artists. They need to work in tandem to deliver delicate lacquerware, especially those inlaid with conch shells or gold foil.

New blood

In addition to furthering his own skills, Xue has started passing down his technical know-how to younger generations.

"Young people need to be passionate and persistent to understand the essence of lacquer art," he says.

Xue has groomed more than 200 apprentices, including his two sons.

"My father works with his apprentices for some five hours a day at the workshop," says Xue Xiaodong, one of his sons.

Xue Xiaodong has adhered to his father's commitment to natural lacquer and draws inspiration from traditional culture.

"It is important for us to know about ancient attire, literature and opera to make good lacquerware," he says.

Xue Xiaodong, on the other hand, has developed his own understanding of the craftsmanship. "It is imperative to integrate modern concepts, as aesthetic standards are constantly evolving, and creators need to study them to appeal to younger generations," he says.

In 2011, the Xue family founded a lacquer art research institute, where enthusiasts can learn the nitty-gritty of techniques. While traditional lacquerware highlights classic tales or auspicious patterns, younger artists like Xue Xiaodong strive to keep the art modern and simple.

At the institute, one can see lacquerware featuring medical workers fighting the pandemic. The human portraits have gold foil outline while the creases of clothes are finished with inlaid white shells, creating a three-dimensional effect.

Xue Shengjin is relieved to see the contribution from younger artists.

"The content and style of paintings can change as long as the craftsmanship stays intact," he says.

In recent years, Xue Shengjin has gotten a new identity. He is an honorary curator of the China Polished Lacquerware Museum in Pingyao, where visitors can feast their eyes on a splendid array of lacquer art, including jewelry boxes featuring Chinese zodiac animals from the Tangdu Polished Lacquerware Co. Other items like delicate tableware, bookmarks and personal accessories are also grabbing attention.

"We have combined traditional techniques with modern elements and stepped up research to expand application of the intangible cultural heritage," says Yin Jianping, the deputy general manager of the lacquerware company.

Yin has sensed the market trend in which Pingyao's polished lacquerware is making inroads into modern life.

"We will work with reputable and culturally creative companies to explore more possibilities," Yin says.

The popularity and influence of Pingyao's lacquerware are on the rise, thanks to online sales and expanding overseas markets. Top lacquer artists and businesses are rich resources for development of the art, says Huo Wenzhong, director of the Pingyao Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center.

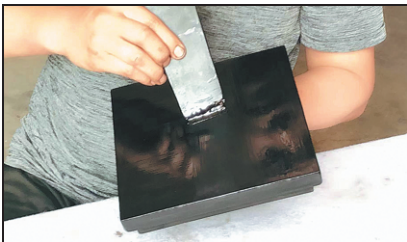
Local authorities are also hosting a lacquer festival to build a communication platform for artists from around the world. The objective is to take Pingyao's polished lacquerware further, Huo adds.

Peng Ke'er contributed to this story.

Contact the writers at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn



Hand-polished lacquerware from an ancient Chinese town, promoted by a master artist and his dedicated disciples, is taking the world by storm, report **Yang Feiyue** in Beijing and **Sun Ruisheng** in Taiyuan.



Top: A jewelry box, featuring magnolia patterns, is a fine example of the traditional lacquer art in Pingyao, Shanxi province. **Above:** The making of lacquerware usually involves a few basic steps: wrapping the wooden item with linen and covering it with a mixture of parget and pork blood; polishing it with sandpaper and covering it with the mixture again, after which the process is repeated several times to create a smooth surface; painting on the refined surface; and polishing with sesame oil and brick dust until a distinct sheen appears. **Below:** A lacquerwork by Xue Shengjin (pictured above left), featuring a group of performers playing music at a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) palace. PHOTOS BY LIANG SHENGREN / FOR CHINA DAILY

