

Province branches out into tree protection

Ancient plants have an ecological, historical and cultural value, say Shanxi officials



By YUAN SHENGGAO

In an era where ecological civilization is highlighted, trees are seen as one of the most valuable assets.

The oldest trees, which have lived for hundreds or even thousands of years, are the most precious because of their association with history and culture. This is especially true in the North China province of Shanxi, which boasts many ancient trees.

Local statistics show that the province has a total of 102,200 living ancient trees, including 14,297 with life spans between 100 and 299 years; 4,426 between 300 and 499 years; and 4,475 above 500 years, which fall in the categories of third to first class respectively on the national list of recognition.

In addition, there are 94 trees in Shanxi that have been recognized as precious trees by the State's forestry authorities for their age, rareness, and historical and cultural significance.

The trees are a source of pride for residents in Shanxi and attract tourists to the province.

Among the tens of thousands of ancient trees still alive in Shanxi, the oldest might be a cypress tree in Jinci Temple in the provincial capital of Taiyuan.

Jinci used to be the ancestral temple of kings of the Jin state (1033-376



From left: With a history of more than 2,900 years, the cypress in Taiyuan's Jinci Temple is the oldest living tree in Shanxi. The Chinese scholar tree in Dicun village in Taiyuan city is said to be planted during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



BC) during the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC) and the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC).

Inside the temple and close to the Never Aging Spring, there are two cypress trees. The two trees — one died in the early 1900s, leaving its trunk — with a history of more than 2,900 years, are the oldest relics in Jinci, older than any built structure.

The two trees are said to have been planted by a certain king of the Jin state. The Jin state disappeared into history 2,300 years ago but the trees remained, standing as witnesses to the rise and fall of many states and dynasties that followed.

In the Lingkong Mountain National Forest Park in the counties

of Qinyuan and Guxian, a Chinese pine called "Nine Flags" is also a must-see attraction for tourists.

Standing on the top of a peak near the Shengshou Buddhist Temple, a tree with a history of more than 600 years is the largest Chinese pine in the world, according to Li Zhenjun, head of the local forestry bureau.

"When we say it is the largest, we mean its size gauged by the diameter of its canopy," Li said. "People often say that a tree doesn't make a forest but this tree is an exception."

The tree begins to branch out at its base section. But several meters above the ground, the nine branches turn upright to heights reaching 40 meters, like nine flagpoles.

According to Li, the canopy of the

tree covers a projected area of nearly 400 square meters, making it the largest of its kind in the world and earning it the fame of a nationally recognized precious tree.

"The 'Nine Flags' is not alone here — there are another seven trees in the forest park falling in the same category of recognition," Li said. "In this park, the old trees enjoy the best care from our forestry workers, from growth monitoring to the control and prevention of pests, diseases and natural disasters."

In Jinci, more than 100 ancient trees in the temple are now under intensive care, according to Bai Kaiwen, an official in charge of garden- ing at Jinci Museum.

"We are using nondestructive testing technologies to diagnose the

hidden ailments of trees, either in the trunks or deep in the roots," Bai said. "And there are also ventilation and fertilizing ducts installed underground to help the roots breathe better and take in nutrition."

But in Shanxi not all ancient trees could enjoy the same level of care as those in forest parks and places of historical interest. The majority of them are scattered across the countryside, some in the wilderness that is not easy to access.

However, this situation is expected to change after Shanxi recently issued a number of documents and regulations, putting the protection of ancient trees in a legal framework.

For instance, Shanxi's authorities

in public security, forestry and grassland, and urban and rural construction jointly launched a provincial campaign in 2022 to tackle the illegal logging of ancient trees.

Li Jun, an official in charge of ecological repair at the Shanxi Forestry and Grassland Bureau, said the province is exploring a forest chief mechanism and the protection of ancient trees will be a responsibility of local government heads.

He added that the protection of ancient trees is a multidisciplinary mission that involves the integration of botany, plant medicine, soil studies, ecology, climatology and microbiology, as well as other modern technologies.

"We will do our best to gather all the possible resources in these sectors for the better care of old trees," Li Jun said. "And we will establish a pool of multisector experts, conducting joint research programs and giving training to people engaged in ancient tree protection."

He said raising awareness and enthusiasm among the general public is also vital to the protection of ancient trees.

"We are publicizing knowledge on ancient tree protection to the public through the internet, and encouraging businesses and individuals to become patrons of ancient trees in their communities."

"We should further tap into the ecological, cultural and tourism values of ancient trees, making them an important part in rural vitalization," Li Jun said.

Zhang Liyuan contributed to this story.

Yuncheng heritage sites enhanced by makeovers

By HAO NAN
haonan@chinadaily.com.cn

The city of Yuncheng is planning to become a tourism powerhouse in Shanxi by strengthening the protection and utilization of its historical relics and cultural heritage.

The city, as one of the birthplaces of China's ancient civilization, boasts rich historical and cultural legacies. Centering on its goal of building a tourism powerhouse, Yuncheng has launched initiatives to enhance the management of travel-related cultural relics, integrate tourism with culture and upgrade infrastructure.

The initiatives aim to bring vitality to the ancient cultural assets and give better play to the social and cultural values of the local heritage sites, local officials said.

One of the first tourism spots to benefit from the initiatives is the Guandi Ancestral Temple Scenic Spot. The temple was built in tribute to Yuncheng native Guan Yu, a famed general during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280). Guan is regarded by locals as a symbol of faithfulness and courage.

The city's cultural protection unit has now taken charge of the protection of cultural relics of the temple,

while the company of Guangong Cultural Tourism Development, founded in 2020, operates related cultural tourism activities.

The two parties are joining hands for an upgrading project, which is aimed to develop the site into the city's first 5A tourist attraction. 5A is the highest level of a tourist destination in the country.

Yuncheng has raised 3.6 billion yuan (\$501.8 million) through the issuance of special bonds for the project and invited China's top cultural tourism designers to make construction plans.

In the past three years, the city invested 1.5 billion yuan to improve the infrastructure around the scenic spot. It has also established a series of supporting facilities such as a Guangong Culture Street, a tourist service center, smart parking lots and an ancient city ruins exhibition center.

The two-floor tourist service center, for example, has a construction area of 6,000 square meters, with a total investment of 158 million yuan. It includes a digital exhibition hall, which allows visitors to experience and immerse themselves in Guangong culture and history.

After the upgrade, the core area of the Guandi Ancestral Temple Scenic Spot increased from 26 hectares



Guangong Culture Street in Yuncheng is thronged with tourists. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

to more than 86 hectares.

Also, activities such as memorials held on the birthday of Guan and Guangong cultural festivals have been held in the scenic spot, attracting a vast number of tourists.

Official statistics showed that by the end of October, the scenic spots operated by Guangong Cultural Tourism Development received 3.18 million visits and achieved more than 56 million yuan in revenue.

Another tourism spot highlighted by the Yuncheng government is a salt culture-themed tourist resort. Dubbed China's Dead Sea, Yuncheng Salt Lake covers a total area of 132 square kilometers. Due to its rich mineral elements, the lake's black mud can be used to activate cells, refresh the skin and relieve fatigue.

Landmarks emerge as heavy industries move

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Boasting 18 suburban forest parks and a high rate of vegetation, the Xishan Ecological and Cultural Tourism Demonstration Zone has emerged as a landmark tourist attraction in the Shanxi provincial capital of Taiyuan.

Its fame increased this year after it was recognized by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment in October as an experimental base for the practices of "turning green mountains and clear waters into valuable assets".

Green mountains and clear waters feature in today's Xishan demonstration zone. Local statistics show that, over the past decade, trees have been planted across 13,000 hectares.

But the scene was different a decade ago. Xishan, which literally means Western Mountains, used to be a major coal-mining site and a coal refuse dumping field in Taiyuan.

When recalling what it was a decade ago, Ji Lei, an executive of Baijiazhuang Coal Mine, said: "There was a huge coal refuse dumping field in Xishan, with an area of more than 1.7 square kilometers. Baijiazhuang was among the four coal mines that dumped gangue — worthless coal mine rock — here."

He added it was also a major source of pollution, with wastewater from coal washing, dust and hazardous gas emitted from the spontaneous burning of gangue.

"What you could see on the ground was just the 'tip of the iceberg'," Ji said. "Under the ground was a mining subsidence area of 120 sq km."

In addition, the neighboring area had gathered more than 2,000 polluting enterprises, especially those engaged in coal min-

ing, electricity, coking and chemistry.

"When the environmental deterioration reached an unbearable level, we realized it was time to transform," Ji said.

The local government began to take action in the early 2010s. Mines like Baijiazhuang were relocated, together with another 2,000-plus polluting enterprises being shut down or relocated.

On the former mining sites and dumping fields, ecological repair and greening moves have been going on for more than a decade.

In the process of greening, a forestry worker recalled that the hardest part was to plant trees on gangue dumping fields and mine-damaged slopes.

"When planting seedlings, we put them in seedling-cultivating pipes made from degradable biomaterials to help the roots reach the depth of the soil," he said.

After more than 10 years of efforts, the vegetation coverage of the Xishan demonstration zone reaches 86 percent, compared with the original rate of less than 20 percent, according to local statistics.

The zone has once again become a tourism hub in Taiyuan. Old attractions, like the neighboring Jinci Temple and Tianlingshan Grottoes, have stepped out from the shroud of coal dust and are shining again.

There are also new attractions, like the Taiyuan Botanical Garden standing on the former premises of coal-producing companies.

Local statistics show that the Xishan demonstration zone received 8.42 million visits during the first nine months of this year, growing 111.8 percent year-on-year.

Meng Ting contributed to this story.



The Xishan Ecological and Cultural Tourism Demonstration Zone has emerged as a tourist attraction in Taiyuan over recent years. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Baijiu liquor tempting taste buds in Argentina

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Renowned Shanxi distillery company Xinghuacun Fenjiu recently made a long journey to the South American country of Argentina, promoting its white liquor — or *baijiu* — varieties to local consumers and the business community.

Its liquor-tasting event was held on Nov 29 in the nation's capital of Buenos Aires. More than 150 representatives from the local business, political and media circles attended.

Denovo, the dealer of Xinghuacun Fenjiu in Argentina, hosted the event with Fenjiu International — the arm of global operations at the Shanxi distillery company.

At the event, Xinghuacun Fenjiu and Denovo executives introduced the products and their history and culture to the guests.

Li Bingqian, an executive from Denovo, talked about the history and culture of the brand of Xinghuacun Fenjiu.

She said Xinghuacun Fenjiu is a unique product from the township of Xinghuan in Shanxi province, which



Mixologists make cocktails based on Xinghuacun Fenjiu's white liquor at the tasting event in Argentina. WEN ZHAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

might be the original source of China's alcoholic beverages.

"An archaeological discovery in Xinghuacun township in 1983 has offered material evidence for the long history of China's alcoholic beverages, which might date back 6,000 years," Li said.

She said one of the remarkable findings at the site, which is located in the premises of today's Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group, was a waving spindle-shaped bottle. It was identified by archaeologists as a utensil used to brew alcoholic beverages. It has 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.

She added that ancient techniques for making Xinghuacun Fenjiu's white liquor were included in China's national list of intangible cultural heritage items in 2006.

The company is also one of the pioneering white liquor companies in China to go global.

After it won a first prize at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, the United States, in 1915, Fenjiu-branded white liquor began to attract the attention of international buyers. Since then, Xinghuacun Fenjiu brands have become popular in overseas markets.

Xinghuacun Fenjiu is now among the top three exporters in China's white liquor industry. To date, its products have been sold to more than 80 countries and regions, through its dozens of overseas dealers and thousands of outlets in foreign countries.

Wu Jia contributed to this story.