

## Waterway withstands the tides of change to bring new hope

By ZHAO RUIXUE

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Zhao Xiumei turned to wickerwork in 2001 after being laid off from her mining job in Shandong province's Zaozhuang, where the economy slumped after its coal reserves dwindled.

But she barely earned enough to make ends meet.

"Zaozhuang was known for its coal. We had no tourists. My wickerwork could only be sold to dealers, so I earned little from production," the 41-year-old says.

But things have changed for the better — the city's tourism industry boomed as the ancient Grand Canal has become an increasingly popular travel destination. Her fortunes reversed when she rented a 20-square-meter space in the rebuilt ancient town of Tai'erzhuang on the bank of the Jia Canal, a stretch of the interprovincial waterway.

"I never imagined my business would grow so fast," she recalls.

"Tourists like to buy wickerwork souvenirs. I earn up to four times what I did before."

Zhao now runs a 102-square-meter store in Tai'erzhuang, selling eight kinds of wicker items, including boxes, baskets and furniture.

She also heads up a cooperative of about 200 women, who make wicker products for her.

"It's the ancient town that has helped me expand," Zhao says. "The canal has run through the town for centuries. It will continue to bless our business. I have faith in it."

The 2-square-kilometer town is home to nearly 20,000 people.

Tai'erzhuang was rebuilt after the ancient town was destroyed during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45).

It was established in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and thrived during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when the Jia Canal was built through the town.

"Tai'erzhuang became prosperous overnight because of the Grand Canal," Zaozhuang's Party chief Chen Wei says.

The Jia Canal is colloquially known as the "canal of pound locks" because eight locks control water levels.

Tai'erzhuang had the first pound lock barges pass through when the water enters Shandong from Jiangsu province.

"In ancient times, passing through a lock took at least two weeks and sometimes up to two months. So merchants had to stay in Tai'erzhuang, which boosted the town's economy," Zaozhuang's Grand Canal culture promotion office expert Dong Yunqi says.



A newly opened folk art museum becomes another tourist site in Tai'erzhuang.



Barges pass the Zaozhuang section of the Grand Canal.

The *Annals of Yi County* records that more than 10,000 barges passed through Tai'erzhuang a year, making the town an important transport base during the Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Tai'erzhuang's permanent population then reached 60,000, and about 150,000 others passed through every year, Dong says.

These people left great legacies — both tangible and intangible.

The town once had about 6,000 buildings constructed in eight architectural styles and 72 temples for major world religions, such as Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Buddhism, Dong says.

But the ancient town of Tai'erzhuang was mostly destroyed during World War II. The local government began rebuilding in 2006 to lure tourists. It has worked to make the new Tai'erzhuang as close to the old one as possible.

"Tai'erzhuang enjoys great fortune bestowed by the Grand Canal," Chen says.

The rebuilt town is a 5-A site — the top national tourism designation.

About 2.6 million tourists visited Tai'erzhuang per year, making it Shandong's third most popular attraction, after Confucius' hometown Qufu and Tai'an city's Mount Taishan.

"Zaozhuang had no tour buses or local tour guides before it was rebuilt," deputy director of the city's tourism office Du Jianmin says.

"It now has more than 100 tour buses and 400 local tour guides."

The city previously had 4,700 hotel beds with a less than 40 percent occupancy rate but now has at least 50,000 hotel beds.

"And four five-star hotels are now under construction, but it will still be insufficient to meet demand in peak seasons," Du says.

Yu Fuxin, a 52-year-old writer born in Taiwan, has decided to spend the rest of her life at Tai'erzhuang, where her family originated.

But she was less than impressed when she first visited decades ago.

"The coal-producing city was dull and dilapidated," she recalls. "I wouldn't have visited if my grandmother didn't live here."

But now she's glad to call Tai'erzhuang home, she says, standing on the Grand Canal's Yu Family Dock.

"The canal brings prosperity and hope," she says.

The cultural resources that spring from the waterway will never dry up, Chen says. It transcends time and has enriched people for generations, he says.

"The canal's significance isn't its engineering but rather its legacies," Chen says. "This transcends all changes."



The Grand Canal's heritage has prompted over 80 sites to seek a shared UNESCO listing. Wang Qian follows the ancient passageway's course into the future.

# Where culture flows

The opening and flourishing of the Grand Canal during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties has left rich cultural legacies in Zaozhuang in Shandong province.

PHOTOS BY JU CHUANJIANG / CHINA DAILY

**X**u Deguang still often reminisces about chanting songs to lead boatmen as they hauled barges through dangerous shoals and rapids along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal.

The 97-year-old is believed to be the only living inheritor of *haizi*, a type of folk music sung to synchronize boatmen in Zaozhuang city in southwestern Shandong province, where a significant section of the canal still functions.

"In the past, navigation depended on the song-leader's ability," Xu says.

"He was vital and decided the rhythm and tone, depending on water flow and rowing pace. This enabled the others to harness their collective strength according to the rhythm."

Unlike other places' boatmen's ballads, whose lyrics are mostly improvised, the lyrics of Zaozhuang's *haizi* are said to have been standardized by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) Emperor Qianlong. *Haizi* is now a provincial-level intangible culture heritage.

"Previously, *haizi* was only used for boats that delivered grain and goods for the royal families from south to north via the canal. The lyrics were approved by the emperor and can't be changed," Xu explains.

There are 11 main *haizi* forms in Zaozhuang, each with different lyrics and functions. They include those for punting, rowing, mast-hoisting and sail-spreading, shouldering, breaking and overcoming rapids.

Xu grew up in a poor family near the canal. He started to help his parents at age 7 and learned from a veteran lead singer who once worked on the imperial boat.

"The lead singer requires not only a good memory and lungs but also enough knowledge of potential dangers. Few people could do it," Xu says.

But he was well rewarded and enjoyed a good reputation.

"A boat loaded with 50 tons was generally hauled by seven men. It was very cool when I sang and others responded in different voices," he recalls.

"The lead singer earned the biggest salaries among boatmen — about 15 *dayang* (a Republic of China silver dollar) a month — enough to feed the whole family then. Other boatmen were only paid 4 *dayang*."

The trade began to vanish when engines started to become more common in the 1950s. "I've seen ups and downs of canal life. I just hope more young people can know the art form and understand bygone days."

The 2,000-year-old Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the world's longest and oldest artificial waterway, has witnessed much of China's history and is celebrated for its myriad traditional cultures.

According to *The Summary of the Ancient Chinese Novel* published in 2005, over 70 per-



Folk artists perform Liugin Opera at a traditional theater in Tai'erzhuang.



A reconstructed historical building stands on the bank of the Grand Canal in Tai'erzhuang.

cent of novels from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties depicted stories set along the Grand Canal during Chinese literature's heyday.

Zaozhuang is the first Shandong city the Grand Canal enters.

"The opening and flourishing of the Grand Canal not only turned Zaozhuang into a communication and economic hub during the Ming and Qing dynasties but also has left

rich cultural legacies," Zaozhuang's cultural relics bureau director Shao Lei says.

The city now contains 406 intangible culture heritage items above the municipal level, including *haizi*, Liugin Opera, storytelling in local dialect with drum accompaniment and Zaozhuang shadow puppetry.

"The canal caused the country's businesspeople to converge in the city, bringing

diverse cultures and folk arts," Shao says.

The Zaozhuang government built a 10,000-square-meter national expo park for intangible cultural heritage in the ancient town of Tai'erzhuang alongside the canal.

Qing Emperor Qianlong once praised Tai'erzhuang as "the world's most affluent town" but it was destroyed during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45).

Since 2009, 1.7 billion yuan (\$278 million) has been allocated to restore the town to its former glory.

"The reappearance of traditional cultures and crafts is important to the town's reconstruction," says the town's management committee director Wang Guangjin.

Wang says 156 national- and provincial-level heritage items from across the nation are displayed in the park.

They include Beijing clay sculptures, Luzhou oil-paper umbrellas and traditional New Year woodprint paintings from Shandong's Weifang.

Tourists can see how these handicrafts are created or try making their own.

Folk artists are also paid to perform in the town. Most are inheritors of centuries-old traditions at risk of vanishing.

Zhu Siqun was overjoyed when he was invited to the town to present Lunan *daxu* — storytelling in Zaozhuang dialect performed while beating a drum and two steel plates.

The performance art can be traced back to 400 years ago and was once very popular in areas around the canal, especially in northern China.

"About 40 years ago, dozens of people would gather in a teahouse every night and watch the show, which generally lasted two hours," says the 63-year-old, who began to learn the craft at age 13 and practiced it for almost half a century.

"The audience erupted into applause as soon as I stepped onstage. Some would come every day, since it usually took a month to finish a book."

Most of the stories are adopted from ancient Chinese literature, and told with rhymed lines and expressive body language.

Zhu lost most of his business 10 years ago and had to open a clothing shop to feed his family.

"I'm so glad I can find a new stage here where tourists can experience the ancient art's glory," Zhu says.

He earns 2,000 yuan a month.

Residents and farmers outside the town have organized more than 200 folk troupes. They've given over 6,000 performances to Zaozhuang's villagers and students, the municipal government reports.

"It's a good way to enrich our leisure and protect dying folk arts," said 62-year-old Yan Jingli, from a troupe in Yicheng district's Gushao township.

After retiring from the municipal opera troupe, Yan has volunteered to teach Liugin Opera in a troupe of about 30 people ages 20 to 65.

"Most are nearby farmers," Yan says. "They're amateurs and can't perform very professionally. But it's a very good start."

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## Reincarnated from rubble

By JU CHUANJIANG and ZHAO RUIXUE

The screen overlooking New York's Times Square — the "crossroads of the world" — today shows a dreamlike Chinese landscape.

The video shows the vicissitudes of Tai'erzhuang, a town in Zaozhuang, Shandong province, nurtured by the Grand Canal, ruined during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45) and later rebuilt.

Zaozhuang's Party chief Chen Wei says two of the phrases shown on the screen resonate with him: "Destroyed but never lost" and "Feel the Chinese dream."

The town's reconstruction was part of Zaozhuang's initiative to boost the city's service industry.

It has had a profound impact on the city's 4 million residents, as the community's coal stocks are becoming depleted. Zaozhuang's namesake comes from a mine and the city thrived when it was among the country's top three coal sources in the 1930s. The Party chief says the city had few prospects with the coal running out.

"We successfully changed our economic structure by developing the cultural resources of the Grand Canal endows," Chen says.

He likens the post-war reconstruction to Warsaw's.

Chen, a native of Zhejiang province's Jinhua, became Shandong province's youngest mayor when he took the post in Zaozhuang in 2006 at age 40.

He has since tackled the challenge of rejuvenating the historical town. "Zaozhuang has no famous mountains and no coast. What it has is the Grand Canal and a destroyed ancient town," Chen says.

Chen says he arrived in Tai'erzhuang to discover a shabby place with no public toilets, and street lamps and ancient docks covered with trash. It was slated to be redeveloped by a real estate company.

Chen halted the real estate project and pushed instead to rebuild the ancient town.

"Tai'erzhuang is infused with culture," he says. "It thrived during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties because of the Grand Canal and hosted the Battle of Tai'erzhuang — China's first major victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Its cultural resources will never be depleted."

But, physically speaking, over 90 per-

cent of the ancient town was destroyed in battle.

Chen and his colleagues spent three years collecting pictures, documents, films and photos to learn what the town was like before the war. They also visited all the locals older than 80.

Chen spent 47 weeks in Tai'erzhuang in 2007, his driver says.

The project's layout was drafted by 2009.

The Party chief raised funds by persuading five State-run coal companies — all eager to transform their structures — to join the project. About 1.7 billion yuan (\$274 million) has been spent on the project in total.

The 2-square-kilometer town is still under construction, but major parts are open to tourists. These include 10 main streets, 72 lanes and 108 bridges.

The buildings are constructed on their original sites and in their original forms. Photographs of the originals are posted next to some.

The rebuilt Tai'erzhuang is the first cross-strait communication base approved by the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office and a 5-A tourist site — the highest national-level designation.

CNN Travel ranks it among China's five most beautiful water towns.

"Despite the small size, Tai'erzhuang has a number of traditional temples, waterways and museums," CNN Travel says.

Chen explains: "We gave up the real estate project but gained a priceless cultural legacy."

Since the reconstruction, Zaozhuang's tourism sector has grown 16.5 percent year-on-year to generate 11.16 billion yuan.

More than 80 percent of residents who got new jobs last year work in tourism.

"But you can't be a good mayor by only developing tourism," Chen says. He's also pushing the city to develop coal processing.

"We're changing coal into materials. He used in value-added products like acetic acid," Chen says. "Our production uses a recycling system to ensure no waste is discharged into the environment."

He has been changing the economic composition in other ways.

The cement industry contributes 3 percent of Zaozhuang's GDP but consumes 25 percent of its energy. Chen closed nearly all of the energy-intensive facilities and developed emerging industries like coal processing.

These emerging industries use only 10



Zaozhuang Party chief Chen Wei has made special efforts to realize Tai'erzhuang's reconstruction.

percent of the energy cement consumes.

The city has invested more than 60 billion yuan in the coal-chemistry sector.

This investment seems poised to pay off in three years, Chen says.

Zaozhuang's new economy has attracted investors. Each of the city's 303 projects under construction has an investment of over 100 million yuan. They include new energy and chemicals.

But Chen isn't merely a technocrat. He wrote the song *Reluctant to Say Goodbye* about the town. And he enjoys reading Ai Qing's poem *I Love This Land*.

The poem says: "Why are tears always in my eyes? It's because I love this land so much."

Chen says: "Zaozhuang is a city where I realize my dreams. I love the city with all my heart."

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The Zaozhuang section of the Grand Canal has remained unchanged since the Ming Dynasty.

## Channeling prosperity

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The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal's flow seems to follow the direction of fortune — especially since its ancient glory is being reconstructed after being destroyed in World War II and 85 sites along the canal have jointly applied for UNESCO World Heritage status.

The artificial waterway that linked northern and southern China served as a lifeline for dynasties for 14 centuries. It carried materials and ideas between the political capitals of the north and economic heartland of the south.

The canal produced 70 percent of the country's economic output during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, says Chen Wei, Party chief of Shandong's Zaozhuang city along the canal.

Over time, the canal's value to the 18 cities that border it has shifted from logistics to culture and tourism.

The channel can be thought of as a necklace, sparkling with the 85 sites applying for World Heritage status.

Zaozhuang, the first city the Grand Canal meets when it enters Shandong province from the south, has the only stretch unchanged since the Ming Dynasty.

"Most docks and mooring points along the canal have been changed or renovated by modern development, but Zaozhuang has a 3-kilometer passage along which the docks and mooring points are original," Chen says.

The water is also unchanged, he says. On paper, the Grand Canal runs 1,747 kilometers — making it nine times longer than the Suez Canal. Parts date back to the 5th century BC.

The original canal system took shape during the Sui Dynasty (AD 581-618), the capital of which was Luoyang — now the second largest city in Henan province by GDP.

Sui emperor Yang Guang needed to transport grain from the fertile Yangtze region northward to support his court and armies. So the emperor forced a huge number of workers to build the canal to connect Luoyang with Beijing and Hangzhou, capital of today's Zhejiang province.

The Grand Canal didn't pass through Zaozhuang until the Ming Dynasty, when an east-west waterway called the Jia Canal was devised to circumnavigate the Yellow River's floods, which frequently paralyzed the Grand Canal.

"The Jia Canal is built according to its geographic features. Since it was completed, the Grand Canal has rarely been obstructed by the Yellow River, solving the biggest problem for emperors," Zaozhuang's Grand Canal culture promotion office expert Dong Yunqi says.

"The canal has developed Zaozhuang's historical coal business, which is waning as deposits shrink."

In 1878, Chung Hsing Coal Mining Co. now Zaozhuang Coal Mining, was founded in the area. The company ran 14 mines across Zaozhuang then, placing the city

among China's top three coal bases until the 1930s.

"Before 1912, the Grand Canal served as the only way for the company to transport coal southward," Zaozhuang Mining Co Ltd publicity office director Hu Lebao says.

It also shipped construction materials purchased from Germany, he says.

The Jia Canal was expanded after New China's 1949 founding to serve increasing demand for cargo transportation. It's currently 99 km long.

Zaozhuang has four ports along the canal. Their throughput reached 32.15 million tons last year.

"The Grand Canal makes inland Zaozhuang a port city," Chen says.

"It plays an important role in shipping cargo like coal, cement and wood materials."

The city's port transportation management office deputy head Li Ying says: "Compared with land transport, the canal saves energy and generates less pollution."

Per ton transported every km, the CO2 generated by canal-based transportation is two-thirds of that transported by railway and one-fifth of that transported by road.

The canal has also given rise to an area of wetlands since it changed the water system. One swath, the Weishanhu wetlands, contains a combined water area of 1,200 square km.

The Grand Canal also aids the South-to-North Water Diversion Project by transporting clean water from the Yangtze River to the northern cities, reincarnating its standing as a lifeline.