

PLACE OF WONDER

SHANXI'S DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE OF MOUNTAINS, THE YELLOW RIVER AND THE GREAT WALL CONTAINS FANTASTIC STORIES GOING BACK CENTURIES

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The North China province of Shanxi is a destination worth an in-depth tour, as it offers a perfect combination of natural wonders and cultural attractions. It's no exaggeration to say that every landscape in the province has deep historical and cultural connotations and an even deeper emotional link with locals.

Shanxi is often referred to as *Shanxi Shuibi* by the locals. The term literally means it is a land between the spectacular Yellow River and Taihang Mountains.

As the Yellow River flows about 3,500 kilometers from its source in Qinghai province through the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, it enters Shanxi province in the village of Luotian in Fangshan county.

Since that point, the river takes an L-shaped course, serving as the border with Shaanxi province to the west and Henan province to the south. It meets the Taihang Mountains — which serves as Shanxi's eastern border with Henan and Hebei provinces — in the southeast. In the north of the province, the river and the mountains are connected by several sections of the Great Wall.

Thus the Yellow River, the Taihang Mountains and the Great Wall are indisputably the three top attractions in Shanxi.

The Yellow River is the mother river of China. It has nurtured the culture and economy of the nation for thousands of years. In Shanxi, the river has ushered in a farming culture lasting about four millennia, making it one of the sources of Chinese civilization.

More than 4,000 years ago, residents in the region began to develop agriculture using the river and its tributaries to irrigate the fertile land. Back then, Shanxi's farming practice was said to be taught by the Red Emperor. Also

called Shennong — which means "God of Farming" — the Red Emperor was the pioneer of Chinese agriculture and one of the co-founders of the Chinese nation along with his contemporary Yellow Emperor.

The mausoleum of the Red Emperor was built in the southeastern Shanxi county of Gaoping. Memorial ceremonies have been held on this site every year for centuries.

Despite the benefits it has brought to locals, the river sometimes destroyed land and properties and even took lives during severe floods.

For millennia, the residents in Shanxi have come to a consensus that the improvement of the Yellow River is crucial to the well-being of the region and the entire nation. But it was only in recent decades that they realized that curbing soil erosion and improving the ecological environment can eventually turn the river to the better.

As Shanxi is located on the Loess Plateau, soil erosion has been a challenge to the Yellow River for thousands of years.

In the early 1970s, the area of soil erosion in Shanxi was 108,000 square kilometers, of which 62,000 sq km was in the Yellow River drainage basin. Soil erosion-induced annual sediment in the Yellow River was 366 million metric tons during that period.

Fangshan, the first county in Shanxi that embraces the Yellow River, had been one of the regions hardest hit by soil erosion. During its worst period in the 1970s, about 81 percent of the land suffered soil erosion. The county began a massive campaign to curb soil erosion in that decade. The moves were a combination of vegetation planting and engineering measures for gully head protection and farmland modification.

Tangible progress has been made since then. One remarkable feature is the sustained growth of vegetation coverage. Local statistics show that the

county's forest coverage increased from less than 3.5 percent in 1977 to 48.6 percent in 2022.

Fangshan is the place where the Yellow River and Great Wall meet. "As the river is becoming clearer and the mountains near the Great Wall are greener, we are welcoming a growing number of tourists and securing more revenue," said an official of the county.

Between 2018 and 2022, Shanxi saw a total of 2,300 sq km of land saved from soil erosion. By the end of 2022, about 50 percent of land suffering soil erosion had been curbed, compared to the ratio of 53.8 percent in 2018. It marked a sharper contrast with the 1970s, when nearly 70 percent of Shanxi's total area was subject to soil erosion.

Like the Yellow River, the Great Wall — the most famous ancient Chinese defense work with a total length of more than 21,000 km running through nine Chinese cities and about 40 countries in Shanxi — has brought the similar feelings to Chinese people because it was related to the fate of the nation throughout history.

When wars took place, the wall was pinned with hopes in the defense against invaders. If the wall was captured by the enemies, it was disastrous to the nation.

In times of peace, the Great Wall passes were the venues of economic and cultural exchanges between the Han people and nomads in the north.

The Shanxi city of Datong near the Great Wall has stood as a witness to such commercial exchanges for centuries.

When the emperors of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), a regime established by the northern nomads, chose Datong — then called Pingcheng — as the national capital in the late fourth century, it was in the heyday of the spread of Buddhism in China.

A landmark project for such cultural exchanges was the construction of the Yungang Grottoes. The site has since become one of the top three famous tourism towns of Chinese grottoes. The other two are Mogao in Dunhuang, Gansu province, and Longmen in Luoyang, Henan province. The Yungang Grottoes were added to the World Cultural Heritage List in December 2001.

The economic exchanges through the Great Wall passes also ushered in the era of the Shanxi merchants some five centuries ago. It showed that the Shanxi people, despite being enclosed by the river, mountains and walls on its four sides, were the pioneers in opening-up to the world.

The Shanxi merchants, or *Jinshang*, were the first group of Chinese businessmen plying the move toward globalization. They are remembered by the people of Shanxi as well as the rest of country for their hardworking and enterprising spirit and their willingness to invest back in their home communities.

These pioneers in foreign trade usually started their business as small vendors, selling products like tea and silk to overseas regions. Once they made a fortune, they would return to their home province, making huge investments in improving local education, infrastructure and the livelihoods of their fellow residents.

The Shanxi merchants reached their peak prosperity during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. It was *Jinshang* merchants who dominated commercial circles in North China for about 300 years since the Ming Dynasty.

A number of cities and counties in central Shanxi, like Pingao, Taijin, Yuci and Qixian, still boast a great number of well-preserved ancient streets, old premises and grand courtyards, which tell stories of the merchants' fortunes to visitors today.

The Chang Family Manor in Yuci district of Jinzhong city might be the larg-

est residential complex built by a *Jinshang* family. Among the many structures there, an open stage, although not prominent in size, attracts the attention of visitors with its history.

The small stage took about three years to complete, not for its complexity in structuring and insufficient investment, but for a charity purpose.

Locals said the long period of construction is because of a big drought in the late Qing Dynasty that had left millions of people in famine.

With the drought lasting three years, the Chang family spent the same amount of time in constructing the stage. The purpose was providing relief by paying and feeding construction workers who were drought victims. This practice called "relief through work" offered a new solution to natural disasters, showing the *Jinshang* merchants' innovative thinking to pay back to society.

With its spectacular sights, the Taihang Mountains have also made a strong emotional link with the people in the 20th century.

One of the most imposing sights in the area are the cliffs rising perpendicularly from the valleys. The cliffs are often called the "iron walls of Taihang". In the eyes of locals, the term "iron walls of Taihang" is not only a description of the landscape but a tribute to the heroes who protected the nation by fighting the Japanese invaders seven decades ago.

The Shanxi merchants were an important base for the Eighth Route Army led by the Communist Party of China.

A number of cities and counties in central Shanxi, like Pingao, Taijin, Yuci and Qixian, still boast a great number of well-preserved ancient streets, old premises and grand courtyards, which tell stories of the merchants' fortunes to visitors today.

General Zhao Qian (1902-82), deputy chief of staff of the army, honored the province by sacrificing his life during a battle in the county. To pay homage to

this great hero, the local people changed the name of the county to Zaoqian from its name of Luozhen in the year of his death.

Taihang is now home to a great number of Red tourism sites related to China's revolutionary history, like the Eighth Army Memorial Museum in Wujiang county, the site of the Hundred-Regiment Campaign in Jiauguan city.

Extending more than 400 km from north to south, the Taihang Mountains are one of the largest mountain ranges in North China. It is also where the name of Shanxi province comes from.

Shanxi — which means "to the west of the mountains" — is called so because it is located to the west of Taihang.

Because of its precipitous peaks, steep cliffs, strange rocks, lush forests and clean waters, Taihang is seen by many as a destination that can be visited many times.

Zaoqian county in the east of Shanxi is known for its Taihang valleys, which is called the "50 km gallery of picturesque landscape" by tourism industry leaders.

Shanxi features one of the largest numbers of cultural heritage items in China, especially unmovable heritage items, like historical relics, ancient buildings and monuments, offering rich material evidence to study the history of Shanxi and the entire nation.

Numerous well-preserved sites of historical interest are scattered in the hinterland of Shanxi, including the Wooden Pagoda in Yingxian county, the Hanging Temple in Hanyuan county, the Jinci Temple in Taiyuan and the Gaoqiang Tombsites in Yancheng.

The province also features a great number of intangible cultural heritage items. Many of these, like paper-cutting, flower buns and wuyang drum and gongxi dances, are kept alive by the people.