

Master craftsmanship wins county new honor

Lacquerware and high-quality beef secure provincial title for Pingyao

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The Shanxi county of Pingyao is known among tourists mostly because of its historical assets.

It boasts a centuries-old ancient city, surrounded by complete city walls and packed with old streets, blocks and structures. It was listed as a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997.

Pingyao is also known as one of the hubs of the famed Shanxi merchants, who are said to have dominated business circles in North China during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

However, the local residents have other things to be proud of, for instance, the craftsmanship embodied in the production of hand-polished lacquerware and high-quality beef with ancient techniques.

The techniques for Pingyao's hand-polished — or *tuiguang* — lacquerware made the national list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006. Those for beef production were included on the same list in 2008.

The two products won further recognition when Pingyao was included in the provincial list of characteristic towns for local specialty industries in September 2022.

Developing towns with characteristic industries is a new strategy in Shanxi, which aims to create economic engines that accelerate high-quality industrial growth locally.

Local officials and businesspeople



said that the listing of Pingyao as a characteristic town shows both the cultural and economic values of the products have been endorsed by provincial authorities. Now they are making plans for better development of the two industries.

Xue Shengjin is a famed inheritor of Pingyao's hand-polished lacquerware. At the age of 86, he still operates a studio for this traditional art. According to Xue, Pingyao's hand-polished lacquerware is one of the top four Chinese varieties. With a history of more than 2,000 years, it is a brilliant representation of the nation's craft.

He added that it is made of natural raw lacquer and is varnished by hand using a special technique.

As the creation of the artworks involve complicated techniques — ranging from embedding and sculpting to painting — a successful craftsman in hand-polished lacquerware needs decades of experience, concentration and an unflinching taste for aesthetics, Xue said.

Xue devotes much of his energy to passing down this art to younger generations. He has offered training to more than 200 apprentices. Some

of his apprentices turned out to be prominent artists in this trade, including two national-level and five provincial-level masters.

Xue said he is happy that the industry is not only well preserved, but brings revenues, jobs and business opportunities to locals.

According to local statistics, Pingyao now has more than 160 businesses — including companies, studios and household mills — in the production of hand-polished lacquerware, creating jobs for more than 5,600 local people. The businesses produce more than 300,000 lacquerware items a year, with an annual combined sales revenue of 100 million yuan (\$14.43 million).

Tangdu Tuiguang Lacquer Ware is the largest producer of lacquerware in Pingyao. Encouraged by the county's new status, the company has recently completed an expansion project, according to Lei Shujuan, an executive of the company.

"We have invested 123 million yuan in developing a lacquerware-themed cultural park in downtown Pingyao," Lei said. "This is a comprehensive facility including such operations as production, sales, exhibition, tourism, research and education."

As the lacquerware industry is closely associated with tourism, Lei said the park is expected to become a new destination in Pingyao.

"We have attracted a growing number of tourists these days," she said. "We hope Pingyao's lacquer-



Pingyao's *tuiguang* lacquerware is renowned throughout the country for its high quality achieved through a hand-polishing technique. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ware can be promoted to the world with more tourists coming."

Feng Yuquan, mayor of Pingyao, said the county government has plans to help the artworks go global.

"We have invited the country's renowned artists to design products meeting the aesthetics of international buyers," Feng said. "We are also planning for global promotional events in cooperation with China's overseas diplomatic missions."

Beef production in Pingyao is an industry with a scale even larger than lacquerware. A single company, Pingyao Beef Group, reported sales revenue of 710 million yuan in 2022, more than seven times that of the lacquerware industry.

Pingyao's beef has whetted people's appetite with its tender texture

and rosy color. The use of traditional techniques, which highlight controlled ingredient selection and production processes, has made Pingyao beef nationally renowned.

The county is home to 22 large or medium-sized beef production enterprises and 24 smaller mills, with a total annual processing capacity of 32,000 metric tons.

Li Zengfu, board chairman of Pingyao Beef Group, said the listing of Pingyao as a characteristic town for beef production is a great opportunity. In terms of the industry's development, it can increase the influence of local products, strengthen local enterprises' innovation and expand marketing channels. Recently, the company is planning for substantial capacity expansion, he added.

According to Wei Jiangfeng, Party secretary of Pingyao, the county's beef industry is expected to realize a total annual output value of 3 billion yuan by 2025.

To reach this goal, the county has invested more than 2 billion yuan in developing a beef industry park with an area of 40 hectares.

"In this park, we will offer standardized production plants for local beef producers and help them modernize their operations by introducing advanced technologies and equipment," Wei said.

The official added that the scale of the lacquerware industry is expected to reach 500 million yuan in annual output value by 2025.

Bai Xuhong and Pei Yunfeng contributed to this story.

Homecoming highlights merchants old and new

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The Shanxi merchants, the first group of Chinese businesspeople piloting the move toward globalization, are always remembered by the people of Shanxi province as well as the rest of country for their hardworking and enterprising spirits and their willingness to pay back to their hometowns.

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, or Jinshang, reached their peak of prosperity during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

The Jinshang's business began to decline in the late 19th century, when new international trade hubs emerged in China's eastern coasts and sea transportation overtook the traditional overland routes.

But this doesn't mean that the merchants disappeared completely

from the historical stage. They have actually branched out, continuing their operations across the world.

And their enterprising spirit and enthusiasm to pay back their hometowns has remained the same.

A recent event in Taiyuan saw the return of Jinshang merchants and their centuries-long values.

The event, called the "Homeward Trip of Hundreds of Jinshang Merchants", was held in the Shanxi provincial capital on April 29, gathering nearly 200 Jinshang representatives from across the world.

According to the organizers of the event, these businesspeople have offered not only suggestions for Shanxi's development, but also proposals for business partnerships.

At the event, Zhang Weidong, chairman of the Shanxi Chamber of Commerce in Germany, introduced the investment possibilities between Shanxi and Germany.

In Germany, the chamber has organized a number of events to publicize Shanxi's business environment and offer networking opportunities for businesspeople from both sides, according to Zhang.

"We will hold more business matchmaking activities in the



Representative Shanxi merchants meet at a networking event in Taiyuan. LI LIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

future, contributing to the high-quality development of Shanxi," Zhang said.

Duan Yong is a Shanxi native who operates a biological science company in the city of Suzhou in East China's Jiangsu province. His company has already invested in several facilities in Shanxi. This time, he said he is looking for further opportunities to invest.

Duan also offered his suggestion on Shanxi's development, saying that local businesspeople should keep close contact with consumer electronics manufacturers in China's coastal regions, who are planning to transfer their production capacities to the country's central and western regions.

Peng Yanwu, chairman of the

Association of Shanxi Enterprises in Zhejiang, said the economies of Zhejiang and Shanxi provinces are highly complementary because Zhejiang is strong in capital and research and development resources and Shanxi has rich natural resources.

"Our association will play a role in facilitating the share of resources of both sides," Peng said.

Lyu Liang, secretary-general of the Lyuliang Business Association in Shanghai, promised at the event that his association will bring suppliers and buyers together, helping to introduce more Shanxi specialty products, especially those from the city of Lyuliang, to Shanghai.

Li Lian contributed to this story.

Digital tools transform coal mining industry

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Yangquan, a traditional coal mining city in the east of Shanxi province, is experiencing an economic revitalization thanks to its technological transformation.

Local officials said the transformation features digitalized upgrades of traditional industry players and the development of emerging sectors as new growth drivers.

Huayang Group, for instance, is one of the leading coal-mining companies in Yangquan. Its operations have been recently upgraded with digital and intelligent technologies, resulting in great improvements in efficiency, safety and cut pollution.

The group's No 1 Coal Mine is one of the pioneers in digital operations in Yangquan, by launching 5G-connected, intelligent coal-mining shafts.

With a 5G network reaching hundreds of meters under the ground, the company's mining operations are now controlled by a coordinating center on the surface. It has basically realized automation for coal cutting and conveying, improving efficiency and safety.

To date, Yangquan boasts two smart coal mines and 57 intelligent coal-mining shafts. This means that 94.5 percent of the city's coal output is produced by advanced, digitalized facilities.

Sunshine Power Generation, a power plant in Yangquan's Pingding county, is using a 5G-connected sensing system to monitor water quality.

"In the past, water quality inspections needed a team of five workers," said Geng Lei, a company executive in charge of 5G operations. "Today, just one person is needed for the same job thanks to the new system."

Huading Machinery in Yangquan High-Tech Development Zone is another example of the industrial

digitalization. It uses digitally controlled machining centers in its production.

Guo Changzheng, board chairman of the company, said all its 70-plus machine tools are digitally controlled and network-connected. It allows full automation of almost all the machining procedures.

He added that, the new equipment features great accuracy, with the qualification rate of machined components reaching almost 100 percent.

While traditional industries, like coal mining, power generation and machine building are revitalized with the use of digital technologies, emerging sectors in Yangquan are giving the local economy an additional boost.

These new industries include new energy batteries, new materials and new energy resources, as well as the digital economy.

Huayang Group is a pacesetter in Yangquan's new energy battery industry, thanks to its diversification efforts.

On Sept 30, 2022, the company announced the operation of the world's first facility for mass-produced sodium-ion cells, with an annual capacity of 1 gigawatt-hours.

Wang Yongge, board chairman of the company, said the battery industry is an extension of the coal industry.

"The negative electrode is a kind of carbon-based material made from coal," he explained.

Enterprises of above designated scale — those with an annual sales revenue of 20 million yuan (2.89 million) — in Yangquan's emerging industries reported an average increase of 17 percent in incremental value in 2022. They contributed 2.9 percentage points to the local economic growth rate, according to the city's statistics bureau.

Bai Xuefeng contributed to this story.



Huge gas valves are produced at a plant in Yangquan.

LIU SHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Tourism surges during May Day holiday

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Welcoming an increasing number of tourists during the five-day May Day holiday from April 29 to May 3, the North China province of Shanxi finally saw its tourism revenue surpass the pre-pandemic level.

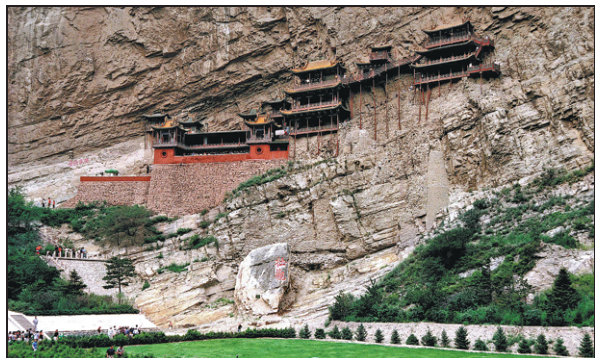
Local statistics show the number of tourist visits to Shanxi reached the same level of the May Day period of 2019, while combined tourism revenue increased 13.9 percent.

The rich offering of colorful activities is one of the reasons driving the growth.

In Hunyuan county, which boasts such renowned attractions as Mount Hengshan and Xuankong Temple, or cliff-hanging temple, tourists were treated to various shows of folk arts and food, after their tours of the sight-seeing destinations.

In Yingxian county neighboring Hunyuan, a historical show was staged near the Sakyamuni Temple, which is famed for China's earliest preserved wooden pagoda built in the Liao Dynasty (907-1125).

The show was called *Empress Dowager Xiao Returning to Hometown and Paying Homage to Bud-*



Tourists line up to visit the renowned Xuankong Temple in Hunyuan county. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

dha, giving people an understanding of how Buddhism developed in the Liao Dynasty, when there was an overwhelming enthusiasm for Buddhism among the royal families, officials and ordinary residents.

In Yunqiu Mountain Scenic Area, a popular rural tour destination in the city of Linfen, a reality show called *Life by the Farms* took place, giving people a glimpse into what life was

like in rural Shanxi decades ago and a nostalgic memory of their childhood.

Other activities throughout the province also included a carnival in the provincial capital of Taiyuan, tours seeking ancestral roots in Hongtong county and a rural tourism festival in Loufan county.

Shanxi's tourism officials said local social media outlets made online promotions for these activi-

ties beforehand, helping tourists select their favored destinations and shows when making trip plans.

The Shanxi Culture and Tourism Department's survey showed that more than 95 percent of the tourists were satisfied with the themed activities they experienced.

Another reason for tourist satisfaction is that Shanxi's tourism operators made accurate predictions of tourist numbers they were about to receive and offered targeted solutions based on the data.

"Scenic area operators, travel companies and hospitality industry players made their predictions according to online bookings of tickets and rooms," an official of the department said. "So they could mobilize adequate resources to serve their customers."

Incentives offered by destinations proved to be another draw to tourists during the period.

Supported by the Shanxi Culture and Tourism Department and the Shanxi Department of Finance, a total of 106 major scenic areas in Shanxi provided tourists with preferential ticket prices.

Other incentives also included free shuttle buses between destinations and free parking.

Zhang Ting contributed to this story.