



Name: Jinci Temple **Age:** 1,638 **Feature:** The oldest royal ancestral temple in China
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Name: Foguang Temple **Age:** 1,553 **Feature:** The largest and most complicated among the few preserved Tang Dynasty structures in China

By YUAN SHENGGAO

For those who have an interest in China's ancient buildings, Shanxi province in North China offers the perfect destination.

As one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, Shanxi boasts a history spanning millennia. Dating back to the period of the legendary Red Emperor some 4,000 years ago, the province has a wealth of historical and cultural heritage.

According to a national survey in 2011, Shanxi is home to 53,875 unmovable cultural heritage items.

Among the sites, Pingyao Ancient City, Yungang Grottoes and Mount Wutai are on the UNESCO list of World Cultural Heritage Sites.

In addition, there are 531 places in Shanxi recognized as relic sites on the national list of protection, ranking first nationwide.

Among the 50,000-plus unmovable cultural heritage items, there are 28,027 ancient buildings, accounting for about one-tenth of the nation's total.

The buildings cover a wide range of fields including government offices, gardens, temples, opera stages, pavilions, pagodas, towers and residences.

Nearly half of these are wooden structures. According to local statistics, Shanxi is home to 495 preserved wooden-structure buildings built before the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

It is worth mentioning that there are only three preserved wooden structures built in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) left in China — and Shanxi has all of them. The province has four of China's five wooden structures built in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960), 150 of 183 such buildings built in the Liao (916-1125), Song (960-1279) and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties, and 338 of the 389 wooden structures in the Yuan Dynasty. These figures prove that Shanxi holds a privileged position in the country in terms of preserved ancient buildings.

Jinci Temple

The preserved structures in Jinci Temple in Shanxi's provincial capital, Taiyuan, are not the oldest in the province but the site is of great significance as it is related to the recorded history of Shanxi.

Jinci Temple, which is located 25 kilometers southwest of Taiyuan at the foot of Xuanyuan Mountain, was built as a temple for Shuyu, the first monarch of the vassal state of Jin (1033-376 BC). This state was where the recorded history of Shanxi began.

The temple was later renamed the Ancestral Temple of Jin, or Jinci Temple for short. Jinci is the oldest ancestral temple complex in China. There are more than 100 preserved ancient buildings built from the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This number has earned it a reputation as a "museum of ancient Chinese buildings".

The precious wooden structures include the Memorial Hall for Yi Jiang — the mother of Shuyu — built in the Song Dynasty and the Hall of Sacrifice built in the Jin Dynasty.

The oldest objects in the temple are two 2,900-year-old cypress trees (one died in the early 1900s, leaving its huge trunk behind), which were supposedly planted by Shuyu himself.

Other precious relics in the temple include 300-plus stone steles with inscriptions writ-

A rendezvous with ancient buildings in Shanxi

Home to more than 53,000 ancient landmarks, this North China province boasts an unrivaled wealth of history



Name: Yingxian Wooden Pagoda (left)
Age: 968
Feature: The oldest preserved and largest wooden tower in China



Name: Xuankong Temple (right)
Age: 1,533
Feature: A hanging temple on cliff and a site worshipped by believers of multiple religions

ten by famous historical figures like Tang Dynasty emperor Li Shimin and empress Wu Zetian.

Foguang Temple

One of the most ancient temples in Shanxi that is still well preserved to this day is Foguang Buddhist Temple, near the renowned Buddhist holy mountain of Wutai. This temple is not only one of the oldest in the province but one of the oldest in China, according to researchers.

Inscriptions found in the temple show that it was originally built in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) and was rebuilt during the late Tang Dynasty.

The preserved Grand Eastern Hall, the main hall of the temple, was built in 857. It has a history that rivals Nanchan Temple, which was built in 782 and is also in the Wutai region.

Foguang Temple's wooden structure, statues, murals and inscriptions are regarded as the four treasures of Tang Dynasty Buddhist arts.

However, if it were not for a discovery by renowned architecture researchers Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin in the 1930s, the historical and cultural value of the temple may still be unknown.

Before the 1930s, many researchers, especially those in Japan, asserted that there were no preserved Tang Dynasty wooden structures in China.

But when examining photographs of the Mogao Grottoes' murals in Gansu province, Liang and Lin noticed there were complete maps of temples in Wutai including Foguang.

The pair, who were also a couple, launched a search with other researchers for Foguang Temple. After several months, they found it in June 1937.

Their intensive research, including studying the architectural style, structural details and inscriptions, proves that the Grand Eastern Hall in Foguang is the largest among the few preserved Tang Dynasty structures in China.

In one report written by Liang, he said he was shocked by the number of Tang Dynasty statues in the hall.

The 34 statues, including the Three Buddhas of Past, Present and Future, and two Bodhisattvas and their followers, constitute China's largest group of colored statues created in the Tang Dynasty.

Decades after Liang and Lin's discovery, there are still new findings to prove the temple's long history. In the 1980s, archaeologists discovered Tang Dynasty tourists' inscriptions on the rear of the wooden gate of the Grand Eastern Hall. It shows that even the gate is more than 1,100 years old.

In addition to the grand hall, the temple is home to a number of buildings from the Jin and Song dynasties.

Xuankong Temple

Xuankong Temple in Shanxi's Hunyuan county is one of China's most stunning examples of ancient architecture.

Originally built in the mid-Northern Wei Dynasty and renovated in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the temple is made up of two three-story wooden-structured pavilions and a yard linked by staircases and steps. These line along the surface of a sheer cliff rising 50 meters above a stream at the foot of Hengshan Mountain.

Seen from below, Xuankong Temple, which literally means "temple hanging in the sky", appears perilous. It is supported only by a few thin wooden pillars stood on protruding rocks. For that reason, it was

selected by Time magazine as one of the 10 most precarious buildings in the world in 2010.

But local researchers refute the notion that Xuankong Temple is perilous. The temple seems precarious as the structure, which weighs dozens of metric tons, appears to be supported by dozens of wooden pillars.

In fact, researchers said 27 square beams made from hemlock wood sustain most of the building's weight. They added that a number of large, deep holes were dug into the cliff's surface and two-thirds of the length of the beams together with wedges were driven into each one. The beams form a strong lever structure that easily supports the weight of the temple.

Xuankong Temple is worshipped by believers of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. There are more than 80 statues of the three religions inside, showing how the Northern Wei Dynasty allowed different religions to coexist.

Yingxian Wooden Pagoda

In the Shanxi county of Yingxian, a wooden tower is the source of pride of many locals.

Sakyamuni Pagoda, which is commonly known as Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, is the oldest preserved and largest wooden tower in China.

Located in a Buddhist temple called Fogong in the northwest of the Yingxian county seat, the 67.31-meter-high tower is a wholly wooden structure built in the Liao Dynasty. The entire tower was put together with mortise and tenon joints, without using a single nail.

In 2016, it was included in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the highest wooden tower in the world.

From the exterior, the pagoda seems to

have only five stories and two sets of rooftop eaves for the first story but its interior reveals that it has nine stories. Each story has 24 exterior pillars and eight interior pillars.

On each floor are Buddhist statues, including a statue of Sakyamuni on the first. The elegantly carved Sakyamuni statue is 11 meters tall. All the statues and paintings on the inner walls are works dating back to the Liao Dynasty.

Historical records show that the pagoda has survived seven earthquakes, including a severe one in the Yuan Dynasty that lasted on-and-off for seven days. The pagoda has stood firm and remained intact, a testament to its rational use of components, fine construction and sound quality.

Yongle Palace

In comparison with Shanxi's ancient landmarks such as Yungang Grottoes, Foguang Temple, Yingxian Wooden Pagoda and Jinci Temple, Yongle Palace is not among the oldest. However, it has significance when it comes to artistry.

Located in Ruicheng, a county in the southwest of Shanxi province, Yongle Palace is one of the top three Taoist temples in the country, along with Chongyang Palace in Shaanxi province and Baiyun Guan in Beijing. It is also China's largest Taoist complex in terms of floor space.

Yongle Palace, which started construction in 1247, was built to worship Lyu Dongbin (born in 796), the founder of the Taoist mainstream Quanzhen Sect. Construction, which spanned 110 years during the Mongolian reign in North China and the Yuan Dynasty, included beautiful Taoist murals.

There are murals covering more than 1,000 square meters preserved there. Among them, *The Painting of Heavenly Court* — or *Chaoyuan Tu* in Chinese — is the best known. Measuring 97 meters long and 4.4 meters high, it features 290 Taoist figures.

Art critics and historians have called the painting the greatest mural in China, saying that it is distinguished by its vivid figures, uninterrupted compositions, steady lines and vibrant colors.

They have said the mural's style shows distinctive characteristics of the Yuan Dynasty, representing the skillful and mature techniques of painters of that time. It marks a milestone in the history of ancient Chinese arts.

A roof-ridge ornament — which features a colorfully glazed dragon — is another symbol of the temple's artistic credentials.

Created during the Yuan Dynasty, the statue retains its original bright colors. This is due to the use of a glaze called Peacock Blue, which was fired with the highest technical level of that period.

Battered by wind and rain for more than 700 years, the temple has faced some severe challenges in the last century.

In 1959, the Chinese government decided to build a huge dam on the Yellow River in the southern part of Shanxi, which would flood the site of the Taoist temple. As a result, the temple had to be moved. It now stands nearly 20 km north of its original location.

Thanks to the painstaking efforts of hundreds of cultural heritage craftsmen and workers, the structures and murals were kept intact despite the relocation.

Li Yao contributed to this story.



Name: Yongle Palace **Age:** 777 **Feature:** China's largest Taoist complex and a treasure house of mural art