



A colored statue of Avalokitesvara in Shuanglin Temple. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The city of Pingyao is one of the most globalized regions in Shanxi province, past and present.

The ancient city is the county seat of Pingyao in the central part of the North China province. It was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List in 1997 for being a well-preserved ancient city and for its two famed Buddhist temples of Shuanglin and Zhenguo in the suburbs.

According to the evaluation report by UNESCO's World Heritage Convention in 1997, Pingyao is recognized as “an exceptional well-preserved example of a traditional Han Chinese city, founded in the 14th century”.

The report added that “its urban fabric shows the evolution of architectural styles and town planning in imperial China over five centuries. Of special interest are the imposing buildings associated with banking, for which Pingyao was the major center for the whole China in the 19th and early 20th century”.

The banking sector the report referred to was a part of the business of Shanxi merchants, also known as Jinshang, over the past centuries. Pingyao was the business hub of these merchants.

The Jinshang merchants were the first group of Chinese businesspeople piloting the move toward globalization.

These pioneers of foreign trade usually started their business as small vendors, selling products like tea and silk to overseas regions that included the Far East and Europe.

The Jinshang merchants reached their peak of prosperity in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. They are said to have dominated the international trade sector in North China during the period.

The Jinshang merchants invented a number of new business models that still operate in the modern age. One is *biaofu*, companies that combined courier and safety guard duties; another is *piaohao*, which were entities to issue China's earliest banking drafts.

The banking draft — or *huipiao* — business of *piaohao* firms was a historic innovation made by Jinshang merchants in China's fledgling financial industry.

The invention of *huipiao* in the early 19th century aimed to replace the long-distance cash transportation provided by *biaofu* firms, enabling Jinshang merchants to do business anywhere that they traveled, paying for things conveniently.

Some Western researchers of that period noticed that the emergence of *huipiao* significantly improved the settlement method, allowing China's circulation of cash to enter a more rapid and convenient era.

Joseph Edkins, a British missionary and sociologist, traveled to Shanxi in the late 19th century to see “the magnitude of what Jinshang merchants made”. After visiting *piaohao* firms in Pingyao, he considered the business as the inception of China's banking system.

In today's Pingyao, there are still a number of properties of the old-time *biaofu* and *piaohao* firms, giving people a glimpse into the innovations that aided the Jinshang merchants' global success.

The Jinshang merchants' business began to decline in the early 20th century, when new international trade hubs emerged in China's eastern coasts and sea transportation overtook the traditional overland routes. Since then, Pingyao had seen its recognition fade on the international stage.

The inclusion on the World Heritage Sites List once again brought Pingyao to light, attracting a great number of international tourists to the city over the decades.

International events

In recent years, a number of international events held in Pingyao have improved its global profile, especially in culture and arts.

The earliest international cultural event hosted by Pingyao was the Pingyao International Photography Festival, with its first session held in September 2001.

Since then, the festival has attracted the participation of about 50,000 photographers from more than 100 countries and regions, with a total of 370,000 photographic works on display. The festival has also attracted more than 5 million visitors,



The urban area of Pingyao has a complete city wall of more than 6.1 kilometers, 199 old streets and alleys, and 3,798 residential and commercial properties dating from the Ming and Qing dynasties. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

Historic city offers modern twist on global influence

Once famous for Jinshang merchants, Pingyao stays relevant through cultural extravaganzas



The ancient city of Pingyao is now among the favored destinations for tourists in Shanxi. LIANG SHENGREN / FOR CHINA DAILY

according to Wei Jiangfeng, secretary of the Pingyao county committee of the Communist Party of China.

This year's photography festival opened on Sept 19, with the theme of “Twenty-four years, new quality images”.

The five-day event featured five sections and 16 subsections held in four venues across the city.

More than 3,000 photographers from 28 provinces, municipalities and autonomous

regions of China had 20,000-plus photos on display. The event also exhibited more than 1,800 pictures by 246 photographers from 30 foreign countries and regions.

Wei said the photography festival has blazed a new trail for Pingyao's international exchanges, pushing its cultural and tourism industries onto the global stage.

Following this festival, Pingyao has hosted a number of international cultural events

including sculpture and painting.

Film festival

Among the international activities, another heavyweight event is the Pingyao International Film Festival, founded by reputed Chinese movie director Jia Zhangke in 2017.

The eighth edition of the festival was held on Sept 24-30.

This year's festival screened 52 films



Tourists visit Zhenguo Temple following the release of video game *Black Myth: Wukong* on Aug 20. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Tourists view pictures during the Pingyao International Photography Festival. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

and featured six academic activities. The official screening section — which was called Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragons — included films from 22 countries and regions, with 44.7 percent of the films debuting globally; 73.7 percent making their Asian debut and all of them making their Chinese mainland debut.

Over the eight sessions, the Pingyao International Film Festival has seen the participation of more than 5,000 filmmakers from across the world, the exhibition of more than 400 works and the attendance of more than 1.7 million visitors.

This time, the festival's founder Jia talked about why he selected Pingyao as the locale of this international event.

“Pingyao is an ancient city that has kept many forms of traditional Chinese culture alive,” he said. “It's a place where traditions are interwoven with people's daily life. This should be something inspirational to professionals in the movie industry — scriptwriters, producers, directors, actors and actresses.”

He added that, with a well-preserved city wall and a great number of ancient buildings, Pingyao offers ideal shooting locations for movies, TV dramas and other forms of visual arts.

Jia, who is a Shanxi native, noted that in China, most of the international film industry events are held in megacities like Shanghai and Beijing.

“I hope people in small cities can also have better access to excellent global cultural resources and artists in the cities can have better opportunities for international exchanges,” he said. “That is why Pingyao is now the only county seat in China to host an international film festival.”

Jia added that the rapid development and the drastically increasing influence of the event have exceeded his expectations.

“The enthusiasm of audiences is incredible this year,” he said. “Within the first hour following the opening of the online ticket booking platform, we received 24 million visits. (This is) considering there were no more than 5,000 tickets for one screened film.”

Gamers' pilgrimage

It is noteworthy that Pingyao was one of the shooting locations for the hit video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, with the city's two Buddhist temples of Shuanglin and Zhenguo featured.

The global success of the game, which was released in August, has strengthened Pingyao's appeal to tourists. The temples are becoming popular tourist destinations, especially among those who wanted to “travel Shanxi with Wukong”.

On Sept 14, representatives of more than 20 media outlets from home and abroad visited the two temples, exploring the valuable cultural assets and introducing the details to the audiences worldwide.

Zhenguo Temple was initially built in the middle of the 10th century. Although it had been renovated several times in the past millennium, it still has some well-preserved relics of that period. Its main hall is among the country's only three preserved structures from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960). The wall painting in the hall is the only remaining mural of that period.

Shuanglin Temple features more than 2,000 colored statues created during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which earned it the fame of “a treasure house of colored statues” in China.

Shortly after the release of the game on Aug 20, Shuanglin Temple received more than 36,000 visits during the 20 days running to Sept 10, an increase of 500.52 percent from the same period of 2023. Zhenguo Temple welcomed more than 15,100 visits in the same period, a year-on-year increase of 598.8 percent.

With an urban area of 2.25 square kilometers, the city of Pingyao is said to be the best-preserved ancient county seat in China. It has a complete city wall of more than 6.1 km, 199 old streets and alleys, and 3,798 residential and commercial properties dating from the Ming and Qing dynasties. It boasts 143 sites of historical interest and 1,075 unmovable cultural heritage items.

During a conference on inbound tourism held in Hefei, Anhui province, on Sept 10, Pingyao was recognized as one of China's top 10 ancient towns and cities favored by overseas tourists.

Feng Siqun contributed to this story.