



Sculptures representing a scene of ancient people making utensils are displayed at the Taosi Site Museum.



Creative cultural products based on the Taosi relics are also on display.



From left: An artistic rendering of adobes of the ancient Taosi people are exhibited. The Taosi Site Museum is built near the relics site to showcase a civilization dating back to 3,900 to 4,300 years ago. A sand table gives an overall view of the Taosi relics site. PHOTOS BY FENG SIQUAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



A length-measuring device shows that 1 Taosi foot equals about 25 centimeters.



Clay and pottery utensils are displayed at the museum.



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MUSEUM SHOWCASES SHANXI'S ANCIENT HERITAGE

Relics discovered at Taosi archaeological site highlight province's role as cradle of early Chinese civilization

By YUAN SHENGGAO

A museum collecting and exhibiting cultural relics representing one of the greatest archaeological discoveries over the past decades in China opened earlier this month in the Shanxi county of Xiangfen, offering visitors and researchers an opportunity to decipher information relating to the formation of Chinese civilization.

The Taosi Site Museum, which opened to the public on Nov 11, was built near the Taosi relics site — located in the village of Taosi in Xiangfen. It is aimed to showcase a civilization dating back to 3,900 to 4,300 years ago, following more than six decades of archaeological work.

The Taosi site was discovered in 1958 and a large archaeological excavation began in 1978. Since the site was included in the national research project on tracing the origins of Chinese civilization in 2002, an urban settlement, a palace enclosure, a storage zone, cemeteries and an observatory altar have been excavated one after another.

Judging from the relics discovered, researchers believe the site was most likely the ruins of the capital city during the period of Yao — a sage emperor dating back more than 4,100 years and one of the founding fathers of the Chinese nation.

Over the past decades, more than 5,500 pieces or sets of cultural relics have been unearthed at the Taosi site, giving researchers adequate material evidence to understand how the earliest Chinese society and nation were formed.

Among the discovered cultural relics, a total of 230 pieces showing the culture and life of ancient inhabitants are on display at the museum, including items of pottery, jade, stone and copper. The museum also exhibits relics that some scholars speculate may be related to astronomical observation and timekeeping.

Construction of the museum, covering about 5 hectares of land and nearly 10,000 square meters of floor

space, started in 2021 and was completed in 2023. It is part of the Taosi Archaeological Site Park, which also includes an exhibition hall for ancient astronomy and a facility for the preservation of the bulk of the discovered relics. The museum now features such functions as the exhibition of relics, research and education.

Prior to its opening, the National Cultural Heritage Administration hosted a special news conference for the museum on Nov 6 in Beijing. Officials from the city of Linfen, which has Xiangfen county in its jurisdiction, as well as the nation's archaeological experts, introduced the highlights of the museum to the media.

Wang Yanfeng, mayor of Linfen, said that exhibitions at the museum are arranged in three sections, centering around the themes of "cradle of civilization," "ancient capital" and "the state in the early stage." There are also two special exhibition zones for "archaeological work in Taosi" and temporary displays, as well as a digital exhibition zone to get visitors familiar with the history of China's earliest civilization.

"The use of digital and other modern technologies is a prominent feature of the museum," Wang said. "The combination of digital displays and physical exhibits is aimed to give a new interpretation of the cultural relics and offer an immersive

experience to visitors."

Zhang Guochun, Party secretary of the Institute of Archaeology, a branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, introduced the most noteworthy exhibits at the museum.

Since 1978, the CASS institute has been responsible for the archaeological excavation work in Taosi and more than 90 percent of the exhibits at the museum have been unearthed by its archaeological team members.

Precious exhibits

Zhang said a gnomon shadow measurement tool called *guibiao*, a colored pottery plate with a curled dragon pattern and a flat pottery kettle with red-linked inscriptions, are the most valuable assets of the museum and worth the attention from visitors.

Gao Jiangtao, head of the CASS archaeological team for the Taosi ruins, gave a detailed introduction to the three exhibits.

He said the colored pottery plate with a dragon pattern — which is 40.7 centimeters in diameter and 7.8 cm in depth — might point to the origin of the Chinese totem of dragon.

"The dragon pattern, in the interior surface of the plate, features a curled snake body, crocodile scales, two ears on the two sides of its head and saw-shaped teeth and a long jaw. These are the typical characteristics of the image of China's legend-

ary dragon, similar to the dragon images in later periods like the Xia (c.21st century-16th century BC), Shang (c.16th century-11th century BC) and Zhou (c.11th century-256 BC) dynasties," Gao said.

The dragon pattern, which was abstracted from a variety of beasts, helps to trace the origins of dragon totems in Chinese culture, the researcher said.

When mentioning the flat pottery kettle, Gao said two red pictographic characters inscribed on it might be the earliest written language in China.

"One character might be easily identified as *seen* — meaning written language or culture in Chinese," Gao said. "This character is similar to those in the Shang and Zhou dynasties."

He said there are different interpretations of the other character, but the most acceptable are *yi* — which means "capital city" — and *yao* — the name of the legendary emperor of Yao.

Gao said that archaeologists believe these two characters were part of an ancient writing system more than 500 years older than the Shang Dynasty oracles written on bones and turtle shells discovered in Anyang city, Henan province.

When mentioning the *guibiao*, Gao said it is a set of gnomon shadow measurement tools comprising a vertical bar called *biao* and a horizontal scale called *gui*. *Guibiao* was



A set of ancient musical instruments (left) and a colored pottery plate with a dragon pattern (right) are on show at the museum.

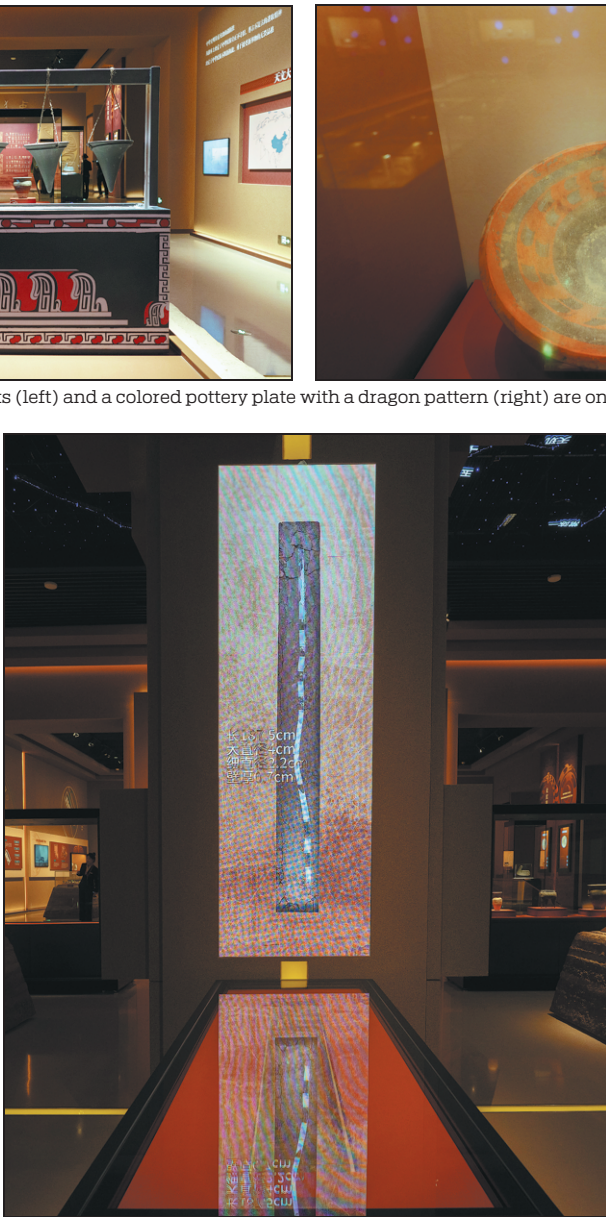
also used as a timekeeping tool, with the vertical bar casting the shadow of sunlight on the horizontal scale to indicate the time of day.

Prehistoric observatory

The *guibiao* on display in the museum is a part of an ancient observatory discovered at the Taosi ruins. Archaeologists believe this is the earliest observatory known in China.

The most exciting part of the observatory are 13 rammed-earth columns arranged in a semicircular shape, Gao said.

"We didn't know the function of the columns at the beginning," Gao said. "However, after years of observation of the columns' projection



From left: A jade ceremonial item, a clay bowl, a gear-shaped bronze wheel, the *guibiao* gnomon shadow measurement tool, a bronze bell, a colored pottery vessel and a flat pottery kettle with red-linked inscriptions are on display at Taosi Site Museum.

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A colored pottery plate with a dragon pattern (right) are on show at the museum.

under the sun, we realized this was the site of an ancient observatory, with the columns used to measure the sun's beam angle and determine the 24 zodiac terms of a year."

He explained that, standing at a specific observation point, observers could determine the solar terms based on the position of the sun during sunrise. For example, the winter solstice occurs when the sun rises from the second narrow gap between the columns, while the spring and autumn equinoxes are marked by the seventh gap.

The establishment of the 24 zodiac terms is believed to be an outstanding contribution to the world made by ancient Chinese almanac scientists.

The system of the zodiac terms, used by Chinese people to guide agricultural production in both ancient and modern times, was recognized as an intangible cultural heritage item by UNESCO in 2016.

Capital of Yao's state

Gao said that historians believed that the earliest state of China was formed as a result of agricultural development. In Taosi, the discovery of astronomical tools to guide farming; the grain remains like millet, wheat, maize and rice; diverse farming tools; and the remains of a relatively big city all prove that the region was the center of one of the earliest states in China.

"According to legends, Yao was one of the sage emperors living in the area. But the lack of confirmed historical records and materials makes many people skeptical of the existence of Yao and his regime," Gao said.

Over the past four decades, remains of palaces, royal tombs, ceremonial buildings and storage areas, as well as fortifications such as high walls and moats, have been found at the Taosi site, showing that it is a capital settlement of an ancient state, Gao said.

"Now with the discoveries in Taosi, we believe Linfen, of which Taosi is a part, was the hub of Yao's regime," Gao said.

Legends said that Pingyang was the capital of Yao's state. Pingyang is

the ancient name of Linfen, where the temple and mausoleum of Yao are located. People have visited the temple and mausoleum to pay homage to this legendary founding father of China for thousands of years but finding material evidence to prove his existence is still a challenge today.

"Now our studies and findings of the Taosi relics proved that Emperor Yao is not just a legend, but a true story," Gao said.

The value of the Taosi relics site in cultural research and tourism has been recognized by many experts and officials in the country. At the Taosi Site Museum's opening ceremony on Nov 11, Li Qin, vice-minister of culture and tourism and chief of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, delivered a speech, confirming the role of the Taosi site in the research to trace the origin of Chinese civilization.

"The latest archaeological findings and research achievements show that Taosi is the site of a capital city of an ancient state, offering strong material evidence for prehistory studies and proving that Chinese civilization is an inclusive one that features multiple cultures and continuity," Li said.

Zhang Hai, vice-dean of the School of Archaeology and Museology of Peking University, said he is proud of the discoveries at the Taosi site.

"We noticed that a number of relics with cultural characteristics of

both northern and southern China have been unearthed at the Taosi site, showing it was at the convergence of multiple cultures," Zhang said. "These discoveries justified a rule of the early development of civilizations and states — it was the convergence of people and cultures that had led to the forming of an early state."

New option for tourists

Yan Jianguo, head of the publicity department of the Linfen committee of the Communist Party of China, said the opening of the museum is expected to promote the integration of cultural and tourism resources and offer a new option for tourists.

Boasting such renowned attractions as the Hukou Waterfalls and Qiankun Bend on the Yellow River, and the Guangsheng Temple and Xiaoxitian Scenic Area, Yan said Linfen is a popular tourist destination in Shanxi.

And the official noted that Linfen is more renowned among tourists as a destination to seek their ancestral and cultural roots.

Dahuashu township in Linfen's Hongtong county, for instance, is the place where many Chinese people inside and outside the country believe their ancestors emigrated from during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). This historical background has made Dahuashu one of the most popular destinations in

China for tourists who want to seek their ancestral roots.

And with the temple and mausoleum of Yao, Yan said Linfen is a place where tourists can seek cultural roots dating back more than 4,000 years.

"The opening of the Taosi Site Museum is offering a new option for root-seeking tourists and a great opportunity for cultural and historical enthusiasts to trace the origin of Chinese civilization," Yan said.

A prominent feature of the museum is that it offers interactive and immersive experiences to visitors, with the use of digital technologies and innovative exhibition design and arrangement.

Once entering the museum, visitors can interact with a sand table to view the map of the ancient capital city covering more than 2.8 million square meters.

The sand table shows that the ruins of the city include foundations of palace buildings spreading 6,500 sq m, the largest prehistoric rammed-earth structure ever found.

In the museum's ritual and music section, restored scenes of ancient banquets, complete with drums, bells and stone chimes, give visitors a glimpse into ancient feasts accompanied by live performances. A digital device also allows guests to hear sounds reconstructed from these ancient instruments, immersing them in a 4,000-year-old soundscape.

In the museum, there are also sculptures showing that ancient people cultivated millet, raised livestock and developed crafts such as pottery and jadeware, forming a vibrant urban culture.

In addition to permanent displays, the museum will also arrange temporary exhibitions featuring relics relating to the sources of Chinese civilization discovered at other archaeological sites in the country, giving visitors a better understanding of the integration of cultures in the formation of the Chinese nation.

Feng Siqian contributed to this story.