

WORLD IN FOCUS



Youths from the US state of Idaho take photos with Chinese tourists in traditional clothings, at the UNESCO World Heritage site Ancient City of Pingyao, in Jinzhong, North China's Shanxi province, on June 15. PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

Ancient echoes, new voices

Idaho students immerse in Shanxi's rich culture, bridge 40-year friendship with fresh connections



Above: US youths experience calligraphy culture in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, on June 14.



Right: US youths practice tai chi fan dance at Shanxi University in Taiyuan on June 16.



Right: A US youth gets traditional Chinese massage in Taiyuan on June 14.



Below: Chinese and US youths pass by a statue of Confucius at the Shanxi Agricultural University on June 16.

By **HOU CHENCHEN** in Beijing and **ZHU XINGXIN** in Taiyuan

For young people from the US state of Idaho, Shanxi was once an unfamiliar name, known only as a “sister province” on the other side of the world in official documents. This summer, that distant name became a vivid reality as they set foot on this ancient land in North China.

In Datong, a city in Shanxi province, they strolled along ancient city walls with local residents, feeling the vibrations of history beneath their feet and taking in the sight of Chinese youth dressed in traditional *hanfu*. In Pingyao, they wandered through stone streets dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), captivated by the cultural goods and street food on display in small shops — a firsthand encounter with the richness of Chinese history and culture.

“I really didn’t expect so much advanced architecture over here in Pingyao ancient city ... much more community as well ... over here like the street markets,” said Eric Torres Garcia, 29.

“The most amazing thing I’ve seen so far was when we arrived and got to climb the city wall at night in Datong and seeing all of the traditional architecture and people dressing up in the (traditional) clothing ... That was just breathtaking,” said Arin Elizabeth Alston, 26.

“Being able to see something so old and rich with history is just so beautiful. Everyone is so kind on the street and it’s just been really lovely,” Alston said.

Garcia and Alston are among the members of the “Exploring China & Creating a Shared Future – China (Shanxi) – US Youth Cultural Exchange Camp”, jointly organized by the Shanxi Provincial Youth Federation and the Shanxi Provincial People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the sister-city relationship between Shanxi province, China, and the US state of Idaho. Since the establishment of this bond in 1985, the two sides have maintained close cooperation in areas such as agriculture, education and trade.

From June 11 to 17, the US youths visited key cultural landmarks in Taiyuan, Datong and Jinzhong, including cultural sites such as the Yungang Grottoes and the Hanging Temple. They also explored the UNESCO World Heritage site Ancient City of Pingyao and tried their hand at traditional crafts such as calligraphy, paper-cutting and lacquer art in Taiyuan.

“I realized now how much time and dedication craftsmen put into mastering skills and passing down these traditions through the ages down to their kids ... I’m glad that it’s still being taught today and I’m glad I learned it myself,” said Bernardus Uitdewilligen, 19.

“This exposure to Chinese culture is important for us to have a greater worldview and connect across boundaries,” said John Ellis Famariss, 18.

The delegation also visited Shanxi Agricultural University, where they interacted with Chinese students and were drawn to a Labubu toy brought by Han Lingda, a 21-year-old student from the university. “I didn’t expect today’s atmosphere to be so warm, and I didn’t expect to gain so many new friendships,” Han said.

Alston said: “There are a lot of differences between Chinese and US people. We have been raised with different values, but through interacting with the students I’ve seen that we just like the same things ... we share the same videos online, we enjoy the same clothing, and we both like to go out to eat.

“And even if maybe the way we were raised was really different, we’re both really interested in connecting and interacting with different and new things. Being here has been a great opportunity to learn about things that are different from me and use them to grow (wiser).”

Kong Zhaosheng, vice-president of Shanxi Agricultural University, said, “Today, the arrival of American young friends not only adds a youthful vibrancy to the 40th anniversary of friendship between Shanxi province and Idaho state, but also showcases the enduring strength of China-US friendship.”

Kong said he hoped both sides can work together in the future and build more bridges of understanding and connection between the two peoples.

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Above: US youths watch a Chinese lion dance in Taiyuan, Shanxi province on June 16.



Left: A US youth shares photos with Chinese tourists at the ancient city of Pingyao, Jinzhong, on June 15.



Left: US youths wear virtual reality headsets at the Shanxi Aviation Exhibition Hall in Taiyuan on June 14.



Below: A group photo of youths from the US state of Idaho in the ancient city of Pingyao, Jinzhong, on June 15.