

Where the Grand Gorge and Great Wall meet

Village of Laoniuwán in Shanxi plays host to two of the most significant symbols of the Chinese nation



The Yellow River, with a total length of 5,464 kilometers, is known as the mother river of China because it has nurtured the culture and economy of the nation. LIU LIANGLIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



By YUAN SHENGGAO

As the Yellow River flows about 3,500 kilometers from its source in Qinghai province through Togtoh county in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, it enters Shanxi province in the village of Laoniuwán in Pianguan county.

From Laoniuwán, which means “Old Ox Bay”, the Yellow River has left its most gorgeous feature, the Shanxi-Shaanxi Grand Gorge, which serves as the border of the two provinces.

The gorge was formed by the Yellow River cutting through the Loess Plateau over millions of years.

The Yellow River is one of the top three sightseeing routes in Shanxi province, along with the Great Wall and Taihang Mountains.

Laoniuwán is a landmark in Shanxi, not only because it is the beginning of the grand gorge but because it is the intersection of the Yellow River and the Great Wall.

According to He Jiao, an official at the administrative center of Laoniuwán Scenic Area, the river



Left: From Laoniuwán, the Yellow River starts its 726-km journey through the Shanxi-Shaanxi Grand Gorge. **Right:** The Hukou Waterfall is one of the most spectacular sights of the Grand Gorge. RAHEEL KHALID / FOR CHINA DAILY PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



and the wall offer unique historic significance to the scenic spot.

“The Yellow River is the mother river of China as it has nurtured the culture and economy of the nation for thousands of years. And the Great Wall was the greatest defense project in ancient China,” He said.

The official noted that the two were also closely related to the fate of the Chinese nation in history.

“For millennia, residents along the river have used its water to irrigate their farmlands. However, the river sometimes destroyed their land and properties and even took their lives when severe floods happened.

“Therefore, the river was some-

times praised as the hope and glory of the nation and sometimes cursed when it brought disaster and despair,” He said.

The official also said the Great Wall had brought similar feelings to the Chinese people.

“In times of peace, the Great Wall passes are the venues of exchange between the Han people and nomads in the north.

“When wars took place, the wall was pinned with high hopes in the defense against invaders. And if the wall was captured by the enemies, it was always disastrous to the nation,” He said.

He said a tour of Laoniuwán is a

trip back in history and there are mysteries waiting to be explored.

“The mysteries are hidden in the ancient watchtowers, ancient buildings, ancient temples, ancient roads and ancient residences,” He said.

Nowadays, the Great Wall near Laoniuwán is not complete. However, there are still a number of watchtowers serving as silent witnesses to history.

The most imposing structure of the wall is the watchtower called Baozita. It was built in early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), at the center of a cliff-top fortress on the southern side of the Yellow River.

The tower is a vantage point for

an overall view of the Yellow River, which used to be a torrential waterway. It became a lake after a reservoir was built in the 1990s.

Laoniuwán borders Inner Mongolia in the north and neighbors Shaanxi in the west. Locals call it a place where “the cock’s crow can be heard in three provinces”.

Tourism in the historical village is not so prosperous compared to other famed destinations in Shanxi due to underdeveloped transport.

The situation is expected to change in the coming months as two highways are under construction.

According to Li Qi, an executive of Shanxi Road and Bridge Construc-

tion, the two highways will connect major sites along the Yellow River and the Great Wall in Pianguan county.

Li said the highways, at a total length of 136.5 km, are scheduled to open in September.

“Highways that can offer easy access to the Yellow River and the Great Wall will give a boost to Pianguan’s tourism and other industries,” said Gao Yongsheng, head of the county’s information office.

In Shanxi, the local authorities are planning the integrated development of its three major touring routes: the Yellow River, Great Wall and Taihang Mountains.

A total of 180 cultural and tourism projects, with an investment of 20 billion yuan (\$2.81 billion), will be built along the three routes in the next few years.

Authorities and tourism operators in Shanxi are also promoting collaborations with provinces and regions that share resources of the three routes.

The 5,464-km Yellow River flows through nine provinces and regions in China. The Great Wall, at a total length of 21,196 km built over different periods, is shared by 15 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The Taihang Mountains constitute the borders of Shanxi, Hebei and Henan provinces.

Li Yali contributed to this story.

Decades of key projects reverse flooding history

By YUAN SHENGGAO

While the Yellow River is praised as the mother river of China that nurtured Chinese civilization, it has also been frequently blamed as the source of disaster throughout history.

Severe floods and soil erosion are big challenges to local life and development on the Loess Plateau in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, where the river serves as the provincial border.

Due to the decrease of forest and grassland areas in past millennia as a result of human activities, huge amounts of soil and silt have washed been away from the Loess Plateau, meaning yellow earth, leading to the name Yellow River.

The soil erosion causes severe flooding and makes the land increasingly infertile.

To solve the problem, the State

has built dozens of water conservation projects along the body and tributaries of the Yellow River in Shanxi and Shaanxi over the past seven decades.

For local governments and residents in Shanxi province, the best effort to protect the river is the decadeslong greening campaign.

In Yonghe county, the Qiankunwan Bend is praised by tourists as “one of the most beautiful bends of the Yellow River”. The river is surrounded by lush forest-covered mountains and hills.

The picturesque sight is radically different from decades ago and is a result of the local people’s painstaking efforts.

Wang Aimin, head of the county’s forestry and grassland administration bureau, said planting trees in the area had been regarded as impossible by some experts.

“It was difficult to find soil on the

rocky mountains as soil had been washed away after centuries of water erosion,” Wang said.

“To solve the problem, our workers carried soil onto the slopes of the mountains and hills. Tree-planting tools, saplings and water were also transported by manpower,” the official said.

To better collect the precious rainfall, saplings are planted in deep holes. The soil near the trees is covered by polyethylene sheets to prevent evaporation.

Such measures substantially improved the survival rate of trees, according to Wang, who added more areas near the Yellow River are covered by trees thanks to these measures.

In the city of Lyuliang, the Lyuliang Mountains are the main source of soil discharged from Shanxi into the Yellow River.

“Lyuliang is among the largest sand producer for the Yellow River because of its lack of vegetation,” said Wang Liwei, mayor of the city.

The official said Lyuliang’s greening campaign has been won inch by inch over the decades.

“Farmers were mobilized to plant trees near their homes at first, then in the valleys and on the slopes,” Wang said.

Over the past three years, the amount of soil discharged from Lyuliang into the Yellow River was reduced by nearly 40 million metric tons a year on average, according to the mayor.

In Shanxi as a whole, more than 1.4 million hectares of land along the Yellow River and its tributaries has been made verdant, according to Sun Pengcheng, an official of the Shanxi Environmental Protection Department.

Shanxi issued a regulation in 2016 requiring more than 3.6 million hectares of forest zones to be developed for the Yellow River drainage.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.

Individuals called upon to help protect cultural legacies throughout province

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Located at the heart of the Yellow River Basin, Shanxi province is one of the cradles of Chinese civilization.

It is said to be the homeland of Red Emperor, Emperor Yao and Emperor Yu, the founding fathers of the Chinese nation some 4,000 years ago.

The reason why the land called Shanxi today is one of the sources of Chinese civilization is that it is blessed by the Yellow River.

More than four millennia ago, residents in the region began to develop agriculture using the river and its tributaries to irrigate the fertile land. The Red Emperor, who is also called Shennong — which means “God of Farming” — was the forefather of Chinese agriculture.

This history has left a wealth of cultural heritage, attracting people to pay homage to the historical figures who contributed to China’s development while enjoying the scenic views of the province.

The cultural legacies are embodied in the many preserved relics, including ancient buildings, villages and towns scattered throughout Shanxi.

However, as the relics are hundreds or even thousands of years old, protecting them becomes a challenge.

In Pujindu village in Yongji city, people frequently mention four iron oxen statues that were built some 1,200 years ago.

Historical documents show that the iron oxen stood on the Yellow River bank. But they sank when the river changed its course dur-



The iron oxen were salvaged from the water to stand on the Yellow River bank again. WANG WENLAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

ing the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

The iron oxen were salvaged in 1988 and now they stand on the river’s bank again.

The salvage was seen as an act to protect the relics from being corroded and worn by moving sands.

Not every relic is as lucky. Many of them, especially ancient buildings, have disappeared after they were weathered by time or destroyed by human activities.

According to Zhao Shuguang, deputy chief of Shanxi Culture Relics Bureau, the province is currently home to 28,027 ancient buildings, accounting for 80 percent of the nation’s total.

“It is not practical for the governments to protect all the relics by relying on their own resources,” Zhao said.

The official said the governments in Shanxi are calling on individuals and businesses to act as sponsors for such relics and take

responsibility for their protection and maintenance.

In Hejin city, local resident Cao Zhanke is the sponsor of the Yuwang Temple.

“I spent about 3 million yuan (\$422,100) repiaring the temple. The cost is not a problem for me,” said Cao who is a businessman and an enthusiast of cultural heritage.

“However, its daily maintenance will take more effort.”

In Beiniuchi village in Wanrong county, the Xie’s Family Temple is on the local list of cultural heritage protection.

Xie Xinquan, 72, and dozens of his relatives are responsible for the maintenance and protection of the temple.

“It’s my honor to be the sponsor of the site, as it is my own family temple and a precious cultural legacy in my county,” Xie said.

Li Yali contributed to this story.



The Yellow River wetland in Pinglu county is now a habitat of migrant birds like swans, thanks to its improved environment.

LIU WENLI / FOR CHINA DAILY