



Various sections of the Great Wall in Shanxi province stand as silent witnesses to a history of more than two millennia, although they are not as complete as they were in their former glory days.

PHOTOS BY YANG JIANMIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ancient barrier brings people new horizon

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Discoveries spark interest among tourists along the famed ancient defense project

Rome was not built in a day and neither was the Great Wall of China.

The country's most iconic defensive structure was built in a period spanning some two millennia from the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Called "the Great Wall Museum", Shanxi province is one of the best places to see the ancient wonder with characteristics of various periods.

With a total length of more than 3,500 kilometers in Shanxi, the Great Wall runs through nine cities and about 40 counties. More than 1,500 km of walls and other relics remain relatively intact.

Yang Jianmin, a resident in Datong city in northern Shanxi, is a professional photographer and researcher of the Great Wall.

Over the course of his explorations, Yang has discovered in Shanxi relics of Great Wall sections built in the Warring States, Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), Northern Dynasties (386-581), as well as Song (960-1279) and Ming dynasties.

"Seen from the maps of China, the Great Wall is basically a long line from Hebei province in the east to Gansu province in the west," Yang said. "But in Shanxi, the Great Wall has many sections distributed in a broad area spreading about 800 km from north to south."

The researcher said the Great Wall is a comprehensive defense system consisting of walls, fortresses and other military facilities.

Such a complete system can be found in the ancient town of Guangwu in Shanyin county.



The Guangwu section of the Great Wall in Shanyin county is a complete defense system consisting of walls, watchtowers, fortresses and other facilities.



The ancient town is composed of two villages — Old Guangwu and New Guangwu, which used to be two fortresses along the Great Wall built in the Ming Dynasty. There are no historical records showing when the ancient town was first built.

Archaeologists found a number of structural relics left by the Liao

Dynasty (916-1125) but they don't believe the relics illustrate the town's origins. The city wall, 1,652 meters in length and 8.3 m in height, was built during the Ming Dynasty.

The residences inside the town are mostly houses in Ming Dynasty style. Researchers believe the houses used to offer accommodation to military forces.

Neighboring the ancient town is a 32-square-kilometer site of about 300 Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 220) tombs. Researchers speculate the site was a burial ground for generals and soldiers who died in battles against invaders about 2,000 years ago.

"When I was a child, I was told the ancient town and the Great Wall were built 1,000 years ago. But recent discoveries show the history of the relics should be at least 1,000 years older than that," said Ma Yufang, Party secretary of Old Guangwu village.

With more discoveries published, Ma said the Great Wall, the ancient town and Han tombs have sparked great interest among both researchers and tourists.

"We receive hundreds of visitors every day," Ma said. "Many of them are excited to be on this site to explore the storied history related to

the Great Wall and related to the ancient frontier."

The Great Wall is regarded as an important symbol of the nation and in ancient China, it was closely related to the fate of the nation.

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

When wars took place, the wall provided defense against invaders. If the wall was captured by the enemies, it was disastrous for the nation.

Because of its historical significance, the Great Wall is a must-see attraction for many tourists.

Its importance is further enhanced by a famous quote from late Chinese leader Mao Zedong: "He who doesn't reach the Great Wall is not a true man."

Capitalizing on the enthusiasm for the wall, many regions in Shanxi are using the historic site as an opportunity to boost local economic growth.

Datong city in northern Shanxi, for instance, boasts 263 km of Great Wall sections in its five counties and districts.

Wu Hongwen, mayor of Datong, said the city is promoting a Great Wall sightseeing route for tourists.

"Just like the famed Yungang Grottoes, one of the top three Buddhist grottoes in China, the Great Wall is likely to become another calling card for Datong's tourism," Wu said.

Weathered by the wind and rain in over millennia and challenged by booming tourism in modern times, protecting the Great Wall has become a pressing concern in regions along the Great Wall.

Pianguan county in the northwest of Shanxi, for instance, has prioritized protecting its precious Great Wall resources, including 126 km of wall, 36 fortresses and more than 300 watchtowers.

According to Wang Yuan, Party secretary of Pianguan, the county has invested more than 100 million yuan (\$14.14 million) in protecting the Great Wall over the past 10 years.

"Protection is the prerequisite for using the Great Wall as a resource for tourism development," Wang said.

Li Yali contributed to this story.

Pianguan county's section of the Great Wall an ode to its rich history

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The construction of the Great Wall, the greatest defense project of ancient China, is said to have begun in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) and ended some 400 years ago during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

However, construction of the wall is still underway in Pianguan county in the northwest of Shanxi province. But the purpose of this stretch of the project is not for defense. Rather, it's to protect the Great Wall as cultural heritage of the nation and a major attraction to tourists.

"Pianguan is a prominent county in China in terms of the Great Wall," said Gao Yongsheng, head of the county's publicity office.

The county boasts six sections of wall built during the Ming Dynasty and several others built in earlier periods dating back to Qing Dynasty (221-206 BC).

There are also 22 fortresses and strongholds built during various periods.

Gao said the most renowned stronghold along the walls is the Pianguan Pass.

The stronghold is located in the north of the county seat. It can be easily recognized even miles away because of its tall, imposing gate tower.

The tower is a Ming-style structure. It's so similar in style to its neighboring structures that visitors may not be aware it was actually built only nine years ago.

Before the construction of the gate tower began in 2011, the designers and civil engineers had visited other sections of the Great Wall for several years to study, measure and survey the remaining structures on the walls to ensure the new tower could retain the original style, according to Wang Yuan, Party secretary of the county.

The county has also repaired and

restored sections of the Great Wall across the city.

"Our research shows that about two-thirds of the materials used to build the walls in ancient times are stones unique to Pianguan. Fortunately, we still have enough reserves of the materials that can be used for the restoration," Wang explained.

"The remaining one-third of the materials are bricks fired from local earth so we can also use similar bricks made according to ancient techniques."

The official said in ancient times when soldiers arrived in Pianguan, their first mission was to repair and enhance the Great Wall, creating a strong defense against invaders.

"We are still renovating the walls today, with the hope of better preserving the precious historical legacies of our nation," Wang said.

Li Yali contributed to this story.



The former barren mountains near the Great Wall in Shanyin county are now covered in lush vegetation. WANG JINFEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Efforts made to restore ecology near landmark

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Serving as a barrier between farmers and nomads in ancient China, the Great Wall was once a site of conflict between the farming Han people to its south and the nomads to the north.

The frequent skirmishes led to a deteriorating ecological environment in the areas adjacent to the walls for thousands of years.

In Shanxi, authorities of counties and cities along the Great Wall have made great efforts to repair the ecological system, exploring a path of green growth and making the areas along the walls more attractive to tourists.

At the Guangwu section of the Great Wall in Shanyin county, the deteriorating environment featuring gradual desertification, frequent sandstorms and severe soil erosion used to be a big threat to the lives of locals and the Great Wall itself.

Authorities in the county began a campaign to improve the environment in 2007 that aimed to curb desertification and prevent sandstorms.

Trees and grasses have been planted along the Great Wall over the past decades. As a result, more than 3,000 hectares of deserts along the wall are now covered in vegetation, according to local officials.

"To further improve the environment, we have planted 5,400 hectares of trees in Shanyin in recent years, expanding the county's forest coverage to nearly 15,000 hectares," said Lan Yechun, deputy chief at the county's forestry and grassland bureau.

Lan said another 400 hectares of forests were added to Shanyin during the first five months of this year.

"As the mountains become greener, the water becomes clean and the sky becomes blue, the sightseeing areas along the Great Wall have attracted more visitors in recent years, bringing more revenue to local residents," the official said.

When reflecting on the 13-year greening campaign, Lan said the achievement was the result of painstaking efforts, especially on steep and craggy mountains and slopes.

"Our forestry workers carried soil onto the slopes of the mountains and hills, where the soil had been washed away after centuries of water erosion," the official said. "Tree-planting tools, saplings and water were also transported by hand."

To collect more rainfall, saplings were planted in deep holes. The soil near the trees was covered by polyethylene sheets to prevent evaporation.

In Datong, a city boasting more than 260 kilometers of the Great Wall, breakthroughs were also made in its greening campaign.

According to the forestry and grassland bureau of Datong, the county invested more than 260 million yuan (\$36.77 million) in planting 2,900 hectares of trees in 2019.

Guo Qing, an official at the Datong planning and natural resources bureau, said the county's greening campaigns have taken the local topography, climate, soil conditions and ecosystem into consideration.

"We have planted trees, bushes and grasses according to various conditions to ensure the survival rate of the vegetation," the official said.

Wang Jinfei contributed to this story.



A section of the Great Wall is restored according to its original style. YANG JIANMIN / FOR CHINA DAILY