

Tourism energizing villages' economies

Group of retired officials impressed by financial turnaround of many rural settlements during tour of Qinshui

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Tian Zhiqian, a retired official, said he was surprised at the great changes made in rural areas of Qinshui county, where he worked several years ago.

Tian and his former colleagues, who also used to work in Qinshui, recently paid a visit to several villages in the county. Nanyang was one of the villages they visited.

"When I worked in Qinshui, Nanyang was among the most underdeveloped villages in the county," Tian said.

According to Tian, farming and animal husbandry were the only sources of revenue for people in Nanyang, which was on the province's list of impoverished villages. Output from the two industries was low due to limited land resources and weak ecology.

Tian said his old impression of the village was completely changed when he saw the broad, paved roads, tidy streets and courtyards.

"Despite all the renovations, I was happy to see that the old-style streets and residences that are typical of an ancient village of Shanxi are still intact," he said.

He was told that it was the emerging rural tourism industry that made the changes happen.

Nanyang is close to the county's major tourist attractions such as Lishan Scenic Area, Honggu National Forest Park and a base for the Chinese military forces during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45).

Making use of the location, villagers began to operate tourism-related businesses, such as bed-and-breakfast accommodations and selling local produce to visitors.

Wang Jianzheng, a local farmer, owns a household B&B business. His special offering to tourists is his unique hotpot dish.

Wang said annual revenue from the business has been more than 30,000 yuan (\$4,245) in recent years, which helped lift his family out of poverty quickly.

To improve local infrastructure, the Poverty Alleviation Office of Shanxi invested more than 500,000 yuan in 2017 to build public toilets and water supply facilities in the village.



Another village that gained support from provincial authorities for tourism-based poverty reduction is Qiaoshang in Huguang county.

This ancient village has a number of old temples, opera stages, residences and bridges. Located in the heart of the Taihang Mountains and featuring natural attractions like a grand gorge with flowing water and dense forests, the village has great potential to become a new destination for sightseeing and relaxation.

However, poor road connectivity and public infrastructure are major challenges to tourism development in the village.

To help tackle these challenges, the Shanxi Culture and Tourism Department invested about 6 million yuan in building roads, water supply facilities, parking lots and public toilets in the village.

"With such public facilities in place, Qiaoshang is now on the fast track of tourism development," said Shi Zhenya, a Shanxi Culture and Tourism Department official who is responsible for



tourism-aided poverty reduction in the village.

The official said the public infrastructure also includes telecommunications like mobile telecommunication base stations and Wi-Fi.

"Accessibility to the internet not only offers convenience to tourists but also helps change the lifestyle of locals for the better," Shi said.

The official said the provincial tourism authorities have also arranged a number of training sessions for local officials and tourism-related business operators. This equips them with the latest management skills and market information for growing the tourism industry in the village.

According to the department, Shanxi has selected 300 villages as demonstrative areas for tourism-aided poverty reduction since 2018.



Top: Increasing investment in improving transport facilities is one of the government's measures to boost rural tourism and help in poverty reduction in Shanxi province. NIU CHENYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY
Above: Handicrafts made by farmers in Guangling county are popular with tourists. LI ZHAOMIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

During the past two years, each of these 300 villages received about 36,000 visits annually on average. The annual tourism revenue of the villages totaled 340 million yuan, according to Wang Ai Qin, chief of the Shanxi Culture

and Tourism Department.

She added that a total of 181,200 rural residents in Shanxi had been lifted out of poverty by developing tourism-related businesses.

Li Yali contributed to this story.

Teacher discovers his dream in China

By RAY WOODARD

I was raised on the ideal of the American dream. A house near the sea, a stable professional career and a loving family.

While this vision was somewhat attainable back home in California, there was always something missing from that image — a piece that existed centuries before my birth.

My great-grandfather left his homeland back in the 1920s, traveling from Guangzhou, China and found a life in the Philippines, marrying a woman whose ancestors also traversed from Spain to the Philippines over a century before. There, my mother was born awaiting my future father from the United States.

My father's journey from the US to my mother's homeland was rooted in the instinctual drive within the family to travel the world in search of home. After spending my childhood in the Philippines, my family returned to the US.

Yet, there was a calling within me to venture to a new land and return to the birthplace of my great-grandfather. And so, in 2011, at the age of 32, I left my life, home and career in California to find a new home in China.

With the entrepreneurial spirit and education I had gained in the States, I chose to do something for and with the young people in Taiyuan, Shanxi province. In the beginning it was a challenge.

With no formal training in Mandarin, I had to get adjusted to my new life in Taiyuan. Thankfully, there were people who welcomed me with open arms and showed me the path toward understanding with local residents and culture.



Ray Woodard poses for a photo with his students. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

I found that the locals, both young and old, were eager to teach me about life here, to show me how to navigate the challenges of daily life and to savor the joys of living. These moments of watching the children play in the neighborhood square, the elders walking or dancing in the parks, the amazing fluidity of traffic where the motorized scooters, bicycles and cars seem to move in unison through the veins of the city have all made their way into my vision of normalcy and contentment.

But most importantly, I have come to find comfort in the daily gift of living, caring for family and cherishing students. One day while teaching a course, a phrase came into my mind — "Look at these children". And I understood that it meant to really look into their faces, their eyes, their minds and their hearts. From that moment forward, I dedicated my work to caring for these students, to laugh with them, to listen to them and most importantly to share my heart with them. When doing this daily, a new feeling which I had not felt for others aside from my family, came into being — love for others.

So now at the age of 41, I continue to live within this great city. I now have my own family including a daughter that is a bridge between this land of my mother's ancestors and the America which planted within me a dream. Not an American dream, but a dream which spans generations and nations. A dream that now takes root in Taiyuan, Shanxi, China.

The writer is an American working at a training school in Taiyuan.

First rail route in Xingxian county celebrates second anniversary

By YUAN SHENGGAO

When passengers boarded a train traveling from Taiyuan, capital city of Shanxi province, to Caijiaya Station in Xingxian county on June 21, they were given a special treat.

A performance of the local Lyu Opera by the crew members was put on from one car to the next, growing into a big chorus with passengers joining in to sing their favorite songs.

Despite the surprise, the passengers were aware that the date marked the second anniversary of the opening of the special train route into the heart of the Lyuliang Mountains in the west of Shanxi.

After renovating a former freight line, the Taiyuan Bureau of China Railway Group launched a passenger route between Taiyuan and Caijiaya, establishing the first passenger train service in Xingxian



Crew members introduce attractions along the railway to tourists on the train from Taiyuan to Caijiaya. ZHANG JIONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

county. The entire trip takes about four hours.

Before that, traveling from the Lyuliang Mountains to the rest of

Shanxi province was no easy feat.

"It took more than seven hours from Xingxian to Taiyuan by bus. And a ride on the zigzagged and

bumpy mountain roads was especially uncomfortable for carsick passengers," said Wang Rui, a passenger on the train.

Sun Zhizhou, head of a nurse training school in Xingxian, said the passenger train service has brought additional benefits to his school.

"With travel becoming easier thanks to the train route, we have enrolled more students from regions other than Xingxian over the past two years," Sun said.

Executives of the Taiyuan Bureau of China Railway said the passenger train service is aimed at helping to alleviate poverty in regions along the route by facilitating travel for locals and bringing in more tourists.

The Lyuliang Mountains are a famed "red tour" destination in Shanxi, as the region used to be a major base for the Eighth Route Army led by the Communist Party of

China during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45).

Caijiaya, the terminal destination of the railway, was home to the headquarters of the army. It has now developed into a prosperous township thanks to the inflow of a growing number of tourists.

Bai Xinyong, a local resident, operates a restaurant near the railway station.

"I opened the restaurant in 2003, mainly serving truck drivers in the beginning," Bai said, adding that it was only a small, self-run business at that time.

"With the rapid growth in diners after the opening of the train station, my business has grown into two-story restaurant with another five workers employed in addition to my wife and me," Bai said.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.

Yanmen Pass hailed as epitome of Shanxi's cultural attractions

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The famed Yanmen Pass, a witness to history at the ancient frontier of northern Shanxi, is now seen by local officials and industry insiders as a precious asset to attract tourists.

Vice-Governor of Shanxi Zhang Fuming and other tourism officials and experts went on a research trip to the site. They said the development of Yanmen Pass is an epitome of the province's new tourism marketing campaign that focuses on local cultural and historical legacies.

During a meeting with local officials and industry insiders, Zhang encouraged the county to be a role model for cultural tourism in Shanxi by making use of local historical assets.

"We expect Yanmen to become a favored destination among tourists by integrating its cultural and natural resources, exploring the depth of



A live show is performed in front of Yanmen Pass to entertain tourists. GUO TINGTING / FOR CHINA DAILY

local history and improving services and infrastructure," Zhang said.

Zhao Xiping, a history professor at the local Xinzhou Normal Col-

lege, said the unique selling point of Yanmen is that it is closely related to the history of China.

Located in Daixian county of

Xinzhou city, Yanmen is an important pass through the inner line of the Great Wall.

Situated at a place of strategic importance that was difficult to get through, it was regarded as "the most important among the nine passes under heaven" in ancient times, Zhao said.

According to Zhao, more than 1,700 battles have taken place in the area over more than 2,000 years, including some decisive wars that shaped the nation.

"As an old saying goes, 'the nation would be safe if Yanmen was under control and the nation would be endangered if it lost control of the pass.' It shows the strategic importance of the site in history," Zhao said.

In the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), the original pass was built on the summit of a mountain accessible only by an ancient trail in defense against the northern

nomads. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) it fell into disrepair. The current Yanmen Pass was rebuilt in 1374 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Yanmen Pass is about 1 kilometer long and the height of the wall is about 4 meters. There are three gates in Yanmen Pass, with the central gate called Yanmen built over a tiny pass between two hills. Yanmen means "wild goose gate" in Chinese, and is named so because wild geese are seen flying around the pass every year. The western gate is called Dili which means "to choose the proper location for a battle" and the eastern gate is called Tianxian, which means "an impregnable fortress".

The entire scenic area of Yanmen covers 130 square kilometers, including the Great Wall, the pass, watchtowers and fortresses.

Li Yali contributed to this story.