

# Zhaoyu aims to reignite Shanxi merchants’ glory

Qixian county to redevelop town into center of tea culture and tourism

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The ancient town of Zhaoyu in Qixian county, Shanxi province, is in line to regain its glory as a hub of the famed Shanxi merchants after local authorities announced an ambitious plan on July 1.

It called for efforts to build Zhaoyu, the county seat of Qixian, into a “center of tea culture” in Shanxi and a key destination for tea-themed tourism.

Shanxi is known for its historical commerce that was developed by the famed Shanxi merchants, or *Jinshang*. It is said *Jinshang* merchants dominated commercial circles in North China for about 500 years since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

However, many of these successful merchants started out as small vendors who traveled as far as Russia.

The trade in tea products was a dominant business of *Jinshang* merchants for centuries.

In the 1700s, the merchants — especially those in Qixian — discovered the great potential of Chinese tea in the markets of North Asia that nowadays includes Mongolia and Siberia.

According to Wang Zaipan, a tour guide at the Jinshang Tea Firms Museum in Zhaoyu, diseases linked to malnutrition were common among nomads in North Asia as meat was their staple food.

“Merchants in Qixian learned from businesspeople selling tea in Southwest China’s Tibet that tea could help with digesting meat,” Wang said.

The tour guide added that Qixian’s merchants nurtured a tea market in North Asia. They established dealerships in the Russian city of Kiakhata.

“They purchased teas from Fujian province and sold them to North Asia



China Shanxi

and Europe through the hubs of Qixian and Kiakhata, creating a trade route of more than 10,000 kilometers,” Wang said.

“In centuries before the 1700s, China-Russia trade was dominated by products like silk and porcelain. It was the businesspeople in Qixian that developed the trade of tea and eventually led to the prosperity of *Jinshang* merchants,” Wang said.

The Jinshang Tea Firms Museum is based in the former headquarters of Changyuchuan. Owned by the Qu family, Changyuchuan was among the oldest and largest tea-trading businesses in Qixian county.

On display in the museum are old account ledgers, documents and tea bricks as well as equipment for storage and transportation.

“Seeing all the exhibits, I understand the enterprising spirit of the *Jinshang* merchants,” said Guo Jianghong, a tourist from Tianjin.

According to local records made during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the merchants in Qixian established operations throughout tea production areas in China and many regions of Russia and other Asian and European countries. The booming tea trade made Qixian a center for the *Jinshang* merchants in Shanxi and a hub for China’s foreign trade.

In 1994, Qixian was approved by the State Council as a Chinese historical and cultural city. The old streets of

Zhaoyu were recognized by the then Ministry of Culture as Chinese historical and cultural streets.

There are 33 sites related to the ancient tea trade in Qixian, among which, 13 sites are on a China-recommended candidate list for the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites.

In Qixian’s new development plan to build a tea cultural hub, Zhaoyu, as well as the entire county, will be positioned as a center for tea trade and a destination for tourism.

In its role as a tea trade center, the authorities in Qixian and Shanxi are expected to highlight operations in both traditional teas and emerging herbal teas.

In recent years, Shanxi authorities have attached great importance to the development of the herbal tea industry. They aim to nurture a unique Shanxi herbal tea brand next to China’s established brand names like Longjing, Oolong and Rock Tea.

Lou Yangsheng, Party secretary of Shanxi province, directed officials in Qixian to make the county a major driver for the growth of the herbal tea industry in Shanxi by developing the county into a new distribution hub.

Lou made the remarks during a meeting in November 2019, when he was the governor of the province.

With regard to its role as a tea culture tourism destination, Shanxi Culture and Tourism Group will be responsible for new infrastructure and marketing in Qixian.

“We plan to complete a renovation of the ancient town in three years and related branding campaigns will go on at the same time,” said Wang Lin, general manager of Shanxi Culture and Tourism Group.

Wang Wenbao, board chairman of the group, said: “Once a tea-trading



**Top:** The ancient town of Zhaoyu was a hub for the famed *Jinshang* merchants in history. **Middle and above:** Exhibits at the Jinshang Tea Firms Museum show how tea products were transported centuries ago. PHOTOS BY ZAHNG JIONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

hub in China, Qixian is witness to a brilliant tea culture in the country”

“As it is turning into a distribution hub of teas and integrating into the Belt and Road Initiative, Qixian will

have a new role to play in Shanxi’s opening-up,” the executive added.

*Zhang Yang contributed to this story.*

## New high-speed train tightens province’s links with neighbors

By YUAN SHENGGAO

A bullet train departed Taiyuan, capital of Shanxi province, for Hohhot, capital of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, on July 1, sealing Shanxi’s high-speed rail connection to all four of its neighboring provincial and regional capitals.

The high-speed train service is the latest effort of Shanxi to improve its connectivity to neighboring regions. This will play an important role in developing Shanxi into an important tourist destination in North China, according to local officials.

Yan Yi, an official at Taiyuan South Railway Station, said the new high-speed train, which is named Guan-yun, can shorten the journey to less than five hours. By conventional train, it would normally take more than 10 hours.

“There will be two trains, numbered D2792 and D2796, going between Taiyuan and Hohhot every



A crew member entertains passengers on the inaugural bullet train from Taiyuan to Hohhot with Mongolian folk song and dance. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

day, allowing travelers to easily reach major tourist attractions in Inner Mongolia and Shanxi within several hours,” Yan said.

Shanxi and Inner Mongolia shared a strong cultural bond in history as a

result of close business relations and immigration.

The renowned Shanxi merchants, or Jinshang, had used cities in Inner Mongolia, such as Baotou and Hohhot, as strategic points to expand

business to North Asia that includes today’s Mongolia and Siberia.

Over the past 500 years, Shanxi merchants opened a great number of businesses in Hohhot and Baotou. Many of them settled down in Inner Mongolia.

The large-scale immigration that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries also brought many Shanxi residents to Inner Mongolia to develop farming and other trades.

“Many of my relatives now live in Inner Mongolia. The new high-speed railway can make our mutual visits much easier,” said Wu Xiaona, a Taiyuan resident on the inaugural bullet train to Hohhot.

“I was told that many of my relatives traveled to Inner Mongolia by foot or by riding wagons a century ago. That was usually a journey of several weeks compared with today’s four-hour trip,” Wu added.

Wei Wenling, a resident of Inner Mongolia, was surprised by this dra-

matic change in travel time.

“The train trip was more than 10 hours when I came to Shanxi a month ago. And now I’m going to reach Hohhot in four hours,” Wei said. She added that she had visited Shanxi by air or by conventional train, “but the experience in a high-speed train is the most comfortable”.

On the inaugural train, crew members entertained passengers by singing folk songs and introducing tourist attractions of both regions.

Kong Lingnan, head of the crew, said the train’s route covers many attractions such as Jinci Temple and Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi and Daozhao Temple and Daqing Mountains in Inner Mongolia.

“Our crew members have attended training to get familiar with the attractions. Everyone of us is the image ambassador of tourism in both regions,” Kong said.

*Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.*

## Lifestyle in Taiyuan impresses teacher

By SHARINA MAE MENDOZA PISO

On March 24, I arrived in Taiyuan, capital of Shanxi province. The feeling was delightful but at the same time nerve-racking because we were in a fight against COVID-19. In addition, it was my first time to China.

Because of the pandemic, I needed to undergo 14-day quarantine at a hotel.

Life inside the hotel seemed so easy. Within those 14 days, I started observing, learning and adapting to the changes.

The hotel staff and other people who were also in quarantine were very kind and friendly.

I was the only foreigner in the group. The staff always helped me whenever I needed something, asked what foods I like and dislike to eat. The food was great and healthy so I couldn’t ask for more.

Every night and day, I looked out of the window to see what was happening outside and observed the people passing by. Many people use bikes to get to their destinations, and that’s one of the big differences I can see from my home country, the Philippines.

Two weeks passed and I was freed from quarantine. It was one of the best days of my life — to start living my life in Taiyuan.

I was determined to forge a fulfilling social life. I met some Chinese and other foreign friends and walked around the parks and around Taiyuan’s brightly lit shopping district at night.



Sharina Mae Mendoza Piso takes a selfie near the Fenhe Bridge. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Another thing that impressed me is the way of living. Food is cheap. The cost of living is not high and shops are very accessible. I also love online shopping, using Taobao and Pinduoduo.

If there’s one thing that I do find difficult for me is to adapt to the language. Many Chinese people in Taiyuan don’t really speak English. The Chinese language supersedes others in originality and complexity. So I need to put effort in learning the language.

I have one Filipino friend in Taiyuan whom I hang out with. The best place that I’ve gone so far is the Fenhe Bridge which is very beautiful at night.

One afternoon, I was in my new apartment and I was bored so I went out. I didn’t know where to go since I was new in the community and I don’t really know much about the directions.

So I just walked down and looked at the places and shops, until I found a park. I went to the park and I saw a bridge from the park, a beautiful bridge. It was almost 6 pm and the sun was setting. I took a picture of it and showed it to my friend on WeChat. And so we decided to meet another day to roam around the park and walk to the bridge.

There are always many people at the bridge. It’s a bridge where people can walk and take pictures. I could see children cycling and adults doing exercise.

The place looks so romantic because you can see couples holding hands while walking together. You can even feel the fresh warm breeze from the river, like a kiss on the cheek. It was a relaxing night for me. The river carries me on and it’s even nicer when you see the reflection of the colorful bridge on the water.

All these beautiful things, I love. There is passion in nature. There’s always good in nature that captures my imagination.

*The writer is a Filipino teaching at Pason Training School in Taiyuan.*

## Highway to scenic area steers into the fast lane

By YUAN SHENGGAO

As Shanxi enters the hot summer months, construction of a highway in the south of Taihang Mountains is accelerating.

Work on the Xiantangshan Sightseeing Road, with a total investment of 449.9 million yuan (\$64.11 million), started in March in Xiangyuan county, Changzhi city. It is scheduled to be complete before the National Day holiday on Oct 1.

The road is part of the Taihang No

1 Highway which runs from the north to the south of Taihang Mountains.

The highway system includes a main stretch from Xinzhou in the north to Jincheng in the south that stretches 1,257 kilometers.

The main road, together with about 3,500 km of branch roads, will link hundreds of tourist destinations throughout 29 counties and six cities in Shanxi.

The Xiantangshan Sightseeing Road is to mainly serve a namesake

tourist destination in Changzhi.

The Xiantangshan — or Xiantang Mountain — Scenic Area is one of the top destinations in Changzhi. It combines sightseeing and cultural and religious experiences as well as opportunities for recreation and relaxing.

With a vegetation coverage of almost 90 percent, the scenic area is home to more than 360 plant species. Its air and water quality reaches the nation’s highest standards.

Xiantang Mountain was the

birthplace of renowned Northern Dynasty (386-581) Buddhist monk Faxian.

Faxian, or Fa-hsien, was an important figure in the development of Buddhism in China. His journey to India in search of Buddhist sutras in AD 402 initiated Sino-Indian relations and his writings give important information about early Buddhism. After his return to China, he translated into Chinese many Sanskrit Buddhist texts he had brought back.



**From left:** The birthplace of renowned Buddhist monk Faxian, Xiantang Mountain is a top attraction in Xiangyuan county with dozens of Buddhist temples. PHOTOS BY LIAN FENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Some historians believe that Faxian was the first Asian to discover the Americas when his ship was driven astray by storms during his trip back to China.

Influenced by this great figure, Xiantang Mountain developed into a renown Buddhist site in the centuries that followed.

The mountain is home to dozens of Buddhist temples, a 19-meter Faxian statue, a 19-m Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva statue and a 59-m Sakyamuni statue.

However, poor roads have made travel difficult to this tourist site.

Zhang Jinsong, a local photographer, recalled the difficulties in building the 59-m Sakyamuni statue on top of Xiantang Mountain.

“The Buddha statue, with a height equal to a 22-story building, is the tallest bronze Buddha statue in the world.

“Special vehicles were purchased for transporting materials on the zigzagging, bumpy road and it took several months,” Zhang said.

Travel was also not easy for tourists, Zhang said, as it would take hours from the Xiangyuan county seat, Changzhi Airport or the Taiyuan-Changzhi Expressway, which are all less than 60 km away.

“With the completion of the Xiantangshan Sightseeing Road, the travel time will be shortened to less than two hours,” Zhang said.

*Li Yali contributed to this story.*