



Located in the southwestern suburbs of Taiyuan, Tianlongshan Grottoes is a major site for ancient Buddhist arts in Shanxi province.
SUN RUISHENG / CHINA DAILY

Relic’s return a highlight of major cultural rejuvenation



Buddha head back home after theft from Tianlongshan Grottoes almost a century ago

By YUAN SHENGGAO

After seven months since its return to China, a stone Buddha head repatriated from Japan finally reached its home at Tianlongshan Grottoes, southwest of Taiyuan, capital city of Shanxi province, on July 24.

A grand ceremony to mark the return was held, attended by Lin Wu, Party secretary of Shanxi, and Li Qun, chief of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, as well as other officials and experts.

The stone head, stolen from one of the Buddha statues in Cave 8 of Tianlongshan Grottoes and smuggled to Japan nearly 100 years ago, was brought back to China on Dec 12, Xinhua News Agency quoted the NCHA as saying.

The administration first identified the Buddha head in September 2020, when the sculpture resurfaced at a Japanese auction house.

After identifying it, the NCHA contacted the auction house and requested a halt to the sale.

Luckily, Zhang Rong, board chairman of the auction house, is a Chinese national. In late October, after buying the Buddha head from a Japanese collector, Zhang donated the sculpture to the Chinese gov-



Visitors take photos of the returned Buddha head statue at the Tianlongshan Grottoes Museum. XU XIAOJIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

ernment, Xinhua reported.

Examinations and evaluations conducted by experts after the sculpture arrived in Beijing in December found that the relic had been stolen from a statue in Cave 8 of the grottoes around the year 1924.

To welcome its return, a special exhibition opened on July 24 in the Tianlongshan Grottoes Museum to review its history through cultural relics, pictures, digitization and 3D-printing technology.

Two exhibition halls have been dedicated to the show. One hall uses 3D-printing, virtual reality and artificial intelligence to show how the cave was dug and how the statue was built more than a millennium ago.

Another hall, a scale replica of Cave 8, houses the returned sculpture. The stone head will not be placed on the original body because of weathering and water erosion, said an official at the museum. The head will be permanently displayed at the museum. Other relics from

Tianlongshan Grottoes are also exhibited in the hall.

“The Buddha head on display reminds me of a reunion with a long-lost family member,” said Yu Hao, curator of the museum.

In the 1920s, a large number of statues — more than 240, according to Yu — were stolen from the grottoes and smuggled overseas. About 150 statues are housed in museums in Japan, Europe and the United States, or have been obtained by foreign collectors. The whereabouts of the rest are unknown.

Zhang Rong, the businessman who purchased and donated the Buddha head, attended the returning ceremony, where he was named an “honorable resident of Taiyuan.”

Zhang said, as a Chinese citizen, his action in helping to retrieve the sculpture was driven by patriotism and a strong sense of pride in the nation.

On July 25, the day following the ceremony, the exhibition received more than 800 tourists who were

eager to see this precious cultural relic.

“I finally have a chance to see the ‘eternal smile’ of the Buddha, which gives me a peace of mind,” said Xu Kai, a visitor from Taiyuan.

Also on that day, Zheng Ya’nan, a tour guide at the museum, reminded visitors of the Buddha’s smile and other artistic features of the statue, and told stories about the centurylong journey of the Buddha head.

Zheng said the Buddha statue in Cave 8 was built during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Construction of the grottoes, consisting of 25 caves, began in the Eastern Wei Dynasty (534-550) and continued until the Tang Dynasty.

When describing the face of the Buddha, Zheng said: “Seen from every angle, the Buddha presents a smiling expression. This is a show of confidence identical to a prosperous period like the Tang Dynasty.”

This 44.5-centimeter-high Buddha head is the first among stolen relics to be returned from Japan, according to NCHA chief Li Qun.

“The fate of cultural relics is linked to the destiny of a country,” Li said at the return ceremony. “Its journey home reflects Chinese people’s patriotism, no matter whether they live at home or abroad, and it marks the nation’s rejuvenation.”

Shanxi Party secretary Lin Wu said the return of the Buddha head is of great significance to Shanxi’s cultural heritage protection.

He asked cultural heritage workers to devote more effort to the protection of and research on cultural relics, as such resources “can play an important role in teaching history and building a stronger province in culture.”

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.

Upgrades assisted by innovation-driven strategy

By YUAN SHENGGAO

By promoting an innovation-driven strategy, Shanxi province has utilized new and advanced technologies to upgrade its economy and bring positive changes to people’s lives.

A Shanxi resident surnamed Dong, who lives in an old urban area of Yangquan city, is one example of how new technologies have changed lives for the better.

She said keeping warm in her old residence during the winter had been a continual problem.

In 2019, the local government began to renovate seven old residential communities in Yangquan. They installed a new heat-insulating coating to the outer walls of the buildings.

The community where Dong lives was one of the beneficiaries.

“In the past, it was hot in summer and cold in winter inside the buildings as they have been here for several decades,” Dong said. “Now I’m very satisfied with the renovation. The temperature in inside can be as much as 10 C lower in summer and 5 C higher in winter.”

The most effective ingredient in the cutting-edge coating is aerogel, a material added that increases its insulating properties.

Aerogel used to be a high-tech material mostly used in the aerospace industry. The domestic market had been dominated by overseas suppliers, and the price of



The stainless steel foil with a thickness of 0.015 millimeters, produced by Taiyuan Iron and Steel Group, represents an advanced level of Shanxi’s manufacturing industry. WU LIUHONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

the material was as high as 1.2 million yuan (\$184,320) per metric ton before 2018, according to industry insiders.

Yangquan-based Huayang Group was one of the Chinese pioneers able to break the overseas monopoly on the domestic market. It began to develop aerogel products in 2018 and founded Asia’s largest aerogel manufacturing enterprise — Yangzhong New Materials — in Yangquan, in cooperation with Aerogel Technology based in Shenzhen, Guangdong province.

“With a density just 2.7 times that of air, the aerogel we produce is superlight in weight and high in performance in heat insulation and

flame resistance,” said Lian Ni’er, general manager of Yangzhong New Materials.

The executive added that the Yangzhong-produced aerogel has brought down the product’s price to about 300,000 yuan per ton, making it possible to be used in a range of industries including construction, energy conservation, textiles and new energy vehicles.

Huayang Energy Conservation, another branch of Huayang Group, is using the aerogel-adding coating to renovate more than 300 buildings in Yangquan this year.

Huayang Group used to be a major coal producer in Shanxi. It began to diversify its operations in

the early 2000s, with a number of branches engaging in new and high-tech industries.

This is in line with Shanxi’s transformation strategy, which has highlighted the development of 14 emerging industries including new materials, information technology, e-commerce and advanced manufacturing.

A truck owner and driver surnamed Dou in Hequ county serves as an example of how businesses are benefiting from emerging e-commerce technologies.

Dou has been engaged in coal transport and other logistics operations for more than a decade.

“It became increasingly difficult to do business in these industries several years ago because of intensified competition,” Dou said.

He said securing orders used to be the biggest challenge for truck drivers. “However, identifying freight carriers is also a problem with the large number of small suppliers.”

Dou said the concerns from both sides have now been properly addressed thanks to the various vehicle-hailing platforms.

“These platforms can effectively help freight carriers identify suppliers and vice versa,” Dou said. “They offer further assistance like online settlement, road rescue and experience sharing.”

Li Shu contributed to this story.

Student embraces her new Shanxi ‘family’

Many overseas students based in Shanxi province have gained a better understanding of the province and China. This section, named Shanxi in the Eyes of Foreign Students, will tell their stories in the province and share what Shanxi looks like from their perspectives, giving accounts of the local environment, customs and culture, as well as their personal experiences.



By AMINA IBRAHIM ABDELKADER HAMMAD

When I first came to Shanxi as a foreign student in Taiyuan-based Shanxi University, everything was strange. However, with the help of local people, I quickly integrated with society.

You should not be surprised, either on campus or on streets, to meet with friendly people: they greet you with smiles, and they are keen to offer a helping hand and share with you their life and stories.

My story of an acquaintance with a local couple started during my first week in Taiyuan.

When I heard that noodles in Shanxi are delicious, I went to a restaurant, where I saw an elderly couple who were served big bowls of noodles.

I fixed my eyes on the bowls and said to myself those were too big for seniors. They noticed my surprise and asked me to sit down by them.

“I know it’s impolite to look at you that way,” I said in broken Chinese.

“We are foodies indeed,” the husband said. “Noodles are among the best food in Shanxi and you should have a try.”

Then we exchanged phone numbers and have kept in touch over the years since. First we became friends and later members of a “family.” I call them grandpa

and grandma.

I spent my first Spring Festival at their home. I still remember how excited I was when I received their phone call.

I stayed with them for several days during that period, learning to put on Spring Festival couplets from grandpa and make *jiaozi* dumplings from grandma. There was also plenty of fun setting off fireworks and talking with other family members and friends.

Later, grandpa and grandma invited me to join them on a tour of Wutai Mountain, a famous Buddhist holy land in Shanxi.

During the trip, they told me a lot of stories about the history of the mountain and the religion.

I was told that Wutai is one of the top four Buddhist sites in China and a major venue for learning teachings from Bodhisattva Manjusri.

“Many temples here are suitable places to make a wish,” grandpa said when we arrived at a temple.

Then he knelt down and prayed.

When I heard his prayer asking Buddha’s blessing for my health and well-being, I burst into tears. I realized that they were treating me as their grandchild.

Back in Egypt, my own grandparents had passed away before I was born. It was in Shanxi that I felt the love from grandparents for the first time. That love has been with me for five years during my stay in the province and I believe it will be with me throughout my lifetime.

Shanxi is the place that gives me a home from home and a sense of belonging.

The author is a student from Egypt, who studies at the School of International Education and Exchange at Shanxi University.

Dedicated officials lead way in poverty relief

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Nearly 18 months have passed since Shanxi announced its eradication of absolute poverty in February last year. However, officials who have devoted their energy and effort on this front are still remembered fondly by many of the residents.

In Taibei village in Lingchuan, a county in the southeastern Shanxi city of Jincheng, when residents talk about the changes over the past year, they usually say that they “owe a lot to the Party officials of senior Guo and junior Guo.”

The two Guos they mention are father and daughter — Guo Jianping and Guo Zihan.

Guo Jianping, then 51, died on his post as a poverty-relief official on Aug 2, 2019, as a result of chronic disease and heavy workload.

Guo Zihan was then a graduate from a university in Liaoning province, planning to continue her studies in a postgraduate program.

Upon the news of her father’s death, Guo Zihan immediately changed her mind. She gave up her plan for postgraduate study and decided to go back to her home village to continue her father’s work.

She applied to the county’s Party committee to work as a village Party official. The application was approved a month later and she became the Party chief of Taibei.

According to her father’s work plan, Guo Zihan helped to build a number of facilities — including a road, a wastewater treatment plant and a reservoir — in Taibei.

Based on local medical herb plantations, Guo Zihan decided to establish a golden bell processing factory in Taibei, offering a new source of revenue and new job opportunities for the locals.

Thanks to these efforts, villagers in Taibei have seen fundamental changes in their livelihoods.

Their per capita annual income increased from 3,000 yuan (\$460) several years ago to 8,000 yuan in 2020.

There was a similar story in the village of Longquan in Yangcheng county in Jincheng.

Zhu Kexin was appointed a poverty-relief official to the village by the Jincheng poverty-alleviation office in 2015. She brought great changes to Longquan, planning to build roads, bridges and, a solar power station, as well as develop a number of industries with local characteristics.

She left her post in 2017 when her term of service expired.

Paying close attention to what Zhu did in the village, Yu Kun, her husband, applied to be Zhu’s successor in the same year.

With continued efforts from Yu, the village was lifted from poverty at the end of 2018.

Thanks to officials like Guo, Zhu and Yu, Jincheng announced the eradication of poverty in 2020.

In 2015, the per capita income of the registered poverty population in Jincheng stood at 3,514 yuan. In 2020, the figure increased to 10,600 yuan, according to the city government.

Wang Pei contributed to this story.



A worker processes golden bell leaves at a herbal tea plant in Lingchuan county. LIU TONG / FOR CHINA DAILY