

City walls invoke a vivid story from ancient past

By LIU XIANG
liuxiang@chinadaily.com.cn

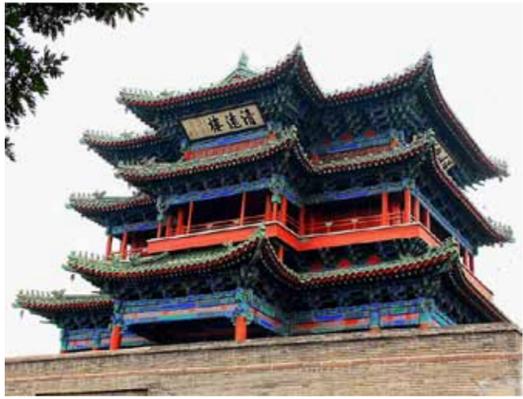
Most cities and towns along the Great Wall have their origins as important military bases to defend against nomadic tribes from the north, and the ancient city of Xuanhua in Hebei province is no exception.

One of the nine strongest fortresses along the Great Wall, its garrison had more than 100,000 soldiers during the Ming Dynasty (1358-1644), compared with a civilian population of only

several thousand.

Although wars and battles are now far distant memories even for locals, Xuanhua's well-protected ancient city walls and magnificent gate towers still tell a vivid story from the remote past to tourists from home and abroad.

Xuanhua's city walls are among the most famous in China. Walls from different dynasties, even back to the Yan Kingdom in the Warring States Period (475-221BC), played a part in its status as a stronghold.



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The Qingyuan Tower built in 1482 is the landmark of Xuanhua.



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A recently unearthed fresco in a Liao Dynasty (916-1125) tomb looks almost freshly painted.

Only 170 kilometers from Beijing, Xuanhua — which literally means educating the (nomadic) people in the north by publicizing (the central empire's) benevolent rules — has a history written in iron and blood, conspiracy and rebellion.

According to Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) records, Xuanhua was once called Xiongwu City, which was built to strengthen the border by the notoriously cruel military governor An Lushan, who was actually preparing for a revolt against the Tang government.

Large-scale renovation of Xuanhua was completed in the early Ming Dynasty when prince and general Zhu Hui stationed a military force to fend off an expected invasion of Mongolians from the north.

Zhu expanded Xuanhua into a large fortress of high walls with a total length of 12,120 meters and seven gates.

As a result, the fortress was claimed by the government "as solid as iron and steel".

It survived the most frequent and severe attacks

from Mongolians during the Ming Dynasty.

Although the city walls have lost their power to defend against military attacks after 600 years of weathering, they are still the most significant symbol of Xuanhua.

Their magnificence and beauty can be compared with today's city walls in Xi'an and Nanjing.

A number of other historical structures also remain intact today.

The Qingyuan Tower — or the Bell Tower — built in 1482, is a distinctive building with multiple eaves and roofs.

It enjoys a reputation equal to another ancient landmark, the Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan, capital of Hubei province.

Inside the tower, a 2.5-meter-tall, 5-ton bell can still ring with the same power it did 500 years ago.

Just 200 meters from Qingyuan is the drum tower called Zhenshuo, which has a history of more than 560 years.

The 25-meter-high Zhenshuo Tower houses a big drum long used to report the time of day.

A large plaque over the north face of the Zhenshuo Tower has inscriptions indicating the city shelters the national capital Beijing.

It was written by renowned Emperor Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when he visited Xuanhua on his tour of north China.

Also on a straight line with Qingyuan and Zhenshuo is the well-preserved Gongji Tower, a two-story building that serves as Xuanhua's southern city gate.

Outside the city there are also a number of compelling historical sites including Liao Dynasty (916-1125) tombs in the northwestern village of Xiabali featuring frescos with bright colors that today still look like they were freshly painted.



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The Jade Emperor Pavilion was built in 1377 to worship the highest god in the Taoist cosmology.

Tourists finding sedate respite in Yuxian county

By LIU XIANG
liuxiang@chinadaily.com.cn

After intensive days touring the grandeur of Beijing's imperial palaces and gardens, increasing numbers of tourists take a relaxing trip to a county 250 km west of the national capital to experience another kind of cultural charm.

In Yuxian county, Hebei province, the attraction is more sedate — the grassroots art of paper-cutting.

The history of Yuxian paper-cutting stretches back more than 200 years. The traditional art form is mostly used in window decorations, so a finished work is also called a window flower.

The earliest window flowers were *tianpiliang* — cuttings and paintings on mica sheets.

Today's window flower art has inherited the essence of *tianpiliang* and learned from the embroidery patterns used on shoes, pouches and pillows that are also popular in the county.

Also absorbing color features from window flowers in other places, Yuxian paper-cutting evolved its unique style. Unlike most other paper-

cuts found in China done with scissors and paper of a single color, the creations in Yuxian are made with special knives and are multi-colored.

The special technique is called *yin* cutting, which uses knives to nick small patterns, leaving behind more paper to paint on.

Images found in the paper-cuts are mainly Chinese opera figures and auspicious images such as birds, flowers and insects.

A master Yuxian paper-cut artist was Wang Laoshang (1890-1951), who created thousands of window flowers during a career that spanned almost 40 years.

In 2006, Yuxian paper cutting was included in China's first list of State-level Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2009, UNESCO added it to its own list, the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In addition to this original art, tourists can also visit the many cultural and historical legacies as well as natural wonders in Yuxian county.

With a recorded history dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC), Yuxian is an ancient city known as the "museum in the ground". It ranks second in the number

of historical relics among all counties in China.

It has 1,610 known cultural relic sites, nine of them given State-level protection and 30 on the provincial-level list.

The most famous sites are the Jade Emperor Pavilion, Nan'an Temple Pagoda and Shijia Temple. Featuring styles of different dynasties, they represent the range of ancient China's main belief systems — Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

Besides the historical legacies, Yuxian has fascinating natural wonders.

On top of a mountain 2,158 meters tall, a marshy grassland covering 36 sq km. It is called "hanging grassland" due to the height and flatness.

In the south of grassland, mountains tower with steep cliffs and deep gullies. A forest covering more than 500 hectares is in the north offers a home to animals such as pheasants, foxes and wild goats.

The average temperature of the grassland is 15C, with fresh air and clear weather. Different types of plants, rare rocks, ice caves and running water make it a welcome summer respite away from urban life.

Guangfu: 2,600 years old, birthplace of tai chi

By LIU XIANG
liuxiang@chinadaily.com.cn

The ancient town of Guangfu, in Yongnian county, Hebei province might be as unknown to the outside world as millions of other settlements in China except for a singular fact — it is the birthplace of tai chi.

Now 2,600 years old, Guangfu remains vibrant, attracting adherents who arrive on a pilgrimage to the epicenter of China's most

notable martial art.

Tai chi is a traditional Chinese therapeutic exercise combining kung fu and the qigong breathing exercise, practiced by people of all ages.

Famous Yang-style and Wu-style tai chi, now listed as national intangible cultural heritage, were both created in Guangfu.

According to locals, Yang Luchan, an influential tai chi master in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), studied tai chi chuan — or tai chi boxing —

for 18 years and finally learned its essence. Then he created the Yang-style tai chi chuan, which won him the title of "invincible Yang".

Another famous master, Wu Yuxiang, traveled to South China to learn local martial arts and created Wu-style tai chi chuan.

About 80 percent of the 300 million tai chi practitioners worldwide follow either Yang or Wu-style tai chi.

Today in Guangfu, most residents know tai chi chuan.

Locals say kids begin when they start to walk and the martial art is still popular among the elderly, some of them 99 years old.

A number of its tai chi masters have made great efforts to promote tai chi and its culture abroad.

Since 1991, Guangfu has held the Yongnian International Tai Chi Chuan Festival that attracts the attention of followers worldwide and brought vitality to the ancient town.

Guangfu's attraction is not limited to tai chi enthusiasts. It has its own allure for those who want to explore the local details of China's ancient history.

The town is said to have been founded in the Spring and Autumn Period (476-770BC).

It was once the capital of the Xia Kingdom during the chaotic years of the later Sui Dynasty (AD 581-618).

Today the ancient city walls built during the Ming Dynasty

(1368-1644) are intact.

Inside the walls, the 1.5-square-kilometer ancient town has four streets and eight lanes lined by old, traditional structures.

In the east, Hongji Bridge has retained its original Sui Dynasty design, but its great age was recently dwarfed by animal fossils from the Ordovician period more than 400 million years ago discovered near its buttress.

Guangfu is a renowned water town in North China

because it lies at the center of the Yongnian Marsh, the fourth-largest wetland in Hebei province. Over the centuries, a complete drainage and water management system has taken form.

Its Xibazha water gate project built during the Ming and Qing dynasties still operates well. It is also the pivotal part of an irrigation system that nourishes thousand of hectares of fertile farmlands outside the ancient town.



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A traditional Chinese therapeutic exercise combining kung fu and the qigong breathing exercise, the popularity of tai chi has spread across the world from Guangfu, where today even toddlers and the very aged continue its practice.