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Waterway withstands the tides of change to bring new hope

in Zaozhuang, Shandong zhaoruixue@chinadailu.com.cn

Zhao Xiumei turned to wickerwork in 2001 after being laid off from her mining job in Shandong province's Zaozhuang. where the economy slumped after its coal reserves dwindled.

But she barely earned enough to make

"Zaozhuang was known for its coal. We had no tourists. My wickerwork could only be sold to dealers, so I earned little from production," the 41-year-old says.

But things have changed for the better - the city's tourism industry boomed as the ancient Grand Canal has become an increasingly popular travel destination. Her fortunes reversed when she rented a 20-square-meter space in the rebuilt

vincial waterway "I never imagined my business would

grow so fast," she recalls. "Tourists like to buy wickerwork souvenirs. I earn up to four times what I did

Zhao now runs a 102-square-meter store in Tai'erzhuang, selling eight kinds of wicker items, including boxes, baskets

about 200 women, who make wicker products for her.

"It's the ancient town that has helped me expand," Zhao says. "The canal has run through the town for centuries. It will continue to bless our business. I have faith in it."

The 2-square-kilometer town is home to nearly 20,000 people

Tai'erzhuang was rebuilt after the ancient town was destroyed during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45).

It was established in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and thrived during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when the Jia Canal was built through the town.

"Tai'erzhuang became prosperous overnight because of the Grand Canal," Zaozhuang's Party chief Chen Wei says. The Jia Canal is colloquially known as the "canal of pound locks" because eight

locks control water levels. Tai'erzhuang had the first pound lock

barges pass through when the water enters Shandong from Jiangsu province. "In ancient times, passing through a lock took at least two weeks and sometimes up to two months. So merchants had to stay in Tai'erzhuang, which boosted the town's economy," Zaozhuang's Grand Canal culture promotion office

expert Dong Yunqi says

more than 10,000 barges passed through Tai'erzhuang a year, making the town an mportant transport base during the

Tai'erzhuang's permanent population then reached 60,000, and about 150,000 others passed through every year, Dong

ngible and intangible

The town once had about 6,000 buildings constructed in eight architectural religions, such as Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Buddhism, Dong says.

But the ancient town of Tai'erzhuang ancient town of Tai'erzhuang on the bank the old one as possible of the Jia Canal, a stretch of the interpro-

national tourism designation.

About 2.6 million tourists visited

Tai'erzhuang per year, making it Shandong's third most popular attraction, after Confucius' hometown Qufu and Tai'an city's Mount Taishan.

"Zaozhuang had no tour buses or local She also heads up a cooperative of tour guides before it was rebuilt." deputy

> "It now has more than 100 tour buses and 400 local tour guides."

with a less than 40 percent occupancy rate but now has at least 50,000 hotel beds.

construction, but it will still be insufficient to meet demand in peak seasons," Yu Fuxin, a 52-year-old writer born in

Taiwan, has decided to spend the rest of her life at Tai'erzhuang, where her family

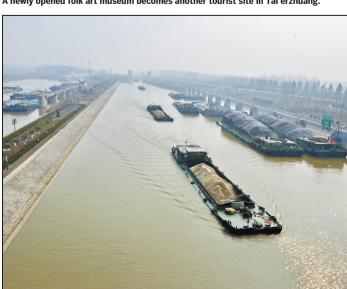
she first visited decades ago.

Canal's Yu Family Dock.

ple for generations, he says.

"The canal's significance isn't its engineering but rather its legacies," Chen says.





Barges pass the Zaozhuang section of the Grand Canal.

Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties

These people left great legacies — both

styles and 72 temples for major world

was mostly destroyed during World War II. The local government began rebuilding in 2006 to lure tourists. It has worked to make the new Tai'erzhuang as close to

"Tai'erzhuang enjoys great fortune bestowed by the Grand Canal," Chen

The rebuilt town is a 5-A site — the top

director of the city's tourism office Du

The city previously had 4,700 hotel beds "And four five-star hotels are now under

But she was less than impressed when

"The coal-producing city was dull and dilapidated," she recalls. "I wouldn't have visited if my grandmother didn't live

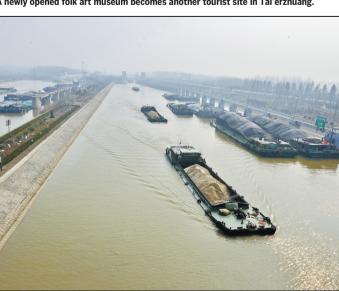
But now she's glad to call Tai'erzhuang home, she says, standing on the Grand

"The canal brings prosperity and hope,"

The cultural resources that spring from the waterway will never dry up, Chen says. It transcends time and has enriched peo-

"This transcends all changes."





The Grand Canal's heritage has prompted over 80 sites to seek a shared UNESCO listing. Wang Qian follows the ancient passageway's course into the future.



The opening and flourishing of the Grand Canal during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties has left rich cultural legacies in Zaozhuang in Shandong province.

sces about chanting songs to lead boatmen as they hauled barges through dangerous shoals and rapids along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand

The 97-year-old is believed to be the only living inheritor of *haozi*, a type of folk music sung to synchronize boatmen in Zaozhuang city in southwestern Shandong province where a significant section of the canal still functions.

"In the past, navigation depended on the song-leader's ability." Xu says.

"He was vital and decided the rhythm and tone, depending on water flow and rowing pace. This enabled the others to harness their collective strength according to the rhythm."

Unlike other places' boatmen's ballads, whose lyrics are mostly improvised, the lyrics of Zaozhuang's *haozi* are said to have been standardized by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) Emperor Qianlong. Haozi is now a provincial-level intangible culture heritage.

'Previously, haozi was only used for boats that delivered grain and goods for the royal families from south to north via the canal can't be changed." Xu explains. There are 11 main *haozi* forms in Zaozhu

They include those for punting, rowing, ing, breaking and overcoming rapids. Xu grew up in a poor family near the canal. He started to help his parents at age 7 and

learned from a veteran lead singer who once worked on the imperial boat. "The lead singer requires not only a good memory and lungs but also enough knowledge of potential dangers. Few people could

do it." Xu savs. But he was well rewarded and enjoyed a good reputation.

"A boat loaded with 50 tons was generally hauled by seven men. It was very cool when I sang and others responded in different voices," he recalls.

"The lead singer earned the biggest salaries among boatmen — about 15 dayang (a Republic of China silver dollar) a month enough to feed the whole family then. Other oatmen were only paid 4 dayang." The trade began to vanish when engines

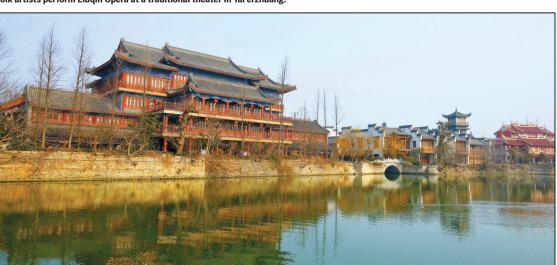
1950s. "I've seen ups and downs of canal life. I just hope more young people can know the art form and understand bygone days." The 2,000-year-old Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the world's longest and oldest artificial waterway, has witnessed much of

started to become more common in the

China's history and is celebrated for its myriad traditional cultures. According to The Summary of the Ancient munication and economic hub during the



Folk artists perform Liugin Opera at a traditional theater in Tai'erzhuang.



A reconstructed historical building stands on the bank of the Grand Canal in Tai'erzhuang

Qing (1644-1911) dynasties depicted stories $\;\;$ relics bureau director Shao Lei says. set along the Grand Canal during Chinese lit-Zaozhuang is the first Shandong city the Grand Canal enters.

"The opening and flourishing of the Grand

Canal not only turned Zaozhuang into a com-

Ming and Qing dynasties but also has left

cent of novels from the Ming (1368-1644) and rich cultural legacies," Zaozhuang's cultural The city now contains 406 intangible culel, including *haozi*, Liuqin Opera,

ture heritage items above the municipal levstorytelling in local dialect with drum accompaniment and Zaozhuang shadow "The canal caused the country's business-

people to converge in the city, bringing (1937-45).

The Zaozhuang government built a intangible cultural heritage in the ancient town of Tai'erzhuang alongside the canal.

diverse cultures and folk arts," Shao says.

Qing Emperor Qianlong once praised Tai'erzhuang as "the world's most affluent town". But it was destroyed during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression

Since 2009, 1.7 billion yuan (\$278 million) has been allocated to restore the town to its former glory.

"The reappearance of traditional cultures and crafts is important to the town's reconstruction," says the town's management committee director Wang Guangjin. Wang says 156 national- and provincial

are displayed in the park. They include Beijiang clay sculptures, Luzhou oil-paper umbrellas and traditional New Year woodprint paintings from Shandong's

level heritage items from across the nation

Tourists can see how these handicrafts are created or try making their own. Folk artists are also paid to perform in the

town. Most are inheritors of centuries-old traditions at risk of vanishing. Zhu Siquan was overjoyed when he was invited to the town to present Lunan dagu – storytelling in Zaozhuang dialect performed

while beating a drum and two steel plates. The performance art can be traced back to 400 years ago and was once very popular ir areas around the canal, especially in northern China.

"About 40 years ago, dozens of people would gather in a teahouse every night and watch the show, which generally lasted two hours," says the 63-year-old, who began to learn the craft at age 13 and practiced it for almost half a century

soon as I stepped onstage. Some would come every day, since it usually took a month to finish a book." Most of the stories are adopted from ancient Chinese literature, and told with

rhymed lines and expressive body language. Zhu lost most of his business 10 years ago and had to open a clothing shop to feed his "I'm so glad I can find a new stage here

where tourists can experience the ancient art's glory," Zhu says. He earns 2,000 yuan a month. Residents and farmers outside the town have organized more than 200 folk troupes

They've given over 6,000 performances to Zaozhuang's villagers and students, the municipal government reports.

"It's a good way to enrich our leisure and rotect dying folk arts," says 62-year-old Yan Jingli, from a troupe in Yicheng district's

Gushao township. After retiring from the municipal opera troupe, Yan has volunteered to teach Liugin 10,000-square-meter national expo park for Opera in a troupe of about 30 people ages 20 "Most are nearby farmers." Yan says

"They're amateurs and can't perform very

professionally. But it's a very good start." Contact the writer at

Reincarnated from rubble

By JU CHUANJIANG and ZHAO RUIXUE

The screen overlooking New York's Times Square - the "crossroads of the world" - today shows a dreamlike Chinese landscape.

The video shows the vicissitudes of Tai'erzhuang, a town in Zaozhuang, Shandong province, nurtured by the Grand Canal, ruined during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45) and later rebuilt.

two of the phrases shown on the screen resonate with him: "Destroyed but never lost" and "Feel the Chinese dream".

Zaozhuang's Party chief Chen Wei says

The town's reconstruction was part of Zaozhuang's initiative to boost the city's service industry.

It has had a profound impact on the city's 4 million residents, as the communi ty's coal stocks are becoming depleted. Zaozhuang's namesake comes from a mine and the city thrived when it was among the country's top three coal sources in the 1930s. The Party chief says the city had few prospects with the coal running out.

"We successfully changed our economic structure by developing the cultural resources the Grand Canal endows." Chen says. He likens the post-war reconstruction to Warsaw's.

Chen, a native of Zhejiang province's Jinhua, became Shandong province's youngest mayor when he took the post in Zaozhuang in 2006 at age 40.

rejuvenating the historical town. "Zaozhuang has no famous mountains and no coast. What it has is the Grand Canal and a destroyed ancient town," Chen says. Chen says he arrived in Tai'erzhuang to discover a shabby place with no public toi-

lets, and street lamps and ancient docks

covered with trash. It was slated to be rede-

He has since tackled the challenge of

veloped by a real estate company. Chen halted the real estate project and pushed instead to rebuild the ancient

"Tai'erzhuang is infused with culture." he says. "It thrived during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties because of the Grand Canal and hosted the Battle of Tai'erzhuang — China's first major victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Its cultural

resources will never be depleted." But, physically speaking, over 90 per

cent of the ancient town was destroyed in

Chen and his colleagues spent three years collecting pictures, documents, films and photos to learn what the town was like before the war. They also visited all the locals older than 80. Chen spent 47 weeks in Tai'erzhuang in

2007, his driver says. The project's layout was drafted by

The Party chief raised funds by persuad ing five State-run coal companies — all eager to transform their structures — to join the project. About 1.7 billion yuan (\$274 million) has been spent on the project in total.

The 2-square-kilometer town is still

under construction, but major parts are open to tourists. These include 10 main streets, 72 lanes and 108 bridges. The buildings are constructed on their

original sites and in their original forms. Photographs of the originals are posted The rebuilt Tai'erzhuang is the first

approved by the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office and a 5-A tourist site — the highest national-level designation. CNN Travel ranks it among China's five

most beautiful water towns

cross-Strait communication base

"Despite the small size, Tai'erzhuang has a number of traditional temples, waterways and museums," CNN Travel says. Chen explains: "We gave up the real estate project but gained a priceless cultur-

Since the reconstruction, Zaozhuang's tourism sector has grown 16.5 percent rear-on-year to generate 11.16 billion yuan. More than 80 percent of residents who

got new jobs last year work in tourism. "But you can't be a good mayor by only under construction has an investment of developing tourism." Chen says. He's also over 100 million yuan. They include new pushing the city to develop coal processing. "We're changing coal into materials used in value-added products like acetic

acid," Chen says. "Our production uses a Qing's poem I Love This Land. ecycling system to ensure no waste is discharged into the environment." He has been changing the economic composition in other ways. Chen says: "Zaozhuang is a city where I The cement industry contributes 3 per-

cent to Zaozhuang's GDP but consumes 25 realize my dreams. I love the city with all percent of its energy. Chen closed nearly all of the energy-intensive facilities and developed





Zaozhuang Party chief Chen Wei has made special efforts to realize Tai'erzhuang's reconstruction.

percent of the energy cement consumes. The city has invested more than 60 billion yuan in the coal-chemistry sector.

This investment seems poised to pay of in three years, Chen says. Zaozhuang's new economy has attracted investors. Each of the city's 303 projects

energy and chemicals. But Chen isn't merely a technocrat. He wrote the song Reluctant to Sau Goodbue about the town. And he enjoys reading Ai

The poem says: "Why are tears always in my eyes? It's because I love this land so

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emerging industries like coal processing Contact the writers through



These emerging industries use only 10

The Zaozhuang section of the Grand Canal has remained unchanged since the Ming Dynasty.

By ZHAO RUIXUE

The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal's flow seems to follow the direction of forbeing reconstructed after being destroyed in World War II and 85 sites along the canal have jointly applied for UNESCO

The artificial waterway that linked

northern and southern China served as a

lifeline for dynasties for 14 centuries. It carried materials and ideas between the political capitals of the north and economic heartland of the south. The canal produced 70 percent of the country's economic output during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911)

dynasties, says Chen Wei, Party chief of Shandong's Zaozhuang city along the Over time, the canal's value to the 18 cities that border it has shifted from logistics

to culture and tourism. The channel can be thought of as a necklace, sparkling with the 85 sites applying for World Heritage status.

Zaozhuang, the first city the Grand Canal meets when it enters Shandong province from the south, has the only stretch

unchanged since the Ming Dynasty. "Most docks and mooring points along the canal have been changed or renovated by modern development, but Zaozhuang has a 3-kilometer passage along which the docks and mooring points are original,"

The width is also unchanged, he says. On paper, the Grand Canal runs 1,747 the 1930s. kilometers — making it nine times longer than the Suez Canal. Parts date back to the 5th century BC

during the Sui Dynasty (AD 581-618), the capital of which was Luoyang - now the second largest city in Henan province by

Sui emperor Yang Guang needed to transport grain from the fertile Yangtze rently 99 km long. region northward to support his court and armies. So the emperor forced a huge number of workers to build the canal to connect Luoyang with Beijing and Hangzhou, capital of today's Zhejiang

province. The Grand Canal didn't pass through Zaozhuang until the Ming Dynasty, when an east-west waterway called the Jia Canal was devised to circumnavigate the Yellow River's floods, which frequently paralyzed

the Grand Canal "The Jia Canal is built according to its geographic features. Since it was completed, the Grand Canal has rarely been obstructed by the Yellow River, solving the biggest problem for emperors," Zaozhuang's Grand Canal culture promotion

office expert Dong Yungi says. The canal has developed Zaozhuang's historical coal business, which is waning

as deposits shrink. In 1878, Chung Hsing Coal Mining Co. now Zaozhuang Coal Mining, was founded across Zaozhuang then, placing the city

among China's top three coal bases until

the only way for the company to transport coal southward." Zaozhuang Mining Co Ltd publicity office director Hu Leba It also shipped construction materials purchased from Germany, he says. The Jia Canal was expanded after New

China's 1949 founding to serve increasing

"Before 1912, the Grand Canal served as

demand for cargo transportation. It's cur-Zaozhuang has four ports along the canal. Their throughput reached 32.15 mil-

lion tons last year. "The Grand Canal makes inland Zaozhuang a port city," Chen says.

"It plays an important role in shipping cargo like coal, cement and wood materi-

The city's port transportation management office deputy head Li Ying says: "Compared with land transport, the canal saves energy and generates less pollution." Per ton transported every km, the CO2 generated by canal-based transportation is two-thirds of that transported by railway

and one-fifth of that transported by road. The canal has also given rise to an area of wetlands since it changed the water system. One swath, the Weishanhu wetlands, contains a combined water area of 1,200 square km.

The Grand Canal also aids the South-to-North Water Diversion Project by transporting clean water from the Yangtze River in the area. The company ran 14 mines to the northern cities, reincarnating its