



Taiyuan: City of the Dragon

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It was a weekend, and the early morning was sparsely populated. People seemed to still not be waking up from deep slumber, with occasional pedestrians hurrying by. Taiyuan slowly woke up in the mist.

Amidst the gentle breeze and light rain, I hailed a taxi and went to Qingzhen Lao Liu Steamed Dumplings. I lined up and ordered a bowl of meatball soup, a bowl of old tofu, and a sweet deep-fried pancake. The boss looked surprised

and asked, "Are you going to eat so much?" After getting a positive answer, he smiled.

In the hustle and bustle of people, I found a seat and soon heard my order number being called. The soup base, made by boiling a mixture of beef shank, beef brisket, and beef, was refreshing. It was sprinkled with chopped scallions and enhanced with a rich pepper flavor. With one mouthful, the cold rain of Taiyuan was shut outside the door. The meatballs were made from

lean and excellent beef tenderloin, chopped and mixed with scallions, ginger, garlic, and starch, then vigorously kneaded until fully integrated. They were then deep-fried in oil, and after 15 minutes, they turned slightly golden and were ready to be served. Crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, they were simply exquisite. The sweet deep-fried pancake looked like a connected series of deep-fried dough sticks, uneven in thickness, with a layer of brown sugar on the surface. They were also deep-fried in oil. When eaten, they were slightly sweet and crispy,

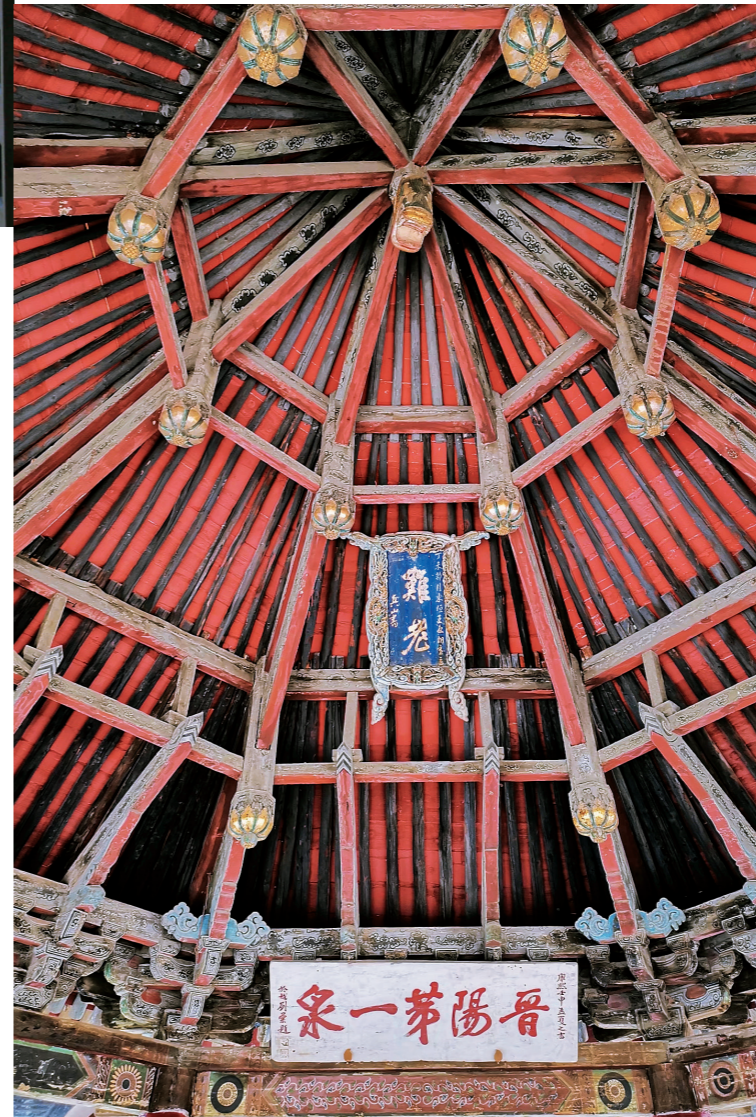


and the slight greasiness was taken away by the meatball soup.

The breakfast in Taiyuan is just like the city and its people—steady, introverted, solid, and sedate. Different regions have their own unique flavors, and Shanxi's flavor is characterized by its sour taste, and Taiyuan is no exception.

To understand Shanxi's vinegar culture, a visit to the Donghu Vinegar Garden is a must. As the only tourism brand in China's brewing industry, the Donghu Vinegar Garden has collected various vinegar-making utensils, agricultural tools, and more than 700 vinegar therapy prescriptions dating from the Western Han Dynasty to the present. Through displays of ancient and modern vessels, excerpts from literary works, old photos and videos, and immersive vinegar-making experiences, the garden fully showcases the historical and cultural heritage of Shanxi's aged vinegar.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, the aroma of aged vinegar filled the air. Without a





navigation app, I just followed my nose. After a short walk, I arrived at the entrance of the Donghu Vinegar Garden. The park not only offers free admission but also provides guided tours by staff members. The guide, a graceful Taiyuan native, explained that the raw materials for making vinegar are sorghum, barley, and peas. Looking at these ingredients, I almost thought they were

used for brewing Fenjiu (a type of Chinese liquor). She smiled and said, "Brewing vinegar and brewing alcohol have similarities in Shanxi." In addition to selecting the materials, vinegar-making also involves five steps: steaming, fermenting, smoking, pouring, and sun-drying. The entire process relies on natural fermentation by microorganisms. After undergoing natural

fermentation through the summer and exposure to sunlight, followed by freezing during the winter, the vinegar is purified and refined to produce high-quality aged vinegar.

Moving forward, you can visit the entire process of vinegar-making step by step and even participate if interested, with the opportunity to taste the

vinegar for free. The aged vinegar of Shanxi has a black-purple color, smooth and refreshing acidity, and a strong and penetrating sweetness. This is the true taste of Shanxi's aged vinegar.

Shanxi's vinegar, like Taiyuan, has a long history, and Shanxi's vinegar is as prominent as the alternative name for Taiyuan. Taiyuan,



founded in 497 BC, is said to have been favored by the Star Purple Emperor, which led to many emperors coming from this city. It is said that if we limit the scope of Taiyuan to the current jurisdiction of Taiyuan city, then at least 8 emperors have come from Taiyuan since the title of "Emperor" was established, and among them, the most well-known is the Li Tang Dynasty, which emerged from Taiyuan.

In the year 617 AD, during the troubled times of the Sui Dynasty, Li Yuan, then the governor of Taiyuan, came to Jinci Temple to pay homage. I don't know how much comfort Jinci Temple brought to Li Yuan's heart, but after rising in rebellion in Jinyang, he took only 126 days to capture the capital Chang'an, and thus the Great Tang Empire was established, lasting for 289 years.

Located in the southwestern suburbs of Taiyuan, at the foot of the eastern side of Xuanwengshan Mountain, Jinci Temple may be the oldest existing temple complex in China. It is a temple dedicated to Tang Shuyu, brother of King Cheng of Zhou and the first feudal lord of Jin. Jinci Temple has gone through multiple repairs and expansions during various



dynasties, such as Northern Qi, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, forming a large complex of halls, pavilions, and towers. The main deity worshipped has changed from Tang Shuyu to the "Goddess of Jin Yuan". By coming here to offer sacrifices before rising in arms, perhaps Li Yuan believed that overthrowing the Sui was akin to King Wu overthrowing the tyrant Zhou.

In 1934, the architect couple Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin went on an expedition to Fenyang, Shanxi. On their way passing through Taiyuan, they caught a glimpse of the side silhouette of the main hall of Jinci Temple. They were deeply impressed by its majestic roof, grand brackets, and far-reaching eaves, which remained visible

even after their car had passed the opposite hillside.

Upon their return journey, despite being physically exhausted and carrying various belongings, they were determined not to let go of the memory of that corner of the temple. When



they arrived at Jinci Temple again, they were pleasantly surprised by the incomparable beauty of the grand garden, which exceeded their initial expectations.

Indeed, Jinci Temple is huge! Covering an area of over 1.3 million square meters, it houses more than 100 buildings from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, including halls, pavilions, towers, temples, bridges, and gazebos. There are also over 100 sculptures, over 30 artworks, more than 200 couplets, and over 400 inscriptions. Among them, the most famous is the "Inscription of Jinci Temple," personally

written by Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, Li Shimin.

The stele, standing 195 cm tall, 120 cm wide, and 27 cm thick, features a running script and is the only surviving stele written by Li Shimin. Legend has it that since the day the stele was erected, people have been eagerly copying it, and it is regarded as an artistic treasure second only to the "Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion." Li Shimin even gave rubbings of the stele as gifts to foreign envoys. If contemporary calligraphers visit Jinci Temple, they might consider buying a rubbing as a



souvenir or creating their own copy.

During the "Jinci Temple Ancient Chinese Culture Festival," many graceful women from Shanxi wear traditional attire, with their rosy lips, white teeth, elegant cloud-like eyebrows, and makeup and styling inspired by ancient books and paintings. Their every movement and expression exude the elegance and grace of classical Chinese culture.

The beauty of Jinci Temple is beyond description; only when you personally step through its gates will you understand why it is said, "Among the Three Jins, Jin Yang is the best; among Jin Yang, Jinci Temple is the epitome," and why it is praised as "where the land and agriculture thrive,

and ancient cypresses are veiled in smoke," and "In that sacred space, doors open wide, Ornate corridors, sunlit pride. A soaring spirit, stars align, A thousand pillars, beauty defined."

Today, Taiyuan serves more as a transit point for Shanxi tours, with many tourists arriving but hastily moving on to other destinations. Perhaps, you can spare some time for Jinci Temple, following in the footsteps of historical figures like Li Bai, Ouyang Xiu, and Liang Sicheng, experiencing the passage of time and the vicissitudes of history, and gaining insights that are difficult to put into words. Though these individuals have long passed away, their essence can still be felt through the bricks and tiles they once walked upon, resonating with us today. 🌏