



A bridge across millennia

Xi'an and Gyeongju share extensive historical and cultural ties.
Yang Ran and Qin Feng report

When Hwangbo Ye-jin, 23, a South Korean student, first walked through the streets of Xi'an, Shaanxi province, in January, she was immediately captivated by the city's blend of history and modernity.

"I was struck by how well Xi'an preserves its traditional architecture and culture. The locals take great pride in their heritage and actively pass it on. I found it remarkable and deeply attractive."

This initial spark of fascination led her to apply to enroll in an international exchange program at Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xi'an. She was accepted and arrived in the ancient Chinese capital in August to begin her studies.

Without knowing it, Hwangbo was retracing a route established more than a millennium earlier. Bai Genxing, professor of the School of History and Civilization at Shaanxi Normal University, said that as early as the seventh century, the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and the ancient Silla Kingdom enjoyed close ties.

During this period, a steady stream of envoys, students, monks and merchants traveled between the two places, particularly between their respective capitals: Seorabeol (modern-day Gyeongju) in the Silla Kingdom and Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) in the Tang Dynasty, Bai said.

Among them, the journey of the monk named Yance, known as Woncheuk in Korean, created a cultural bridge between Xi'an and Gyeongju that endures to this day.

Yance, from the capital of the Silla Kingdom, entered monastic life at a very young age, Bai said. When he was 15, he traveled to Chang'an, where he dedicated himself to Buddhist studies for decades, ultimately becoming a renowned monk.

"Yance was one of the earliest and most influential monks from Silla to study in Chang'an, stayed the longest, authored numerous texts, and participated in official scripture translation projects. He helped build an early bridge for Buddhist exchanges between Tang and Silla, paving the way for many more who followed."

This ancient connection is not confined to history books. Xingjiao Temple in Xi'an, which houses Yance's relics, has maintained ties with Bulguksa Temple in Gyeongju, with continuing personnel exchanges between the two sides.

Xi'an and Gyeongju, building on their profound historical connection, formalized their relationship as sister cities in 1994, two years after China and South Korea established diplomatic ties.

Zhang Rui, vice-president of Xi'an Municipal People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, described the sister-city relationship as a natural culmination of centuries of exchange.

"It's a dialogue between civilizations spanning thousands of years, a moment where historical legacy and contemporary opportunity perfectly meet."

"Gyeongju, known as 'the museum without a roof,' is the cradle of Silla civilization, and Xi'an, a millennia-old ancient capital of China, is commonly seen as the starting point of the Silk Road. These two vibrant civilizations intertwined through the Silk Road thousands of years ago. This shared histori-



Clockwise from top left:

Xingjiao Temple in Xi'an, Shaanxi province.
GAO CHENXIANG/FOR CHINA DAILY

South Korean student Hwangbo Ye-jin in Xi'an, Shaanxi province.
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Signage for an exhibition of Shaanxi History Museum in Gyeongju.
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Artifacts from the Gyeongju National Museum.
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cal and cultural heritage forms the bedrock of our friendship."

Indeed, evidence of this shared past is woven into the fabric of both cities. Xingjiao Temple in Xi'an, a UNESCO World Heritage site, stands as a lasting testament to the Silla monk Yance's legacy in the city. Throughout Gyeongju, one can still find remnants and influences of Tang culture at numerous historical sites. According to a UNESCO webpage introducing Gyeongju, Chang'an, which was designed during the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and prospered in the Tang Dynasty, provided a model for the Silla.

With this background, Shaanxi History Museum and Gyeongju National Museum forged a sister-museum partnership. Liu Peng, an official at the Shaanxi History Museum, said that when his museum leadership first met its counterparts from Gyeongju, they felt an immediate kinship.

"Both sides found our museums strikingly similar. Gyeongju is an ancient capital of the Silla Kingdom, and our city, Xi'an, is also a historic ancient capital. Both museums are leading institutions in their nations. And both sides are interested in collaboration and exchanges related to cultural relic protection and research."

"With a shared, strong desire to become sister museums, we signed a Sister Institution Exchange Agreement in 2002. Since then we have maintained regular exchanges and cooperation in artifact conservation, exhibitions, and academic research."

This partnership reached a significant milestone in 2012 when the museums commemorated their 10th anniversary of the exchange agreement with reciprocal exhibitions, showcasing Silla Kingdom artifacts from South Korea to audiences in Xi'an, and presenting Shaanxi relics in Gyeongju.

"In selecting the exhibits, we mainly chose artifacts from the same historical period in both countries, with the goal of demonstrating the long-standing cultural exchanges between the two sides," Liu said. "The exhibition in Gyeongju was a sensation, attracting more than 160,000 visitors in just two months."

In more than 20 years of collaboration, staff from both museums have exchanged regular visits and shared expertise in museum management, academic research and conservation science, Liu said.

"We are now in the process of renewing our exchange agreement with Gyeongju. I hope the collaboration between the two museums, and even the cities of Xi'an and Gyeongju, will deepen beyond our existing exchanges. China and South Korea have extensive historical and cultural ties. Increased exchanges lead to greater understanding and reduce the chance of misunderstandings," said Liu,

who is also secretary general of the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Association.

Last year, marking the 30th anniversary of their sister-city pact, the Mayor of Gyeongju, Joo Nak-young, led a delegation to Xi'an. The visit yielded a new memorandum of understanding on archaeological research and cultural heritage preservation between the Xi'an



An artifact from Shaanxi History Museum that was exhibited at Gyeongju National Museum in 2012. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology and the Silla Cultural Heritage Research Institute in Gyeongju.

The partnership is a natural fit, said Zhao Fengyan, vice-director of the Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology.

"Our institutions have a common focus on archaeology and cultural preservation, which creates natural synergy in our academic work. Historically, our regions were closely connected. For example, artifacts about the Silla Kingdom have been discovered here in Xi'an in recent years. These finds provide a strong basis for joint research projects."

Over the past 30 years, collaboration between Xi'an and Gyeongju

has expanded beyond historical artifacts research to encompass trade, education and professional training.

Zhang of the Xi'an Municipal People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries said the two cities have pioneered exchanges between government employees, with Xi'an officials traveling to Gyeongju for administrative training programs and Gyeongju staff taking part in Chinese-language courses held by Xi'an.

On the economic front, Zhang said, Xi'an plans to explore collaboration opportunities in emerging fields such as digital cultural tourism, green energy, and tech-enabled wellness.

"Our aim is to merge Xi'an's technological prowess with Gyeongju's unique strengths, elevating our sister-city ties into a powerful driver of new productive forces for both regions."

Cho Hong-lai, vice-president of the Korea-China Business Association Northwest Regional Branch, talked of the natural affinity between the two cities.

"Xi'an and Gyeongju are both cities proud of their cultural history. They are interested in and curious about other people who share similar qualities, and they foster friendships easily. Because of this, people from Gyeongju and broader North Gyeongsang Province are interested in Xi'an, and many of its residents will come to Xi'an to study or do business."

"Gyeongju's cultural tourism industry is well-developed, and Xi'an has many cultural tourism industries and historical sites. Connecting these two points to create a cultural tourism project would be a promising avenue," said Cho.

Kang Ho-gu, director of the Sino-Korea Economy/Society Institute, said, "Long ago, the Kingdom of Silla and the Tang Dynasty enjoyed friendly relations, which contributed to regional stability. In modern times, South Korea and China are using their complementary assets to build an East Asian production network together, paving the way for shared prosperity."

"We must not forget the example of amicable partnership that our predecessors set, which forms the foundation of the friendly relations between South Korea and China," he said.

With Gyeongju set to host the 2025 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting this month, Kang expresses hope for this gathering to help further advance bilateral collaboration. "The meeting in Gyeongju this year, themed 'Building a sustainable tomorrow: Connect, innovate, prosper,' aligns closely with China's four global initiatives and the concept of a community with a shared future for humanity. I look forward to seeing all those attending the meeting using it as a platform to engage in bilateral and multilateral talks, enhance communication, dispel misunderstandings and promote collaboration," he said.



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Majesty of old royal capital is a big drawcard

By YANG RAN and QIN FENG

For Kim Hyun-jin, a doctoral student in the College of Natural Sciences of Seoul National University, memories of her first trip to Xi'an in July are palpable and detailed.

"In Xi'an we visited the Bell and Drum Towers, the Grand Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City, the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, the Shaanxi History Museum, and the Muslim Quarter. We tasted authentic local delicacies such as *liangpi*, a cold noodle dish, *roujiamo*, a meat sandwich, and *zenggao*, steamed rice cake."

Kim's journey to the heart of ancient China and an old royal capital was inspired by her doctoral supervisor, who had visited Xi'an for academic exchanges late last year.

"I was struck by Xi'an's profound historical atmosphere, delicious street food and the warmth of its people. What impressed me the most was the various performances on the streets of the Grand Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City at night, which felt like stepping right into the Tang Dynasty."

Kim said many of her friends have chosen Xi'an as their first stop in China, drawn by its history, rich culture and beautiful scenery.

Indeed, South Korean tourists have been a leading force in Xi'an's foreign visitor market. The Xi'an Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism says South Korea has ranked among the top three sources of inbound tourists to the city since 2017 and has held the top spot since 2023. This surge has been fueled by China's expanded visa-free policies over the past year.

As Shaanxi Daily reported, data from the Shaanxi General Station of Exit and Entry Frontier Inspection says that more than 100,000 foreign travelers entered Xi'an from Jan 1 to July 9 under the visa-waiver policy, a 290 percent year-on-year increase, with South Korean, Malaysian and Russian visitors leading the way.

Zhao Guang, an itinerary manager at Xi'an Hanyan International Travel Agency who has nearly five years' experience catering to South Korean tourists, said Xi'an's appeal lies in its blend of historical culture and natural landscapes.

"In Xi'an, attractions such as the Terracotta Warriors and Huaqing Palace are essential stops. Shaanxi History Museum and the City Wall are also popular requests from South Korean tourists. After all, people come to Xi'an, a former capital, precisely to see its historical relics."

"In addition, South Korean tourists generally enjoy hiking and natural scenery, which is why Huashan Mountain has become a must-visit destination. In fact, it has recently become the most popular attraction in our tour packages."

Xu Bihong contributed to this story.