

LIFE

Tracing a golden legacy

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One can see large cloisonne vases, striking plates and other colorful pieces in Beijing Gongmei Group's arts-and-crafts factory's studio near Yonghegong, or the Lama Temple, in the capital.

Gaze upon these long enough and you will be stunned by the diversity of distinctive Chinese patterns traced by countless thin gold-wires.

"They say there are 108 steps in producing cloisonne goods," said the factory's director, Zhang Yongzhen, 59, who has practiced the craft for 40 years.

"I don't know the exact number, but I can tell you that the traditional handicraft is very sophisticated. No one can finish the whole process by himself or herself. It's a delicate art that takes dedication to every small step."

Cloisonne, or *jingtai*, is the technique of creating designs on metal with colored-glass paste, or enamel, that fills in spaces among copper or bronze wiring that is bent or hammered into patterns.

The fundamentals include shaping the object's body; bending and inlaying copper wires to render surface patterns; coloring in the shapes these wires form with metallic oxides; heating — because the enamel usually shrinks after firing, this process is repeated to fully fill in the designs; and, finally, polishing and gilding.

The technique was introduced to China in the late 13th century. Cloisonne is believed to have reached its peak and been given its present Chinese name during the reign of Emperor Jingtai in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). *Lan* means blue, and *jingtai* goods were typically infused with a special dark blue enamel as the base color.

The craft was further developed in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), following innovations in copper-smelting techniques.

Zhang calls cloisonne goods "treasures that will be seen as cultural relics 1,000 years later".

"Cloisonne, with its flam-



A cloisonne incense burner (center) in Beijing's Palace Museum and a plate in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

boyant styles and vibrant colors, was initially primarily intended for the royal family. The objects' bodies were usually made of copper or bronze, which were expensive materials that could only be owned by royal families in the past.

Zhang said he did not realize these treasures' value when he began to learn cloisonne at the age of about 17, when his father sent him to a vocational school to study the technique. His father spent his life working on the first step of making cloisonne items, hammering copper or bronze into the objects' shapes.

Zhang instead learned the more intricate step of using thin metal wires to outline patterns and designs on the surfaces.

"The technique requires patience and concentration,"



Zhang Yongzhen's and Xi Wen's cloisonne creations. PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

Zhang said. "Imagine inserting the thin metal wires with small tweezers and repeating the movements thousands of times every day. It was incredibly boring."

"But I agreed to learn it and later worked in the same factory as my father because he believed the job was stable and guaranteed a living."

Still, Zhang continued to seek other jobs in different departments of the company. He even worked abroad as a salesman and as a trainer and manager at the factory.

"When I saw people were wowed by the technique, especially when I worked abroad, I started to rethink cloisonne. I didn't realize its beauty and value until I left it and observed it as an outsider."

New blood is needed to

infuse the old medium, Zhang said.

He singles out for praise Xi Wen, 39, head of the factory's design department, which belongs to the 70-year-old Beijing Gongmei Group.

Xi joined the group in 2007 after graduating from the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University in Beijing after studying environmental art design. Later she obtained a Master of Arts degree in interior design at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Her cloisonne designs have since won national awards.

Xi worked as a designer with Beijing Gongmei Group for years before she was transferred to the arts-and-crafts factory in 2016. Since then she has concentrated on learning cloisonne techniques and designing related products as Zhang's apprentice.

"Unlike traditional cloisonne artisans, who strictly follow their masters' instructions, Xi is full of creativity and imagination when it comes to design," Zhang said. "She is also very bold with the use of colors. Her creations are unique."

One item Xi made was inspired by the *pipa*, a traditional Chinese lute, that is depicted in the murals of the Mogao Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Gansu province.

Named *Shengshi Hefeng*, which means prosperity and harmony, the black, blue and gold vase, which resembles the pear-shaped instrument, combines the traditional techniques of cloisonne and filigree inlay.

Xi said she hopes to bring *jingtai* into people's daily lives by making everyday items such as jewelry, boxes and incense burners.

"I don't consider myself an artist, although I design and paint. I like the word artisan, which is not only about the creative side but also about functional value. Artisans make cloisonne products with their hands, and through skill, experience and talent they can create things of great beauty that are also useful."

— CHEN NAN

Close up with cloisonne

About eight years ago Li Jinglong and Guan Dian visited the Palace Museum in Beijing. Also known as the Forbidden City, it was China's imperial palace from 1420 to 1911 and is home to more than 1.86 million cultural relics. It was the cloisonne objects on display that particularly attracted Li and Guan.

"We spent hours looking at those beautiful objects," Li said. "We just couldn't take our eyes off them."

Li, 35, born and raised in Beijing, is no stranger to cloisonne, because a pair of cloisonne vases graced his grandparents' home. His wife Guan, 34, who learned to paint as a child and later became a designer after graduating from the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, is also familiar with cloisonne.

As a result of their visit the couple boldly decided to open a workshop to promote Chinese-style cloisonne.

"We learned cloisonne after seeing the pieces displayed at the Palace Museum," said Li, who worked in a finance company before quitting his job to launch Handcraft Addicted, a DIY workshop in which participants can make cloisonne.

"We wanted to turn our hobby into a career so people could enjoy and learn to make cloisonne."

Since 2018 they have opened three workshops in Beijing.

The art of cloisonne making involves many steps, including making a metal base, soldering delicate metal strips bent to the outline of a design, filling the spaces with different colored pigments and firing. The couple simplify the



From left: Guan Dian and her husband, Li Jinglong, run cloisonne workshops in Beijing. Guan instructs a student on how to create a painting. The fish image involves soldering delicate metal strips bent to the outline of a design and filling the spaces with different colors. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

process so students only have to learn to bend the thin metal wires into their desired pattern and apply the powdered ore pigments.

Instead of focusing on making traditional cloisonne objects, such as plates and vases, the workshop allows students to create the designs they want on panels of glass, resin or wood.

Chang Yunqi, who has been making cloisonne art at Handcraft Addicted for about five years, said that when she and her classmates were looking

for a place to celebrate their high school graduation in 2019 they chose to try Handcraft Addicted.

Chang learned oil painting as a child and for her first try chose to re-create *The Birthday*, a painting by the French artist Marc Chagall.

"The thin metal wires resembled the pencil lines I draw on canvas. The coloring process was magical. When I saw the finished result, which was based on an oil painting, presented in total different medium

and approach, I was amazed."

Since then Chang has made one painting a year at the workshop. One of her latest was based on John La Farge's *Autumn Scattering Leaves*, which she saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York last year. It took her seven months to finish.

"I have a full-time job, so I only go to the workshop in my spare time. It allows me to slow down and dedicate myself to the piece."

— CHEN NAN



Cloisonne artwork in Beijing's Palace Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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BEIJING SPECIAL

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Shougang Park, an iconic Olympic venue and a landmark conference and exhibition destination, which was a steel mill, marks fruitful cooperation in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Trunk rail network crucial to coordinated strategies

Beijing will continue to improve its transportation infrastructure with rail as the backbone, creating an advanced hub for commuters while boosting high-quality development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

Beijing-Kunming Expressway, Tianjin-Shijiazhuang Expressway and Rongcheng-Wuhai Expressway have also been opened to traffic.

Currently, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region forms a national highway backbone network centered on Beijing, consisting of seven radial lines, two longitudinal lines and three transverse lines.

By the end of 2023, total mileage of expressways in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region reached 6,835 miles, up 38% compared with the end of 2014.

Starting from 2015, Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei jointly issued the Transportation Union interoperable card, gradually realizing "one-card access" in major cities in the region and extending coverage nationwide. As of now, more than 7 million cards have been issued in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, achieving interconnection with 336 cities nationwide.

Meanwhile, the "world-class airport cluster" in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has been solidified. Data from the Beijing Bureau of Statistics show passenger throughput at Beijing Capital International Airport exceeded 770 million over the past decade, with more than 5 million flight take-offs and landings, leading the country. As of the end of 2023, the opening of Beijing Daxing International Airport ensured the operation of 764,500 flights, serving 93.97 million passengers.

The development of regional transportation has supported decentralization of non-capital functions in Beijing, along with the orderly relocation of industries and population to the Beijing Municipal Administrative Center in Tongzhou district and Xiong'an New Area in Hebei province.

— WANG JINHUI

Refining blueprint for megacity development

Beijing has achieved breakthrough progress in reallocating non-capital functions over the past decade, including the relocation of State-owned enterprises and optimization of its public service resources, according to a senior official.

"We pay more attention to making improvements during relocation, not simply to move to another place," Guo Lanfeng, a senior official with the National Development and Reform Commission, said at a recent news conference.

Guo said SOEs should upgrade their management mechanism, expand business scope and further boost sci-tech innovation after being relocated so as to promote the development of Tianjin and Hebei province, and that a primary aim of cross-regional coordinated development is "to solve the big city diseases of the national capital that have resulted from its rapid growth through deep reform".

Since 2014, Beijing has been implementing a new urban development plan to reduce its permanent population and areas under construction. As a result, it became the first megacity in China to achieve sustainable development that pursues growth while consuming fewer resources, Guo noted.

Official data show the current permanent population in the city's six major districts has declined by 15% since 2014, and by strictly controlling



construction in urban and rural areas, its built-up area has been reduced by more than 50 square miles over the past decade.

Beijing's GDP passed the 3 trillion yuan (\$417.3 billion) benchmark in 2018 and eclipsed 4 trillion yuan in 2021. It has also led the country's provincial-level areas in many indicators, such as labor productivity and energy and water consumption per 10,000 yuan of GDP.

The city attaches great importance to developing advanced, sophisticated industries and the digital economy, and to determining the layout of future industries in advance. As a result, it has nurtured two trillion-yuan-level industrial clusters of new-generation information technology and sci-tech services, along with several 100-billion-yuan-level industrial clusters.

Moreover, Beijing has annually upgraded its measures to reform the business environment, striving to create a market-oriented, law-based, convenient and international atmosphere of entrepreneurship.

Last year, the number of newly registered market enti-

ties in the city increased by 20.3%, attaining a record high in excess of 22.11 million.

As one of Beijing's two new wings, Xiong'an New Area in Hebei, along with the Beijing Municipal Administrative Center, has entered a new development stage of carrying out large-scale construction while undertaking the relocation of non-capital functions. Guo said the new area has finished building a backbone road network, and over the next decade, Xiong'an will mainly focus on the establishment and improvement of its systems and mechanisms while some major infrastructure projects will continue to be accelerated.

According to the news release, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has implemented coordinated development in an all-around way, and plans to build itself into a power source serving the country's high-quality growth.

For example, Tianjin has strengthened interaction with Beijing in resource sharing and cooperation in sci-tech innovation and industries. Tianjin is now home to more than 120 companies providing parts for Beijing Benz Automotive, Li Auto and Xiaomi EV.

Data from the Beijing Bureau of Statistics show the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region generated 10.4 trillion yuan (\$1.44 trillion) in GDP in 2023, 1.9 times that of 2013.

— HAO NAN

Cross-region cooperation helps companies expand and prosper

On a raw egg, the words "10th Anniversary of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development" gradually emerge. A five-axis computer numerical controlled machine developed by Beijing Jingdiao Group, using a spindle speed of 18,000 revolutions per minute, carves the words onto the shell at a depth of 0.01 to 0.02 inches.

"The vigorous development of Jingdiao is inseparable from the implementation of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development strategy," said Yang Meng, a staff member of the company, which is a national high-tech business focused on the research and development, production, sales and engineering services of precision CNC machine tools.

Due to the booming market of computers, communications and consumer electronics, and the high demand for high-end machine tools around 2010, Jingdiao faced tight industrial land resources in Beijing. "Then we had to cope with the challenge of conducting numerous tests on product quality for research and development while meeting regular production tasks in the same workshop. That fell short of the product demand," Yang said.

With the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region elevated to a national initiative in 2014, Jingdiao has set its eyes beyond Beijing, relocating its production and assembly center to

Langfang, Hebei province.

This year, the company's Tianjin base is scheduled to start operation, focusing on the research and production of key core components for machine tools.

The past decade saw Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei working to eliminate institutional and systemic barriers, forming a development pattern characterized by shared goals, integrated measures, complementary advantages and mutual benefits. Industrial relocations and increasingly close collaborations, including the Jingdiao model of "research and development in Beijing, production in Tianjin and Hebei", have accelerated their formation.

Beijing Infrastructure Investment — a company specializing in the financing, construction and operation of infrastructure projects, especially those involving rail transport — and its affiliate Beijing Rail Transit Technology Equipment Group, have set up an intelligent manufacturing base in Baoding, Hebei province, which achieved mass production in 2021.

The Baoding base has rolled out more than 100 vehicles across 17 types, serving the western section of Beijing Metro Line 11, which is also known as the Winter Olympic branch line, among other urban rail projects.

In addition, BII has established a technology research institute in Beijing, dedicated to

high-end rail transit equipment R&D, leveraging the innovation advantages of the capital city and driving the development of the high-end equipment manufacturing industry in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

"Industrial synergy is a substantive part and key support of the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region," said Ye Tanglin, executive vice-president of the Academy of Metropolis Economic and Social Development at Capital University of Economics and Business.

As one of the most dynamic and innovative regions in the Chinese economy, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has conditions favorable to industrial synergy development. Beijing is rich in educational and human resources, with active scientific and technological innovation; Tianjin has abundant industrial space, proximity to ports and convenient transportation; and Hebei has a strong manufacturing base, abundant natural resources and an ample labor supply, Yang said.

Data from the Beijing Commission of Development and Reform show that the industrial added value of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region reached 2.43 trillion yuan (\$337.55 billion) in 2023, 1.43 times that of 2013.

Businesses from Beijing have made 49,000 investments in Tianjin and Hebei, pouring in a total of 2.3 trillion yuan.

— YUAN SHENGGAO

Environmental protection remains a top priority

Senior officials say Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei province have made remarkable achievements in environmental protection over the past 10 years thanks to their close cooperation and integrated development.

The three regions have signed two major cooperation agreements on environmental conservation during the past decade and established collaborative mechanisms in some 10 fields, including air pollution control, protection of key river basins, and implementation of emergency drills, said Liang Wenyue, an official from the Beijing Ecology and Environment Bureau.

"With air pollution control as a top priority, we continue to deepen cooperation, promoting the structural optimization and adjustment of energy, industry and transportation," Liang said at a recent news conference in Beijing.

So far, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has carried out autumn and winter air pollution control programs for seven consecutive years while gradually expanding "coal-to-electricity" projects in mountain villages, Liang added.

By the end of last year, the annual average concentration of PM2.5 — fine particular matter with diameter less

than 2.5 micrometers — in the region had fallen by around 60% compared to 2013, according to stats from the bureau. In 2023, Beijing recorded 95 more days with good air quality than in 2013, while Tianjin had 87 more and Hebei 121 more.

To better protect the Miyun Reservoir, a reservoir receiving runoff from Hebei and Beijing, the two areas have jointly built an ecological compensation mechanism and released a comprehensive ecological protection plan (2019-25) for the Chaohe River, one of the major waterways supplying water to the reservoir.

Additionally, Beijing and Hebei have made sustained efforts to step up rural domestic sewage treatment, reduce pollution sources, and increase the monitoring and early warning abilities for the water environment, said He Zhi, deputy director of the bureau's water ecological environment department.

In 2021, water storage at the Miyun Reservoir reached a record high of 4.68 billion cubic yards, and in 2022 the reservoir was recognized by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment as one of the first nine cases of "Beautiful Rivers and Lakes" in China.

— YUAN SHENGGAO



An aerial view of Grand Canal Forest Park in Beijing's Tongzhou district. CHANG MING / XINHUA

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