



Residents and officials in Datong city commemorate the people who lost their lives during the nationwide COVID-19 epidemic on April 4, Tomb Sweeping Day. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Shanxi moves to extinguish risky behavior on Tomb Sweeping Day

Fears that people burning offerings to honor ancestors could spark forest fires amid dry climate



By YUAN SHENGGAO

During Qingming Festival — or Tomb Sweeping Day — residents in North China's Shanxi province were told by the local government to use safer methods when paying tribute to their ancestors and deceased family members.

The requirements were proposed due to the high risk of fire and the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Traditional practices during Tomb Sweeping Day, which falls around April 4, include clearing weeds in graveyards and burning incense, candles and paper sacrificial offerings as well as setting off fireworks.

The burning of things and fireworks are highly risky in forests and on grasslands, especially in the dry weather of spring.

According to a domestic media report, a forest fire in Xichang, Sichuan province, on March 30, killed 18 firefighters and a local guide.

The accident rang the alarm for governments throughout the country, including Shanxi.

On April 4, the provincial government of Shanxi started a weeklong campaign to prevent fires in forests and grasslands.

During the first fire-prevention weeklong event in Shanxi, officials in various regions spread fire prevention advice among residents via TV broadcasts and mobile phone text messages.

The province's law enforcement institutions have also dispatched task forces to patrol near graveyards, to prevent risky practices.

In Qinyuan, a county boasting the highest forest coverage in Shanxi province, the government made the highest level of fire response.

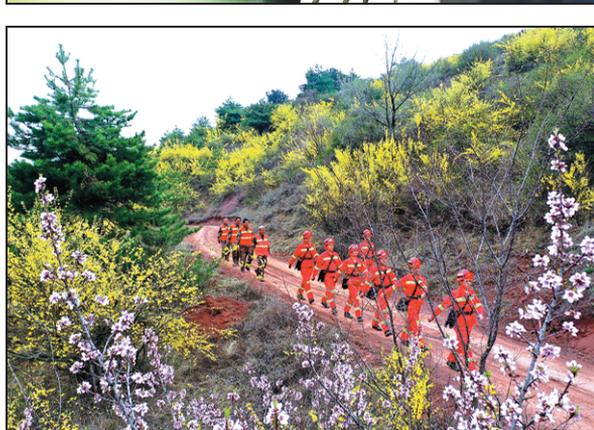
The county has established a smart fire monitoring and early warning system, using helicopters and drones on 24-hour patrol and 48 infrared cameras on watch towers.

During Tomb Sweeping Day, the county also mobilized firefighting officers, officials and forestry workers to carry out various fire-prevention tasks.

A fleet of 800 vehicles patrolled the county, while hundreds of forestry workers have been on duty at 100-plus watch towers and at more than 380 checkpoints.

The county's 390 forestry fire-fighting officers, 1,200 officials and more than 3,600 volunteers have been in place to deal with any emergencies.

Heading the task forces is Jin Suojun, Party secretary of Qinyuan. He visited the county's 14 townships to make sure all fire-prevention measures had been carried out.



Top: A Taiyuan cemetery worker lays flowers in front of graves according to the request of clients. KOU NING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Above: Forestry workers patrol forests in Qinyuan county to prevent the risk of fire. MA LI MING / FOR CHINA DAILY

In Yangqu, another county with high forestry coverage, there are manned checkpoints on the roads to forest areas. Their duty is to ban kindling and inflammable materials being taken into forests.

At Wanbailin forest farm in the suburbs of Taiyuan, the provincial capital, all kinds of smart equipment are used in fire prevention.

At the fire monitoring center of the forest farm, a big screen is divided into 16 sections, showing images caught by cameras in different areas.

Lu Tong, head of the monitoring center, explained how the system works.

"Every camera is placed at the

highest point of an area and can take pictures of locations within a radius of 5-20 kilometers during the daytime," Lu said.

"During the nighttime, the cameras will shift to infrared mode, which can identify spots of fire or smoke in 5-10 km," he said. In the case of an emergency, the big screen shows the exact location immediately, he added.

The official said the 17,500-hectare forest farm used to rely on 180 patrolling workers for fire monitoring and prevention. He added that one worker can only walk around a dozen kilometers a day in some cliff areas, so the smart system has greatly improved work efficiency.

While increasing manpower to monitor forests and grasslands, local officials also advocated safer ways of tomb sweeping.

In Changzi county in the southeast of Shanxi, local authorities called on residents to lay flowers instead of burning paper sacrificial offerings.

Yu Bo, who has run a flower store in the county for five years, said his sales increased heavily during this year's Tomb Sweeping Day.

"I began to receive orders a week before the festival. Flowers like white and yellow chrysanthemums are the most popular," Yu said.

Li Quanfu, a civil affairs official in Taiyuan's Wanbailin district, suggested tomb sweepers offer cold food as tribute to their ancestors.

"People always believe it's a tradition to burn incense sticks and paper-made sacrificial offering during Qingming Festival," he said.

"However, offering cold food is an even longer tradition, as we have celebrated Qingming together with Cold Food Festival for more than 2,500 years in China. And both festivals are dedicated to our ancestors," Li explained.

In Shanxi, tomb sweeping in large public cemeteries was affected by the novel coronavirus epidemic. People are advised not to visit cemeteries in a bid to avoid crowding and cross-infection.

In this circumstance, people can ask cemetery workers to sweep tombs for them or pay homage to the deceased on cemetery websites.

"The workers can visit the graves, clear the weeds around the tombs, present flowers, fruits and food and deliver memorial speeches for people who apply for the service," said Yang Yong, a manager at the Yong'an Cemetery in Taiyuan.

"All the rituals of tomb sweeping will be recorded by video cameras and sent to the clients," Yang said. He added that more than 200 clients ordered the service.

"To mark their great contributions during the COVID-19 outbreak, we offer free tomb sweeping services to medical workers in Shanxi," Yang said.

Wang Chong, a folk culture researcher in Shanxi, noted that Tomb Sweeping Day is an important occasion for Chinese people.

"It is a common practice in China for people to travel thousands of kilometers to pay tribute to their ancestors during the festival," Wang said.

"However, Qingming is not the only occasion in the year for this purpose," he added.

Wang noted that the Zhongyuan Festival on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month and the Winter Clothing Festival on the first day of the 10th lunar month can be options for people to pay tribute to their beloved ones in another world.

Guo Yanjie and Li Yali contributed to this story.

Chinese living abroad receive shipments of protective equipment

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Despite the difficulty in logistics and transportation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the first shipment of protective equipment such as masks and gloves from Shanxi was received by Chinese expatriates in Japan on March 30.

The Shanxi Chamber of Commerce in Japan, which is responsible for distributing the supplies, sent a letter to the Shanxi Federation of Returning Overseas Chinese to express their gratitude.

The supplies were donated by businesses and individuals in Shanxi. The Shanxi Federation of Returning Overseas Chinese and the Shanxi Red Cross Society have been responsible for delivering them to the overseas Chinese in more than 30 countries and regions including Japan, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States.

The first batch of supplies left Shanxi on March 20. Due to the difficulty in transportation, the first recipient in Japan obtained the supplies 10 days later.

In the following days, the two organizations in Shanxi received confirmation letters from countries including Sweden, Malaysia and the UK.

Xue Pengguo, an official at the Shanxi Federation of Returning Overseas Chinese, said he has been busy contacting overseas organizations since early February.

"At the beginning, we received a lot of supplies from overseas Chinese, including businesspeople, students and overseas residents, to help fight against the COVID-19 epidemic in China," Xue said.

"The overseas Chinese made a great contribution to China's battle against the epidemic.

"But now they are having a difficult time overseas and it's time for us to pay them back," said the official.

Xue said the most difficult part of the deliveries is the pressure on transportation and customs clearance.

“We are paying close attention to the situation and we will make all efforts to help our folks overseas survive the hardship.”

Xue Pengguo, official at the Shanxi Federation of Returning Overseas Chinese

300,000 expats

from Shanxi living abroad

"We have foreseen all the difficulties, so we planned for the donations and delivery at an earlier stage," the official said.

According to Xue, the supplies have reached all targeted recipients "safe and sound" in about 10 days after they left customs in Shanghai.

"We didn't expect the pandemic to develop so fast worldwide, so we are paying close attention to the situation and we will make all efforts to help our folks overseas survive the hardship," Xue said.

Those who are also relieved are the parents of overseas Chinese students knowing that their children received assistance from Shanxi and China's other foreign missions and organizations.

"My daughter is studying in Sweden and the situation of the country worried me a lot. Now I'm relieved when she told me that she had received supplies from Shanxi," said a Shanxi resident surnamed Yang.

According to Pang Le, another official at the Shanxi Federation of Returning Overseas Chinese, there are a total of 300,000 expats from Shanxi living overseas.

Li Yali contributed to this story.

Springtime sightseeing begins as virus spread brought under control

By YUAN SHENGGAO

With the nationwide novel coronavirus epidemic showing signs of being under control, residents in Taiyuan, capital city of Shanxi province, are going out sightseeing as spring flowers start to bloom.

A popular destination is the Double Pagodas Temple in the southeast of the city.

"Every late April when the peony flowers blossom, the Buddhist temple is a must-see place for me," said Bai Jie, a local resident.

He added he will visit the site several times in April to take photos of peony flowers.

Although China does not have an official national flower, peonies are a national favorite. The flower received the most votes in a survey conducted in 1994 asking people to select a national flower — a high honor for the peony in a country where people are especially fond of flowers.

The most renowned variety of peony at the Double Pagodas Temple is called the "purple cloud fairy", which is said to have a history of more than 300 years.

Purple cloud fairy peony flowers are mostly located in front of the main hall of the temple.

The temple has more than 30 other varieties of flowers.

The temple got its name for its two Buddhist pagodas, which were built in the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

The two pagodas have been landmarks of Taiyuan for more than 300 years.

The pagoda in the north is called the Sarira Pagoda as it houses the sarira of Sakyamuni. Sarira are the bone relics after the cremation of Buddha or saintly monks.

The other in the south is called



Blossoming peony flowers make the Double Pagodas Temple a popular attraction in Taiyuan. JI MEIJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

the Peak of Culture Pagoda, which was built under the sponsorship of Fu Lin, a local scholar and official during the early Qing Dynasty.

It is said the construction of the Peak of Culture Pagoda was aimed to lift Taiyuan's status as a cultural city and improve the "cultural fortune" of the sponsor's family.

Coincidentally, several decades after the construction, Fu's grandson Fu Shan became one of the country's top scholars, poets, calligraphers and painters of his time.

The story has made the temple a favorite among local intellectuals and residents who wish for good academic fortune for their children.

The temple's collection of more than 260 stone tablets with inscriptions of renowned calligraphic works from the past millennium is a must-see attraction for calligraphy enthusiasts.

Li Yali contributed to this story.