

# Tianyige Museum: Ningbo's Calling Card

By Gou Wen

There is a unique library located in downtown Ningbo—the Tianyige Library. Constructed in the 16th century, it has stood here ever since and thrived over the centuries. Today, Tianyige Library, part of Tianyige Museum, is Ningbo's "calling card", with an impressive collection of ancient books and historical architecture.

Nowadays, this historical museum is actively keeping up with the times, revitalizing the knowledge in its collection with advanced modern technology. Tianyige is and will always be part of Ningbo's past, present, and future.

## Tianyige's History

Tianyige was built by Fan Qin in 1566. Fan was a scholar-official of the Ming dynasty. He was fond of collecting books, and whenever he travelled to different parts of China, he would always make a point of acquiring local books. The name "Tianyi" comes from traditional Chinese philosophy and divination, which associates *tian* (the heavens) and *yi* (the numeral one) with the element water—an element that would supposedly protect the library and its books from fire. Today, Tianyige Museum is a national heritage protection site and national historical books conservation unit.

Tianyige was Fan Qin's private library. Now, it is the oldest existing library in Asia. The ancient books in Tianyige's collection represent a history of many centuries, a city's shared memory, and a way for people to "travel back in time".

When visitors step into Tianyige Museum, the first thing they see is a statue of Fan Qin. Collecting books was Fan's lifetime passion. He was mostly interested in acquiring local chronicles from different regions of China and imperial examination records. To store the great number of books that he obtained, he had Tianyige built as his private library. Fan employed scribes to make additional copies of rare books in his collection, which were then well-preserved and now highly valuable.

There is a traditional Chinese-style garden in front of Tianyige, built more than 300 years ago, adding a touch of tranquil beauty to the library's grounds. The landscaping rocks are reef rock, adorning the shore of a small pond that Fan Qin had designed to protect the library from fire. An underground channel connects the pond and Moon Lake, so



Tianyige Museum. [Photo by Zhou Jianping]

the pond is full of water all year round.

For four and a half centuries, there has never been a fire at Tianyige. Not only because of the pond, but also because of the Fan family's strict rules. For example, no fire and alcohol were allowed to enter Tianyige Library. The Library's doors were kept locked most of the time; the entire family had to be present for them to be unlocked. Although the rules may seem harsh, if it were not for them, the Library and its collections might not have survived to the present day.

## Reviving Ancient Tomes

In addition to keeping the vast collection safe, Tianyige Museum is trying different approaches to make the ancient books and the knowledge they contain more accessible and lasting.

"There are a lot of Chinese ancient books, and it is impossible for any one individual or any single organization to conduct research on their own. For this reason, we cooperate with other publishers to make available to the general public high-resolution digital versions and tangible copies of Tianyige's valuable books and documents. This way, more people would be able to make use of Tianyige's resources," said Rao Guoqing, Vice-Director of Tianyige Museum.

In addition to reproducing and

publishing collections of text from Tianyige's books in cooperation with universities and research institutions, Tianyige is also taking a citizen-oriented approach to become more accessible.

On Chinese Valentine's Day in 2020, Tianyige Museum held an evening reading salon. Citizens came together to read the Ming-dynasty classic play *Jinlian Ji*. The play itself was also performed at the event as a Kunqu opera. The performers sang their parts, dressed in traditional robes, while local Ningbo musicians gave the performance a modern twist by combining Chinese-style music and electronic music.

Through these methods of dissemination and adaptation, Tianyige's collection has been revitalized and entered the lives of ordinary Ningbo citizens.

## A Future of Increased Cultural Exchanges

"As the calling card of Ningbo, Tianyige Museum is striving to make itself even better known. We want to let more people discover Tianyige, a true treasure trove of ancient books and cultural artifacts," said Zheng Weiwei, Deputy CPC Secretary of Tianyige Museum.

By participating in Zhejiang Provincial Museum's online exhibition "Images of Ancient Chinese Women",

Tianyige Museum is making the art and calligraphy pieces from its collection more widely available to the public. An online exhibition allows visitors to "linger" over each piece longer, appreciating their beauty. Meanwhile, many calligraphy enthusiasts are flocking to Tianyige for the special exhibition "Xi'an Steles Forest—Calligraphy Masterpieces", which features valuable artifacts from halfway across the country. To enrich visitors' experience, Tianyige has also held calligraphy classes on the sidelines of the exhibition, in which seasoned calligraphy artists guide tours and teach visitors to imitate the works of masters.

According to Zheng, items from Tianyige's collection will also be loaned to and displayed in Xi'an in April, as part of a mutual exchange program linking the cultures of the two cities.

Zheng points out that Tianyige Museum has longstanding partnerships with many domestic and international museums. In 2017, Tianyige Museum's collection had its overseas debut, when select artifacts were exhibited in Korea. Tianyige also hosts the annual Chinese Language Competition for Foreigners in Ningbo, serving as a portal for the outside world to understand the city and China. Through these events and many others, this historical Museum is keeping up with the times.

## INFO&TIPS

## Ningbo's Seaweed Harvest Season Arrives

By Dong Na

March is the peak season for seaweed harvesting. As an ingredient, seaweed is used extensively in Ningbo food for its unique savory taste. Many of Ningbo's best-known traditional foods and snacks, such as batter-fried yellow croaker, braised pork cubes, and you-zanzi (fried dough twist), are flavored with powdered or shredded seaweed.

In recent days, the fishermen at Xiangshan Port have been busily harvesting seaweed. Stroll along the shoreline and you will see villagers laying seaweed out to dry everywhere. In early spring, the weather tends to be rainy, but as soon as the skies clear, locals would begin harvesting and drying seaweed. In the afternoon, when the tide recedes, you can see the tidal flat covered with fresh green seaweed, waiting to be harvested.

Adequate sunshine is a necessary condition for drying seaweed. The northwest wind helps the seaweed dry faster and achieve its distinctive crispy texture. Therefore, the locals pay close attention to the weather forecast before harvesting seaweed. Only after three consecutive days of fine weather would they start the harvesting preparations.

After harvest, the seaweed goes through a series of cleaning and processing. It is first washed by machine, then dried for 18 minutes in a large drying equipment. The seaweed comes out of the other end of the machine thoroughly rinsed. Workers will then carefully remove remaining particles and impurities by hand.

The villagers at Xiangshan Port have been harvesting seaweed for more than 200 years. The seaweed in Xiangshan Port belongs to the genus *Enteromorpha*, commonly known as sea lettuce or green nori. *Enteromorpha* is rich in carbohydrates, protein, crude fiber, minerals, fats and vitamins. It is very nutritious and sometimes called the "treasure chest of vitamins". However, several other aquatic plants closely resemble wild *Enteromorpha*, and silt often clings to the seaweed underwater. Thus, the quality of the harvest could be uneven.

In a regular year, the annual sales of fresh and dried seaweed in Xiangshan can reach over 30 million yuan.

Finally, let's talk about Ningbo's famous seaweed dish, batter-fried yellow croaker with shredded seaweed. Ningbo locals like to shred seaweed and mix it with batter; yellow croakers are then dipped into the batter before being deep-fried. This highly-popular dish is famous for its rich flavor, crispy skin, and tender texture.

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## HISTORY&CULTURE

# Qingming Festival's Tempting Flavors

By Jin Lu

Qingming is not only one of China's twenty-four solar terms, but also an occasion for the Chinese people to honor deceased family members. This year, Qingming Festival falls on April 4.

Qingtuan (青团) is a popular local treat on Qingming Festival. It is an adorably round and green rice bun, traditionally stuffed with sweet red bean paste and has a special flavor. It is also used as an offering to ancestors during Qingming ceremonies.

To make qingtuan, the Chinese mugwort herb is first mashed to extract its juice, which is kneaded with glutinous rice flour dough. Then red bean paste is wrapped in the dough, formed into spheres, and steamed.

Weng Yanyun, a villager of Baiyu village, Haishu district, told us that the best time to eat qingtuan is when it is cooled to room temperature after being steamed, which will bring out the flavor

of the rice balls. "If it's too hot, the fragrance of the herb juice will disappear, and if it's too cold, the glutinous rice layer will be too dry," she added.

Maci (麻糍) is another Qingming delicacy in Ningbo. Just like qingtuan, maci is a dessert made with glutinous rice flour and herb juice, but it is cut into slices. Maci is often eaten as a snack as families make their way to the tombs of ancestors. Ningbo locals believe that eating maci on Qingming Festival will bring good fortune.

To this day, many people still retain the custom of making maci at home during Qingming Festival. Among the ingredients for maci, the Chinese mugwort herb, which grows only in spring, is the most important.

The traditional method of making maci is to grind up the herbs with glutinous rice in a stone mortar. The mixture is spread out on a wooden board, covered with pine pollen, and then pressed to half an inch thick. The pastry



Citizens are making Qingming delicacies. [Photo by Xu Neng]

is cut into squares or diamonds, then fried or steamed.

In the past few days, the production and sales of maci in Dongqian Lake township has reached its annual peak. The green maci made here is favored by tourists for its unique taste. In the

Xiashui area of Dongqian Lake, 5 tons of maci are sold annually, mostly in the month before and after Qingming Festival. In 2020, several farmers of Dongqian Lake township managed to earn 350 thousand yuan each just from making and selling maci.

