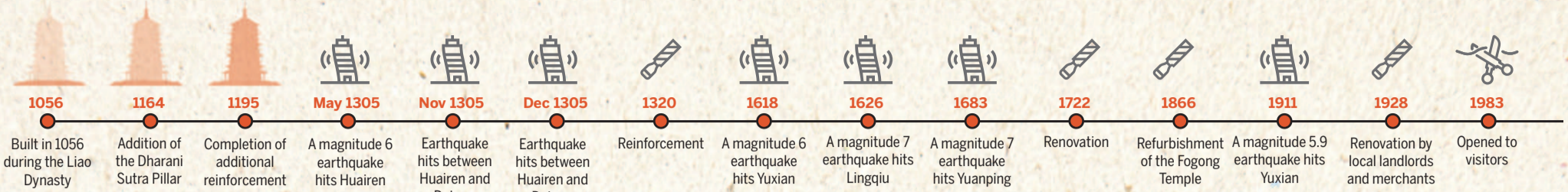


Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

TIMELINE

The Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, also known as the Sakyamuni Pagoda of Fogong Temple, was built in 1056 during the Liao Dynasty. It stands as the oldest and tallest surviving wooden pagoda in the world.



# WOODEN PAGODA STANDS TEST OF TIME

Nailess, 67-meter-tall tower bears witness to cultural resilience over centuries, as **Xu Xiaodan**, **Shan Juan** and **Zhu Xingxin** report from Yingxian, Shanxi

The architectural marvel that is the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda in the city of Shuozhou, Shanxi province, claims the title of the world's tallest and oldest wooden structure, standing shoulder to shoulder with global landmarks like Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Built in 1056 during the Liao Dynasty (916-1125), the pagoda, also known as the Sakyamuni Pagoda, is located in the grounds of the Fogong Temple in Yingxian county. It stands 67.31 meters tall with a base diameter of 30.27 meters, and weighs more than 7,400 metric tons. While it appears to have five stories and six eaves, it actually contains nine layers — five visible and four hidden.

On each story, there are two circles of wooden pillars to support the upper story: 24 at the outer circle and eight at the inner circle.

The most impressive aspect of the pagoda's construction is that no iron nail was used. All connections were completed through the Chinese mortise and tenon joint structure, which can bear large loads and allows for certain deformation. Some 54 types of *dougong* (interlocking wooden brackets) were used to connect various pillars and cross-beams. Over the past centuries, the pagoda has survived numerous earthquakes and even artillery attacks during conflicts in the 1920s.

The tower is a typical example of Buddhist architecture with ceremonial sites constructed along the vertical space, which shows the prosperity and creativity of Buddhist architecture in the Liao Dynasty. It bears witness to how the nomadic Khitan were deeply affected by Han farming culture after they passed the Great Wall southward and established the Liao Dynasty, and vigorously promoted cultural integration by developing Buddhism.

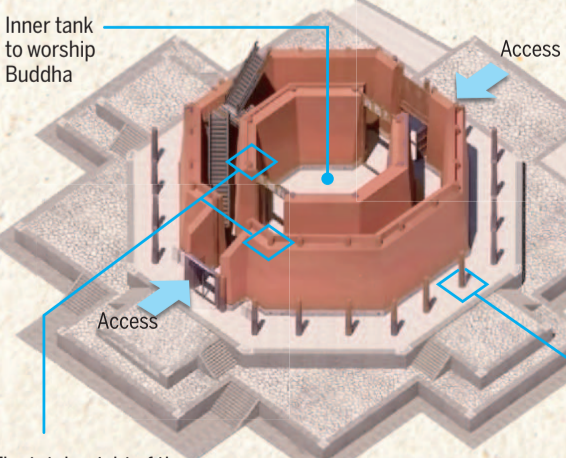
Objects originally within the pagoda include two tooth relics of Sakyamuni, the 11-meter-high Sakyamuni statue sitting under a delicate caisson ceiling on the first floor; statues of Buddha and Bodhisattva from the second to the fifth floors, and historical plaques inscribed by notable figures from different dynasties.

Migratory birds serve as natural guardians by feeding on wood-boring insects, whose twittering presence adds lively charm to the time-honored pagoda.

Contact the writers at [shanjuan@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:shanjuan@chinadaily.com.cn)

## OCTAGONAL SHAPE

Its octagonal shape holds significant symbolic and structural meanings. The eight sides represent the Eightfold Path in Buddhism, which is the path to enlightenment.



The total weight of the wooden tower, excluding the secondary column, is mainly borne by 32 columns on both sides of the outer and inner walls.

The first layer of the tower uses an extra circle of 24 visible pillars, attached to the outer circle

## HOW MANY FLOORS

Appearing to have five stories and six eaves, the wooden pagoda actually consists of nine stories, with painted statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (pusa in Chinese) on the five solid floors.

### L5 Mahavairochana Buddha

The supreme cosmic Buddha (an alternate form of Sakyamuni) is surrounded by eight Bodhisattvas.

### L4 Statue of Vairochana Buddha

The Buddha (another form of Sakyamuni) is surrounded by disciples Ananda and Kasyapa, as well as two Bodhisattvas. Inside the statue, Liao Dynasty scrolls and paintings are hidden, in addition to Buddhist relics.

### L3 Statue of Buddhas of the Four Directions

Some believe that the statues are also forms of Sakyamuni.

### L2 Statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School

The saints are Sakyamuni, Manjushi Bodhisattva (Wenshu pusa in Chinese) and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Puxian pusa). They are accompanied by two attendant Bodhisattvas.

### L1 Statue of Sakyamuni

Six murals decorate the surroundings, while six paintings of sponsors are painted on the door jambs of the northern and southern entrances.

L5 Five visible storeys

L9 Nine floors, including hidden layers

The top of the pagoda, known as a finial, is formed by iron and stone components that carry special Buddhist and cultural meanings.

Total height 67.31 m

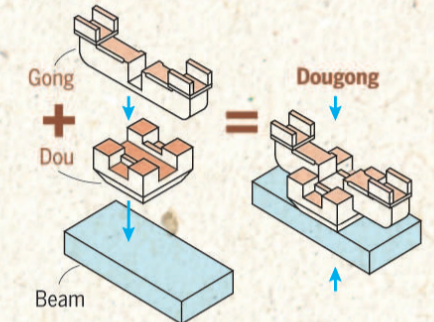
While it appears to have five stories and six eaves there are actually nine floors.



The Sakyamuni Pagoda is located in the ground of the Fogong Temple in Yingxian county, Shuozhou, Shanxi.

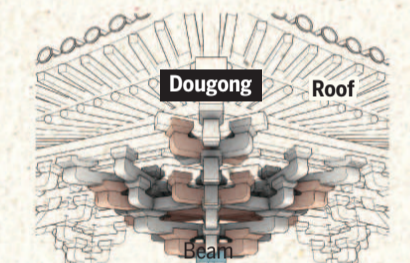
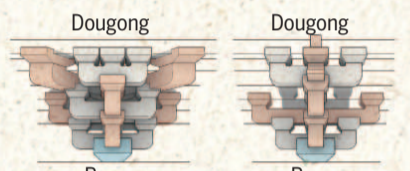
## NOT EVEN A SINGLE NAIL

The structure is built entirely of interlocking wooden beams without nails, showcasing ancient Chinese dougong (bracket-set) craftsmanship.

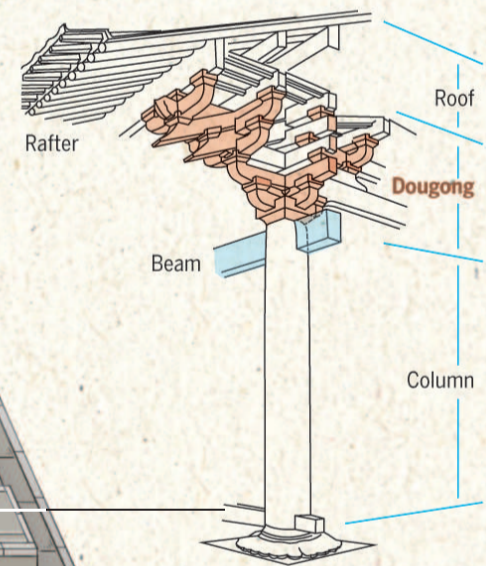


Dougong is a unique interlocking wooden bracket system used in traditional Chinese architecture. It serves both structural and decorative purposes, distributing the weight of the roof evenly while adding intricate beauty to the design.

The tower has 54 types of dougong. Here are just three of them located on the first floor of the building



This dougong holds up the roof on the first floor



After the deification of the Buddha, worshiping gradually became the most important and basic element of Buddhist activities.

## 50 MILLION TREES

The wooden pagoda is made with the equivalent of 500 km<sup>2</sup>



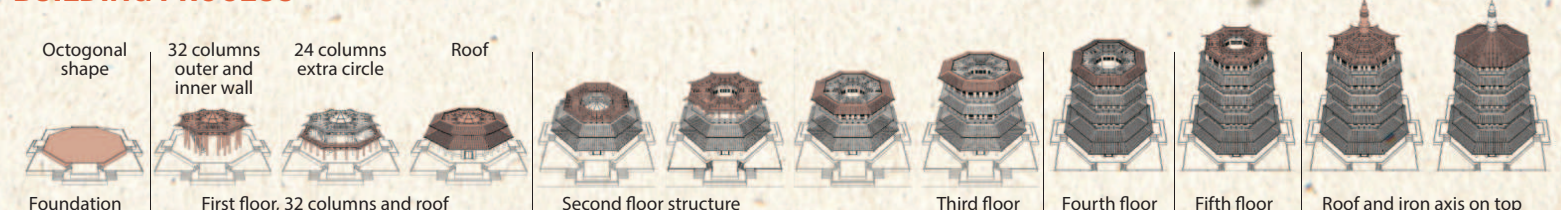
The 50 million trees used to build the pagoda are equivalent to filling the entire area of Beijing's Chaoyang district with trees, and a little more.

## HIGH HERITAGE

In November 2012, the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda was included in the preparatory list of China's World Heritage Sites. Alongside the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Eiffel Tower, it is considered one of the world's three great towers.



## BUILDING PROCESS



An iron axis stabilizes the finial, and also serves as a lightning rod.