

Mountain abode for philosophy

Prominent during the Song and Ming dynasties, Neo-Confucianism has elements that echo modern China's core values

By WANG KAIHAO

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There is an old saying in China: "No matter how high the mountain is, its name will spread far and wide if there is a fairy." Xiqiao Mountain, on the outskirts of Foshan, a city in southern Guangdong province, is perhaps one such example.

Rated as a national AAAAA-level tourist site, the highest ranking, and honored as one of the "four famous mountains of Guangdong", Xiqiao Mountain, an extinct volcano, stands out not just for its natural beauty but also for the special place it holds in Chinese philosophy.

In late November, more than 40 scholars from universities and research institutions from both sides of the Taiwan Straits gathered at a forum at the foot of Xiqiao Mountain to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the site becoming a hub for the study of Neo-Confucianism.

After Zhan Ruoshui, an iconic figure in Neo-Confucianism during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), established the first private academy in Xiqiao in 1517, many more scholars gathered there over the following decades, and another three major academies were set up in the area.

Neo-Confucianism, commonly known in China as *lixue*, was prominent during the Song (960-1279) and Ming dynasties. It is a more secular and practical variety of Confucianism than previous schools, which often borrowed ideas from Taoism and Buddhism.

"Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming eras was closely connected with academies," said Wen Chunlai, a history professor at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong. "When many academies were established on Xiqiao Mountain, it naturally became an important location for the spread of the philosophy."

Wen is the executive director of the research institute of Lingnan culture at the university, which launched the forum. Lingnan (which means "south of the mountains") is a cultural term used mainly to describe geographic regions of today's Guangdong and Hainan provinces and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

"When we revive the best of traditional culture, we can find many elements in *lixue* that echo the core values of modern China," Wen said.

"We want to take this opportunity to tell people: Philosophy is not exclusive to academia, but it also has something for people at the grassroots."

According to Ren Jianmin, an associate researcher at Wen's institute, *lixue* was only popular among



The ruins of Sifeng Academy, one of the four earliest private academies on Xiqiao Mountain during the Ming Dynasty.

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Clockwise from top left: Scholars gather at Xiqiao to celebrate its 500-year history as a hub for Neo-Confucianism studies; Sanhu Academy, where late Qing Dynasty reformer Kang Youwei studied, was rebuilt in recent years; A sketch of a Ming academy on Xiqiao Mountain.

scholars before the mid-Ming Dynasty, but pioneers like Zhan unlocked its gates to the general public.

"For example, academies in Xiqiao began to accept a wider range of people if they were interested," Ren said. "The lectures here once attracted people like street vendors and woodcutters. Zhan told people everyone can be a sage."

Ren attributed the change to the fast-growing economy of Guangdong at that time, which made scholars

step out of their studies and make contact with a broader section of society.

Even today, there are villages near Xiqiao Mountain with centuries of history. They still have well-preserved ancestral temples, reflecting the ethics and social orders greatly influenced by Neo-Confucianism.

Private academies on Xiqiao Mountain faded away beginning in the early 17th century, but the spirit of their teachings has lived on.

"People here were nurtured to be inclusive and open-minded toward different ideologies," Ren said. "And they were also taught to be patriotic."

Kang Youwei, a native of Xiqiao, is an example of a famous political reformer from the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). In 1898, he played a crucial role as a member of a think tank for Emperor Guangxu's short-lived reforms during a period of deep social crisis in China.

"He trained at the academy and

studied traditional Chinese philosophies before later absorbing Western thinking in Hong Kong," Ren said.

Since Sun Yat-sen University established the research institute on Xiqiao Mountain in 2011, the glory of the past appears to have returned. The academy where Kang once studied has been rebuilt, and the architectural remnants of an academy from the Ming Dynasty have been listed as items of key cultural heritage.

Ren introduces weekly lectures promoting traditional culture at the academy to tourists visiting Xiqiao Mountain and local elementary and high school students. His institute plans to publish more easy-to-read textbooks on *lixue*, in a bid to revive the tradition.

"It's just like the time of Zhan," Ren said. "It's a good thing for kids to become exposed to traditional Chinese culture in the early stages of their education."

Huang Yi-long, a history professor from Taiwan Tsinghua University, said: "No matter where you walk on the streets of Beijing, Guangzhou, Taipei, Tokyo or Seoul, you will find that the interests of young people today are fundamentally similar."

"However, when the notion of traditional culture is revived among them, differences do become apparent."

Huang praises the boom on the Chinese mainland for the revival of interest in the philosophy.

"Academic institutions, colleges and governments need to better cooperate and offer guidance to the public," he said. "There have been some good attempts at this at Xiqiao."