

YOUTH

A blossoming idea

Flower cultivation helps transform community in Guizhou province as the scent of success takes root, **Wang Ru** in Beijing and **Yang Jun** in Guiyang report.

When Leung On-lee alighted from the aircraft and took a car to visit Jiucaiping, a scenic spot in Hezhang county, Guizhou province, in 2017 her life was about to change. An idea began to take root and, blossom, literally. She was at the invitation of a friend. The young woman who grew up in Hong Kong was soon attracted by the natural beauty that welcomed her.

"When the car was driving on a corkscrew mountain road, I saw wild leek flowers spread all over the mountain, and herders graze animals peacefully. I felt like I was having a vacation in a fairy tale," says Leung.

The impression laid a basis for her later business in Hezhang. In the same year, Leung and her mother Chan Kit, a Hong Kong businesswoman, met Yang Weiqiang, an official who manages poverty alleviation in Guangdong province. He introduced his work and invited Leung and her mother to see if there were any business opportunities they could develop in Hezhang. Panyu district in Guangzhou city provides partner assistance to the county in Guizhou.

Thus, the 29-year-old embarked on a journey to help alleviate poverty in Hezhang.

"Yang told me poverty alleviation is really tough. He invited many entrepreneurs to start businesses in poverty-stricken areas, but in the end few of them lasted. I thought it sounded meaningful; though we were not sure what we could do, we would like to have a try," she says.

Located in the Wumeng Mountain at an average altitude of nearly 2,000 meters, Hezhang is among the 52 counties that still retain the poverty label "because of its harsh natural conditions like fragmented and barren land, lack of water and lagging infrastructure development", according to Wen Yongsong, director of Hezhang's poverty alleviation and development office.

Then the wild flowers she saw in the county came into her mind. Leung organized a group of experts on flowers to investigate a dozen villages and towns in Hezhang, and was told that the high altitude, climate and temperature difference between day and night were all conducive to growing flowers.

In 2018, Leung and her mother officially signed an investment agreement with the local government to develop horticulture, and to combine it with the local tourism and health industries in a bid to boost incomes in the county.

But Leung's good intentions were overwhelmed by doubts from local people. They could not understand how growing flowers could help them battle poverty. After all, flowers had been growing there for generations.

"Different from growing corn and potatoes, which can be eaten, sold or fed to livestock, many people like me doubted what we could do with the flowers," recalls Zhou Qiao, 28, a local woman who later joined Leung's business.

Difficulties soon became apparent. Leung suffered from altitude sickness and often had severe headaches. She brought a group of eight people to Hezhang, most of whom were from Guangdong. It took time for them to become accustomed to the hardships, such as lack of water or heating.

Leung wanted to contribute to the poverty-alleviation mission in a way that empowered locals with the means to prosper and help them sell what they had planted. It was also important to ensure the flowers grew on their land. For this reason, she gave up planting chrysanthemums, which had been proved to grow well in Hezhang.

"At first we experimented, planting more than 40 kinds of chrysanthemums, 90 percent of which successfully grew in the county. But we discovered such flowers needed complicated cultivation in greenhouses, so they were hard to grow on the farmers' own land."

A change that matters

Considering that Hezhang is perceived in the mountains with few areas of flat ground for growing



Leung On-lee (second from right) instructs local farmers in Hezhang county, Guizhou province, in cultivating flowers at her base in Tiejiang town. She has hired 30 local workers and occasionally hires 100 on a temporary basis. PHOTOS BY XIONG WANSHAN FOR CHINA DAILY



Leung (third from right) is with one of her employees, Zhou Qiao (right), 28, and her family, in front of their house in Hezhang county, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“Our country has made the cause a national effort, using all the possible resources to help poor people. ... It would be really hard to believe China could do so much, and to such an extent, if I hadn't personally participated in it.”

Leung On-lee, 29, a Hong Kong entrepreneur



flowers, they gave up mass cultivation. They decided, instead, to grow flowers that have high added value and can be made into products, such as aromatics.

As a result, her team introduced lavender and *Hydrangea macrophylla* which can be transformed into scented oil and preserved fresh flowers that can last for years.

Now, Hezhang's flowers are being ordered by cosmetics companies.

"I also hope our flower cultivation can be part of local tourist resources," says Leung. Visitors can only see flowers in season, so she is planting more varieties.

Zhou was one of the first local people Leung met in Hezhang. When they met for the first time, Leung found that the woman, a year younger than herself, was a mother of three, and "her family of seven people lived in a very small house without any decent furniture".

"Zhou told me she wanted to buy some new clothes for her children, since they always wore hand-me-downs from others. Although her children never asked for new clothes, she still felt guilty," Leung recalls.

Zhou joined Leung's business soon after it was established, though she had her doubts. But she worked very hard, and with her good Mandarin, she became a bridge between Leung's team and the local people.

Six months after she joined Leung, her family was lifted out of poverty. After more than two years, she is currently a member of the managerial staff, and other members of her family have also joined the venture.

This year, Zhou's family built a new two-story house. She says: "I could only earn about 1,000 yuan (\$146) per month in my previous jobs, but now I can earn 4,000 yuan. My husband and my parents-in-law also work here, with my family earning about 10,000 yuan per month now."

She is satisfied with her current life, Zhou says. "I get a stable income and don't need to migrate to other places for work. It is exactly the life I always wanted to live."

Zhou respects Leung very much. "Leung is from Hong Kong, a big city, but came to our poverty-stricken village and endured all the difficulties," Zhou says.

"She treats us like friends and always chats with us. I feel confident and hopeful working with her, and she motivates us."

Zhou is among the 30-odd local people whose life has been changed for the better with Leung's help, as her employees. And in planting seasons, Leung says, another 100 people are hired to work temporarily at Leung's flower base in Tiejiang town.

Moreover, Leung rents local people's land for the base. Some poverty-alleviation funds from Guangzhou

were also used in building the infrastructure for it. At the end of 2019, Leung shared a profit of over 900,000 yuan, benefiting more than 3,000 poor local people.

According to Wen, over the past five years, 184,000 people have been lifted out of poverty in Hezhang, and Leung has played a role in that.

Growing with the country

Born into a merchants' family in 1991 and growing up in Hong Kong, Leung was told from childhood that she would engage in business like her parents. She went to the United States at 15 and pursued her bachelor's degree in business administration at Boston University.

In 2013, the Boston Marathon bombing happened when she was at school, which made her feel insecure, so she chose not to stay in the US after graduation.

Her family also has business in the Chinese mainland. "I have been going to Guangdong for my vacations since I was young, and got more chances than my peers to see the Chinese mainland and its speedy development," explains Leung. "I realized the true side of it is quite different from what it is described by some Western media."

She feels "heartbroken" to see the chaos and violence in Hong Kong that happened last year. "Many Hong Kong young people say they cannot see their future, but I believe the future must be created with effort, instead of by smashing communal facilities."

Her understanding of poverty alleviation in China has also changed. "I used to understand poverty alleviation in a shallow way, like solely donating money and goods to poor people, but now I realize it covers much more than that."

"Our country has made the cause a national effort, using all the possible resources to help poor people solve problems in various aspects, like housing, education, medical services and finding jobs. It would be really hard to believe China could do so much, and to such an extent, if I hadn't personally participated in it."

Leung was excited to see a formation representing China's poverty alleviation efforts during the military parade to celebrate China's 70th anniversary in Beijing last year. "In the past, I was only related to the formation representing people from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, but this time I felt connected with one more formation," says Leung.

"It made me feel like I was increasingly engaged with the development of our country, and I'm very proud to develop with it."

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Foreign students leaving Australia

SYDNEY — Just a few months after arriving in Sydney for a planned two-year stay, university students Maggie Zhang and boyfriend Sunny Gu sat down to make a "pros and cons" list about life in Australia. The list was quickly unbalanced. On the positive side, staying to complete their master's program in commerce at the University of Sydney would keep the couple, who had met in Australia, together.

Weighing down the other side of the equation was a host of negatives, almost all spurred by the coronavirus pandemic. Their classes had moved online, making study harder and less interactive, many friends had already returned home and the relatively high cost of living in Sydney was biting.

"We really wanted to stay so it was a difficult decision to make," Zhang says as she packed for China late last month.

The pair are part of an exodus from Australia of international students, the bulk of whom are from China, that is worrying officials in a country which boasts education as its fourth biggest export.

With Australia already sliding into its worst recession in almost a century, education leaders expect the disappearance of international students to cost billions of dollars. Data on how many international students have left the country this year is not yet available, but anecdotal evidence on departures and data on new enrollments paints a worrying picture.

New enrollments of international students, who generally make up about 20 percent of all university students in Australia, grew by an average of 10 percent over the past two years. But growth in the first half of the year was negligible as Australia closed its borders in March to all foreigners because of the pandemic. New enrollments from China fell 8 percent in the past six months, compared with a gain of 4 percent across 2019, according to government data.

Further darkening the prospects for Australian universities, students going overseas were warned by the Chinese government to think carefully before choosing Australia, whose Prime Minister Scott Morrison in April told foreign students to go back to their home countries if they were unable to make ends meet during the pandemic, adding they weren't entitled to any welfare payments.

Zhang and Gu says that a key factor in their decision centered on isolation and its impact on their social life as well as studies. "It's a little bit frustrating (to) not participate in real-life classes," Zhang says. "You can't really talk with the professor or meet new friends. Of course, the tutorials are all online. It doesn't have a feeling of participation. It's not like school."

Shiyu Bao, who graduated from the University of Sydney in July with a degree in public relations, is looking for permanent work before her student visa expires this month.

"It's a race against time," says Bao at a cafe, who has a part-time job in a student organization. "A majority of my friends have gone back home but I really want to stay here. I have polished my resume and have applied for a few jobs but I've had no success so far."

Zhang and Gu plan to return to Australia next year for their final semester if face-to-face classes resume.

"Online classes have lost the real meaning of studying abroad," Gu says via WeChat from Guangzhou, Guangdong province, where he is in two-week quarantine with Zhang before she returns to her hometown of Wuhan, Hubei province. "I hope everything will be normal in 2021. My family and I are looking forward to coming back for my graduation ceremony."