

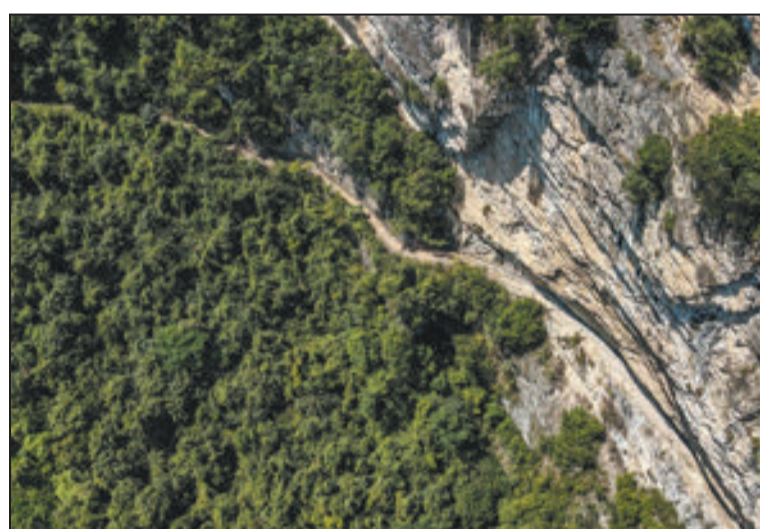
CHINA

A mountain miracle cut in stone

Canal dug by villagers brings wealth and water to hillside homes



A villager patrols the Gaoliu canal in Shengji town, Bijie, Guizhou province, in September. PHOTOS BY CHEN XI / FOR CHINA DAILY



From top: Gaoliu villagers clear the canal during a regular patrol in September. Cut out of the rock, the Gaoliu canal has been considered an engineering wonder.

By YANG JUN in Guiyang and LI HONGYANG

More than 60 years ago, villagers in Gaoliu, Guizhou province, used to peer down from their hillside homes and recite a sarcastic ditty about how they were hungry and thirsty but couldn't reach the large river below.

It took them five hours on foot to travel from their village in Shengji town, Bijie, to fetch water from the Chishui River, the sheer karst cliff making the journey perilous.

But 56 years ago, the villagers completed an engineering marvel, cutting a canal out of the raw rock that has helped bring mountain water and prosperity to their home.

Today, the canal helps irrigate about 166 hectares of farmland and provides drinking water for 3,200 villagers. Xu Wujun, 39, uses water from the canal, which his father helped build, to grow oranges and plums. Annual profits of 30,000 yuan (\$4,580) from fruit sales support his teenage son and daughter.

"Due to proper maintenance, the canal has performed its function well since its completion decades ago, so villagers here still use it for irrigation," he said.

Xu said villagers had learned how to plant oranges from growers in Sichuan province in the 1970s, nearly a decade after the canal's completion.

High on a hill

Before the canal was built, the scarcity of drinking water forced vil-

lagers to collect rainwater in wash basins or scoop it from muddy ponds, which often caused diarrhea.

In 1958, desperate for potable water, villagers made up their minds to find a reliable source of clean water.

About 40 villagers volunteered to do the work and spent six years building a 6-kilometer canal, according to the local government. About 1.8 km of the canal snakes along a karst cliff up to a mountain water source.

The job was dangerous. In some difficult-to-access sections, workers dangled from ropes and used hammers and drills to dig the canal along the cliff, centimeter by centimeter. They also dug holes to detonate explosives for a tunnel that the canal passes through.

Three people died during the construction work, hit by rocks or falling off the cliff.

Xu Guangfu, 82, who took part in the canal building with Xu Wujun's father, said they slept in caves on thatch mats for long periods so they could stay on-site and reduce construction time.

"We never thought of leaving the place because our ancestors have lived here for generations. We believed we could make it," he said.

Bearing fruit

In 2015, Xu Wujun returned to Gaoliu from Chaozhou, Guangdong province, where he worked in a hardware factory for nine years, to start a fruit plantation.

He said he quit his factory job because he couldn't advance his position as he only studied until middle school.

"Fruit production in my village has increased in recent years as farmers have become increasingly skillful at planting. I saw an opportunity in farming and chose to return home," Xu said. "Now I can earn a living and take care of my parents in my hometown. The canal offers both drinking water and a path to wealth for us villagers. My father's generation really did a great job."

He said he was moved to tears every time his 83-year-old father told him stories about how they built the canal.

"During the years of construction, he worked on the mountain day and night. I would barely see him, even during Spring Festival," Xu said.

Not only Gaoliu residents but all the villagers in Shengji had to overcome the challenges of the mountainous terrain to find water.

According to the Bijie water resources bureau, since the 1950s, people in Shengji have dug 10 canals, including the Gaoliu one, with a total distance of about 100 km.

The local government said it plans to plant 1,067 hectares of plums and 667 hectares of oranges to boost revenue for the villagers.

Wang Jin contributed to this story.

Contact the writers at lihongyang@chinadaily.com.cn

Relocation gives rural women a new lease on life

YINCHUAN — Hai Yan, a 27-year-old rural woman who dropped out of primary school in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, is today riding the wave of the booming e-commerce industry.

"My daily routine used to be taking care of my two kids, working in the fields and attending to the livestock," said Hai, who once lived in Xihaigu, which was until recent years one of the country's most impoverished areas.

Thanks to a government-sponsored relocation project, she has moved to a new urban area, Minning, near the regional capital Yinchuan. The move eight years ago has not only improved Hai's financial situation, but also given her a fresh zest for life.



They (women) not only contribute their efforts to fighting poverty within their families and the region, but also set a good example for the younger generation ..."

Xu Meijia, manager of an agricultural product workshop in Minning, Ningxia Hui autonomous region

She has a job at a workshop that processes local agricultural products such as goji berries. But Hai also does online sales work that involves conducting livestreaming sessions every afternoon.

"I help sell agricultural products online for two hours every day," said Hai, as she put on her makeup in preparation for a livestreaming session.

It is the first job that Hai has ever had, which gives her satisfaction and makes her proud. Her husband works away most of the year, earning more money than he would at home.

Hai said that she is now used to the bustling urban lifestyle in her new hometown, as are the 50 or so women in the workshop, most of whom lived on farms before moving to the town.

Xu Meijia, who is in charge of the workshop, said "women used to be undervalued in their families, but their lives have changed dramatically since getting jobs and incomes."

Female employees are quick to enroll their children in classes, despite fees that can account for over one-third of their income, Xu said. "They believe that they are uneducated, but the next generation should not be."

Xu said over 90 percent of her workers are mothers with only primary-school educations. In the beginning, few were able to use a computer, but their hard work and persistence soon paid off.

Hai earns about 2,500 yuan (\$382) per month, and her salary goes up if she volunteers to work extra hours when the orders pour in during busy periods.

"They not only contribute their efforts to fighting poverty within their families and the region, but also set a good example for the younger generation who will be the future of our township," Xu said.

On Nov 16, Xiji, the last poor county in Xihaigu, was removed from the list of poverty-stricken counties. It marked the end of poverty in all nine poor counties in the region amid the country's efforts to eradicate absolute poverty by the end of the year.

XINHUA

Village masters the art of poverty relief

ZHENGZHOU — Zhang Xingli, a 60-year-old villager, sat on a stone in front of his house and struck a pose as painters quickly sketched him and his traditional house.

At his age, Zhang never thought he could earn money working as a model in Sanhe, a poverty-stricken mountain village in Songxian county, Henan province.

The village welcomes tourists who come to draw landscapes and recreate the beauty of its traditional houses. Villagers were recently preparing for the upcoming travel season and building an exhibition hall, a symbol of Sanhe's rapid development.

Tucked away in the depths of Funiu Mountain, the village was once mired in poverty and the surrounding rolling hills and deep gorges made it difficult to access. Most of the land was not fertile and there was no mineral wealth under the ground. In 2014, one-third of the 415 village households lived in poverty.

"Living near bare mountainsides, villagers were scared of drought and flood. After a heavy rain, all the crops would be

destroyed," said Wu Songsheng, Party secretary of the village.

In 2016, changes began when Feng Yake returned to the village from Zhengzhou, the provincial capital. A college-trained artist, the 33-year-old had run an art school in Zhengzhou for years.

During that period, Feng had taken his students to many locations to draw landscapes, which made him realize the value of the rustic village.

"Mountains, groves by the river, cottages — this type of scenery was exactly what schools and art studios needed for their students," Feng said.

In 2015, he raised 1.5 million yuan (\$229,250) and went back to his hometown.

Feng convinced his parents to demolish their house and build the first agritainment resort in the village to accommodate students who want to paint and draw landscapes.

Six months after the resort opened in 2016, Feng and his family had earned 200,000 yuan. The village received a total of 2,000 tourists the same year.

Feng's success inspired other villagers. At the end of 2016, Wu organized 11 meetings in two months to

encourage villagers to build and run homestays.

In a short time, the village was redesigned and rebuilt. Old houses and a bean curd workshop were repaired. The walls were painted white, to contrast with the gray roof tiles, and a pavilion was built. The village signed contracts with more than 70 art studios to receive artists and students.

In 2018, the village was lifted out of poverty. Over the past two years, 25 agritainment resorts have been built in the village, receiving more than 30,000 tourists and generating an annual income of over 4 million yuan.

The influx of tourists has brought more job opportunities to Sanhe villagers, and many young people have returned to start businesses.

Gao Biao, 31, organizes field training and summer camps in the city. In the summer of last year, Gao's camps hosted more than 10,000 people. "Catching fish in the river or playing with mud, these activities have become children's favorite in the summer camps," Gao said.

XINHUA



From top: Many houses in Sanhe village, Songxian county, Henan province, have been transformed into homestays for tourists. Feng Yake instructs two of his students to draw landscapes in Sanhe.

PHOTOS BY LI AN / XINHUA