

CHINA



Li Zhenxia (right) works with her daughter at her oil paper umbrella store in Datong ancient town in Chishui city, Guizhou province. PHOTOS BY WANG CHANGYU FOR CHINA DAILY

Artisan's passion on oil paper umbrella pays off

Li Zhenxia's lifelong love is earning her a living in Guizhou province

By CHEN MEILING in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

In the late 1960s, when Li Zhenxia was 5, she dreamed of buying the beautiful, red oilpaper umbrella in a store next to her grandmother's house. It was too expensive for her family to afford one at the time.

When she was 10, she watched a young Miao bridegroom pass by her village house on his way to pick up his bride. He and his companions were carrying six red oilpaper umbrellas, and the image touched her heart. When she was in high school, her physics teacher would arrive with an oilpaper umbrella every time it rained. She and the teacher became good friends.

In 1996, Li's dream of oilpaper umbrellas came true when she started learning how to make them for herself. Two years later, she produced her first one. Of course, it was red.

Today, Li is an entrepreneur and an intangible cultural heritage inheritor, and she enjoys talking to her customers and passing on her techniques to apprentices.

"The oilpaper umbrella is like my lover; it has been with me my whole life and always makes me feel better," the 58-year-old said.

The traditional Chinese handicraft, which is made of bamboo and paper coated in the oil of the tung nut for waterproofing, has been around for at least 1,000 years and was eventually adopted in other parts of Asia. Both ceremonial and practical, it was used on rainy days, as well as during weddings and religious ceremonies. Usually exquisitely patterned and now more decorative than functional, it is often found for sale at tourist sites or in hotels as decorations.

Li's store in Datong ancient town in Chishui city, Guizhou province — a



From top: Li works on an oil paper umbrella at her store. Two customers shop at Li's store in Datong.

town where there is a lot of rain — welcomes curious, nostalgic tourists who buy her umbrellas to model in photos, decorate their homes or add to collections, and sometimes even to use for catwalks at shows and performances.

"It's more a piece of art that adds elegance and grace than a means of protection from the rain," she said.

Production involves over a hundred individual steps, from cutting the bamboo and threading the pieces together, to pasting on the paper shade, drying it in the sun and brushing it with oil. The whole process takes between 15 days and several months, depending on the umbrella's design, and this complexity means that it's still made by hand.

Individual prices range from about 100 to 700 yuan (\$15 to \$108) and at its peak between 2017 and 2019, the store was selling about 20,000

umbrellas a year. Sales declined sharply during the pandemic, however, and Li still does not have an e-commerce outlet.

But she is no stranger to difficulties. Li's husband made his living as a root carver, and she was once forced to give up her business and go to Beijing as a migrant worker because they were not making enough to feed elderly family members and their three children.

"At the time, few people bought oilpaper umbrellas because cheaper umbrellas had caught on," she said. "None of my family supported my wish to continue."

In 2009, she won third prize at a provincial contest for craftsmen, which boosted her confidence. Afterward, she worked for two years with a TV opera crew sewing sheets and duvet covers, which brought her between 100 to 200 yuan a day. In 2012, she borrowed money and took out loans to open her store. At the time, her husband had just been diagnosed with heart disease.

"I told him not to worry and that I could make money from my hobby," she said. In 2016, he passed away. Out of love and to assuage her grief, Li poured all her energy into the umbrella business.

She had never forgotten that red umbrella in her grandmother's neighborhood store, an object so beautiful, that the 5-year-old girl couldn't take her eyes off it.

"It cost 2 yuan. My parents earned 0.5 yuan a day. It was impossible to buy that kind of luxury," she said. "So it became my lifelong obsession."

Now Li has two more stores, one in Danzhai in Guizhou and another in Sichuan province. Of her three children, only her eldest son, who is 36, helps with the business, running the store in Danzhai. Her daughter is

married in Beijing, while her youngest son is a Grade-3 high school student. Li hopes he will major in art and help her design umbrellas in the future.

Over the years, she has had several apprentices but most are no longer in the business. "When a craftsman has to worry about food and clothing, they cannot work wholeheartedly. I like to teach, but few want to learn," she said.

One of her students, a teenage girl from a single parent family of five children, dropped out of school, because they were too poor for her to continue. Li offered her accommodations and training. The girl was a good learner, but after a year, her mother passed away, and as the first-born, she was forced to find other work to support the family.

Li recruits locals, mostly unemployed women from nearby villages. She takes her umbrellas to exhibitions, and maintains contact with other intangible cultural heritage inheritors. But most of time, she prefers to sit drinking tea, making umbrellas and talking to fellow umbrella lovers from all over.

One of her regulars, a 38-year-old woman surnamed Cai, has bought eight oilpaper umbrellas from Li since 2016. She uses them on rainy and sunny days, matching them with her outfits. "It is a classic item with great cultural meaning. I don't use ordinary umbrellas anymore," Cai said. "I like Li's hand-painted umbrellas. They're pretty, good quality and nicely priced. She offers free maintenance, too."

Wang Jin in Guiyang contributed to this story.

Contact the writers at chenmeiling@chinadaily.com.cn

Teacher fulfills sports dreams by officiating

By DENG RUI and TAN YINGZI in Chongqing

"Normally, you know, a triathlon won't be canceled unless it rains knives. It is one of the best competitions ever!" joked Pan Xingyu, a college physics teacher who fulfilled his long-cherished dream of becoming an international referee after 12 years of persistence.

Thirty-year-old Pan, whose professional officiating has won him respect, was one of the youngest triathlon technical officials at the 14 National Games — a top-level national multisport event — held in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, in September.

Pan, a physics teacher at Chongqing Chemical Industry Vocational College, was also one of about 50 people in the country — most of whom are sports majors — to have obtained the WT Level-1 technical official certification issued by the World Triathlon.

He was born in Chongqing's Changshou district in 1990. As a child, he dreamed of becoming a professional basketball player until in his late teens, when he realized his 172-centimeter-height might derail his hopes.

He developed a new dream when he was 18. As he watched the Beijing Olympics on TV, he thought, "Why not be a basketball referee instead?"

Soon after Pan entered the Sichuan University of Science and Engineering in Zigong, Sichuan province in 2009, he applied for an audit course in basketball refereeing. He insisted on traveling between his college's campus to the university's other campus for two years for extra study.

To catch up with his own major, machine design, he burned the midnight oil. Even so, he got up at 7 am everyday to practice officiating gestures and do physical training.

His hard work paid off. Three years later in 2012, Pan got his certification as a National Level 1 Basketball Referee.

In 2015, he was introduced to triathlons and became addicted to the sport. He had a bigger dream — to be a triathlon referee.

Pan absorbed himself in gaining professional knowledge, learning English and undergoing physical training for nearly three years, working even harder than

he did in college. He went on to earn triathlon referee certifications from the city level to the national level.

In May 2018, Pan was certified as a WT Level-1 technical official, which allows him to officiate at international triathlons.

"You should know the contest inside out, from the rules, the officiating principles and the venues to the athletes," he said. "The most complex part is the venue setting."

Unlike soccer, basketball or volleyball, which have standardized sites, each triathlon is held at a unique venue.

The sport, which is integrated with nature, may take place in aquatic areas like rivers and lakes or on streets and sidewalks. It takes the joint efforts of the technical delegate, head referee and the field of play and equipment groups to establish a successful triathlon course.

"Flexibility is also a must," Pan said. For example, if there's a tide or undercurrent in the water, or traffic management and control puts too much pressure on the city during the event, adjustments should be made promptly.

Pan said it takes a lot of energy and strength to participate while being exposed to multiple weather conditions. Sometimes, referees have to officiate from 3 am to 7 pm during a long-distance triathlon. Still, he finds the exhausting events, all held in breathtaking scenic spots, worthwhile.

Over the years, Pan has served as a triathlon technical official at the 2nd National Youth Games, the 7th Military World Games, ITU Triathlon World Cups, ITU Triathlon Asian Cups and the China Triathlon Sport Association's National Triathlon Championships. He has also refereed many city-level basketball games in Chongqing.

"I thank the CTSA and inclusive sportsmanship for allowing a non-sports-major technical official like me to officiate," Pan said. "I wouldn't have made it without support from my former teachers, my current workplace or my family, either."

"I'll reach a higher stage one day, to give full play to my strength at serving sports events."

Contact the writers at dengrui@chinadaily.com.cn



Pan Xingyu serves as a triathlon technical official at an event. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

GEP accounting to help promote environmental awareness

By MA ZHIPING in Haikou mazhiping@chinadaily.com.cn

Chinese scientists have placed an annual gross ecosystem price tag of about 205 billion yuan (\$31.7 billion) on products and services at the Hainan Tropical Rainforest National Park, China's largest contiguous tropical rainforest.

The move aims to help people better understand the tremendous wealth inherent in a sound environment and to promote coordinated efforts to boost environmental protection and socioeconomic growth.

Official research results released at a news conference held by the Hainan provincial government on Sept 26 showed that the GEP of the rainforest park hit 204.5 billion yuan in 2019, or 46 million yuan per square kilometer based on GEP value per unit.

More specifically, the value of ecosystem regulation services (including water conservation, biodiversity, flood regulation and storage and air purification) was 167 billion yuan, accounting for about 83 percent of the park's total GEP, while the value of material products (including forestry, agricultural and animal husbandry products) was 4.85 billion yuan, or 2.37 percent, according to Yang Zhongyang, president of the Hainan Academy of Forestry Sciences.

The institute jointly conducted the country's first-ever GEP accounting for a national park in conjunction with the Chinese Academy of Forestry Sciences.

In addition, the value of ecosystem cultural services (including tourism, landscape value and other indicators) was 30.77 billion yuan,

accounting for 15 percent of the park's GEP, Yang said.

GEP refers to the total value of the direct and indirect use of ecosystem goods and services, including the values of provision, regulation services and ecological culture services. It summarizes the value of nature's contributions to sustainable socioeconomic development.

The rainforest park was one of the country's five first formally designated national parks announced at the Leaders' Summit of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, or COP 15, which was held in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, on Oct 12.

Located in the mountainous area of central Hainan island, it covers about 4,269 square kilometers, or one-seventh of the province's land

area, and is known as one of the world's key germ plasm resource banks. The green massif boasts five national nature reserves and four provincial reserves that are home to 3,653 species of wild vascular plants and 540 species of vertebrates.

The park is the only habitat of the Hainan gibbon, which is a critically endangered species that numbers just 35.

As a new measure that is being carried out on a pilot basis in six provinces across China — Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Guizhou, Qinghai, Fujian and Hainan — GEP accounting will help establish a market-based, sustainable value realization mechanism for eco-products, in which the Chinese government takes the lead, while people and enterprises participate, said Wang Jinnan, head of the Chi-

nese Academy of Environmental Planning.

Li Yide, a researcher at the Institute of Tropical Forestry, part of the Chinese Academy of Forestry Sciences, said GEP accounting effectively makes up for the inability of GDP accounting to measure natural resource consumption, ecological resources and environmental damage. He added that regular quantitative accounting of the output and benefits of the ecosystem in the Hainan Tropical Rainforest National Park system will help promote the achievements of officials, with GEP growth as the bottom line, and help ensure that the public understands that resources are limited, and ecological systems are valuable.

"The GEP accounting of the park provides a quantifiable yardstick for the country's development of an

ecological civilization, showing that Hainan is promoting the new and green development concept through concrete efforts," Li said.

"The calculation of GEP is an essential precondition for promoting its application in ecological protection incentives and ecological damage compensation, as well as in financing for ecosystem product and service development and operations related to ecological resource rights."

Li suggested that the total value of ecological products be included in the comprehensive performance evaluation of the achievements of local governments in promoting high-quality development.

"I never thought the natural environment in my hometown could be so valuable," said 58-year-old Liang Yiwen, a forest ranger who has worked in the rainforest for most of his life. He said he believes that GEP calculation will improve people's environmental awareness.