

# CHAOZHOU PAYS RESPECT TO ANCIENT PAST WHILE KEEPING ITS EYE ON FUTURE

City in eastern Guangdong province and its people maintain traditions of cultural enlightenment and education and pursue a high-quality life in all aspects, especially elaborate craftsmanship

### Chaozhou embroidery

Originating in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Chaozhou embroidery is a major school of Guangdong embroidery, one of the top four traditional styles of embroidery in China. The earliest Chaozhou embroidery artworks discovered in Chaozhou were decorations and Buddha statues in Kaiyuan Temple built in 738. Since the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, Chaozhou embroidery works have featured in ordinary people's daily lives. They vary in themes including animals, figures and flowers and feature exquisite craftsmanship. Chaozhou embroidery has won many national awards and had a huge effect on the arts and crafts sector nationwide. It has also been widely acclaimed at home and abroad. The craft was selected as one of the first of China's national intangible cultural heritage items in 2006.

## MASTER EMBROIDERER GIVES TRADITIONAL CRAFT A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

By WANG XIN

At the top of a three-story studio on Pafang Street — a popular tourist spot that has a host of well-preserved ancient structures in Chaozhou, Guangdong province — 30 women focus on their embroidery work, their fingers deftly moving in silence. While at work they resemble demure portraits.

"Embroidery is a slow art," said Kang Huifang, founder of the studio, who is a national-level inheritor of Chaozhou embroidery, a national intangible cultural heritage item.

A slower pace and burying oneself in such traditional craftsmanship can be a challenge for many amid the hustle and bustle of urban lives. But Kang has devoted herself to Chaozhou embroidery for more than half a century.

Born in 1946, Kang began to learn embroidery at home at the age of 15 to help support her family. She was quick to learn and showed talent.

"Since I had decided to earn a living from embroidery, I was determined to learn from the best in the trade," she said.

Chaozhou has a long tradition of the craft. It was bustling with embroidery businesses during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, with historical records. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, almost every household in the city had family members involved in embroidery. Yet the expert knowledge of Chaozhou embroidery is not common, regardless of the period.

An important feature of Chaozhou embroidery is its padding techniques, which make the patterns look more vivid. Kang's talent and persistence opened a door for her to approach experts. When she was 18, she won the opportunity to work at a local embroidery business and receive training from experienced embroiderers. There she picked up the craft and stood out from her peers.

When she was 33, she was admitted to a Chaozhou embroidery research institute where she gained further expertise from an inheritor of the craft. She recalled she was also taught painting, sketching and the fundamental principles of fine arts at that time.

Riding the wave of the country's reform and opening-up, Kang quit her job and founded her own studio in the 1990s. She soon shot to fame in the industry for her prowess and innovation. Some of her embroidery works have been given to foreign leaders as national gifts.

She has since developed new methods to create double-sided embroideries, giving the traditional craftsmanship a new lease on life.

The integration of the cultural heritage into the local fashion industry is a crucial reason why the city's wedding dresses and evening gown industry has come to prominence nationwide or even worldwide, analysts noted. This has helped Chaozhou become a trendy manufacturing hub across the two segments, they said.



Beef hotpot



Guangji Bridge



Marinated meat platter



Longhu Ancient Village



潮州刺绣

By WANG XIN

Despite being close to the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area — one of China's most dynamic regions teeming with the hustle and bustle of business — Chaozhou retains a lot of old-world charm, with traditional customs and a wealth of historical heritage.

Situated in the eastern part of South China's Guangdong province and neighboring Fujian province, the city faces the sea to the east. It has a long fishing history, dating back 8,000 years. Archaeological discoveries show that humans lived there catching fish.

"Chaozhou's culture is a dynamic, open system," said Huang Jingzhou, vice-president of Hanshan Normal University in the city and an expert of Chaozhou culture. "It is an outgrowth of interactions between indigenous and immigrant civilizations."

During some periods in ancient times, the nation was split into smaller regions with frequent wars breaking out. To escape the chaos, crowds of people originally living in the Central Plain areas, roughly referring to the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River that were the economic and cultural center, went all the way to the south. Some of them settled in Chaozhou.

Generally, only wealthy families could afford such a long trip, and they were particular about their quality of life, Huang said. "They brought not only production technologies but also values and lifestyles, spurring the integration of farming and fishing cultures."

**Far-reaching effect**

In addition to the immigrant population, officials dispatched from the royal court were another force pushing Chaozhou ahead. Among them was Han Yu, a noted high-ranking official and philosopher during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). He created many great works of literature, including *On Teaching*, an essay on education, which is a standard section of high-school textbooks in contemporary mainland China.

Han was sent to Chaozhou in 819 to head up the city. He left a rich legacy in Chaozhou during his eight-month service, spending almost all of his income at the time promoting education and Confucianism. When he was 18, the crown prince of Chaozhou was his role as a guide to cultural enlightenment in the city, Huang said. What Han did still has a far-reaching influence over Chaozhou's character. Since his service, Confucius teachings and a focus on education have gained common acceptance in the city.

In gratitude to Han, locals built a memorial temple in 999 to worship him, which has become a national-level heritage site. The mother river was even renamed the Hanjiang River and a nearby mountain was renamed the Hanshan Mountain.

school at the foot of the mountain evolved into today's Hanshan Normal University, which prepares future teachers for their careers.

Chaozhou is a city of gratitude, a local official said. Successful businesspeople from Chaozhou like to pay something back to their hometown.

Another example is Shantang, a type of traditional nongovernmental charity organization, where Chaozhou people help or donate to those in difficulty. They also hold gatherings and cultural events there. Currently, Shantang facilities are active both at home and abroad.

**Elaborate efforts**

People in Chaozhou prefer the finer things in life — that doesn't mean buying luxury goods and having an expensive lifestyle, but rather, means that they make elaborate efforts to refine all aspects of their daily life and appreciate things such as exquisite craftsmanship and tasteful architecture.

There is an old saying that Chaozhou's farming is likened to subtle embroidery. It expresses the recognition of local farmers' continuous efforts to improve technologies and increase the yields of their crops.

Guangji tea, a local tea ritual, is an exemplary case to demonstrate Chaozhou people's attitude to life. It is so popular outside that almost wherever visitors go, they will be greeted with the ritual.

Different from the practice of brewing tea for a while in a normal cup in northern China, the typical tea set used in the *gongfu* tea ritual can be described as being "miniature." Instead of waiting for the tea to cool down, it takes just a few minutes to serve a steaming cup of tea during a *gongfu* tea ritual. After a sip of the strong tea, the tea drinkers with subtle sweetness that brings relaxation and refreshment.

The ritual has a set of procedures passed down from ancient times, which has been listed among China's national intangible cultural heritage. "It is not for personal orientation but shows our lifestyle. That is, no matter how hard we work, we can still manage to find a way of enjoying ourselves," Huang said. "You may find villagers taking a tea set with themselves when they go farming. During breaks near their fields, they'll have a cup of tea to relax."

Ye Hanzhong, an inheritor of the cultural heritage, said that though the *gongfu* sounds like kung fu, it has nothing to do with the martial art. Rather, it means focusing attention

and elaborate effort to make the tea.

There is no unnecessary step in the ritual — all the procedures and standards were designed to make a cup of satisfactory tea for guests — from choice of tea utensils to tea-making techniques and tasting tips, he said. "The ritual itself is a dialogue between people and tea, the host and guests. The intangible cultural heritage is also a vehicle for communication, promoting the folk conventions and unique lifestyles."

The Chaozhou cuisine, a branch of Cantonese cuisine, has its own unique style for processing ingredients. Among the most favorite cuisines in China, it is famed for its freshness, mild yet diverse flavors and nutritional health, as well as a rich variety of ingredients. Signature dishes include beef balls, beef hotpot, marinated meat, oyster omelets, and claypot seafood porridge, to name just a few.

Residents from nearby regions often drive all the way to Chaozhou, just to delight their taste buds.

In addition to Chaozhou cuisine and *gongfu* tea, the city is home to another 15 national intangible cultural heritage items.

**On the move**

"Chaozhou people are a group on the move who have a strong attachment to their hometowns," Huang said.

Since ancient times, many of them have taken advantage of the city's location and explored overseas, especially the Southeast Asia region, and created success stories of their own business careers. The group has even gained the name of Chaozhong merchants, which still carries weight in local communities.

Their experiences show that while Chaozhou people have stayed true to traditions, they have a bold, assertive and innovative side with a pragmatic approach to dealing with new circumstances. From their moving from the Central Plain in ancient times, or relocating to other regions of China or foreign countries to seek new opportunities, they have kept a strong desire for a sense of belonging and cultural identity. So among Chaozhou people, the heritage and customs that embody their cultural inheritance are preserved better, according to Huang.



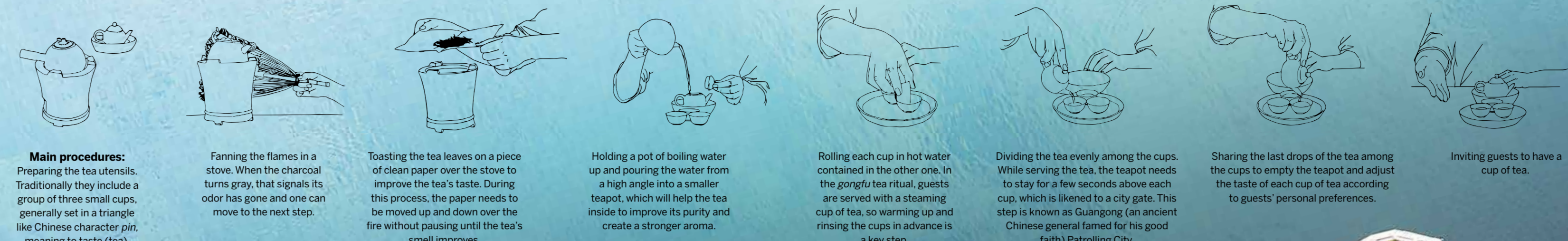
Gongfu tea

Chaozhou's *gongfu* tea is a local traditional tea ritual with given procedures, and was included on China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008.

It has set standards for making and sipping tea in every detail, ranging from preparing a tea set, generally of a small size, and brewing techniques to the way one holds the teapot and cups and the proportion of tea to water.

*Dancong* (single bush) tea from Chaozhou's Fenghuang Mountain, a type of semi-fermented oolong tea, is a local favorite to serve during the *gongfu* tea ritual.

Tea has a long history in Chaozhou and is an indispensable part of local residents' daily lives.



Main procedures: Preparing the tea utensils. Traditionally they include a group of three small cups, generally set in a triangle like Chinese character pin, meaning to taste (tea).

Fanning the flames in a stove. When the charcoal burns gray, that signals its odor has gone and one can move to the next step.

Toasting the tea leaves on a piece of clean paper over the stove to improve the tea's taste. During this process, the paper needs to be moved up and down over the fire without pausing until the tea's smell improves.

Holding a pot of boiling water up and pouring the water from a high angle into a smaller teapot, which will help the tea inside to improve its purity and create a stronger aroma.

Rolling each cup in hot water contained in the other one. In the *gongfu* tea ritual, guests are served with a steaming cup of tea, so warming up and rinsing the cups in advance is a key step.

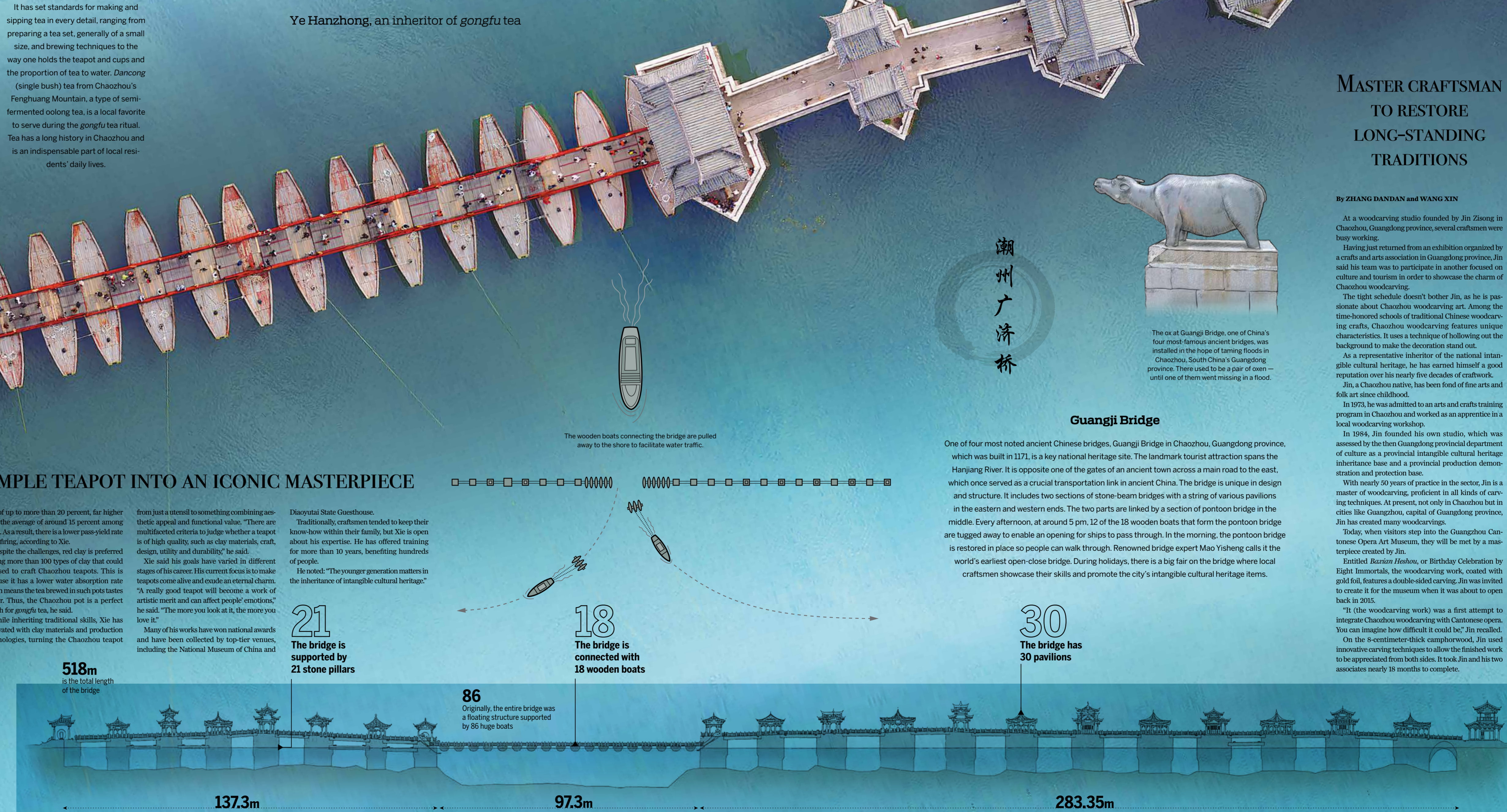
Dividing the tea evenly among the cups. While serving the tea, the teapot needs to stay for a few seconds above each cup, which is likened to a city gate. This step is known as *Guangji* (an ancient Chinese general famed for his good faith) Patrolling City.

Sharing the last drops of the tea among the cups to empty the teapot and adjust the taste of each cup of tea according to guests' personal preferences.

Inviting guests to have a cup of tea.

"Intangible cultural heritage is a vehicle for communication, promoting folk conventions and unique lifestyles."

Ye Hanzhong, an inheritor of *gongfu* tea



The wooden boats connecting the bridge are pulled away to the shore to facilitate water traffic.

## TURNING THE SIMPLE TEAPOT INTO AN ICONIC MASTERPIECE

By WANG XIN

A pair of young apprentices concentrate their attention on shaping a teapot on a potter's wheel, with the aid of simple tools, like a small knife. They are learning to craft Chaozhou handmade red-clay teapots at a studio founded by Xie Hua, a national-level inheritor of the intangible heritage originating from Chaozhou, Guangdong province.

Xie, now in his 60s, was born into a teapot-making family, the owner of a major local time-honored brand in the trade. He is a fifth-generation inheritor of the craft in his family business called Juehe, which means a gathering of talent.

Immersed in crafting pottery for more than three decades, Xie has established himself as a leader in the trade. Yet the master said one of his principles is to keep a critical eye on his own works in a bid to make continuous improvements and then keep learning and be inspired by other artworks.

Paired with *gongfu* tea, a local tea ritual, the Chaozhou handmade teapot has a centuries-old history.

The pot is mainly made of unique red clay, which falls into the category of *shizu* earth materials. It is more difficult to use the red clay to make a teapot because it has a contraction

rate of up to more than 20 percent, far higher than the average of around 15 percent among *shizu*. As a result, there is a lower yield-ratio after firing, according to Xie.

Despite the challenges, red clay is preferred among more than 100 types of clay that could be used to craft Chaozhou teapots. This is because it has a lower water absorption rate, which means the tea brewed in such pots tastes better. Thus, the Chaozhou pot is a perfect match for *gongfu* tea, he said.

While inheriting traditional skills, Xie has innovated with clay materials and production technologies, turning the Chaozhou teapot

from just a utensil to something combining aesthetic appeal and functional value. "There are multifaceted criteria to judge whether a teapot is of high quality, such as clay materials, craft, design, utility and durability," he said.

Xie said his goals have varied in different stages of his career. His current focus is to make teapots come alive and exude an eternal charm. "A really good teapot will become a work of artistic merit and can affect people's emotions," he said. "The more you look at it, the more you love it."

Many of his works have won national awards and have been collected by top-tier venues, including the National Museum of China and

Diyaotai State Guesthouse.

Traditionally, craftsmen tended to keep their know-how within their family, but Xie is open about his expertise. He has offered training for more than 10 years, benefiting hundreds of people.

He stated, "The younger generation matters in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage."

518m is the total length of the bridge

137.3m

21 The bridge is supported by 21 stone pillars

86 Originally, the entire bridge was a floating structure supported by 86 huge boats

97.3m

97.3m

18 The bridge is connected with 18 wooden boats

30 The bridge has 30 pavilions

283.35m

283.35m



潮州广济桥

## Guangji Bridge

One of four most noted ancient Chinese bridges, Guangji Bridge in Chaozhou, Guangdong province, which was built in 1171, is a key national heritage site. The landmark tourist attraction spans the Hanjiang River. It is opposite one of the gates of an ancient town across a main road to the east, which once served as a crucial transportation link in ancient China. The bridge is unique in design and structure. It includes two sections of stone-beam bridges with a string of various pavilions in the eastern and western ends. The two parts are linked by a section of pontoon bridge in the middle. Every afternoon, at around 5 pm, 12 of the 18 wooden boats that form the pontoon bridge are tugged away to enable an opening for ships to pass through. In the morning, the pontoon bridge is restored in place so people can walk through. Renowned bridge expert Mao Yisheng calls it the world's earliest open-close bridge. During holidays, there is a big fair on the bridge where local craftsmen showcase their skills and promote the city's intangible cultural heritage items.

In 1978, he was admitted to an arts and crafts training program in Chaozhou and worked as an apprentice in a local woodcarving workshop.

In 1984, Jin founded his own studio, which was assessed by the then Guangdong provincial department of culture as a provincial intangible cultural heritage inheritance base and a provincial production demonstration and protection base.

With nearly 50 years of practice in the sector, Jin is a master of woodcarving, proficient in all kinds of carving techniques. At present, not only in Chaozhou but in cities like Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, Jin has created many masterpieces.

Entitled *Beizhou Hezhou*, or Birthday Celebration by Eight Immortals, the woodcarving work, coated with gold foil, features a double-sided carving. Jin was invited to create it for the museum when it was about to open back in 2015.

"If the woodcarving work was a first attempt to integrate Chaozhou woodcarving with Cantonese opera, you can imagine how difficult it could be," Jin recalled.

On the centimeter-thick camphorwood, Jin used innovative carving techniques to allow the finished work to be appreciated from both sides. It took Jin and his two associates nearly 18 months to complete.

Connecting woodcarving products with the market is another approach proposed by Jin, which is expected to help promote the inheritance and development of the traditional art.

Each woodcarving work is a creative cultural product. It can strike a balance between artistry and practical utility, as it can be used in decorating buildings and furniture, Jin said.

If woodcarving products can expand in sales, it will help to boost the development of the woodcarving craft, Jin added.

## MASTER CRAFTSMAN TO RESTORE LONG-STANDING TRADITIONS

By ZHANG DANDAN and WANG XIN

At a woodcarving studio founded by Jin Ziaog in Chaozhou, Guangdong province, several craftsmen were busy working.

Having just returned from an exhibition organized by a crafts and arts association in Guangdong province, Jin said his team was to participate in another focused on culture and tourism in order to showcase the charm of Chaozhou woodcarving.

The tight schedule doesn't bother Jin, as he is passionate about Chaozhou woodcarving art. Among the time-honored schools of traditional Chinese woodcarving crafts, Chaozhou woodcarving features unique characteristics. It uses a technique of hollowing out the background to make the decoration stand out.

As a representative inheritor of the national intangible cultural heritage, he has earned himself a good reputation over his nearly five decades of craftwork.

Jin, a Chaozhou native, has been fond of fine arts and folk art since childhood.

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潮州木雕

## Chaozhou woodcarving

Chaozhou woodcarving is a folk carving art in Guangdong province, mainly used to decorate buildings, furniture and sacrificial utensils.

It began in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), matured in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and reached its peak in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Chaozhou woodcarving products mostly take history, mythology, stories, auspicious animals and flowers as themes. They are mostly made of camphor wood. There are various forms of carving, such as relief, circular carving and hollow engraving, which allows the finished products to be exquisite and rich in layers. With lacquer coating and gold leaf, the woodcarved products look resplendent, magnificent and elegant. In 2006, Chaozhou woodcarving was included on the first national intangible cultural heritage list.

Another of Jin's signature creations was inspired by *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of the four ancient Chinese literature classics. Combining the literature with his craftsmanship, the carved ornament portrays nearly 20 scenes and features more than 60 figures. It is considered a masterpiece showcasing traditional Chinese culture. The first one was bought by a renowned Malaysian entrepreneur in 2013.

"We are so far the only ones that are able to use the hollowed-out crafting technique to create figures in Chaozhou woodcarving," he said proudly.

Throughout his art career, Jin has been thinking about how to better carry forward the cultural treasure of Chaozhou woodcarving.

With the development of modern science and technology, mechanical production of woodcarving can imitate 80 percent of handmade work. It has affected the manual woodcarving industry and replaced it to a large extent, Jin said.

However, the most delicate parts of manual woodcarving have not yet been replaced by machinery, Jin noted.

Mechanical woodcarvings generally look stiff and rigid, while manual ones are made with a craftsman's thoughts and feelings, which inject life into their creations, he said. A craftsman's inner world can be read via his woodcarving creations, which are interlinked with other arts like painting and calligraphy, according to Jin.

To attract more young people to learn Chaozhou woodcarving, Jin gives lectures in universities. He also participates in exhibitions to expand the influence of the folk art.

It is bright, a growing number of young people are interested in woodcarving, and Jin has received appreciations at his woodcarving studio.

Each apprentice has to study for four to six years before they can complete a single piece of woodcarving on their own, Jin said.

"I have often told them to strive for perfection as a craftsman, for a good work is like a graceful lady, who will have admirers," Jin added.

Connecting woodcarving products with the market is another approach proposed by Jin, which is expected to help promote the inheritance and development of the traditional art.

Each woodcarving work is a creative cultural product. It can strike a balance between artistry and practical utility, as it can be used in decorating buildings and furniture, Jin said.

If woodcarving products can expand in sales, it will help to boost the development of the woodcarving craft, Jin added.

The innovation of the double-sided hollowed-out woodcarving is one more facet for appreciation and thus has given the traditional craft greater development room, Jin said.

Later, based on the Birthday Celebration by Eight Immortals, he and one of his associates spent one year creating *Guangji Hezhou*, without gold foil, for display in his studio. The new creation represents a scene where more immortals congratulate a top goddess in ancient myths, called Wangmumingming, on her birthday.

Jin said he personally prefers plain woodcarvings without the coating of gold foil, though that means more attention needs to be paid to crafting skills and the choice of wood materials, as it is a little more left for repairs to any errors.

"The plain woodcarvings are a test of crafting skills and have a greater texture," he said, adding they also have better market prospects.



Jin Ziaog, an inheritor of Chaozhou woodcarving

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