YOUTH

Cooking up a good life

Videos of traditional food and a stunning landscape help centuries-old village turn a corner and attract visitors, **Yang Feiyue** reports.

Huanhe village, dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), is a rural haven nestled among the mountains in Dejiang county, Guizhou province, and is set to be the future tourist destination for those online, who have been attracted to its beautiful scenery of wooden houses, lush trees and the age-old well. It's all thanks to the videos by Ding Lang, who has returned to his hometown to launch his business. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

An ancient village is getting a new lease of life thanks to one man's imagination.

The village, dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), is now a rural haven and a future tourist destination that has been attracting hundreds of thousands of internet users.

Ding Lang has been using his account on the short video app TikTok, or Douyin, to record the local food and landscape at Huanhe village, Dejiang county, Southwest China's Guizhou province, since July 2019.

The village, nestled among the mountains, with its gray-tiled wooden houses and lush trees, is attracting attention from far and wide.

To date, Ding has more than 530,000 followers, many of whom have given a thumbs-up to his work and expressed a strong desire to come and visit.

The popularity of the videos has not just opened a new career for Ding but brought development opportunities to Huanhe.

The 31-year-old was born and bred in Dejiang county. After graduating from college in Jinhua city, East China's Zhejiang province, Ding moved to Jiangmen city in Guangdong province to work on e-commerce platforms for leather shoes in 2012.

But he missed rural life.

"I've always preferred village life to city life," Ding says.

"I felt a bit depressed staring at the computer all day long, for 12 hours at a time, and having no social life."

He eventually followed his heart and returned home in 2015, when he found Dejiang county was trying to evolve itself into a national e-commerce county.

At that time, Dejiang county was struggling with poverty. Many of its villages were shut off from the outside world. Ding found that local villagers were desperately trying to sell farm produce.

"The farm produce is of good quality," Ding says.

He then decided to start up a business to help locals sell their agricultural produce online.

However, in the beginning, traditional e-commerce didn't work very well.

Ding sold honey, kiwis and oranges online. As their production is seasonal, Ding and his team only managed an annual income of around 100,000 yuan ($14,426).

Transportation also posed a big problem.

The mountainous terrain meant it took four to five days for fruit to reach customers, which made things impossible during summer, as they would not remain fresh.

Reviving a hermit's haven

At the end of 2018 Ding noticed Douyin's talent training program for poverty alleviation and he immediately signed up on the short video-sharing platform.

After getting professional guidance, Ding thought of applying his new skills to Huanhe.

The village has a proud history.

The first residents settled there to avoid war. There are about 30 households in the village now and most of the residents are above 60.

With a firm idea of what he wanted to achieve, Ding aimed his camera at the well-preserved ancient architecture and local life.

That was when Ding zoomed in on Zhang Jinxiu, a 72-year-old resident.

Zhang lives in a 200-year-old house that sits near a local well. Its doorsteps are stone, and it is surrounded by ancient trees.

"It is just stunning," Ding says, adding that it was the first reason he picked Zhang as his subject.

Ding Lang (left), who quit the hustle and bustle of city life in 2015 and settled down in his hometown in Dejiang county, Guizhou province, carries purple sweet potato seedlings from neighboring Sinan county to grow at home in Huanhe village.

Zhang and her husband used to be railway workers in Xiangyang, Hubei province. They returned to Huanhe after retirement more than a decade ago.

Over the years, Zhang has established a reputation for her cooking skills in the village.

Ding recorded her picking fresh vegetables from the soil, washing them near the well and stirring them in a big iron pot over a roaring wood fire.

The videos became a hit online. Viewers were drawn to the villagers' close ties with nature shown in the clips.

"I like this way of life, from the house, the well, the vegetable basket, the sun and the firewood stove," says one Douyin user.

Others have expressed a strong appetite for Zhang's cooking and the healthy lifestyle of the locals.

One video showing Zhang cooking cushaw flowers received over 1 million hits in one week after its release in July 2019, and a total of 55,000 viewers gave it thumbs-up.

"Many of the viewers didn't know cushaw flowers could be cooked and eaten, and said they'd buy some to cook at home after watching the video," Ding says.

The success of the video greatly boosted Ding's confidence after the setback of his initial business.

"I felt like my efforts were paying off," he says.

Collective contribution

Ding then visited Huanhe at least three times a week, making more videos about the village.

However, Huanhe is about 26 kilometers from his home, and the mountain road doesn't make traveling easy.

It was not until October 2019 that Ding decided to settle down in the village, when one of his videos featuring Zhang cooking purple sweet potatoes helped a local rural cooperative receive 5,000 orders for its produce.

The video ended up having over 10 million views.

Now, Ding has invited three of his friends to join his new venture.

"I can better focus on making videos here and I think about my future in the tranquil village at night," Ding says.

Ding's arrival has also brought positive changes to the village. He visits the elderly and cooks for them from time to time.

He also made donations to have streetlamps installed, so villagers can see where they are going at night.

Ding has also brought in purple sweet potato seedlings and has encouraged locals to grow them.

"If sales are good online, I will scale up production in the village," Ding says.

Through his efforts, an increasing number of travelers have made their way to the village.

Ding has taken some of them to experience what is recorded in his short videos.

"Developing tourism sites and homestays might be something to consider in future," says Ding, adding that he's still figuring out how he can convert the popularity of his account into public recognition of the village.

When asked if he ever feels like village life is boring, Ding says he has no time to idle around.

He usually gets up at 8 am, then spends the morning filming content and the afternoon editing it.

"I come here to work and every day is fulfilling," he says.

Contact the writer at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

Potential way found to tackle autism

CHICAGO — A novel precision medicine approach, enhanced by artificial intelligence, has laid the groundwork for what could be the first biomedical screening and intervention tool for a subtype of autism, according to a new study.

The subtype of the disorder studied by researchers from Northwestern University, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is known as dyslipidemia-associated autism, which represents 6.55 percent of all diagnosed autism spectrum disorders in the United States.

The study's co-first author Yuan Luo, associate professor of preventive medicine at NU's Feinberg School of Medicine, says: "This discovery was like finding a needle in a haystack, as there are thousands of variants in hundreds of genes thought to underlie autism, each of which is mutated in less than 1 percent of families with the disorder.

> "When a physician identifies it ... brain developmental windows have passed. ... This discovery could shift that paradigm."
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> **Yuan Luo,** an associate professor at Northwestern University

"We built a complex map, and then needed to develop a magnifier to zoom in," Luo says.

To build that magnifier, the researchers identified clusters of gene exons that function together during brain development. They then used a state-of-the-art AI algorithm graph clustering on gene expression data.

"The map and magnifier approach showcases a generalizable way of using multiple data modalities for subtyping autism," says Luo. "And it holds the potential for many other genetically complex diseases to inform targeted clinical trials."

Using the tool, the researchers also identified a strong association of parental dyslipidemia with autism spectrum disorder in the children. They further saw altered blood lipid profiles in infants later diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

The findings are leading the researchers to pursue subsequent studies, including clinical trials that aim to promote early screening and early intervention of autism.

"Today, autism is diagnosed based only on symptoms, and the reality is when a physician identifies it, it's often when early and critical brain developmental windows have passed without appropriate intervention," says Luo. "This discovery could shift that paradigm."

Autism affects an estimated 1 in 54 children in the US, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Boys are four times more likely than girls to be diagnosed.

The findings were published recently in Nature Medicine.

XINHUA

Researchers in Australia use filter to make seawater drinkable in half an hour

SYDNEY — Using only a high-tech filter and the power of direct sunlight, Australian researchers have developed a world-first technology that can make large volumes of seawater safe to drink in under 30 minutes.

According to the Melbourne-based Monash University, the specially-designed filter is capable of generating hundreds of liters of drinkable water per day, and requires only direct sunlight to purify it, making the process energy-efficient, low cost and sustainable.

Used in making the filters are metal-organic frameworks, or MOF, a class of compounds consisting of metal ions that form a crystalline material with the largest surface area of any material known.

During the desalination process, a functionalized MOF filter firstly adsorbs salts from water, which consumes no energy, then the salt-filled MOF can be put under sunlight to regenerate, taking fewer than four minutes, before it can absorb salt from water once more.

Lead author of the research paper, professor Huanting Wang from the Department of Chemical Engineering at Monash University, says the desalination is a feasible option to address the pressing water shortage crisis around the world.

"Desalination has been used to address escalating water shortages globally. Due to the availability of brackish water and seawater, and because desalination processes are reliable, treated water is able to be integrated within existing aquatic systems with minimal health risks," Wang says.

"But thermal desalination processes by evaporation are energy-intensive, and other technologies, such as reverse osmosis, has a number of drawbacks, including high energy consumption and chemical usage in membrane cleaning and dechlorination."

With low energy consumption and no chemicals needed during the process, Wang says this highlights the durability and sustainability of the new technology for future clean water solutions.

"This study has successfully demonstrated that the photoresponsive metal-organic frameworks are a promising, energy-efficient and sustainable adsorbent for desalination," he says.

"Our work provides an exciting new route for the design of functional materials for using solar energy to reduce the energy demand and improve the sustainability of water desalination."

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