

LIFE



Shi Liping, a deputy at the recent fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress, takes the chance to show the traditional craft of Miao embroidery from Songtao Miao autonomous county, Guizhou province, an intangible cultural heritage she has helped to develop. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Creating a pattern for growth

NPC deputy Shi Liping has spent the last two decades promoting her Miao ethnic community's traditional embroidery, **Wang Ru** and **Yang Jun** report.

“With traditional craft, I will make my own contribution to rural revitalization,” Shi Liping, wearing the customary clothes of the Miao ethnic group, declared at this year's CCTV Spring Festival Gala on Feb 11, which attracted many people's attention.

The 55-year-old provincial-level inheritor of China's intangible cultural heritage of Miao embroidery, who was awarded a prize for poverty alleviation by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development last year, says she feels “lucky” to have stood on the stage, showing her clothes as an example of the traditional craft.

Over the years, Shi has continued to develop the craft, and in turn it has helped her and the people in Songtao Miao autonomous county, Guizhou province, to stitch together a better life. She was also selected to be a deputy at the fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress.

Born in Songtao, like Miao girls, Shi learned the embroidery skills as a child, being taught by her mother and grandmother. She finds the traditional craft rather appealing since “it reflects the wisdom of Miao women,” she says.

Without a written language, Miao women record things in their embroidery. “Embroidery has profound cultural connotations. It

records the change of our ethnic group, and reflects our respect for the nature and our ancestors,” says Shi.

But when she grew up, she found that, as many young people migrated to work in cities, only leaving the old and young in her hometown, there seemed to be fewer people inheriting and developing the craft. She was worried that one day it might be lost.

To ensure that did not happen, starting in 2000, she spent eight years visiting numerous Miao villages honing her embroidery skills. In 2008, she founded Fanjingshan Miao Culture Tourism Product Development, a company selling Miao embroidery products, such as bags, clothes and decorations, trying to preserve the craft through commercial means.

“I believe business can help the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. We have progressed so fast, so I want to slow down and comb through the craft to see what we can add to it or let go of,” says Shi.

In the beginning, when she established the company, Shi knew that the passing down of the traditional craft would require more than just her own efforts, so she recruited locals — such as those with disabilities that excluded them from manual labor, people who had been laid-off and returning migrant workers — and trained them as needleworkers.

Over the years, the company has offered jobs to more than 4,000



Shi speaks during the recent fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress. She proposed the establishment of a Miao embroidery research and development center in Songtao Miao autonomous county. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

women who have been “left behind” by their husbands, who go to big cities seeking better-paid work, and lifted more than 300 households out of poverty.

Yang Guangrong, 45, one of Shi's few male employees, used to live on a subsistence allowance from the government after injuring his leg in an accident. He has seen his life change since becoming a needleworker at Shi's company in 2017.

“I'm thankful to Shi. After finding out about my situation, she encouraged me to learn embroidery. Now I have stable work and can save money every month,” says Yang.

According to Tian Yingzhi, another needleworker, “We all feel grateful to Shi as she has offered us a very good opportunity. The company pays us according to the number of embroidered items we make, so the harder we work, the higher our income.”

The company's products are sold in 67 countries and regions. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, between 60 and 70 percent of the company's total output was sold overseas.

The pandemic has impacted Shi's business significantly. “Our sales volume reached 60 million yuan (\$9.22 million) in 2019, but was less

than 200,000 yuan in the first several months of 2020,” says Shi.

Facing the situation head-on, Shi shifted the company's focus to the domestic market, and established an online shop selling sachets, pillows and key chains adorned with Miao embroidery, and also sold products via livestream.

“The pandemic brought us unprecedented pressure, and made us consider how to continue and transform. We want to take this opportunity to attract more young people to use our products through online channels,” she adds.

During this year's two sessions, the annual gathering of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, held in Beijing, Shi proposed to establish a Miao embroidery research and development center in Songtao to try and engage more young people with the craft, and to cultivate young talent.

After all the hard work over the years, Shi says more young people are now joining the industry compared with 20 years ago.

“Now the majority of staff at my company are young people who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. We need the participation of a greater number of knowledgeable and capable young people in the development of our industry,” she says.

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Retirees net kudos for skills in basketball

CHANGSHA — What would you choose to do after reaching 60 years of age? Retire, take care of grandchildren or just stay at home? In Changsha city in Central China's Hunan province, a group of retirees has chosen to add some bounce to their twilight years with basketball.

Watching them play, you'd be forgiven for thinking they are younger. The women's basketball team that go by the moniker Feiyue has an average age of 60 years old.

Team member Li Ying dribbles the ball quickly, breaking through the defense, turns around and makes a rear shot. The ball slots accurately through the hoop, barely rattling the netting before landing and bouncing off the surface of the court.

Ten years ago, out of their common love for basketball, they spontaneously set up this team. Team leader Xiao Jing says, “Life isn't all about basketball, but it isn't a life without basketball.”

Both Xiao Jing and Li Ying have a more than 40-year history with the sport. They studied basketball together at a sports school as children. Although they did not engage in professional sports, for a long time after graduating, they were known as “basketball pros” at their workplaces.

“Even if I haven't played for a period of time, when I pick up the ball, it is like it sticks to my hand. No one can steal it from me,” Li says.



Members of the Feiyue women's basketball team, who are in their 60s, play together in Changsha, Hunan province, on March 6. XUE YUGE / XINHUA

Many members of the team come from a sports background. Some did track and field at school, while others were swimmers. There is even a relay champion on the team.

At the same time, they have also become coaches to their teammates. One player found the team's information on the internet and signed up barely knowing anything about the sport. The senior members of the team explained the rules, demonstrated the movements and it wasn't long before the newcomer developed into a skilled player.

“Some people say, how can 60-year-old women play basketball? But look at us, we feel like we can run all over the court!” Xiao says.

The habit of playing basketball on a regular basis has brought a lot of positive benefits to the sporty sexagenarians. They are now able to move fast and react quickly with good physical strength. “For so many years, we have hardly ever been sick or hospitalized,” says Xiao.

Apart from the physical gains, the most precious thing basketball brings to them is a young heart and youthful outlook. “We train twice a week, and we don't feel tired — even playing continuously for an hour. Whenever we have the chance, we travel all over China to compete,” Xiao says.

Over the past 10 years, all the team members have sweated, run and enjoyed victory together. Their hearty laughter can be heard on, and off, the court.

“The passion and pure love for basketball is what brought us all together,” Li says.

“Age is only a number for us, but not a limit,” Xiao says, adding that women her age can not only take on family roles, but also develop sporting hobbies to enrich their lives.

After the final whistle, the team made an appointment with each other for the next training session.

Every time Li Ying plays, she looks up to her oldest teammate, who is 65 years old this year. “As long as you can play, you should keep playing.”

Farmers enjoy spice of life as chilies seed profit

HOHHOT — Li Yihua and his wife, Zhao Liwei, have been engaged in the chili industry in Kailu county, North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, for nearly 20 years.

As an entrepreneur, Li mainly imports chili seeds from the Republic of Korea and exports fresh chilies to the country. With the advent of the peak chili export season, tonnes of chilies have been kept neatly piled up in their yard.

“Business is good. We export more than 4,000 tons of fresh chilies a year and earn more than 200 yuan (\$31) per ton,” says Zhao.

“I can speak Korean fluently, which helps me a lot in dealing with clients,” says Li, who is an ethnic Korean in China.

Kailu county has a history of growing chilies spanning more than 30 years. “The advantages

of abundant sunlight and a significant temperature difference between day and night make the county highly suitable for chili cultivation,” says Yu Xiaoxiang, a local agronomist.

Currently, Kailu has around 40,000 hectares dedicated to chili cultivation, about one-third of the county's arable land. Each year, 30 of its major chili farming cooperatives export more than 15,000 metric tons of chilies to over 10 countries in Europe and Asia.

To better develop the chili industry, in 2013, Kailu spent 200 million yuan on the construction of the largest chili trading center in North China. A total of 21 cold storage units were built across the county, capable of storing 100,000 tons of fresh chilies for off-season sales.

Meanwhile, to extend the industrial chain and make more



A rural resident removes weeds in a chili field in Kailu county, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, in July. Growing chili is a pillar of the local agricultural industry and has helped to improve people's income. AN LUMENG / XINHUA

money from the chilies, Kailu has set up 15 enterprises to process chilies into various products

like chili sauce, chili powder, and ingredients used in lipsticks and medicines.

Annually, the 15 enterprises can process 140,000 tons of chilies, with a sales volume exceeding 2 billion yuan.

High value-added products rely on good quality chilies. In recent years, Kailu has been striving to strengthen technical training among chili growers.

As well as door-to-door visits, agronomist Yu Xiaoxiang and his colleagues also record videos covering various topics like methods for nurturing seedlings, fertilization and pest control, and post them on short-video platforms.

“Such online training is more convenient, as chili growers have easy access to the information,” says Yu. “Over the years, the chili industry has greatly increased the income of the locals. The chili has truly spiced up their lives.”