

BUSINESSFOCUS

Embroidery helps stitch handsome profits

Miao patterns preserve tradition, raise incomes in mountainous regions thanks to automation, craftsmanship

By **ZHU WENQIAN** and **YANG JUN** in Guiyang

Wei Zuying, a native of South-west China's mountainous Guizhou province and a deputy to the 13th National People's Congress, said embroidery is inherently part of the culture of the Miao ethnic group, and she hopes the skill can be passed down over generations.

Wei, 40, an inheritor of an intangible cultural heritage designation for embroidery, started working at a clothing factory in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, two decades ago. She worked there for more than 10 years and was deeply impressed by the modern equipment and automation there, even as she was engaged in an activity traditionally reliant on manual labor.

In 2011, she returned to her hometown and bought a used automated embroidery machine. With an initial investment of 200,000 yuan (\$29,700), she opened her own embroidery workshop in Maan village, Congjiang county, Guizhou.

A niche has since developed for embroidery in Congjiang. Wei and other designers now create new templates every year, and she tends to blend traditional Miao patterns with modern styles. The factory has made it possible for impoverished women in the village to both work near home and increase their incomes.

Over the years, an entrepreneurial spirit has been growing in Maan — formerly a source of a great deal of migrant workers. Some former employees who worked at Wei's factory have even established their own factories and become their own bosses.

"Embroidery has become a major business in Maan. The streets are filled with the sound of embroidery machines, and everyone is rushing to and from work as they have a large number of orders to finish," Wei said.

"Compared with manual embroidery that requires time and patience, embroidery machines can help quickly complete large quantities of orders and meet demand from different customers. Despite the fact that we now use machines, traditional Miao embroidery culture remains the soul of these embroidered products," she said.

The national culture of the Miao ethnic group should not be hidden deep in the mountains and restricted by geography, but should be promoted to wider areas nationwide, Wei added.

In Maan, there is a traditional custom that when girls get married, they usually wear a new beautifully embroidered handmade dress, and they will later also wear it at major festivals. Thus, most girls in the village learn the skill from childhood, and embroidery has become an essential undertaking for most locals.

"At the factory, embroiderers



Employees work with embroidery machines at the workshop owned by Wei Zuying, a deputy to the 13th National People's Congress, in Congjiang county, Guizhou province, in September. YAO XU / CHINA DAILY

arrive daily and work with machines. Some with exceptional skills can work from home and be paid based on the number of pieces they produce. The combination of mechanical and manual embroidery ensures mass production and helps pass down skilled craftsmanship," Wei said.

Serving as a deputy to the 13th NPC, she hopes to help more women who live in impoverished conditions to master and inherit traditional embroidery skills and thus make a better living and enrich their lives. Inheritance and development of national culture is her focus as a deputy, and she has felt greater responsibility after taking the position of a national lawmaker.

During the annual two sessions in 2018, she put forward a proposal on how to transform the advantages of national culture into advantages of industrial growth.

Last year, she put forward proposals on building firefighting facilities in villages in less developed areas in Guizhou, and constructing a national highway to ease travel difficulties in mountainous regions.

Most villages are now equipped with fire trucks and the highway has been opened for traffic, which provides a road to prosperity for villagers and their products, including embroidered pieces of course.

With the support of the local government, Wei set up another embroidery factory at a community in Congjiang in March. A large



An embroiderer sews patterns with a sewing machine on a traditional ribbon at Wei Zuying's factory in Congjiang county, Guizhou province, in September. YAO XU / CHINA DAILY

number of villagers moved to flats in town from their rural homes, and they received professional training before landing jobs as embroiderers.

They live above the factory, thus making it convenient for them to look after children.

The 6,000-square-meter workshop has 26 large-scale embroidery machines and 120 sewing machines. It mainly produces traditional clothing, shoes and silver ornaments unique to the Miao ethnic group. The products are sold to Guizhou, Guangdong, the Guangxi

Zhuang autonomous region and other areas.

The community factory is expected to achieve annual output value of 10 million yuan, and it plans to pay 240 female employees a combined 5.8 million yuan a year, Wei said.

Besides a brick-and-mortar store in Congjiang that sells finished embroidered pieces, the factory also sells its products online through messaging app WeChat and mobile video app Kuaishou.

The average age of the factory workers is 50, and their minimum

wage is set at 1,800 yuan a month, Wei said.

"Women who come from Congjiang have attained a certain degree of mastery in craftsmanship since they have been doing it for many years," said Yang Liuzhen, president of the women's federation of Meie community, Congjiang, who is responsible for the management of Wei's factory.

"Most women would like to find a stable job as an embroider. We give them embroidery training for about a week before they become skillful enough to do the work," Yang said.



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Wei Zuying, a native of Guizhou province and a deputy to the 13th National People's Congress

During the two sessions this year, what Wei cared about the most was how can younger generations better understand, inherit and develop national folk cultures.

"Embroidery skills and folk songs of Miao and Dong ethnic groups need promotion by experts and scholars. More importantly, the younger generation needs to inherit and innovate their culture. It is a long-term and arduous task as many young people do not pay attention to such things or are not that interested in traditional culture," Wei said.

Currently, China has nearly 9,500 companies engaged in making traditional folk costumes, with the number increasing steadily in recent years. More than 60 percent of the total are small and medium-sized enterprises, according to data from Tianyancha, a data company providing information on Chinese enterprises.

Guizhou has more than 2,100 related enterprises, accounting for the largest portion nationwide. Guizhou is followed by the Inner Mongolia autonomous region and Yunnan province.

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Agricultural park to be major vegetable base for GBA

By **ZHU WENQIAN** and **YANG JUN** in Guiyang

In a small county in Southwest China's mountainous Guizhou province, the country's sole province devoid of any significant plains, a large-scale high-yield agricultural park has witnessed solid growth this year, and it aims to become a major vegetable base for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

The Chejiang dam vegetable base, located in Rongjiang county, southeastern Guizhou, utilizes gradual gradients and rolling hills in the region for cultivation. Occupying 670 hectares, it is expected to see annual output of 159 million yuan (\$23.6 million) in 2020.

This year has seen the facility become a driving force to lead the deeply impoverished county to prosperity.

"So far this year, we have provided more than 4,000 metric tons of vegetables such as peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes to the

Greater Bay Area, and flavors of some vegetables are tailored to cater to local appetites and eating habits," said Kong Weiwei, director of Guiyang Agricultural Investment Development.

"In July, we exported about 100 tons of cowpeas to Japan and South Korea. We have also exported vegetables to Southeast Asia. Besides, we plan to export more products overseas," Kong said.

Thanks to the Guiyang-Guangzhou high-speed railway and multiple highways, Rongjiang is no longer a forgotten corner of the country. It has become more convenient for local agricultural products to be transported to other regions.

Eyeing the creation of even more convenient transportation and given the region's advantageous natural conditions, the Rongjiang county government and the Guiyang Agricultural Investment Development company plan to invest a total of 500 million yuan over time in building the agricultural park.

Previously, the agricultural sector in the county was small-scale and fragmented. Since the agricultural park became a reality, automated farming equipment has become the norm. For instance, some machinery can initiate irrigation after automatically assessing soil moisture and air humidity levels.

By taking advantage of its subtropical climate, high altitude and fertile soil, the agricultural park plants peppers, tomatoes and pumpkins in the spring, and eggplants, cucumbers and gourds in the summer. In addition, it plants high value-added products such as pea seedlings and cabbages in the cooler winter months.

With higher average temperatures than other regions in the country, vegetables such as tomatoes and peppers can hit the market in March, which is earlier than those produced elsewhere, and can thus command higher prices.

By purposefully selecting vegeta-

ble varieties and improving industrial management practices, the agricultural park has been able to minimize planting costs and maximize profits.

The park has signed long-term cooperation agreements with 12 wholesale markets nationwide, including those in Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, and Chongqing, in addition to a number of local wholesale venues and supermarkets in Guizhou.

Meanwhile, the large-scale agricultural park has created abundant job positions for villagers. On average, about 840 people work at the park every day, with an average age of around 50.

Shi Jingzhu, 35, used to be a migrant worker. After the agricultural park was founded, she went back to her hometown and started working at the greenhouse tending the vegetables. By working eight to nine hours a day, she can make 120 yuan daily. It has also become more convenient for her to look after her



A farmer picks passion fruit at an orchard in Rongjiang county, Guizhou province, in September. YAO XU / CHINA DAILY

three children as she works close to home.

Wu Guowen is a technician working at the agricultural park. Before, he had been a small-scale farmer for more than two decades. Now, he manages about 20 hectares of land and is responsible for field management tasks such as

fertilization and spraying.

"I have planted multiple kinds of vegetables before and gained ample experience. I also attended professional training on a regular basis after working here. Now, the vegetable varieties are hybrids with higher yields. My income has also increased," Wu said.