

LIFE

Celebrating our anniversary season far apart this year

From late January to early May is what my wife and I call our anniversary season. It is a collection of

important dates that led to our becoming a couple, marrying and spending virtually all of our wedded life in China.

This year's season is particularly poignant, given that we are having to celebrate while in different countries due to disruptions caused by COVID-19.

To understand the story, you have to know that we found each other

relatively late in life, at the transition in age from our 40s to our 50s. We had both been married before, and I have three children — all boys — who were entering young adulthood.

We had both enrolled in a computer dating service. As I read her profile, I realized that she was born and had grown up only about an hour's drive from where I spent part of my teenage years in the US state of Alabama.

I had not dated a woman from my part of the United States in many years. But when we met in 2010, we hit it off. Our first real date was on May 8 of that year, though we had been talking online for a few weeks.

We had a certain amount of automatic understanding, given our similar cultural background.

Dee was a smart, capable and attractive woman with a sense of humor. She said she was attracted to my being a gentleman typical of our part of the country, but a worldly one with a broad perspective on life. Our courtship wasn't always smooth, but we kept coming back to each other.

After several years, we were at the point of either staying together or drifting apart. I had almost lost her, but at this point, a job offer came in for me to become an editor in China. We had talked about living in China together, and I could not imagine liv-

ing this dream without her. So, on Jan 24, 2012, I asked her to come with me. We were both scared of such a big step, but pushed forward anyway.

I proposed marriage on Feb 12 at an outdoor bar in Lake Worth Beach, Florida, where we were having dinner with my eldest son. After that, things moved quickly. Each of us owned a house, and we had to sell them both, finish up at our jobs, sell many belongings and reduce the rest to a small storage space. We became legally married on Feb 21 at a local courthouse.

The next few months were exhilarating and terrifying as we prepared

for a radical change. As a child, I had read a biography of Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, so I was interested in China, but most of my foreign experience was in Latin America. Dee had spent time in Mexico City and saw the allure of living abroad.

Our wedding ceremony was on March 31 beside the ocean in Jupiter, Florida, with my brother officiating. We had just over a month to wrap everything up and get on a plane to fly halfway across the world. On May 3, we boarded a China Eastern Airlines flight in Los Angeles bound for Shanghai, arriving exhausted and dazed but very happy.

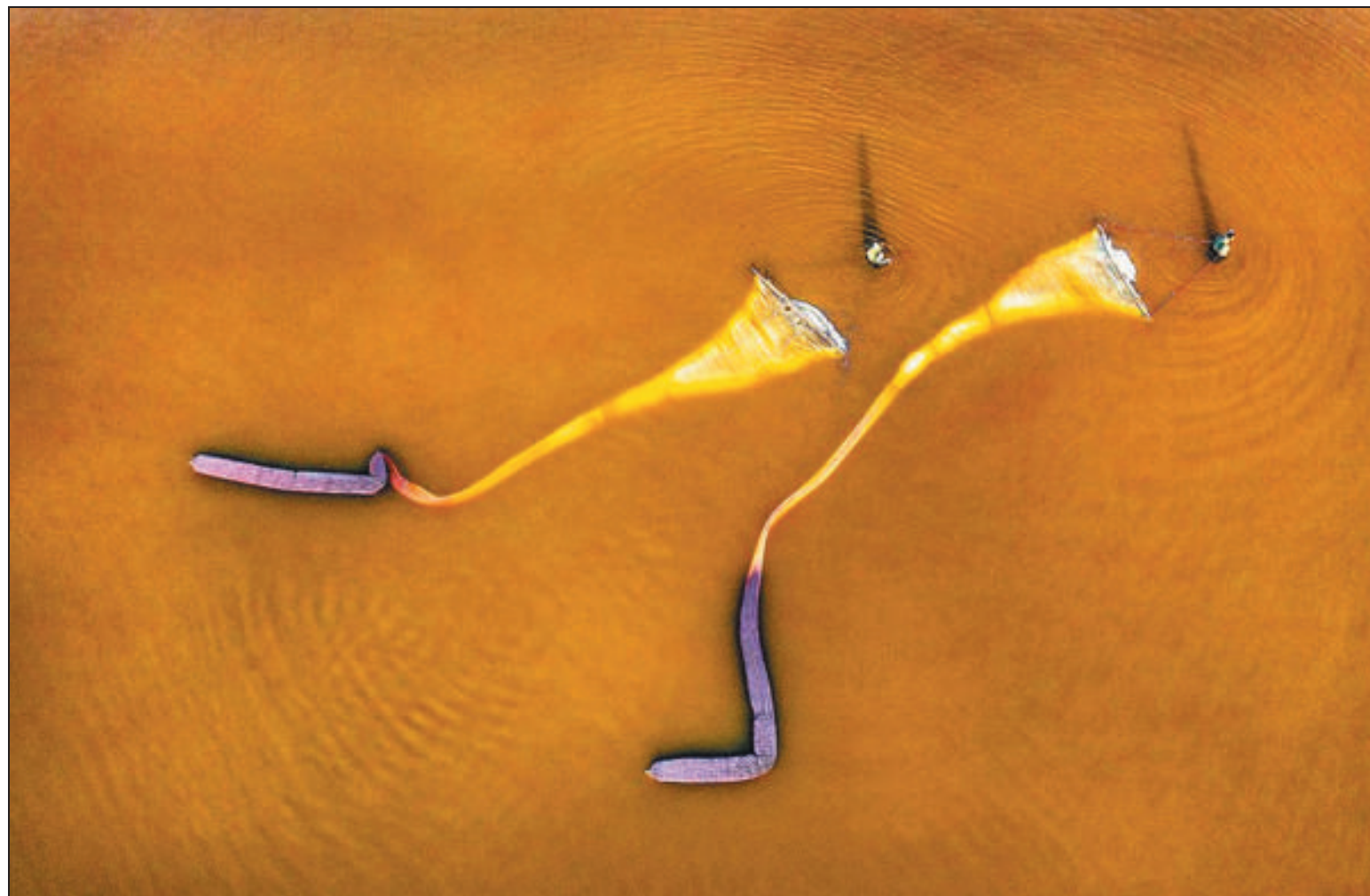
We were so exhausted we barely moved from our hotel for several days, finally venturing out and finding our first culinary delight in China — *jianbing*. Two years later, we moved to Beijing, and now, eight years after first stepping foot in China, we still know we made the right decision.

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Candid camera: Net gains



Dragging open nets, workers from the Shanxi Coking Coal Group catch brine shrimps in a salt-lake farm in Yuncheng, Shanxi province, on Tuesday. This is prime breeding season for the shrimp, a popular aquaculture crop. XUE JUN / FOR CHINA DAILY



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Lesson of hope for students facing financial struggles

HEFEI — On a rainy afternoon, Zhou Yumei, accompanied by a philanthropist, paid a visit to Jinzhai Hope Primary School to look for 15 pupils to attend a free summer camp in Beijing.

The school was the first to be built under Project Hope, an initiative launched in 1989 by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the China Youth Development Foundation. The goal of the project is to ensure students in poverty-stricken areas have good access to education.

Tucked away deep in the mountains, Jinzhai Hope Primary School was founded on May 19, 1990 in Nanxi township, Jinzhai county of East China's Anhui province. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of the school.

"Before the two-story building was erected, the school was originally in an old ancestral hall," says Yu Gan, a teacher at the school for 37 years.

"When the new school was ready, the students rushed into the classrooms roaring with laughter, and excited to find that it had access to electricity. Some of them wouldn't get up from the new chairs and desks."

But the building of the new school was no panacea. Like many students in the 1990s, Zhou was forced to drop out of school several times due to her family's poverty.

Jinzhai was an important revolutionary base for the Communist Party of China and the birthplace of a major branch of the Red Army. However, its remote location and poor transportation facilities had held it back as it became one of the most impoverished areas in China.

"I had to quit school for the first time at the age of 11 because my family couldn't afford the tuition. I later found a job at a restaurant washing dishes," says Zhou, who is now 36.

About a month later, she received a call from the school and was told someone was willing to pay her tuition.

It was an entrepreneur from South China's Guangdong province, who donated 400 yuan (\$56) through Project Hope to Zhou.

"After the establishment of the school, donations started to pour in from all over China, including money, clothing and school supplies, such as pens and books," says Jiang Huai, the principal.

However, even with the funds from Project Hope, Zhou still "needed to climb the mountains to collect firewood and sell it for money" to continue her education.



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Yu Gan, teacher, Jinzhai Hope Primary School

In junior high school, when Zhou was on the brink of being pulled out of school again, a civil servant from Jiangsu province lent a hand.

"I wrote a letter to the donor, vowing never to quit school and to pay him back when I grow up. He also wrote back to encourage me," she says. "We never met, but he influenced me a lot."

Zhou eventually finished high school in 2002 and went to Shanghai after graduation. After trying various jobs, she finally settled down at a manufacturing company and, over the course of eight years, rose from an assembly line worker to vice-chairwoman, the quickest such career progression in the company's history ever.

In her spare time, Zhou is a public welfare activist. In 2016, she gave up her job and returned to her hometown to concentrate on the cause of Project Hope.

"When I was a child, I often sat in the hills and looked into the distance, hoping that one day I could get out. Now my dream has come true, but eventually, I decided to come back," she says.

Official data shows that, as of September 2019, Project Hope had received over 15.2 billion yuan in donations since its establishment, aided nearly 6 million students in financial difficulty, and built 20,195 primary schools across China.

More than 5,400 students have graduated from Jinzhai Hope Primary School over the past 30 years, and many have become teachers, doctors and journalists.

"Nowadays, there are almost no kids dropping out of school because of poverty. What we're doing now is bringing them more care, giving them a good education and a happy childhood," she says.

XINHUA



Students of Jinzhai Hope Primary School in Nanxi township, Anhui province, get ready for lunch on Sept 2, 2019. The school, which was established on May 19, 1990, was the first funded by donations through Project Hope. ZHANG YAZI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Inheritor weaves her way into a better life

By WANG RU in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

For Yang Changqin, a 30-year-old provincial-level inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Chishui bamboo-weaving, the craft has not only changed her life, but also helps many people in Chishui — a county-level city in Southwest China's Guizhou province — to shake off the shackles of poverty.

Yang, who is a deputy at the third session of the 13th National People's Congress, was born to a poor family in Yinjiang Tujia and Miao autonomous county, Guizhou, in 1990. Her father passed away when she was young and, after graduating from junior high, she dropped out of school to work and support her family. After a year of trying various jobs, including sales, waitressing and cooking, she collected some money and applied to study preschool education at a local vocational education center.

In 2007, just as Yang was about to complete her course, she got offered the chance to join nine other classmates on a six-month excursion to learn the bamboo-weaving craft from Chen Wenlan, an inheritor based in Chishui — a city which calls itself the hometown of bamboo in China, and boasts a bamboo forest of 88,667 hectares.

"At first I often cut my fingers, making it hurt too much to hold chopsticks at mealtime, but I also started to take a fancy to the handicraft," recalls Yang.

Yang's talent and diligence soon attracted the attention of Chen. "Yang is clever and deft, and studied very hard. She quickly understood the many techniques I taught her, and I believe that she has a talent for the handicraft," says Chen.

Back home, when she finished her course, instead of finding a job as a kindergarten teacher, Yang made the decision to return to Chishui, and



Above: Yang Changqin (middle), inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of bamboo weaving, examines a bamboo-woven bag with her employees. WANG HONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Left: Yang works in her company to sell bamboo-woven products. WANG CHANGYU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Chen, to continue learning the craft.

"I often felt pity for the loss of traditional crafts and the culture contained within them, so I wanted to inherit this craft and call on more young people to learn it."

In 2012, Yang started a business to sell bamboo-woven products, like jewelry, tea sets and bags after seeing a business opportunity through the craft. "If you sell a bamboo, you can get 6 yuan (84 US cents) at most, but if you sell a bamboo-woven product, which is meticulously crafted, you can get several hundred yuan or even a thousand," says Yang.

Her company has gradually developed from a four-person operation when it was established into a company with 106-strong work force and 12 patents. In 2019, the company's sales volume reached 6 million yuan as its products were sold all over China, and even abroad.

Yang also established an intangible cultural heritage base in Chishui, which combines production, processing, display, research and training of the craft. Since Minzu county, where the base is located, is an attractive place with a number of tourist attractions, Yang hopes the base will become a part of the local tourism circuit in the future.

Growing up in a single-parent family, Yang understands the plight of "left-behind children" and the elderly. As a result, she has taught many local women to weave bamboo. They now produce bamboo products for Yang from home, where they are able to take care of the family instead of migrating to faraway areas to find work. So far, she has helped more than 100 local women in this way.

According to Huang Yongqiong, a woman who works with Yang, "I

used to do farm work at home but could only earn just enough money to eat. Now, by learning the craft from Yang and making bamboo products, I can earn about 4,000 yuan a month."

"My company is named Qianshou, which means 'joining hands' in Chinese. I want to take more people's hands and guide them to engage in the bamboo-weaving industry."

Many people admire Yang's record of starting a business at 22, becoming a provincial-level inheritor of an intangible cultural heritage at 24, and being elected as a deputy to the 13th NPC at 28, but behind the success are unknown hardships.

She faced many difficulties in starting her business, especially in collecting funds, organizing groups and establishing sales channels. During the worst of it, she was in debt to the tune of nearly 1 million yuan, which impacted her health.

"From the early stages of my life to when I started the business, I met various difficulties. However, I believe there is always a way of scaling every obstacle that appears in my life," says Yang.

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, she is focusing on the integration and development of traditional crafts and rural revitalization.

"By inheriting and developing intangible cultural heritage, we can develop special industries which can supplement existing revenue streams in rural areas and help people achieve a better life. I hope the government will offer more help so that traditional crafts can play a bigger role in rural revitalization, poverty alleviation and rural development."

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