

CHINA



People from Yangwei and nearby villages in Liping county, Guizhou province, often play soccer on the pitch after it was opened in January. PHOTOS BY ZHAO YUEYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Rural resurgence the goal of soccer tourism promotion

Villages are prospering and living standards are rising as matches draw visitors to the countryside. **Li Hongyang** reports from Beijing with **Yang Jun** in Guiyang.

Let's go and play soccer!" In a WeChat group containing more than 400 villagers, people who are free from farm work and chores always enjoy receiving this proposal.

In response, they join games played on a new artificial pitch in Yangwei, a village in Liping county, Guizhou province.

In October, the village completed laying the pitch, which cost 3 million yuan (\$460,000). The funds were provided by the central and local governments, and the pitch was put into use at the beginning of the year.

Now, villagers — male and female, old and young — have a bigger and dedicated place to play sports, sing, sunbathe and hold festivals.

"Before, people tended to fill their time by eating and drinking wine together, but now they exercise. We see lots of energetic villagers instead of tipsy ones," said Yang Bin, a 40-year-old resident.

People from neighboring villages also benefit, and they often take part in friendly matches or join in with the Dong Grand Chorus.

The art form — a traditional multi-voiced type of music made by people from the Dong ethnic group — was included in UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Dong people who live in Yangwei often perform the songs at local festivals.

"Hundreds or even thousands of spectators come to the pitch for the games or the festival chorus. That enhances the friendship and feeling of unity between our close neighbors and us," Yang said.

He earns about 50,000 yuan a year in Shanghai, driving a truck for a factory, but during the harvest season he returns to his hometown to help with farm work.



Clockwise from left: Villagers from the Dong ethnic group sing and play instruments on the soccer field in February. Residents who left to become migrant workers play soccer on a trip home. Players pose for a group photo after a soccer game in February.

Last year, per capita disposable income in the village reached 8,000 yuan, from 6,000 yuan in 2018.

As a result, the Yangwei authorities removed 467 people from a list of impoverished residents. They were the last members of the population of 2,265 to be officially declared free from poverty in the village.

Cooperation

The soccer pitch has helped the villagers lead healthier lives as their incomes and standard of living have improved.

In February, Yang and some fellow residents organized a mixed-sex

soccer competition between married and single people, including his 20-year-old daughter who studies at a college in Duyun city, Guizhou.

"My team, the married one, won, but it doesn't matter who wins so long as everyone has fun," Yang said. "After learning to play soccer, the villagers have become more cooperative and more willing to do things for the public well-being, including cleaning the streets."

Despite the game's growing popularity, when the plan to lay the soccer pitch was first mooted, a few of the villagers disagreed because they thought the facility would bring no

benefits and would occupy much-needed farmland. "Few villagers knew anything about soccer or the rules. Some didn't even know what soccer was, so they saw it as a useless activity," Yang said.

In May last year, the village committee held a meeting to discuss where to lay the pitch. Finally, the 8,250-square-meter pitch was laid mainly on barren land, but also on some farmland.

Wu Min, the village head, said it was decided that residents who volunteered land would be allowed to use fields owned by the entire village as recompense.

encourage people to stay as long as possible. They can drink coffee or red wine and even pick fresh vegetables," Tan said.

In 2017, Chengdu Economic Daily reported that Sanhe had hired coaches from the city's Southwest Petroleum University to provide weekend training sessions for teenagers from the village and other nearby settlements.

Villagers can attend the camp, which provides two-hour sessions every weekend, for free, while outsiders pay 200 yuan a month.

"Teenage soccer teams usually generate more income than adult ones because the parents often accompany their children and spend money in the village," Tan told the newspaper.

In 2018, per capita income in the village reached 23,423 yuan —

Village cadres promised that residents would be able to use the pitch free of charge and said it would add impetus to moves to develop tourism and rural entertainment venues. They also took the lead in guiding and organizing locals in maintenance work.

National plan

Establishing soccer pitches is part of a national plan to improve public health by boosting participation in sports.

In July 2019, the National Development and Reform Commission and the General Administration of Sports issued a guideline that aimed to promote the development of soccer and other sports, along with related businesses.

The NDRC selected a number of demonstration cities and counties nationwide and arranged funds from the central budget to subsidize the laying of a number of soccer pitches. Venues were built in the provinces of Hebei, Guangdong, Sichuan, Fujian and Guizhou.

Meng Wei, a commission spokesperson, told a 2019 press conference that the number of soccer facilities in China was inadequate, while distribution was poor and the utilization rate was low.

"The move will meet the rising demand for better physical fitness among the populace and encourage greater participation in soccer games," she said.

Wu, the Yangwei village head, is now in discussions with the Guizhou Evening News to found a soccer club and provide one-on-one guidance for children who love the game.

He added that the village committee is planning to train hundreds of children from both rural and urban areas.

"The rural scenery and traditional culture will help attract young fans to our field for training," he said.

Yangwei is also building a reception center for non-residents who visit to play soccer, while a museum is being planned to display old photos and artifacts, such as traditional tools and clothes.

"The soccer pitch is providing the opportunity to develop sports tourism and is a good way to renew rural areas," Wu said.

Wang Jin contributed to this story.

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double that in 2013, Tan said.

"The villagers have an intense desire for better facilities and new job opportunities. They no longer have to go to cities for work because they can earn good money in the coffee shops and hotels at home," he added.

In March 2019, the village held a starry sky music festival, which attracted tens of thousands of visitors.

Tan said it is vital to attract skilled new residents such as architects, interior designers and talented musicians.

In September, China Sports Daily reported that the village had cooperated with the Chengdu Sport University to build an industry research base. Sanhe has also joined hands with the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in the provincial capital to introduce performances in coffee shops in the village.

TALKING POINT

Exercise provides a range of benefits



Li Hongyang

I am not the kind of person who usually gets on well with children. I have never been confident dealing with them because I don't know what they like or dislike.

However, I recently found myself revising that opinion at my best friend's home after an enjoyable time playing a game with her 7-year-old cousin.

That inspired two thoughts: first, children tend to have good relationships with adults who play games with them; second, they need more sports training.

The boy and I played with a balloon as if it were a volleyball. Since the "ball" was light and floated easily, it was easy for the little boy to hit.

We both enjoyed the game, but I was not as persistent as him. For nearly an hour, he performed beyond my expectations because I had thought that children were unable to focus their attention easily.

When I left, he waved goodbye to me. I could tell from his eyes that he wanted me to stay longer and continue our game. It was one of the few times a child had shown me such obvious friendship.

Sports are not only about physical benefits but also mental ones. Games create relaxing atmospheres for families, improve people's reactions and enhance concentration.

However, packed academic schedules mean children in China rarely have time for sports. Moreover, there is a lack of sports fields and guidance from busy parents and schools.

Last year, the Ministry of Education said students in primary, middle and high schools should exercise for at least one hour a day.

It also strictly forbade schools from replacing physical education classes with other subjects. That's a big temptation because universities use exam scores as major criteria for admission.

In rural China, schools are short of sporting facilities, so students have fewer chances to play games such as soccer, ping-pong and badminton.

In urban areas, schools are better equipped with exercise facilities but students have more distractions, including electronic devices, family activities and extracurricular classes.

Busy parents, common in both rural and urban areas, have little extra energy to accompany their children to outdoor activities.

Soccer pitches in the rural areas in the southwestern provinces of Sichuan and Guizhou are part of attempts to expand awareness of sports nationwide.

Some of the residents of Yangwei, a village in Guizhou that was once classified as poverty-stricken, had never heard of soccer and didn't know the rules.

That didn't stop them from eagerly trying the game on their new pitch, though.

Beginning to play sports does not necessarily require formal training or knowledge, but interest is paramount.

Likewise, establishing games fields does not require comprehensive planning that takes every factor into consideration, including local people's level of education and financial situations.

Any sports field, no matter how simple, can pique people's interest in exercise.

When sports fields are used well, families are united, people's productivity and creativity are strengthened and children's talent is tapped.

To ensure that every county, village or community has a games field goes some way to ensuring that every child has a chance to become a sports fan.

Of course, very few will become athletes or win gold medals, but they will have more options to spend time with their family instead of staring at their phones in separate rooms.

The game's afoot for eager residents

By LI HONGYANG

Soccer has become a major reason for people to gather together in a rural part of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province.

Since the Sanhe village committee completed laying two 3,000-square-meter soccer pitches in 2016, more than 100,000 visitors have visited annually to play or watch games, authorities said.

"We were surprised at the result and didn't expect so many visitors," said Tan Jie, Party chief of the village. Tan came up with the idea in 2013 as a way of attracting people from nearby areas and improving sales of agricultural produce.

Soccer fans from cities in the province, such as Shifang and Guanghan, have taken part in games in the village.

The large numbers of visitors saw the sales revenue for grapefruit, a major crop in the village, rise from 9,000 yuan (\$1,376) per 0.067 hectare in 2013 to 20,000 yuan in 2018.

In 2017, Chengdu Economic Daily reported that the winning team in a 2015 soccer competition, the first held in the village, received 6,000 yuan and 50 kilograms of grapefruit.

Every year, the soccer season on the two pitches lasts six months, and the sponsors pay for the fruit given to the 30 participating teams.

Wang Xiong, from Chengdu, told

the newspaper that the fruit tasted good and that he and his teammates always bought some to take home after soccer games.

Party chief Tan and his colleagues have also overseen construction of other soccer-themed tourist facilities, including restaurants, homestays and a recording studio.

"The aim of developing the industry is to improve villagers' livelihoods. Sports are just the beginning because we will add more facilities," he said.

After each game, the players and spectators have a meal in the village and some even stay overnight.

"We have created a good environment and the hotels and shops

encourage people to stay as long as possible. They can drink coffee or red wine and even pick fresh vegetables," Tan said.

In 2017, Chengdu Economic Daily reported that Sanhe had hired coaches from the city's Southwest Petroleum University to provide weekend training sessions for teenagers from the village and other nearby settlements.

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