

LIFE



A sailfish print created by Yu Qinyuan. The art form usually features calligraphy, stamps and seals. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Paintings to scale

The ancient practice of 'fish printing', once used to record the achievements of Chinese anglers, has evolved into a treasured traditional art form, **Cheng Yuezhu** reports.

Anglers are likely to recount "big fish" stories about herculean battles with silver-scaled kraken. These usually end with the declaration, "It was definitely at least this big!", as they exaggeratedly gesticulate with their hands to indicate the vastly overstated length of their former aquatic nemesis.

It was probably much easier to persuade people that these tales were true before the age of camera-laden smartphones.

However, even before the invention of photography itself, avid anglers around the world came up with inventive ways to prove the legitimacy of, and record, the outstanding fish they managed to land. While those in the West opted for things like fish taxidermy, in China a different method was used to, literally, mark an impressive catch — one that has since evolved into a traditional art form.

The method is called *yuta*, or fish printing. People apply paint to the fish and press it on paper to record its exact shape and size, and such details as the texture of its scales, fins and tail.

Yu Qinyuan, a native of Gaomi, a county-level city of Weifang, Shandong province, has been a leading figure in inheriting, practicing and promoting the art form.

The 56-year-old was first exposed to the practice as a child.

"I grew up with my grandparents, a scholarly family, who knew the basic fish-printing techniques. When they caught a big fish, they'd print it and frame it as a memento," he recalls.

Yu has been practicing fish printing full time for 10 years. During that time, he has learned from masters from around the country and developed his own systematic approach to the art form.

The uniqueness of fish printing, Yu says, lies in that it is able to precisely capture the details of the fish species. "Each fish scale has



Yu Qinyuan hosts fish-printing trainings in his studio in Gaomi, Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"I grew up with my grandparents ... who knew the basic fish-printing techniques. When they caught a big fish, they'd print it and frame it as a memento."

Yu Qinyuan, a practitioner of fish printing

its distinctive texture, like a person's fingerprint. The texture cannot be drawn by even the most perceptive painter but is clearly visible when rubbed onto the paper."

He says that a fundamental rule of fish printing is to not use a pen or brush to add any details to the fish. The only exception to the rule is the eyes, which require a great painting technique and often take longer than the printing process.

The origin of fish printing remains unclear.

According to Yu, there is no written record of the art form in historical records, and no ancient works have been found.

But experts believe that the art form might date back to ancient China, as the techniques resemble that of stone rubbings from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). For instance, both art forms use a dabber.

The art form is now known best in Japan as *gyotaku*, meaning fish rubbing. In China, a small group of practitioners are working to promote the art form.

Yu estimates that fewer than 1,000 people in the country have mastered the skill.

"The Chinese style of fish printing has influences from traditional Chinese painting. Upon completing the printing, usually we would adorn it with drawings of plants and landscapes, calligraphy and also stamps and seals," Yu says.

The Chinese aesthetics are also reflected in the color choices.

While most of the time the artists would select colors to create the original shades of the fish, works

commissioned by clients would often use red, as many consider the red koi fish to be auspicious.

Yu is currently working on a 20-meter scroll that incorporates 22 varieties of fish that inhabit Shandong's Weihe River.

Yu led the successful effort to include fish printing on Gaomi's intangible cultural heritage list and the equivalent list of Weifang city this June.

"To be honest, fish printing does not have a standardized system like Chinese watercolors or calligraphy. There are only a handful of practitioners around the country. So each year we will meet up a few times to discuss the techniques, tackle problems together, learn and progress," Yu says.

Yu now has his own studio in Gaomi that aims to promote fish printing. He occasionally hosts short-term training courses in Beijing. So far, more than 100 people have learned the skill from him, either in one of these courses or at his studio.

Yu considers Yan Beiyu one of his best students. She has attended four of his training sessions.

Her interest started in 2018, when she enrolled her 4-year-old daughter on the course as she thought it would be a good approach to introducing children to traditional art. She did not expect to develop an interest in the subject herself.

Yan took the next three sessions by herself and went back to teach her daughter. Now, the entire family practices the skill.

"Yu's teaching method is very detailed and approachable. It's easy for people of all ages to understand and master. He also explains a lot about the origins of the genre and discusses the future of fish printing, and what we can do to promote the art form. It really is a traditional art form suitable for all ages," Yan says.

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Mongolian yurts making a comeback

HOHHOT — Yurts have been transformed with modern encasements and glass domes in Burenbayar's "experimental yurt field" on the vast grasslands of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region's Hulunbuir.

The 39-year-old operates a yurt company in Chen Barga Banner. Over the past 20 years, he has manufactured over 3,000 kinds of yurts.

A traditional yurt, or *ger*, is a portable, round tent covered with animal skin or felt and used as a dwelling by ethnic Mongolians and other nomadic groups. As nomadic life has gradually faded into history, people rarely use yurts as dwellings, aside from tourists who hope to catch a glimpse of past lifestyles.

With Burenbayar's innovative ideas injected into the manufacturing technique, traditional yurts have taken on a new look, attracting orders from across the country and raking in profits.

Born into a herders' family, Burenbayar has been a fan of yurts since he was a child.

"Although I was raised in a brick house, I loved staying at my relatives' yurt on the grassland," he says, adding that his parents always had to drag him home as he was reluctant to leave the yurt.

He was thrilled to hear that one of his relatives opened a Mongolian yurt workshop and offered to work there in 2000. In the plant, he learned how to erect a pole in the center, assemble windows and the door and cover the main structure with felt.

Despite the meager income of 1,000 yuan (\$140) per month at the workshop, Burenbayar was delighted as he had acquired all the skills of manufacturing yurts in three years.

He decided to leave the workshop in 2003 because his relatives rejected his proposed innovations.

"Times have changed. And yurts should be adapted to modern needs," he says.

In 2006, he set up his own workshop. He has explored different ways to make the yurts larger and more comfortable for tourists.

The largest one he made was 30 meters in diameter and can hold more than 100 people. It is meant for performances.

"I have replaced the central wooden pole with a steel one to make the large yurt stable and wind-resistant," he says, adding that he has filed patents for several of his innovative ideas.

He has designed yurts to resemble hotel rooms, equipped with card-activated door locks, a shower section and a flush toilet.

"Staying in an ethnic Mongolian yurt has become a must for grassland tours, and a hotel room-like yurt makes tourists feel safe and comfortable," he says.

Based on tourists' preferences, Burenbayar has also designed yurts with glass domes so that people can enjoy starry night skies. A trinity yurt has been created to house family members and friends in three interconnected rooms.

Despite innovations, he continues to incorporate some traditional elements, such as the central pole and leather ropes used to hold up the walls.

"I was told by the older generations that the dome of a Mongolian yurt is a symbol of ethnic unity on the grassland. It is impossible to support any dome if the central pole is missing," he says, adding that traditional culture has to be preserved no matter what innovations are made.

His company has generated an annual revenue of 4.6 million yuan, with a profit of roughly 1 million yuan. The company also brings income to some 80 herders, including five from households previously living below the poverty line.

His company has produced about 70 percent of the yurts in Hulunbuir's resorts. His yurts have even been sold in Beijing, and the provinces of Sichuan and Liaoning.

"I hope more people will fall in love with Mongolian yurts like me, as well as traditional Mongolian culture and the beautiful grasslands of the region."

XINHUA



Burenbayar experiments with innovative ideas to modernize traditional yurts in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region. XINHUA

