

YOUTH



Down memory lane

Videos of wobbly TV aerials, black-and-white programs, and ice cream sold on the back of a bike reveal a yearning for yesteryear, **Xu Lin** reports.

A black-and-white TV set is broadcasting a scene with Monkey King from *Journey to the West*, a series first aired in the 1980s and adapted from a classical Chinese novel of the same name.

Back then, getting a good TV signal was not always guaranteed and aerials often had to be adjusted by hand to get watchable transmission.

Now the scene is being repeated as we step back in time. Wang Cunjin carefully turns a long pole attached to an old-fashioned TV aerial in the yard and holds it to get a strong and stable signal.

The black-and-white short video showing this long-lost ritual, filmed by Wang, which went viral last summer, is only one of his works that arouse feelings of nostalgia for the 1980s and '90s among Chinese internet users. They comment that these short videos made them "time travel" to the old days.

"It's all about authenticity, so that you can touch the viewers instantly. These videos make them recall their pleasant childhood memories and happiness," says Wang, 36, living in Jining city, Shandong province. He has over 1.27 million fans on short-video platform Kuaishou.

"It's a period when people's material living standards were lower than nowadays, but they knew that happiness was found in contentment and pressures were also lower."

His original inspiration was from a visit to a family, when he spotted an old TV aerial. "It suddenly summoned up my childhood memories. I visualized these scenes in my mind, but I had to search online to learn how to edit the video," he says.

In early 2018, he started to post different kinds of short videos, like funny jokes, on Kuaishou, but it's not until the sudden success of the TV tuning video that he decided to make nostalgic content reliving common scenes from the 1980s and '90s.

To create a perfect shooting environment, he rents a house with a yard in a less populated area of the city. He also collects daily use items from the 1980s and '90s from secondhand markets and recycling stations, as well as some pieces from his friends, neighbors and fans.



Wang Cunjin and his son, Wang Zixuan, are presented with a best performance award at the short video film festival held by video-sharing platform Douyin last year, by director Ning Hao (left) and director-actor Xu Zheng (right). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"Audiences empathize easily with old stuff, such as a cassette recorder," he says.

He, his wife and their 12-year-old son are the lead "actors" in the short videos, with common family scenes from the old days. Wang and his son are always dressed in traditional Chinese tunic suits.

Attire is important and used imaginatively. With a cone-shaped bamboo-woven hat, the father is transformed into a peddler riding on a bicycle and hawking on the streets in the local dialect. He pretends to sell popsicles stored in an insulated foam thermo-box perched precariously on the back of an old bike.

"Most of my videos are based on my own childhood experience. I also talk with the elderly and read internet users' comments about my videos to get inspiration," he says.

In the 1950s, the central government set up a program to show films in rural areas. Wang recalls that, when he was a child, a projectionist would erect a large square cloth as the screen and show a film outdoors in the village free of charge. Villagers would bring their stools out when they heard, from a loudspeaker, that the film was about to start. The sense of excitement was palpable.

"It was my favorite entertainment. Our village began to bustle at night. People were everywhere (when the film was showing), and some were

even sitting on top of a nearby wall (for better viewing)," he says.

To revive these vivid memories in a short video, he visited an elderly projectionist and invited him to show a movie outdoors with his vintage projector. Wang also invited over a dozen villagers to participate as the audience.

"For me, it's a 'big production' as I need more 'extras'," he says. Another "big production" is about farmers transporting their grain in handcarts and using it to pay agricultural tax. This practice was abolished in 2006.

About 30 people were in the video, but over a hundred, who were working the land nearby, came to watch out of curiosity.

In the past, it was not uncommon for rural dwellers to exchange daily necessities with each other, rather than paying for something with money.

In August 2019, his video about villagers exchanging sesame seeds for sesame oil from a peddler won a best performance award in a short video film festival hosted by video-sharing platform Douyin. Director Ning Hao and director-actor Xu Zheng presented the award to him and his son onstage.

"The award made me think that all my hard work is worthwhile. It's a great honor and encouraged me to produce more short videos," he says. "As the bread winner, I was putting

all my energy into it and I didn't have a regular job. My family is still in debt due to my previous business. At that time, they wanted me to give up filming videos as they thought it was a waste of time."

Once he came back to his hometown, a village in Shandong, an 8-year-old recognized him. The boy was a fan and gave him snacks as gifts. "I want to pass on positive energy via my videos, especially when I find out that some of my fans are kids," he says.

He made a short video to introduce some toys and physical exercises that were once popular in his childhood. He says now, even in the rural areas, kids play with smartphones, and he wishes that children would do sport after class.

He doesn't shoot videos about how he used to bathe in a river, because he's worried that children might imitate it and that it may lead to accidents.

His son, Wang Zixuan, says: "Filming with my father makes me understand the simple happiness of rural life. I'm also glad to learn to play with some toys that I've never seen before."

Wang Cunjin didn't finish junior middle school and became a laborer. He then served in the army for two years. In 2006, the ex-serviceman worked in a factory in the city as a security guard for four years and became an electrician.

In 2010, he opened an online store on Taobao, the country's biggest e-commerce platform, and learned how to take and retouch photos of his goods.

Now, for him, being an influencer has become a full-time job and he wants to attract more fans with good-quality work.

"I'm glad that my videos have received public recognition. I've also made friends across the country. Some fans will send me old items for my videos and give me ideas for new films," he says.

China Internet Network Information Center reported that up to March 2020, the number of internet users in rural areas of China was 255 million, accounting for 28.2 percent of the national total.

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Clockwise from top left: Wang Cunjin repairs an old-fashioned TV aerial. He is on an old motorbike in his courtyard home in Jining, Shandong province, beside an old bike refitted to sell popsicles. Wang and his son with their black-and-white TV set. Wang acts as a watermelon peddler that visits many villages to trade with people. A corner of his home with a collection of old items.

No place like homestay as rustic approach pays off

By YANG FEIYUE  
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Homestay owner Zheng Yunfang has been busy answering customers' calls, taking down their information, while checking the booking status of her hostelry since early August.

"Our 18 guest rooms were fully booked over the past few weeks, and we've received bookings up to November," says Zheng, in her 50s, who runs Ziming Mountain Villa in Shuikou village, East China's Zhejiang province.

Most of her guests have been to her place before, and they often bring in new guests during their visits, Zheng says. "By the look of things, business shouldn't be a problem in the second half of the year."

As cross-provincial tourism has resumed nationwide, locals in Shuikou are back in business and looking forward to a full recovery of the local tourism industry.

Just walking distance away from Zheng's villa, another local homestay owner, Song Chaofeng, in his 30s, has begun receiving visitors as well.

He is starting to reap the reward of an earlier promotion of his homestay on the short-video app Douyin, also known as TikTok. As an experiment, Song made a video featuring local food and landscapes earlier this year and uploaded it online after a bit of simple editing.

"It was a total surprise that several thousand people watched it the next day," Song says.

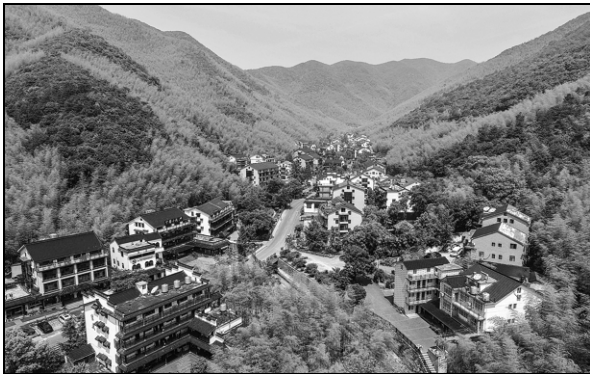
Tourist Qi Jia, in her 30s, recently visited Song's place with her family after flipping through Song's Douyin account.

"My child loves playing table tennis here, and my parents love the distinctive rural-style breakfast, with fresh and nutritious food that is picked right from the field," says the traveler from Shanghai. "It feels right to come here."

At the moment, Song says he will focus on maintaining the quality of his homestay operations and updating his fans online on the latest developments.

"Hopefully, they can all come here and experience what we have to offer," Song says.

Shuikou village is home to 10,000



Shuikou village of Zhejiang province has been a favorite destination of urban travelers to the Yangtze River Delta region, with its fresh food, greenery and outdoor activities. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

residents, and about 30 percent of them are engaged in the homestay business. The village has evolved into one of the major rural tourism destinations in the Yangtze River Delta region over the years.

The COVID-19 outbreak dealt a heavy blow to the village, where

tourism has been a pillar industry.

For several months, many local villagers couldn't sell their farm produce, much of which was prepared for tourists.

"We've been thinking about how to turn the crisis into opportunities," says Zhang Yuhua, director of

Shuikou's ecology and tourism office. Some of them first tried to sell stockpiled agricultural products online, which turned out to be an effective solution.

"We had more than 800 orders in just a week," says Jiang Caihong, a local homestay owner, who began to sell fresh food through her WeChat account.

"Many guests were quarantined at home and couldn't go out shopping," Jiang says.

To date, about one third of the nearly 600 homestay business operators in Shuikou have managed to get an income from selling local agricultural products and specialties online, according to the local authority.

"It's not just a new approach for villagers to increase their income, but also an effective way of maintaining customer relationships and expanding the source of customers," Zhang says.

The pandemic has also urged locals to push ahead with upgrades to their homestay facilities and service infrastructure.

Before the outbreak, the village

had enjoyed good tourism business, but most operations were not quality-driven and featured an underdeveloped service concept, he says. "During the pandemic prevention and control period, people increasingly preferred high-quality travel, which requires us to adapt and change."

The village launched a campaign to spruce up courtyards and, during the past few months, offered improvement advice for individual homestays.

Decorative walls, trees and flowers have been put in place, and buildings along the village road have been given a face-lift.

The idea is to create a spectacle every step of the way, he says.

Local homestay owners have also joined various training sessions to learn what makes a good host, such as tea making, musical instrument recitals, cooking and photography skills.

So far, a tourism project that digs into the Tang Dynasty (618-907) culture while showcasing modern Chinese trends is under development and will come down the pike in September, according to Zhang.

"Most of our customers have been middle-aged or seniors, so, hopefully, this program will attract more young people," he says.