

LIFE



Folk artists display their achievements in reviving traditional crafts at the Sixth China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo in Jinan, Shandong province. The expo also shows how these time-honored crafts help people in rural areas to fight against poverty.
PHOTOS BY ZHAO RUIXUE / CHINA DAILY

Crafting prosperity

Intangible cultural heritage is being used to create jobs, **Zhao Ruixue** reports in Jinan.

Traditional handicrafts are getting a new life through poverty-reduction programs in China. The Sixth China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo kicked off on Oct 23 in Jinan, East China's Shandong province, showcasing information about 46 poverty-alleviation projects that used intangible cultural heritage and 84 heritage items from across China.

Dressed in clothing bearing horsetail embroidery, Song Shuixian, a national-level inheritor of the intangible heritage of Sandu county in Southwest China's Guizhou province, promoted such embroidered products at the expo.

Horsetail embroidery uses horse hair and silk thread as raw material. The skill of weaving horse hair with thread and sewing traditional patterns has been passed down for generations by the Shui ethnic group in Guizhou.

"In the past, the embroidery appeared on small garments such as aprons, but now we put them on daily clothes, handbags and notebooks to increase the embroidery's commercial value and meet consumers' demand," Song says.

The 54-year-old ethnic Shui woman started learning horsetail embroidery from her mother as a child. Since then, she has dedicated herself to protecting and promoting the handicraft.

Following her suggestion, a center for protecting and inheriting horsetail embroidery was founded in Sandu last year.

"Now we have a better place to train more women in the skills of horsetail embroidery, and many of them are in their 20s and 30s," Song says.

To date, more than 1,000 women have been trained there, helping around 300 families overcome poverty.

"Today, many women choose to stay at home to make embroidery products instead of working in the cities," says Song, adding that some women can raise their families as well.

To link intangible cultural heritage with poverty-alleviation projects, the



Song Shuixian (center) demonstrates the skills of traditional embroidery in a poverty-relief workshop in Sandu county, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

government has established workshops since 2018 where people living in impoverished regions are trained to make products such as pottery, teapots, embroidery, silver items and paper-cuts.

Over 2,000 poverty-relief workshops had been established by October, involving 2,200 intangible cultural heritage projects, according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The workshops have trained 180,000 people, provided jobs for 500,000 people and helped to bring 200,000 families out of poverty.

Pan Shixue from Maliao village in Leishan county of Guizhou province opened a workshop in 2018 after attending a training class on making silver products with skills handed down by the Miao ethnic group.

Maliao is an old village known for its silver products. The process of making the items involves multiple steps, including casting, carving and washing silver. It was listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage in 2006.

But due to the lack of transportation and poor conditions of the village, most young people had abandoned the handicraft and went to work in cities.

With rural revitalization carried out in recent years, many young people have started to return to villages. Pan is one of them. His workshop provides jobs to families who once lived in poverty.

"The outcome is beyond my expectation. Within two years, I have reached the goal that I had set to reach in five years," says Pan.

"I feel great that I can make a good living by making traditional handicrafts. More importantly, I can hand down our culture."

Central China's Hunan province is another place where handicraft workshops are being used as platforms to promote traditional heritage for commercial purposes.

By the first half of this year, 152 workshops had been opened in 52 impoverished counties in the province, providing jobs for 72,000 people, 68,000 of whom have

escaped poverty, according to the provincial culture and tourism authority.

At the recent Shandong expo, Hunan put up stalls where ethnic Miao embroidery, batik and bamboo weaving were displayed.

Shi Jia, an inheritor of Miao embroidery in Hunan, says at the expo that one such workshop in the province had trained over 1,000 ethnic Miao women to make traditional embroidery products and more than 400 of them had already signed up for work there.

Shi says a woman who worked for the workshop could earn from 1,000 yuan to 2,000 yuan (\$150-\$300) each month.

"The workshops are expected to cultivate the vitality of intangible cultural heritage to help more people lead better lives," Zhao Gang, head of the Arts and Crafts School of Suzhou Art and Design Technology Institute, says at the expo.

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Cotton farmer sets sights on tourism

URUMQI — Kulesi Rehim, 54, spent nearly half of his life growing cotton in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. However, locals regard him as a businessman.

"They call me *baiha*, which is similar to the pronunciation of department store," says Kulesi, who is a resident of southern Xinjiang's cotton hub, Yuli county.

Kulesi's nickname stems from his experience of working as a shop assistant at a department store after graduating from a vocational school in the late 1980s when China's reform and opening-up drive started to sweep across the country. Through hard work and having a keen sense of emerging trends, he soon rose to become the store's director.

Yuli started to promote reclaiming wasteland to boost agricultural production in the 1990s, and Kulesi was one of the first locals to heed the call. He started in 1995 with about 3 hectares of barren fields to plant cotton. In 2000, Kulesi became a full-time cotton farmer as the local government encouraged development in the private sector.

His cotton fields kept growing in

the area, thanks to his devotion and a pioneering spirit to try the latest technologies. In 2006, Kulesi managed 46.7 hectares of cotton fields and became the first cotton farmer in Yuli to try drip irrigation. The efficiency of the technology further expanded his cotton fields.

He led local farmers in using machines to harvest cotton in 2016 and using agricultural drones to

spray pesticides and defoliants in 2019. Now, Kulesi owns over 86 hectares of cotton fields.

Twenty-five years of cotton growing has brought Kulesi a prosperous life. He built a well-furnished house of more than 200 square meters.

However, Kulesi's career focus has shifted away from the cotton fields. In 2018, he contracted with a professional cotton farmer to manage his cotton fields and made a foray into the tourism sector.

Yuli, which is located near China's largest desert and features the unique Lop Nur culture, has seen

robust tourism growth in recent years. The county received nearly 2.15 million visitors and raked in 375 million yuan (\$56 million) in 2019, increasing by about 53 percent and 89 percent year-on-year, respectively.

Kulesi has invested about 6 million yuan to build a folk-custom garden in the county to offer catering and accommodation for visitors.

"Hard work pays off, and most importantly, you have to keep pace with the times to seize emerging opportunities," he says.

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