

YOUTH



Far left, left top and above: Children create a carousel-like installation, called *Blooming Time*, in Puge county, Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture, Sichuan province, as part of a program helping cultivate youngsters' creativity in rural areas. They dismantle bicycles to make the major structure of the installation and use plants to decorate the canopies.
Left below: Students enjoy a Quidditch game with plastic drain pipes as they participate in the creativity program in Dabie Mountain area in Hubei province.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Under the cloudy night sky lit by fireworks, a group of schoolchildren takes a "carousel ride" to celebrate a traditional torch festival in Puge county, Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture, Sichuan province.

This "carousel" is a new toy they make themselves — with 12 bicycles joining each other to form a circle. The inside space is dotted with colorful solar lamps.

As the 12 children ride the bicycles, the bright yellow installation turns round and round — just like a carousel in theme parks.

The torch festival, which fell on Aug 2 this year, is for the Yi people to pray for a good harvest. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented large-scale celebrations, the children did get a new fantasy instead.

Nan Xueqian is one of the initiators of Program Spark which helps nurture the creativity of children. The bicycle installation, *Blooming Time*, is inspired by the strong emotional connection among children.

It was the fourth time Beijing-based One Take Architects, together with Wuhan-based social enterprise group, Sunners, launched the weeklong program. It aims to motivate "left-behind" children — 8 to 12 years old — to use easily available material to create large playthings for themselves under the guidance of architects and volunteers.

"When I was at this age, I was no longer satisfied with little hand-works but always dreamed of something big enough to put myself in," Li Hao, founder of One Take Architects, says about his original intention of the program.

He grew an interest in the education of "left-behind" children when he worked with projects in the countryside in 2015.

He discovered that as living conditions improved, another problem became evident. Apart from their parents' work — the majority do blue-collar jobs in cities, the children barely knew what other choices, such as more creative job

opportunities, could possibly lie in their future.

Li then wanted to give rural children an example: What an architect can be good at.

This year around 30 pupils from Te'erguo township's central primary school joined the making of the "carousel" and some of them learned to ride a bicycle for the first time.

Before the architects set off from their city base, they had prepared for a month.

They managed to get 12 bicycles out of use, designed the main structure of the "carousel" and completed the whole process for testing before tearing it down again and deciding what tools the children would use. They made a manual introducing the assembling steps one by one.

Fun-filled activities

It was the children who took the lead in designing the canopies made from canvas and thermoplastic sheets.

They collected local plants, covered them on the sheets and sprayed pigments on them to form patterns. They also pasted white tape in the shape of Yi characters on the canopies.

The Yi characters are a set of single fonts, mainly symbolizing their meanings, with some also indicating the pronunciation. The earliest document with Yi characters dates to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

Yi families usually speak the language in daily conversation, but not many children know how to write it these days.

Li says that during the program, the volunteers took the characters from books. They also learned how to pronounce the characters from the school cook.

It was not easy for the children to learn to ride, but the installation could move while being stable enough so they did not fall. Meanwhile, it could not turn around smoothly if any of the children slacked off in pedaling.

The architects and volunteers hoped the children could safely maintain their physical balance and coordination while learning to

Nurturing a younger generation

Program for children in rural areas aims to get them to use daily items in creative ways, **Fang Aiqing** reports.



Children in Puge county, Sichuan province, show part of their creation, featuring Yi characters and patterns made with plants.

cooperate at the same time.

Not to waste other parts of the bicycles, they also painted the fenders showing what their hometown looked like.

Sustainable efforts

The program has been designed to engage as multiple senses as possible. One of the trials took place in the Dabie Mountain area in Hubei province in 2019, where musician Tie Yang joined other participants to build a multifunctional theater with white and blue plastic drain pipes.

One of the installations, *Blue Daydream*, was a percussion instrument itself similar to old Chinese chimes. The pitch was determined by the length and thickness of the pipes. Using disposable slippers as drumsticks and accompanied by a *djembe* (African drum), the children's band was able to work out the well-known tune of *We Will Rock You*.

Just some minor rearrangements turned the installation into an amphitheater where the children performed a mini play in English. They even managed to make a ukulele.

But children making magic and casting a spell to better their surroundings means that a certain person is not too far away. Enter Harry Potter. During the break, the children spontaneously turned a balloon into a Quidditch ball — Quaffle. They designed and assembled their own clubs, and started a little Quidditch game that primed the adults for a try.

Despite all that, Li and Nan have another ambition close to their heart — they want to explore a standard system to insert such lessons into more rural schools.

The system, hopefully, can operate without the architects actually on the scene. Volunteers, usually college students majoring or interested in architecture or art, can be trained online and independently guide the children to get going with the least intervention.

The children, meanwhile, forming teams or simply creating their own work, would design the appearance and functions of the installation or

variants if any, give a presentation, discuss, vote and make the decision at last.

In fact, Li's team has already developed two such lessons: one to build conical shelters with thin, flexible tubes and painted plastic sheets, and the other a toy block course.

Li says they have uploaded program information online for reference without charge.

A boy attending a 2018 program in Hubei province wrote in his diary: "I enjoyed concentrating on what I liked doing today, not to ask and not be bothered, but I'm more looking forward to tomorrow's workshop because we're going to use a drill. A real man must know how to use a drill!"

And the next day he continued: "The drill is powerful, efficient and soaked me with sweat, but then I've got a clue how hard my father works, in the heat and without complaints."

As son of a construction worker, the boy says he wants to thank all the fathers who fight for their families.

Program Spark has won the innovative design award for people under 40 at this year's China Eco Design Award held by Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation.

"With mature operation experience and the capability for relatively large-scale replication, the program can benefit more 'left-behind' children," says designer Zhang Na, from the award jury.

Zhang adds that from creating, experiencing, sharing to interacting, the program has helped build a complete solution to tackle creativity and boost morale among the participants.

Li says: "Rural revitalization is not just about upgrading infrastructure, but also about nurturing the younger generation. It's like sowing seeds and we have to wait for 10 years to see whether it brings positive economic, social and environmental linkages between urban, semi-urban and rural areas."

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