

TREND

E-commerce lets a village thrive

Xuezhuang, a village in southern Shandong province, is well-known for its willow products. Now, the internet is letting its residents, including its young people, make a decent living. **Chen Nan** reports.

As the temperature rises to 35 C in the early afternoon, Liu Yuesheng places another finished pet basket on the pile in his home, which is almost touching the ceiling. And despite sweat streaming down his face, he is working on weaving a willow cushion.

Born and raised in a small village called Xuezhuang, located in Tancheng county, 90 kilometers from Linyi city, in southern Shandong province, Liu, 48, has been weaving willow since young.

He says that the people of the village have been planting willow trees and weaving willow straw into various products — from furniture to decorations — for generations.

The villagers never made much money from their willow products until the village comprising around 1,000 people — led by pioneers like Liu — discovered Taobao, an online shopping platform of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, in 2011.

Now, with four online stores on Taobao.com and one store on Alibaba's business-to-consumer site Tmall, Liu has sold thousands of products nationwide with yearly income crossing 4 million yuan (\$601,000).

"In the past, we sold our products to nearby commodities markets, but now we run our own businesses, which gives us freedom and more money," says Liu.

"All my family members, including my two sons, who have just graduated from university, are working for the online stores. Our buyers range from individuals to companies. We also design products for customers."

According to Wang Yanping, the head of Xuezhuang village, weaving willow is a traditional skill in the village with a nearly 300-year history.

Following Liu's success, nearly all the families in the village have learned how to combine their traditional skills and e-commerce.

The village, which has land measuring more than 1,100 mu (73 hectares) under willow

“Opening an online store is free. You don't need a large space, or much funding.”

Wang Chao, head of Linyi Qiaoyi E-Commerce Company

cultivation, sold woven willow products worth more than 60 million yuan in 2015, earning it the title "Taobao village".

Slogans written on the village walls now say "Gold bowls and silver bowls can't beat willow bowls", replacing phrases promoting the family-planning policies.

In recent years, the country's urbanization has changed people's lives in rural areas. One of the biggest challenges that the rural areas have faced is that young people left for cities to make a living, which resulted in "empty nests" and "left-behind children".

Empty nests refer to the elderly, who live alone unaccompanied by any family as their children have grown up and left to pursue their own careers, while left-behind children are those left behind in rural areas under the care of relatives, mostly grandparents with little or no education, and family friends as their parents move to cities in search of work.

But thanks to the success of the willow-weaving businesses, almost all the young people are now staying in the village and managing online stores, says Wang, adding that even major delivery companies, such as Shunfeng Express, have built offices in the village to ensure good service.

"We send some of our young people to learn about e-commerce in the city and they then return and pass on their knowledge to the villagers.



Top: A willow woven craft is among the exhibits on show at the willow weaving cultural heritage center near Xuezhuang village in Shandong province. Above left: A local villager makes willow products at home. Above right: Two women make Chinese knots at the factory owned by entrepreneur Wang Chao at Honghua town in Linyi. PHOTOS BY LU PENG / XINHUA

They also teach the older generation how to use computers, and how to set up and manage a Taobao store."

Last October, the village started working on an e-commerce industry park with an investment of 20 million yuan. It will provide offices, factories and warehouses to the villag-

ers. Many residents from nearby villages have also been coming to Xuezhuang village to work and learn willow-weaving skills.

Meanwhile, according to statistics from the China Center of Information Industry Development, China's internet population has grown dramati-

cally in the past decade and by June 2015 China had 667 million internet users.

The online business model has had a dramatic impact on the lives of village youth. An example of this is Wang Chao, a 28-year-old resident of Honghua town, located at the southern end

of Tancheng county.

Speaking of how the online model has made a difference to his life, Wang, who owns Linyi Qiaoyi E-Commerce Company — the biggest online company selling Chinese knotted products — says: "Thanks to the development of e-commerce and the rising

number of Chinese online consumers, we (online entrepreneurs) not only make more money now, but also enjoy better lifestyles."

With three registered brands and nine online stores on popular e-commerce platforms — Taobao, Tmall and Jingdong — Wang sells products worth around 15 million yuan a year.

"Opening an online store is free. You don't need a large space, or much funding," says Wang, who also attributes the popularity of Chinese knots to the growing awareness of Chinese consumers about traditional Chinese culture.

"People like decorating their rooms and cars with traditional folk artwork, especially during Chinese festivals," he says.

In 2012, like many young people, who were leaving their poor villages to seek better opportunities in the cities, Wang joined an internet company in Shenzhen, in Guangdong province.

He came up with the idea of selling Chinese knots online after seeing his colleagues buying the products before the traditional Spring Festival celebrations.

He tested his idea by opening a Taobao store and selling Chinese knots, which he bought from nearby commodities markets.

The following year, Wang quit his job and returned to his hometown to start his own company.

Separately, the local government is also supporting the e-commerce trend by offering free or cheaper land for entrepreneurs to build offices and factories.

"We all want our villages to become richer and better," says Wang.

"The success of companies is not just about reviving traditional folk art, but also offering job opportunities to young people, so they don't have to leave their villages to seek jobs."

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ANTONI GAUDI

Lots of Chinese influence in the great master's works

By DENG ZHANGYU
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Although Spanish master architect Antoni Gaudi never visited China, oriental elements are widely seen in buildings designed by the genius from Barcelona, experts said at the 2nd Gaudi World Congress in Shanghai in June.

Images of Chinese dragons and porcelain and ceramics seen in many of Gaudi's works and Gaudi's philosophy of naturalism are influenced by Chinese culture, says Pere Jordi Figuerola, a historian and expert on Gaudi.

The first Gaudi World Congress held in 2014 in Barcelona saw more than 500 scholars and experts from across the globe discuss the architect's life and work.

At the congress, many experts acknowledged for the first time that Chinese culture had influenced Gaudi.

More research on this was then done following the congress, according to Hou Teh

Chien, the man behind last month's congress in Shanghai. "That's why we organized the second event in China," says Hou, adding that the congress will be held every two years until 2026.

According to research, the images of Chinese dragons, which are seen on Gaudi's buildings, were taken from ancient Chinese coins, which he had access to thanks to his close friend Eduard Toda, who was a diplomat in China from 1876 to 1882.

During his six years in China, Toda collected more than 10,000 Chinese coins, and many had images of Chinese dragons and phoenixes on them.

He also acquired lots of Chinese artworks and books, and finally became a well-known Sinologist.

It was from Toda that Gaudi learned about Chinese culture.

Gaudi even brought Toda together with one of his backers, Eusebi Guell, to discuss

buying Toda's Chinese coins.

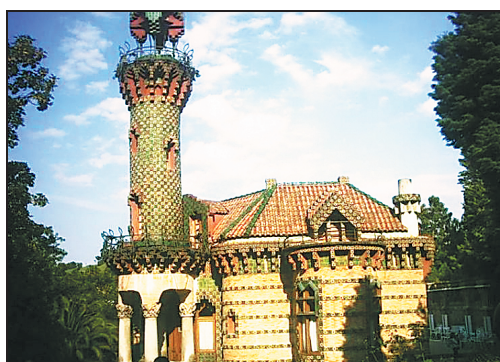
"From the coins, art works, books and photos Toda carried from China, Gaudi had a fundamental understanding of the culture and later incorporated it in his works," says Figuerola, one of the founders of the Gaudi Research Institute in Barcelona, an academic institute working with the University of Barcelona.

Figuerola says that the two tortoises under two giant stone pillars in Gaudi's signature work Sagrada Familia are definitely Chinese elements.

The Sagrada Familia is a large Roman Catholic church. Although incomplete, the church is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Construction of Sagrada Familia commenced in 1882 and Gaudi became involved in 1883, taking over the project and transforming it with his architectural and engineering style.

Gaudi devoted his last years to the project, and at the time of his death at age 73 in 1926, less than a quarter of the



El Capricho de Gaudi, a summer house built from 1883 to 1885 by Gaudi in Comillas, bears the green glaze and brackets that are unique in China's ancient architecture. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

project was complete.

Construction passed the midpoint in 2010, and the project now has an anticipated completion date of 2026, the centenary of Gaudi's death.

Other Chinese elements that Gaudi used in his works include porcelain and ceramics.

Hou says that Gaudi put lots of things from nature into his works to show a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, which in Gaudi's time was inspired by Chinese philosophy.

Hou, who was one of the first Chinese experts to study Gaudi, began that work in the 1980s.

Last year, Hou set up Gaudi Shanghai Projects to boost research on the architect as well as increase exchanges in culture and art between Spain and China. It's authorized by the Gaudi Barcelona Projects, a company formed to spread and apply knowledge all about Gaudi issued by the Gaudi Research Institute.

He plans to open a Gaudi-themed restaurant in Shanghai later this year, featuring menus inspired by Gaudi's art.

"The architect created so many marvelous works influenced by Chinese culture. Why can't we learn from him and do something in China in return," says Hou about his works on Gaudi and the plans related to him in future.

In fact, many foreign master architects influenced by Gaudi are now designing buildings for China, such as Italian architect Benedetta Tagliabue.

Tagliabue, who attended the congress in Shanghai, admits that her obsession with curved lines comes from Gaudi.

The Italian architect gained fame for her design of the Spanish Pavilion for the Shanghai Expo in 2010 and the new Scottish Parliament, a joint effort with her husband Enric Miralles.

Tagliabue is now designing the Zhang Daqian Museum in Neijiang — Zhang's hometown in Sichuan province. In her work dedicated to Zhang — one of the best-known and most prodigious Chinese artists of the 20th century — she integrates many oriental elements, such as bamboo and gourds.

She says it's very interesting that she is now doing architecture for the Chinese after she was influenced by Gaudi, who was first influenced by Eastern culture.

Hou says Gaudi's influence in the world is not only limited to architecture but includes many other fields — art, city planning and even food.

He hopes all this can be used by the Chinese to develop more creativity in the future.