

CHINA

Employment



Zhang Qiuju (center), a former migrant worker who returned to her home in Wuyi, Hebei province, and opened a business growing and selling succulents, shows customers how to care for their plants. LI XIAOQUO / XINHUA

Reverse urbanization provides new direction for rural regions

Former migrant workers are returning home and establishing their own businesses. **Jiang Chenglong** reports.

Spring Festival sees the largest annual migration in the world. During the 40 days of China's most important festival, hundreds of millions of people, most of them migrant workers, return to their hometowns from the distant cities where they work.

The great migration is inseparable from reform and opening-up, one of the country's most important policies, which started in 1978. The policy triggered rapid urbanization in the coastal regions, leading massive numbers of farmworkers from impoverished parts of central and western China to move south and east to feed the hunger for laborers in construction and other trades.



A trainer (right) demonstrates how to shape new products at a clothing factory in Binzhou, Shandong province. LIU YUHE / XINHUA

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of migrant workers hit more than 280 million last year. However, a growing number are choosing to leave the cities to return home for good and start their own businesses.

After 40 years of reform and opening-up, developed East China is witnessing a large-scale industrial transformation, with labor-intensive industries moving to central and

western parts of China, which have enormous development potential. Meanwhile, a new development model has been stepped up in the countryside and a good startup environment has been created in villages, stimulating the rural economy.

In October last year, a strategy for rural revitalization was included in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Three months

later, the State Council, China's Cabinet, released a strategy guideline that required action to be taken to promote rural startups and raise the level of employment in the countryside.

The guideline also demanded that some activities in villages should be developed more fully, including culture, science, tourism and ecotourism, while family-run factories, workshops and other facilities should be further cultivated.

The trend of migrant workers returning to start businesses has started to take shape. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, more than 7 million people arrived in, or returned to, rural areas to start businesses last year. Nearly 70 percent of them were ex-migrant workers.

In addition, preferential policies related to local financing and training are being offered to rural entrepreneurs to raise the number of centers for raising livestock, farms, agritainment — activities that attract visitors to farms — and other facilities in suitable villages.

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Returnee enjoys the fruits of his labor

By **JIANG CHENGLONG**

Once, Lyu Wei was a migrant worker who assembled iPhones at a Foxconn factory in Shenzhen in the southern province of Guangdong. Now, he sells homegrown fruit and vegetables nationwide from his startup in Shiyan, his hometown in rural Hubei province, Central China.

"I was born in 1987, and worked for my family's fish business after graduating from junior high school. I started work at Foxconn in 2006," he said.

The 31-year-old vividly remembers working hard at the enormous factory. Initially, he worked on the production line for first-generation iPhones.

"Wearing earplugs and a mask, I worked in a very noisy environment and repeated the same actions for more than 10 hours every day," he said.

He worked alongside 50,000 colleagues in the precision machinery department. More than 700,000 employees lived and worked at the huge factory. As the factory recruited more workers to produce newer iPhones, Lyu was appointed as a team leader in 2007.

"It was much busier than before. A team leader is responsible for everything, and I once worked 36 hours without sleep. However, I only



Lyu Wei checks oranges at an orchard in Shiyan, Hubei province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

earned 2,000 yuan (\$290) a month in 2006 and 5,000 yuan when I left in 2012, which was not satisfactory," he said.

"I just wondered whether I could earn more if I found something else to do, working for myself."

His idea became a reality after he quit his job. He returned to his hometown, got married in 2013 and returned to the family fish business for the next two years.

"We made money by producing dried fish and selling them to local residents. Sales were very poor,

though, so I thought about how I could sell the fish outside our city," he said.

He posted photos of his products on WeChat, and sent packets of fish to friends and relatives across the country.

Many people praised the taste, and eventually Lyu began receiving orders from people on WeChat. He opened an online shop on Taobao to expand sales. During the winter of 2015, he sold 1,000 kilograms of fish and earned 100,000 yuan.

"I thought it was a good way to get

rich, but things changed suddenly in early 2016 when Danjiangkou Reservoir near my home was expanded and fishing was banned in the area to protect the environment," he said.

Lyu had no choice but to start over. He discovered that local farmers were growing specialty fruits, including mandarin oranges, and other produce such as acacia and honey, which he thought had great potential.

He started buying agricultural produce and selling it via his online shop, which he named Xianyu Ecological Orchard.

Last winter, some of his oranges were damaged as a result of being poorly stored in subzero temperatures. In addition, some consumers returned inedible sweet potatoes they had bought. The setbacks resulted in a loss of 60,000 yuan.

"I was inexperienced, so I thought that was acceptable," Lyu said. "Having learned a lesson, I decided to expand our sales volume by dropping the price this year."

From January to Dec 1, he received orders for more than 25,000 kg of oranges, compared with 15,000 in the same period last year.

"Though it was quite dull and hard work at the Foxconn factory, the training I experienced there really taught me a lot about management and operations," he said.

"I am confident that my business volume can reach 1 million yuan this year, up from last year's 600,000."

From researcher to budding entrepreneur

By **JIANG CHENGLONG**

If Bai Wen hadn't returned to his home village four years ago, he might have been an outstanding researcher at an institute in Lishui, in the eastern province of Zhejiang, studying the cultivation of wild mushrooms. However, he has never regretted his decision.

The 30-year-old grew up in Lujia village in Huzhou, Zhejiang. After studying at a technical secondary school for three years, he entered Nanjing Forestry University in Jiangsu province in 2011, majoring in landscape architecture.

After graduation, he complied with his parents' wish that he would live in a city, and became a researcher at a microbiology institute in Lishui, cultivating wild fungi.

However, in 2014, he decided to quit his job and return to his home village.

"I noticed that it had developed a lot, and I wanted to apply what I had learned at university to its further evolution," he said.

His parents could not understand why he had resigned and returned to the village. They told him that university graduates should work in offices, rather than villages, and if he insisted on working in a rural area, it hadn't been worth spending several years at university.

Bai became an official in Lujia. "Working as a grassroots official, I knew there were preferential policies to encourage university graduates to establish startups, which inspired me," he said. "I was young, so I decided to start out on my own."

In 2015, he rented 1.33 hectares of land to establish a farm, which he called Lingzhi. He used the skills he had gained at university



Bai Wen examines orange buds in Lishui, Zhejiang province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

to plant edible mushrooms, strawberries and other cash crops.

Lack of funds and experience are an inevitable problem for most startups, and Bai's was no exception. However, he benefited from preferential policies put forward by the provincial government that provided graduate entrepreneurs with 300,000 yuan (\$43,516) in interest-free loans from local banks.

In addition, the local agriculture department provided classes in startup management and agricultural techniques, which showed Bai how to run his business.

"It was very helpful, and I was also introduced to many business partners," he said.

Lingzhi farm began with a soft opening in October last year, selling its produce to local restaurants, government canteens, and individuals who provided agritainment — activities designed to attract visitors to farms. Bai also set up an online store.

"The farm has already made a profit, we plan to open officially next year," he said. "I think annual revenue could hit 300,000 yuan then, so we could recover our setup costs in about five years."

Livestock revolution lifts living standards

By **JIANG CHENGLONG**

In the 1990s, Mo Xiaohui was one of millions of migrant workers in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, the front line of reform and opening-up at the time.

The 44-year-old now raises more than 300 cows in her home village of Baqiao in the mountainous Qianxinan Buyi and Miao autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province.

In 1992, at age 18, she moved to Shenzhen in search of work. She stayed there for five years, during which time she married a man named Zhou Guangqiang, also a Qianxinan native, and had four children.

"In Shenzhen, I worked many jobs including livestock breeder and salesperson, but I didn't earn much," Mo said. In 1997, she and Zhou returned to Qianxinan, and made a living selling honeycomb briquettes, which were used as fuel for fires.

"We still didn't earn much, just enough to support our family," she said. "So, I decided to start a business at home rearing cattle."

Mo has deep affection for cows. "I spent my whole childhood with cows and always sat with them after class," she said, adding that her parents raised about 20 cows.

"I wanted to improve standards in the livestock industry in our village, so it wouldn't have an adverse affect on the land and hills," she said.

However, Zhou was strongly opposed to the idea. "Rearing cattle is hard work. We had experienced such a tough life when we were young, and I didn't want to live like that again," he said. "Moreover, we might suffer losses. I really could not understand my wife's idea."

Although Mo's parents and other relatives asked her if she was mad, she persisted.

"I didn't say much, I just decided that I would have to develop the business efficiently, and let my actions show if I was mad or not," she said.

She had her own ideas about how to run the business. "Almost all the young people in our village had moved to work in big cities,



Mo Xiaohui feeds her cows in Baqiao, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

leaving the seniors to raise cattle at home," she said. "But their breeding methods were mostly traditional and outdated, and the cattle had little energy to plow the fields, which affected the farms."

"I asked myself: 'Why don't we rear the cattle by advanced methods and sell the best to other families?' In this way, the cattle would be strong enough to work, which is what every family wants."

In 2012, the couple raised 2.2 million yuan (\$318,275) by selling a number of houses and cars they owned and taking out loans. They rented 66.6 hectares of land and set up a cattle station. Mo worked from 5 am until midnight every day, tending the cattle and collecting their manure to sell as fertilizer.

After six years, the station's annual revenue was 3 million yuan, generating a profit of 200,000 yuan, and Mo employed more than 15 villagers. Now, she's planning to expand into breeding chickens.

"When they are asked about the most important thing for a startup, many people will say money," she said. "Superficially, they need money most, but essentially, they are also short of confidence, as well as concepts, courage and action."

"Our hometown in the mountains is so backward and lacks access to transportation. That's all right, though. No matter how tough my life is, I just want the younger generation to have a good life and promote the livestock industry in our hometown."