

# LIFE

Guizhou province, nestled among the hills in Southwest China, is the place with the second-largest outflow of workers in the country. In 2018, the number reached 9.28 million people, which equates to a quarter of its permanent residents. As large groups of young men choose to leave to seek better pay and jobs with greater stability in more industrialized cities, most women stay home to take care of the children and the elders.

However, since the provincial government launched its Jinxiu Plan — to promote the development of the local handicraft industry — in 2013, around half a million women in Guizhou have found employment closer to home with the more than 1,000 handicraft enterprises and professional cooperatives that make up a 6 billion yuan (\$849 million) industry.

The rich culture of ethnic groups in China, including embroidery and batik techniques they have learned since childhood, is now a ticket out of poverty for those housewives, and even the coronavirus outbreak can't stop them from earning a better living.

Yang Mei, 45, is from Qimo subdistrict of Zhijin county, Bijie city of Guizhou. Together with her husband, she moved to Guiyang, the provincial capital, one year after they got married. For about 20 years, they built brick walls, transported sand and carried stones in baskets on their backs at construction sites, earning a combined monthly salary of about 4,000 yuan.

Yang says they didn't have much choice.

"Embroidery is the only craft I know. However, in my hometown, there's hardly anyone who would pay well for it when almost everyone is a master of embroidery," Yang says. "We used to create embroidery just for daily use and self-gratification. For example, we would work for days to create a beautiful wedding dress with complex embroidery patterns that symbolize luck, in order to bless the marriage of the wearer."

One day in 2010, Yang was severely injured while unloading some sand. "I can never do heavy work again," she says, her words dripping with pain and regret.

After a year of recovery, Yang found a new job as an embroiderer at a company in Guiyang which sells products with ethnic cultural characteristics.

After six years there, in 2017, Yang returned to her hometown to develop the local batik and embroidery industry. She brought with her bundles of plain scarves and gathered several of the local women to add ethnic-style embroidery to them, before sending them back to Guiyang for sale. Surprisingly, the scarves sold very quickly.

In 2015, two years after the Jinxiu Plan was launched, Yang invested 50,000 yuan and established a cooperative with four other people.

It seemed to be a reasonable investment for Yang, especially when she learned that the provincial government would provide a special fund of 15 million yuan to support the plan every year. The China Women Development Foundation participated in the plan, which serves as

# Patterns of success

By leveraging traditional embroidery techniques, women in Guizhou province are crafting a brighter future for themselves, **Xu Haoyu** and **Yang Jun** report.



**Above:** Yang Mei (left), founder of an embroidery cooperative in Zhijin county of Guizhou province, communicates with a colleague. **SHANG YUJIE / FOR CHINA DAILY** **Left:** Embroiderers in the county present ethnic works through livestreaming during the coronavirus outbreak. **PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY**

“As we can now support the family while doing embroidery at home ... we no longer have to make a living elsewhere.”

**Yang Mei**, founder of an embroidery cooperative in Zhijin county, Guizhou province

## 500k women

in Guizhou have found employment closer to home in the local handicraft industry

weather and daunting terrain makes collecting herbs very difficult and dangerous.

There are currently 67 professional cooperatives operating in Zhijin county, employing 3,500 women, including 2,200 people who have emerged from poverty as a result.

Yang reveals that the needleworkers can make between 2,000 and 4,000 yuan a month, and an increasing number of young women of their families are willing to work in their hometowns at jobs which offer a fair wage, and leave them plenty of time and energy to take care of family.

Luo Ying, 42, is in charge of an embroidery and batik cooperative in Chadian town of Zhijin county.

She used to work in a garment factory in Fujian province, before returning home to take care of the children and the elderly in 2012. Two years later, in 2014, she opened a store selling batik products in the town before establishing a cooperative with four other people in 2018.

Luo says during the years spent far away from home, the annual salary of around 10,000 yuan barely kept her fed, but her life got much better after the establishment of the cooperative.

She adds that the cooperative now employs more than 100 female embroiderers, including 73 poor people, and the income created last year reached 1.2 million yuan. The monthly average income for the craftswomen is between 2,000 to 6,000 yuan, depending on the workload and sales volume.

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, however, the embroidery business has met a bottleneck.

Yang and Luo both explain that they used to send representatives to first-tier cities to exhibit and sell embroidery products, but now, as people are encouraged to stay at home to avoid spreading the virus, they are not able to reach more consumers. As a result, sales have reached a low point.

According to Luo, from January to March last year, the cooperative completed orders to the value of 300,000 yuan. This year, though, since the women returned to work after Spring Festival in February, the cooperative has only received two orders with a total income of 70,000 yuan. Yang is facing the same situation.

"Many garment factories, which used to be our big clients, are still temporarily shut down," Luo says.

Many of the young women are communicating with consumers online via livestreams, presenting the embroidery process and chatting with viewers. One of Luo's most recent orders came from someone who has been following their livestream.

"As we can now support the family while doing embroidery at home, with the baby sleeping in the back and the elders by our side, we no longer have to make a living elsewhere, and the number of 'left-behind' children and 'empty nesters' is going down," Yang says. "We will conquer any challenge together, even the virus outbreak."

*Zhao Yandi contributed to this story.*

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# Farmer's collection of ethnic Daur items a rich harvest

HOHHOT — E Tiezhu admits that, at first, he collected old items of the Daur ethnic group just to make money.

However, as he brought more old objects together, the 58-year-old farmer, who is a member of the Daur community from Tengke township in the city of Hulunbuir, North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, found he could not bear to sell them.

"They would be worth a lot of money now," he notes. "It's not easy to collect these things of our ethnic group. They are priceless treasures."

With rapid economic and social development over the last 20 or 30 years, the Daur people, one of the Chinese minorities mainly living in Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang province, have witnessed many old items and customs gradually fading out their daily life.

Growing up in Tengke with its Daur ethnic cultural atmosphere, and familiar with the local production tools and household items, E Tiezhu realized how important it is to preserve the traditional culture of the group and began collecting items in 2008.

Before long, his collection boasted a wide range of old things with Daur characteristics, including birch bark



**Left and right:** A Daur culture exhibition displays more than 60 sets of relics and more than 100 pictures to showcase the history and customs of the ethnic group in Qiqihar, Heilongjiang province, in December 2017. **PHOTOS BY WANG YUNLONG / FOR CHINA DAILY**

utensils, hand-spinning tools and horse saddles. When E Tiezhu acquired a new item, he enjoyed repairing and restoring it.

"This one was so valuable that it took me a long time to get it from an old Daur herdsman," says E Tiezhu, showing off a freshly restored horse saddle.

"Look at it. It's a Daur saddle. Its front bulge is higher than the rear one, contrary to Mongolian ones."

His obsession with collecting old

Daur items impressed the cadres in Tengke township, as the local government was also trying to preserve the area's ethnic culture.

In 2009, a museum of Daur folk culture, a wooden wicker-roofed traditional Daur dwelling, was set up in the township and the government funded E Tiezhu to continue his "hobby".

"I'm in charge of looking for Daur folk treasures and the government pays the bill; I'm in charge of prepar-

ing the exhibition and the government organizes people to visit the museum," says E Tiezhu.

"Our cooperation is very satisfying. Both sides are making a joint effort to preserve our past."

In collecting the objects, which are scattered far and wide, the farmer has traveled all across the Daur Autonomous Banner of Morin Dawa where he lives, and even to places like the city of Qiqihar in Heilongjiang.

Once he took a fancy to a birch bark utensil during a visit to the home of a local resident in his banner. The resident charged 2,000 yuan (\$283) for the utensil and refused all attempts to bargain.

In attempt to get a better deal, E Tiezhu pretended to turn around and leave, but the resident didn't ask him to stay.

In the days that followed, he was unable to get the birch bark utensil out of his mind and returned to

the resident's home.

"I want to buy it for an exhibition at the museum in my township. I hope to make our ethnic history and culture known to more people," he explained to the resident.

Moved by his sincerity, the resident finally sold the birch bark utensil to him at a lower price of 500 yuan.

Over the past 12 years, E Tiezhu has collected 205 old Daur items, from cooking utensils and household items to hunting equipment and daily clothing, covering almost every aspect of the daily life of the Daur people.

Now, the museum has become the most culturally vibrant place in the township and receives over 40,000 visits a year.

Working as the curator and the director for the museum, E Tiezhu lives there and can be found proudly telling the stories behind the items to his fellow villagers and tourists who come to visit.

Someone once tried to buy the birch bark utensil from E for 15,000 yuan, but E Tiezhu politely refused.

"Only by preserving these old items can our ethnic culture be passed on," E Tiezhu says.