

LIFE



Stitching a plan for progress

A unique event called the Remote Mountain Bazaar in the capital helps embroidery workers from minority areas across the country earn a decent livelihood from their skill

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Pan, a 73-year-old illiterate female embroidery worker who lives in a mountainous area of Guizhou province, earned 520,000 yuan (\$74,122) in 2018, while the average annual salary for an employee in a Chinese privately-owned company was 49,575 yuan, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

On Aug 3, a group of embroidery workers like Pan came to Parkview Green Shopping Mall in Chaoyang district of Beijing, to participate in a bazaar, which runs until Sept 29.

The event, called the Remote Mountain Bazaar, is being held by the Eve Group, China's leading high-end menswear brands founded in 1994 by Xia Hua.

Xia, 50, was born in Dalian, Liaoning province.

In 1991, Xia graduated from the China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing. Then, after graduation, she began to teach in the university. However, her real dream and passion was something else.

Speaking about it, she said: "In my childhood, my family was very poor; it was a fantasy to wear beautiful clothes. But every New Year's Eve, I would find new clothes made of old bed sheets by my mom. So a seed was planted in my heart — that maybe one day, I would make beautiful clothes for my friends and family."

In 1994, Xia quit her job to become a sales clerk at Xidan Shopping Mall in Beijing to develop fashion sense. And later in the same year, she founded a company.

Over the years, the company has successively created brands — Eve De Uomo, Notting Hill, Kevin Kelly, Jaques Pritt and Eve De Cina. And they've achieved eye-dazzling sales, especially in the Beijing market, with more than 500 stores in China.

In 2014, seeking a new breakthrough, Xia led her teams to the country's minority areas in the mountains, knocking on doors looking for embroidery workers, hoping to protect and promote traditional ethnic embroidery that is disappearing.

Speaking about the trip, she said: "At that point I realized that the Chinese aesthetic was what I really appreciate, and it was also the root of Eve's brand value. Now, we not only look for embroidery, but also originality that comes from this cultural heritage."

Xia said she still remembered that when she first visited the poverty-stricken counties, she found that many houses were

covered in darkness, because people didn't want to spend on electricity, and she saw no decent furniture.

She confessed that in the beginning, she was simply thinking of working with the craftspeople, and presenting traditional elements in a modern, fashionable manner in new collection. But after approaching them, she found that many people had to give up on embroidery, and leave home and their children to work or sell fruits in the city. And that was when Xia decided to find a way to help embroidery workers make a decent living from their craftsmanship.

Recounting one of her other experiences, she said: "Once, the county magistrate brought together hundreds of people wearing different costumes, holding handmade products on a playground. I was very touched and I said, 'Thank you, everyone, you introduced me to the most beautiful art pieces.'

"But the county magistrate said that they don't understand 'art'. So I decided to encourage them in a simpler way — 'you've done a good job, I will take you to Beijing', I said. The elderly applauded. I was much excited and added, 'I will take you to London (for fashion show)', but the crowd remained silent. The county magistrate said, 'See? I told you, they don't know where London is.'"

Xia delivered on all her promises.



She took the Bouyei people to several events in London, including the event to mark the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and China, which was jointly organized by the Chinese embassy and the UK-China Entrepreneurs' Club. There, while Eve Cina held a fashion show, presenting 45 dresses inspired by Chinese embroidery on the runway, the Bouyei people performed ancient folk songs, which are traditionally sung during the embroidering process.

So far, the Eve Group has created a database with information of over 8,000 female embroidery workers, including their location and specific capability, and over 7,000 kinds of traditional patterns. At the same time, over 400 brands at home and abroad, as well as 1,600 designers, have established relationships with the company and gained access to the database.

Separately, the company has set up over 1,000 workshops and helped 137 minority small-and-medium-sized enterprises to design products for international markets and produce them on an industrial scale.

After the bazaar was launched last year at Parkview Green, it was then taken to Shanghai, Xi'an, Chengdu, Wuhan, Nanjing, Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Xiamen. The bazaar created



Female embroidery workers present their works in Beijing to protect and promote traditional ethnic embroidery that is disappearing.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



income of tens of millions of yuan for the mountain villagers and small-and medium-sized handicraft enterprises in Guizhou, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Gansu and Qinghai.

Unsurprisingly, Pan did not miss the bazaar in Beijing this year.

Speaking about the event, Pan, dressed in a traditional blue Miao costume with a red headscarf, matching silver hairpin and big, round earrings, said: "The sun represents the boy, and the moon represents the girl. They got married and the human was created."

"I can't write this, but I will pass on this legend through by embroidery."

Meanwhile, colorful embroidered shoes lay on a table next to her, and she cut paper into different shapes — a phoenix, a camellia, a rape flower, a Buddha and Chinese characters that symbolize good luck. Asked what she is doing, she said the paper-cutouts were molds for the patterns on shoes.

As for how her life had changed, she said: "We no longer have to look for a job in another city to support our families. Staying at home, embroidery workers can take care of the elderly and children while working. And the finished product can be sold through the bazaar."

Speaking at the start of this year's event, Xu Guanglei, from Beijing Parkview Green, the co-founder of the bazaar, said: "Today, Remote Mountain Bazaar returned to where it began. And I am very pleased to see that the bazaar has changed the fate of many female embroidery workers. I believe that the traditional craftsmanship of our country will go far, and an increasing number of craftspeople will walk out of the mountains and earn wealth with their own hands."

Xia hopes that when people visit Dali again, they will not only see the beautiful natural landscape of the city, but also experience the charm of local customs and traditional handicraft. And she hopes that urban consumers understand, recognize this with each purchase as this increases the possibility of craftspeople living a decent life thanks to their culture and craftsmanship.

"We hope that every bazaar will set off a craze in the city, and let the city understand the culture of the mountains."

Looking ahead, Xia is confident about the future of Eve and the embroidery workers. And she said that by 2020, about 100,000 embroidery workers will be connected to the company's database, and accept orders through the system. The bazaar will be continued, and more embroidery workers will walk out of the mountains and introduce beautiful Chinese embroidery to the world.

Modern US musician handpicks traditional Chinese instruments

NEW YORK — Justin Scholar, a New Jersey native, has earned his name as the "Chinese instruments guy" at the annual Philadelphia Folk Festival as he brings a Chinese instrument every year to let people try.

"This year I brought a *zhongruan* (Chinese plucked string instrument) to entertain the guitarists because it's shaped like a guitar. And some people really pick it up quite quickly," Scholar told Xinhua in New York after he returned from the outdoor music festival held at the Old Pool Farm, about 56 kilometers outside of Philadelphia last month.

Two clear goals

The 26-year-old musician has previously presented Chinese instruments including *guzheng*, *bawu*, *hulusi*, *sheng* and *erhu* at the event.

"Even though I can't share the traditional Chinese tunes, the new instruments are enough of a fun experience," he said. "The children and non-musical folk really seem to enjoy it, and some people have bought their own *guzheng* after trying."

"Their (musicians) unabated passion for the preservation of folk music means they are incredibly curious about the folk music that is rarer or less represented; that's where I thrive," said Scholar.

"I always invite people to come sit in and learn about it and try it and you'll be amazed at how some Americans who have never heard of this instrument before can figure out how to play on their own with no more instruction," he said.

Scholar had his heart stolen by Chinese instruments ever since he made his first trip to Shanghai in 2015 through a study-abroad program when he was a student in New York University.

"I find the *guzheng* is my most inspirational tool of expression, and the seeming lack of experimentation with the instrument is what I aim to change," he said.

"I have two clear goals as a musician," he said. "In China, I hope to reinvent the *guzheng* for a younger audience by producing new music influenced by jazz and folk and singing in English."

"My second goal is to introduce *guzheng* to the West, which is why I am here," he said. "I find the *guzheng* is the most accessible instrument for non-musicians to create beautiful sound."

Scholar said his musical style can be described as "meditative and serene at times, or melancholic and expressive other times. It depends on the song."

"I hope one day that many people will hear my music, especially the thousands of *guzheng* players, and that they will be encouraged to try writing their own music and freestyling while learning to express themselves," he said.

Experimenting wildly with *guzheng*

Played traditionally, the about 1.5-meter long *guzheng* can be "very daunting," he admitted.

"Of course, it will take years and years of practice. But if your goal is just to express yourself and to make sounds that are pretty and just lose yourself in music, I find that the *guzheng* is the fastest route to creating that sound pleasing to the ears," he said.

Because of its pentatonic scale (the traditional tuning), the sounds *guzheng* naturally produces are "always complimentary and pleasant to your ear," according to Scholar.

"I am convinced that anyone, with 10 minutes of focus, can produce something that they are proud of. It's an outstanding experience for young children and adults who are often afraid of trying to play music, although they'd like to," he said.

Scholar said he is "experimenting wildly" with the *guzheng*.

"I've invented my own tuning by shifting its scale around, and adding a new note which allows me to make western-sounding chord changes," he said.

"I am building an electric *guzheng* sound using a loop pedal, synthesizer and amplifier," he said. "I can play standing up, with hammers; I even played a show in complete darkness."

There is "great potential" for *guzheng* and other instruments to "be reinvented and shared", he said, "This is my lifelong passion."

Scholar's music video debut *Thinkinbout* features the young musician alone in a dark room with the *guzheng*, delivering a stirring vocal performance while the Chinese characters for his English lyrics flash across his face.

Riding massive wave of culture fusion

Scholar said he felt very lucky that his exposure to Chinese culture has opened a new window for his life and career.

"Being in China has completely opened my mind to a world of potential for learning and modernizing some ancient Chinese instruments," he said.

Scholar's passion for Chinese instruments was highly applauded by many young Chinese musicians living in the United States.

"It's very rare to see somebody like him, I mean among young American kids, who devoted so much into Chinese traditional instruments," said Yang Feifei, a well-known *erhu* player in New York City.

"We jam a lot actually sometimes. I often introduce some Chinese traditional songs to him. And he gave me a lot of idea about how to modernize this Chinese traditional instrument," said Yang, who joined Scholar for an improvisation performance at the end of the interview.

"I very much intend to promote Chinese instruments in the United States, but right now I really need to grow myself as a musician," Scholar said.

Calling themselves "culture exchange kids", both the musicians have a strong sense of obligation to help promote people-to-people exchanges between the United States and China.

"I think that there's a lot of work to be done in cultural communications between our countries and our cultures," Scholar said. "We're kind of riding a massive wave of two big countries coming together. I'm very happy to be a part of it."