



Above: Cai Qun draws patterns for a batik design at her workshop at Dazhai village, Zhijin county in Guizhou province. Below: Cai's workshop showcases batik handcrafts, which are favorites for tourists.



PHOTOS BY ZENG JUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Putting folk art skills to work

The women of Guizhou have turned their traditional batik dyeing and embroidery techniques into a source of income.

Li Jun and Zhao Kai report from Guiyang.

A decade ago, it seemed the best option for young people like Cai Qun from the mountainous areas of Guizhou province was to head to the cities in search of work. However, these days Cai would advise girls to stay in their villages, where there are more employment opportunities than before.

In 2009, Cai set up a small company making goods using the traditional batik and embroidery techniques of the Miao ethnic group. Employing dozens of local women, the company produces handmade goods with intricate designs that sell well overseas, particularly in Singapore and the United States.

When Cai left her village in 2000 at age 20, she never imagined she would end up running such a business. Instead, she was heading to Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou province, where her sister said she had found a job for her.

"But when I got there, I found out her work was collecting garbage at landfills," Cai says she was shocked and very sad.

Having no other options, Cai joined her sister in sorting garbage. "The days were rough. We had to wake up before sunrise to go to dumping sites and we worked until sunset."

After a month, she decided to try her luck elsewhere, heading to Shenzhen, Guangdong province, which was known for its population of migrant workers. But for a village woman with limited skills, the best job Cai could find in Shenzhen was as a waitress in restaurants.

The turning point came in 2006 when she participated in a contest on traditional handicraft skills in her hometown. The contest was aimed at finding new workers to design tourist goods for Guizhou province.

"Though I don't have any other skills, as a woman of the Miao ethnic group, I learned the skills of dyeing and embroidery from elders in my village when I was a little girl," says Cai. "That's basically all I learned in my entire life, so I decided to give the talent fair a try."

Batik is a technique for creating designs on cloth using wax and dye, while embroidery is used to add intricate patterns. In Guizhou prov-

ince, local people of the Miao and Bouyei groups use these techniques to create images on traditional costumes, including plant and animal images with mythological significance. Because of its high aesthetic value, batik fabrics and artworks are put in display in museums around the world.

During the contest, Cai's brilliant artwork earned her the title of skilled craftsman.

"It's really impressive to see a girl at this young age create such amazing works of art," says Long Chaoya, director of the Small and Medium Enterprises Bureau of Guizhou province.

Long is also the organizer of the 2006 event in which Cai participated — the Colorful Guizhou Tourism Product Original and Craftsmen Competition and Exhibition.

"The event was intended to help people like Cai to present their skills and help them realize their dreams," Long says. Launched in 2006, the competition and exhibition has become a famous annual event for the local cultural industry in Guizhou.

The competition has also attracted foreign folk artists. According to Long, more than 300 craftsmen from more than 60 countries participated this year's event.

A lot of local craftswomen were discovered in the competition. But in Long's mind, the local craftswomen like Cai encountered a common problem: the lack of marketing skills and capital to upgrade the scale of their business.

Therefore, at the initiative of Long, the SME bureau of Guizhou has established a special foundation for training the local women in managerial skills and helping them to start their own businesses.

With the prize money from the competition and the SME bureau, Cai started her own business sell-

ing batik artworks. Like any start-up, the money did not just turn up automatically. Cai struggled at first, but little by little her artworks gained recognition in the local travel market.

"I didn't realize it was a business opportunity until someone was actually willing to pay for my works at the talent fair," Cai says. "More importantly, it boosted my confidence."

A tourist group from South Asia once visited Cai's workshop and praised her artwork highly. They bought a lot of products at high prices, and shortly after that, the same travel agency placed another order.

Cai was very happy to see her business growing, providing a brighter future for women like her.

"Because it is not only me, but also my sister in Guiyang and the girls in our village that are good at doing this too."

In 2009, with 80,000 yuan (\$13,000) of initial funding, Cai and her husband established a company hiring local villagers to make batik and embroidery products.

Right now, Cai's Batik and Embroidery Company hires more than 60 local women during peak season. Prices for their products range from hundreds to thousands of yuan, and the annual output totals around 3 million yuan.

Earlier this year, Cai became a deputy to the National People's Congress.

"I was stunned and excited when I heard I had been elected," Cai says, "Then I realized that it means a lot of responsibilities."

In March this year, she made a proposal at the annual session of NPC on promoting industries rooted in ethnic cultures.

"People have realized the value of ethnic artworks, so ethnic groups should preserve our traditions and pass them on," Cai suggests. "By combining ethnic artworks with tourism, we can protect our traditions and provide more jobs at home to support the young."

Cai has a dream that one day women in her village will no longer need to work outside. "My sisters and I can sit together at home, singing folk songs while making batiks."

Xing Yi contributed to this story.

Congolese artist sees big picture

BY JOSEPH CATANZARO and CHEN YINGQUN

In a Kansas schoolyard in 1979, alone in a crowd of children at play, Theodore Jonas Akonga made a discovery that would determine the course of his adult life.

Newly arrived in the United States, the 7-year-old from what was then Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was isolated from the other children by barriers of language and culture.

In that lonely place, Akonga found his voice and his calling.

He spoke to his playmates not in the tongue of his African homeland, but in the scratchy whisper of pencil on paper, in the language of lines and shading.

"I took a pencil, and I drew what I wanted to say," Akonga remembers. "This is how I started using art to communicate with people."

It is a skill the now Beijing-based 41-year-old still uses.

"I did the same thing when I moved to China in 2003," he says.

Paints and brushes have become Akonga's communication tools, along with English and Mandarin. Using art to transcend language and culture has become his profession, as well as his passion.

In November, his work was shown as part of a multi-artist exhibition in Beijing that documented through paintings, drawings and photographs the experiences of Africans living in China.

Akongong and the exhibition's organizer, Ajiike "Saint Jerry" Njoku, believe strongly that art is a way for both China and Africa to see the other from different perspectives, to find common ground, and to discover and relish differences.

"I use my paintings to make people think," Akonga says. "We can help the cultures understand each other better."

Akongong came to China after receiving a scholarship to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He is close to completing a PhD, and his studio space at CAFA is a riot of color and shapes — a clutter of canvases that range from nude models from his life-drawing classes to portraits of Congolese leaders to intriguing blends of Chinese and African symbolism.

"I draw on inspiration from Chinese characters," he says.

In one piece, he infused the Chinese character for "door" (*men*) with a layer of meaning from Africa.

"In my country we have an expression — to do things the right way, you have to get in or out the door, not the window."

Among the other paintings that clutter his workspace is a self-portrait, featuring the Great Wall both on his shirt and in the background. It is an exploration of retaining a sense of self and cultural identity while immersed in a foreign country.

It is one of two paintings in the room that are not for sale.

The other is his personal favorite, a red and gold dominated abstract titled Convic-

“ In my country we have an expression — to do things the right way, you have to get in or out the door, not the window.”

THEODORE JONAS AKONGA
CONGOLESE PAINTER

tion. Unlike his other works, which have evolved over long periods of creation, that painting came together in a sudden, frenzy of inspiration — at a time when he was mired in self-doubt about his future as an artist.

"It dispelled all of my weariness and I felt like I could start a new life," he says.

"For most of my paintings, I can tell you the story behind them," he adds with a slow smile. "For this one, I tell you frankly, I have no idea what it means."

Beijing artist Xie Fei, who has worked with Akongong in the past, loves the African painter's use of bold colors, which lend a strong African flavor, and his tendency to infuse different cultural elements in his work.

"It makes the finished product modern and international," Xie says.



MIKE PETERS / CHINA DAILY

Congolese painter Theodore Akonga touches up a self-portrait that explores retaining a sense of self and cultural identity while immersed in a foreign country.

Akongong is contemplating a return to his African homeland when his studies are complete next year. Having brought something of Africa to China, he now hopes to bring a new understanding of China back to Africa.

"Sometimes the most helpful people are people like us," says his friend Njoku. "We are a product of both cultures."

Akongong picks up a pen and begins to doodle on a notepad. He draws the Chinese

character *men* that has featured so prominently in his work.

It looks like an open door. It looks both African and Chinese. It looks like a way into the future.

Mike Peters contributed to this story.

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