

Big welcome for Wenchang diaspora

Hainan city expands Nanyang festival to give thanks for contributions of overseas townsmen and to increase cooperation

By MA ZHIPING

in Wenchang, Hainan
mazhiping@chinadaily.com.cn

The traditional Chinese Qingming Festival, or Tomb-sweeping Day, which fell on April 4 this year, is an occasion for people to return to their hometowns to pay respect to their deceased ancestors and family members. And for Wenchang, in South China's tropical Hainan province, an event leading up to Qingming has a very forward-looking focus.

Situated about 80 kilometers from the provincial capital Haikou, Wenchang is the ancestral home of more than 1.2 million overseas Chinese. In March, the city was busy making preparations for the Nanyang cultural festival, held on April 1 and 2, to welcome fellow townsmen from overseas.

It is a place renowned for its more than 2,000 years of history, culture and charming tropical landscapes. And Wenchang is also the location of the country's most advanced satellite launch center, which has received worldwide attention since becoming operational last June.

Xing Caihong, vice-mayor of the city, said Wenchang has held a Nanyang festival for five years, but this year the Hainan government decided to expand it into a bigger provincial event. Already these festivals have generated a positive impact, attracting and uniting many overseas Chinese who trace their ancestry to Hainan natives who journeyed to Nanyang during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, seeking fortune.

Nanyang is a geographical term referring to the vast region which, during that historical period, covered today's 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Many people in the coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan, who lived in extreme poverty because of wars and lack of land resources, left their homeland for Nanyang to seek a better life.

More than 3 million descendants of the Hainan natives who went to Nanyang now reside in more than 50 countries and regions around the world, many playing important roles in local social and economic development.

Wang Luli, grandnephew of Wenchang native Wang Zhaosong, a leader in the overseas Chinese community in Malaysia, said Wang's progeny now live in more than 20 countries. "They have passed on Wang's patriotic spirit and donated more than 2 million yuan (\$290,000) to support education and social relief work in Hainan in the past 10 years," he said.

Overseas Chinese with Wenchang

roots have made enduring contributions to the city's development, especially in education. Many of Wenchang's most beautiful buildings are school buildings, said a local official.

Wenchang Middle School, established in 1908, has cultivated much talent for the country, with generous support from overseas Chinese. Incomplete statistics from the city government show that overseas Chinese have built more than 280 school buildings in Wenchang with their own funds. Figures for their total donations were not available.

But their support for education is only part of the story. They have also invested in tourism projects, improv-

ing the city's infrastructure and generating new businesses.

The vice-mayor, at a news briefing on March 27, said Wenchang had invited more than 200 overseas Chinese community leaders and compatriots from 20 countries and regions to attend the two-day festival which was being staged in Longlou town. The regions included Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

Longlou is becoming well-known because of its proximity to the Wenchang Satellite Launch Center — China's fourth and southernmost space vehicle launch facility and its first coastal one. There are plans to develop aerospace-themed tourism in Longlou, making it similar to Florida's Cape Kennedy in the United States.

Wenchang, by highlighting both overseas Chinese culture and local culture, wants to make this festival a platform for win-win cooperation, showing overseas fellow townsmen the new opportunities the city offers in trade, tourism and culture.

"We hope to show them around to see the latest changes and convince them to stay and make efforts to bring about new changes for Wenchang," said Chen Xiaobo, Wenchang's Party chief.

The Wenchang Satellite Launch Center and a large number of infrastructure projects have turned the city into a hot investment destina-

tion, according to local reports.

The vice-mayor said guests from government departments, businesses, tourism, cultural and research fields would join their fellow Chinese from overseas to discuss how to carry out Hainan's five-year plan (2017-2021) on overseas cooperation, and exchanges in building projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. The initiative, put forward by President Xi Jinping in 2013, aims to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through an infrastructure and trade network along the ancient Silk Road.

Li Jiaohui, one of Wenchang's top officials, said: "Wenchang plans to make the festival a public foreign affairs platform to bring the wisdom and talent of overseas Chinese into full play. It will be a local brand cultural product, or even a provincial brand."

Speaking ahead of the festival, Li said a total of 28 projects would be introduced, covering such sectors as tourism, manufacturing, agriculture, science and technology, and with investment projected to top 17.6 billion yuan.

A world council meeting of Hainan community groups and associations was also planned to further mobilize overseas Chinese to invest in the future of their homeland, according to the city government, which organized the event.

A plan was made for festival participants to tour Wenchang's beautiful villages, enjoy delicious food and performances by artists from places such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong, and show their talent in Chinese calligraphy and painting.



STUDENTS at a school in Wenchang. Overseas Chinese with Wenchang roots have contributed significantly to the city's development, especially in education.

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