

South China Sea

Editor's note: China Daily is running a series of articles on the South China Sea. Compiled by our reporters Li Xiaokun, Zhang Yunbi and Liu Xiaoli, the articles cover a range of topics and provide a fascinating insight into what life is like. In these articles our reporters present the colorful and unique way of life on the islands, including Yongxing Island, which despite being no bigger than 280 football pitches hosts the government of Sansha city. Sansha, governing the Chinese islands there, will soon be 4 years old.



Su Xun (left) and Deng Ruming, who work at China Mobile's Hainan branch, are veterans in combating the elements to maintain equipment on the Xisha and Nansha Islands. ZHANG YUNBI/CHINA DAILY

Technicians ride wave of modern communications

By ZHANG YUNBI and LIU XIAOLI in Sansha, Hainan

Vast distances, loneliness, wind and tide, are no obstacles to technicians answering the call, so that others can, well, answer their calls. China's largest cellular network provider is boosting and ensuring fourth generation signal access in the South China Sea.

Their work has connected many isolated remote islands to the outside world. Even Vietnamese fishermen, who sometimes illegally fish nearby, have bought the China Mobile SIM cards for signals, local islanders said.

But the scale of the operation, including shipping, installing, maintaining and upgrading transceivers and cellular radio towers, is huge, especially as it takes 10 to 15 hours to cover more than 300 km from Hainan Island to Yongxing Island.

"Sometimes we have to relay a signal to reach a more remote island, transferring from a bigger ship to a smaller one, and so on," said Su Xun, a veteran technician with China Mobile's Hainan branch. "Sometimes we rent a boat from local fisherman for shipping."

With the distances involved, time is of the essence. Su noted that government ships often stay at a destination for just a few hours before weighing anchor and sailing again.

This means that all the work, be it tower installations, offloading equipment, must be done as efficiently and quickly as possible. Any delay can mean weeks of waiting.

"Sometimes it is impossible to finish fixing or updating the equipment within three hours.

Sometimes we have to relay a signal if we are to reach a more remote island, transferring from a bigger ship to a smaller one."

Su Xun, a veteran technician with China Mobile's Hainan branch

We have no choice but to stay for a month to wait for the next ship to dock," Su said.

Deng Ruming, a colleague of Su, works on optimizing the networks, and he noted one frustrating incident to highlight the point.

"The laptop is a must for tuning and upgrading transceivers. Once a colleague's laptop went overboard during a storm," Deng said, adding that the trip had to be made again.

Other challenges facing Su and his team include high levels of humidity and corrosive seawater, both of which can play havoc with the sensitive equipment.

Those on board *Sansha 1* — the largest vessel commuting between Hainan Island and Yongxing — have reason to appreciate the technical expertise that allows them to utilize 4G signals during their trip and make a call at their convenience.

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Island school shows its unique character

Class act by teachers allows pupils to relish life and learning on the country's southernmost outpost of education

By LI XIAOKUN and LIU XIAOLI in Sansha, Hainan

Like many schools on the Chinese mainland, the walls of the country's southernmost school are decorated with children's paintings.

But the images reveal the unique way of life on Yongxing Island. Shells and marine creatures, from vibrantly colored fish to an octopus opening its inquisitive eyes, have pride of place in the paintings that provide a fascinating insight into life on the island.

"We have encouraged the students to be curious about the different forms of life here. It is a precious experience and the root of their love for the island," said Li Zanzong, headmaster of Yongxing School.

The newly built four-story school was opened just six months ago, but Li said it has adopted the most advanced educational methods in Hainan province.

"I'm confident of raising the quality of education here to the highest level," said Li, 36. Li and the school's six teachers, all graduates of a famous Hainan teacher training col-

lege, volunteered for half-year terms.

Tang Hualing, one of the teachers, is Li's wife. In February, the couple brought their 5-year-old son here at the start of a new semester.

"I came when I learned the island had opened its first school. Children here need education. We are willing to stay here as long as we are needed," Tang said.

They carefully prepared for enrollment upon arrival. But on the morning of the first day their son was the only pupil.

"The parents were very cautious, just watching. We talked a lot with them about the school's plans," Li said. On that afternoon, 18 pupils arrived.

Three months on, the school has 29 students, mainly the children of fishermen. It has three kindergarten classes and three primary school classes.

"At first the pupils were very shy, and many of them cannot speak Mandarin," said Huang Haiwei, an English teacher.

"Now I'm happy to hear them say 'hello' to me on their own initiative every morn-

“At first the pupils were very shy, and many of them cannot speak Mandarin. Now I’m happy to hear them say ‘hello’ to me on their own initiative every morning.”

Huang Haiwei, an English teacher at Yongxing School

29 students

Number enrolled this semester at Yongxing School, which opened six months ago with three kindergarten classes and three primary school classes

ing." Huang, 26, said.

The school requires no fees and all the pupils are provided with free food, bags and uniforms, thanks to the local government. Li said they are also considering issuing a scholarship of 10,000 yuan (\$1,500) for every newly enrolled pupil.

The school is also planning to serve adults on the island. Li said that in the future soldiers will be able to avail themselves of diploma courses through long-distance education. Fishermen will also be instructed on modern fishing and breeding techniques.

Lin Li, a cleaner working for the Sansha government, said her daughters have been more active since going to the school. "And most importantly, now I can take them with me, instead of leaving them in my hometown."

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Above: Teachers encourage students in a reading class at Yongxing School, Yongxing Island, where Sansha city is located. **Right:** Children in a kindergarten prepare to get creative with toys. PHOTOS BY YANG GUANYU / XINHUA AND ZHANG YUNBI / CHINA DAILY



Road sign indicates distances from South China Sea issue



At first glance, a road sign indicating the distance to New York and Bangkok, as well as other destinations, may seem out of place on tiny Yongxing Island, which hosts the city government of Sansha, but it has become a landmark in its own right.

Standing at the end of Beijing Road and in front of the Xisha Hotel, the brown, steel road sign points out the distances and directions to global destinations.

"Bangkok, 1,220 kilometers; New York, 13,601 kilometers; Sydney, 6,976 kilometers," its gleaming white letters inform.

Interestingly, it gives the distance to major cities of countries not directly involved in the South China Sea issue — Thailand, the United States and Australia.

The countries have differing positions and policies regarding the South China Sea.

Bangkok has echoed Beijing's call for peacefully resolving disputes through negotiation, while Australia has demonstrated an increasing interest in having a say about the South China Sea issue.

And the US is increasing its military presence in the sea by boosting alignment with treaty allies, including the Philippines. US warships



A road sign on Yongxing Island indicates (from top to bottom) the distances to Beijing, Haikou, Sanya, Bangkok, New York and Sydney. ZHANG YUNBI / CHINA DAILY

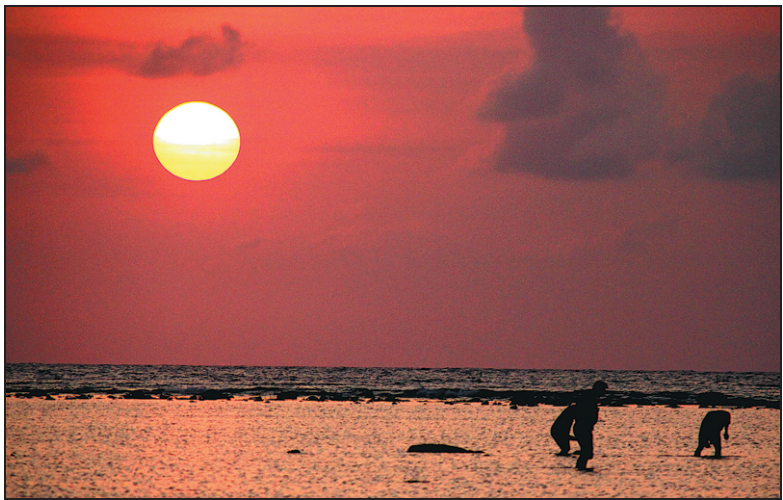
have embarked on what it calls the "Freedom of Navigation" program.

Some US politicians and experts have doubted China's sovereignty over the Nansha Islands because the islands are geographically closer to the Philippines and they say China has made "excessive claims".

But they fail to see the glaring contradiction that the US military will go to "great lengths" by traversing the Pacific Ocean thousands of kilometers from their home bases to fulfill what Washington describes as a "rebalancing in Asia".

But the road sign is a symbol of something more significant than distances. It also shows the importance of a connected world and greater communication.

It testifies to the point made by Foreign Minister Wang Yi responding to a question by CNN in March: "History will prove who is a mere visitor and who is the real host."



Against the backdrop of a paradise sunset, residents collect shells and enjoy the sandy shoreline of Sansha Island. ZHANG YUNBI/CHINA DAILY

Internet campaigns boost protection of ecosystems on Xisha Islands

Thanks to the cellular network and Wi-Fi on Zhaochu, an island in the Xisha chain, simply scanning a QR code on a label hanging from a coconut tree will tell you who has adopted and financed it.

In February, Sansha city launched an online bidding campaign that allowed people to adopt 500 coconut trees. The campaign was so popular that all the trees were sponsored within 24 hours.

Wang Chun, head of the Qilianyu working committee who lives and works on Zhaochu Island, told China Daily that a second round of adoptions may be held in July, with 300 to 500 trees available for sponsorship.

"There will be more such campaigns, and we are also exploring allowing people to adopt shell-dwelling invertebrates, such as mollusks, for nurturing," Wang said, adding that the animals would help to balance the marine ecology and purify the waters.

Xiao Jie, the mayor of Sansha, adopted the first coconut tree in the first batch.

"The greening programs, which have been in operation for



Modernity comes to nature as a QR code hangs on a coconut tree on Zhaochu Island. The code shows that the tree was "adopted" by Xiao Jie, mayor of Sansha. ZHANG YUNBI / CHINA DAILY

more than three years on islands — including Zhaochu — have resulted in greater plant coverage, which has improved living conditions for the residents," he said.

Shi Guoning, head of Sansha's Bureau of Land Resources and Environmental Protection, said the completion of water desalination plants on islands in the Xisha chain has tackled a chronic

shortage of fresh water and produced conditions that allow an increasing number of plants to thrive.

— ZHANG YUNBI

‘Patron’ promotes safer, greener environment

By ZHANG YUNBI in Sansha, Hainan zhangyunbi@chinadaily.com.cn

The sea has been a pivotal part of Wang Chun's career since 1993 and his tide of progress has seen him now lead a working team that governs a slew of islands and waters. His role has earned him the affectionate title of "Patron of the Islands".

The islands group he is responsible for within the Xisha Islands is called Qilianyu, "seven islands in a string".

Qilianyu forms a special part of Sansha city's administration because Wang's committee combines five organs in one — a police station, border defense branch, law enforcement workstation, militia command and a medical, rescue and aid center.

Wang is often the first person that officials visiting the islands will turn to. There they are guaranteed a friendly welcome by Wang, whose deeply tanned complexion shows he is a man who enjoys the outdoor life, an impression enhanced by his favorite

attire of a wide-brimmed hat and all-weather jacket.

Wang and the islanders are at the forefront of protecting the ecology of the South China Sea by regulating fishing activities. They have also encountered, and firmly dealt with, illegal fishing by foreign ships from neighboring countries.

Illegal fishing? This is not innocent fly-cast fishing. The crews on board these vessels often use dynamite to kill the fish and the explosions cause immense damage to the fragile marine ecology.

"The ecology here is very vulnerable, and recovery is extremely difficult," Wang said.

For centuries, the islands have played a crucial part both in the work and lives of Chinese fishermen. Wang likes to show visitors a traditional temple frequented by fishermen on Zhaochu Island for blessings before they went out on the perilous sea.

Another must-see place is the old office of the village committee, a bungalow built in the 1970s just a few meters



A bird's view of Qilianyu islands. ZHA CHUNMING / XINHUA

away from the new committee building, a testament to China's unbroken presence and jurisdiction.

Partly because of shrinking fishery resources, "traditional fishermen on the islands have been encouraged to shift to other sectors", Wang said.

"Some fishermen have

become cooks and yacht captains, some work in the power plants, and some nurture pearls and seashells for scientific institutions," Wang said.

The islands may be remote, but they are connected. They are fully covered by a cellular network and the meeting room on the second floor of the committee building has a videoconferencing system.

As the annual typhoon season — usually from June to October — is around the corner, Wang said they had a contingency plan in place and the building could function as a shelter for the residents.

"In the past, we transferred



“Some fishermen have become cooks and yacht captains, some work in the power plants, and some nurture pearls and seashells for scientific institutions.”

Wang Chun, chief of the Qilianyu working committee



Online See more by scanning the code.

An ocean paradise with all the conveniences of the mainland



As the ship sailed slowly, almost hesitantly, into the harbor of Yongxing Island, after an exhausting 15-hour trip from Wenchang, Hainan province, I was astonished by the dreamlike light-green morning sea stretching in front of me.

The spectrum of colors was more vibrant, more gasp-inducing than I had seen in the Maldives.

But, I had to remind myself, this was the Xisha Islands, two words that have frequently appeared in my daily news reports, yet for the first time I could truly appreciate their scenic lure.

But it wasn't just the natural setting that caught me by surprise.

When my colleagues and I walked down the 300-meter

long Beijing Road, surely the quietest road named after our capital 2,680 km distant, I found no fewer than four bank branches.

The stores lack for nothing, and there is even a branch of a famous chain selling spicy duck neck.

When having a drink outside a coffeehouse that night, among many relaxed residents, I developed an illusion, incongruous as it sounds, of still being on the Chinese mainland.

It was not long before I realized that I was on the largest island of Xisha and the location of the Sansha government.

A marine affairs officer pointed out "how quickly clouds move here" — so there is not much rain on the island. In its darkest corner meteors can be seen streaking across the sky about every 10 minutes.

People living here are proud of their home, and cherish it.

A fishing vessel captain told

me they stop fishing from mid-May to Aug 1 every year to protect stocks.

Despite the long distance, it seems residents, both long-term and those more recently arrived to help build or guard the southernmost Chinese city, have developed a stronger attachment to the motherland.

I guess that is due to their awareness of the island's strategic significance for China, and the responsibilities on their shoulders.

Five-star red flags are hung at the gates of almost every building, from the school to the greengrocer's. I also saw a tiny one under a tree.

Fisherman Li Jinsan sang me a song he composed for the motherland when I interviewed him.

A soldier told me, when the first ray of sunshine arrives in the new year, national flags are raised at the same time on all islands administered by Sansha.

"At that time tears fill my eyes," he said.