

Rural planner gets 'stuck' in village

Li Pei-chen has helped residents transform their home into a clean, vibrant community

By ZHANG YI and HU MEIDONG in Xiamen, Fujian

Four years ago, Li Pei-chen, a rural planner from Taiwan, was invited to join a village transformation project in Xiamen, Fujian province.

After her eight-month contract expired, she chose to stay in Yuanqianshe village, about half an hour's drive from downtown Xiamen.

"I felt I was on a business trip when I first came to Xiamen," she said. "But later I gradually became attached to the land as I met many people here who work with me to make it a better place."

The village is home to 750 residents — including about 200 young people — who used to depend on farming for a living.

Before 2014, many young people left the village for jobs as migrant workers or to start businesses in cities. Mostly only women, children and the elderly remained.

"Many fields were abandoned, and some streams were turned into gutters, with rubbish in the water," Li said, likening the village to an empty shell.

The situation was so bad that at one stage the city recommended Yuanqianshe be demolished.

Yet the village's fortunes changed in 2014, when Xiamen launched its Beautiful Xiamen strategic plan, which encourages community efforts to upgrade living places. Li said the community focus is similar to what has been happening in Taiwan.

A survey of the village found that several buildings dated back to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. "They are no longer habitable, but protecting old buildings is like caring for the elders in a family," Li said. "The nostalgia can connect people."

Working as the village's



Rural planner Li Pei-chen from Taiwan works at a vegetable plot in Yuanqianshe village, Fujian province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Children from the city of Xiamen learn farming techniques from a villager in Yuanqianshe.



Old farm tools and daily utensils are used by Li and villagers to decorate the rural community.

assistant director, she encouraged the development of rural tourism and got its jobless young people to join in.

Li and the villagers cleaned up chicken coops, pigsties, shabby toilets and gutters, collecting 500 metric tons of garbage.

They also paid special attention to making use of old things. For example, abandoned stone mills and troughs were transformed into decorative water containers in flower beds and gardens.

Old houses that are no longer habitable have been

turned into community activity centers and playgrounds for children.

Abandoned plots of farmland have been turned into a "city farm", where urban residents can rent a patch of land to grow whatever crops they like. Those renting the land can farm it themselves or pay villagers to do it.

At weekends, many people living downtown bring their children to the village to work the land. That has helped create jobs, with some villagers teaching farming techniques and delivering vegetables to

the city, while others make more money from their land.

Yan Deqiang, who studied logistics management in college, returned to the village after it was threatened with demolition and is now devoted to the city farm project, where he oversees vegetable deliveries.

"Now I can use what I have learned outside to help improve my hometown," he said. "We have to protect the old buildings. If everyone contributes a little bit, the village will see big progress."

Li said it was also important not to ignore the potential of the young.

"Even if some are without college degrees, they still can change their lives and the destiny of the village," she said. "Their efforts saved the village from being demolished. The villagers' sense of belonging has improved a lot, and they are proud of their community now, which is the most important thing."

She said the newly vibrant village, with its fruit-laden trees, well-tended vegetable fields and clean environment,

will remain in her heart forever.

After witnessing Yuanqianshe's transformation from a shabby place to a beautiful village in the past four years, Li said she had chosen to stay there.

Following in Li's footsteps, Xiamen introduced 35 new assistant village directors from Taiwan this month — all rural planners like Li.

"Local people are nice to Taiwan people, because we share the same accent and have similar eating habits," she said. "I hope the new assistant directors can also play to their strengths and talents, and bring their experiences here."

"Nowadays I often think of the rainy season in 2014, when I first set foot in Yuanqianshe," Li said. "My feet were stuck deep in mud. It took a great deal of effort to pull them out, and one of my sandal straps broke."

"The land in Yuanqianshe is so sticky that I have been 'stuck' here for four years — and maybe longer."

Contact the writers at zhangyi1@chinadaily.com.cn

Around China

SICHUAN All-you-can-eat deal dooms eatery



A Chengdu hotpot restaurant had to close 11 days after offering all-you-can-eat buffets for a month for just 120 yuan (\$18) per person. Su Zhe, the boss of Jiamener Restaurant, said business had been out of control since June 1, when it launched the membership card promotion. The restaurant, which opened 11 am to 11 pm, attracted more than 500 diners a day, with some lining up outside at 8 am and others refusing to leave until midnight. There were no photos on the membership cards and no way to stop diners using them more than once a day. That meant card holders could either visit the restaurant multiple times a day or pass the cards to family members or friends to use.

CHENGDU BUSINESS DAILY

gers. Cheng searched the coaches but could not find Wang. Fortunately, the girl remembered Wang's phone number, and when Chang called she discovered Wang was on the platform seeking help from station security. The girl was dropped off at Hefei, where station workers looked after her until Wang arrived via high-speed train an hour later.

WUHAN EVENING NEWS

GUANGDONG Woman negotiates with ATM bandit

A woman bargained with a knife-wielding robber while withdrawing money from an ATM in Chaozhou. The male robber threatened the woman with knife at her back, asking for 3,000 yuan (\$460) in cash, but the woman remained calm and asked if 1,000 yuan would be acceptable. They reached a deal at 2,000 yuan. The woman called the police as soon as the robber left with the money, and he was captured five hours later.

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ANHUI Train worker helps lost girl find mom



A 10-year-old girl who lost her mother as she boarded a train in Qianjiang county was over 100 kilometers away by the time her mother was found — still standing on the platform. Crew member Cheng Yanjun spotted the girl crying while patrolling the train, which was traveling from Nanjing to Xiangyang. Cheng said the girl had lost her mother, surnamed Wang, in the crowd and had boarded with other passen-

CHONGQING 'Health products' strain marriage

A man in his 60s called media in Chongqing twice, asking them to help stop his wife buying all kinds of "health products", which left them no money to buy regular food. Yang Yusheng said his wife, Wu Mei, started attending lectures about health products about six months ago and had become obsessed with buying them. Their living room was cluttered with boxes of vitamin supplements and medicines claiming to relieve eye fatigue. Yang said he had experienced major hair loss all over his body after taking them for a long time, but his wife insisted he continue taking them. He said he hoped his wife would stop buying such products.

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'Tofu Beauty' ferments fervent following

Shi Qingxiang is known to friends and customers as "Tofu Beauty" — not because of her looks, but because she is a master tofu maker.

Tofu, one of the most common and least expensive foods in China, is a key source of extra income for many people in Hunan province.

Shi, 42, runs a tofu factory in Pinglang village, home to the Miao ethnic group for hundreds of years. The unique quality of the region's moun-

tain spring water and locally grown soybeans have given Pinglang tofu widespread recognition.

"Our tofu is so fragrant and sweet that no dipping sauce is even required," she said.

Historical records show the local soybean planting and tofu making began about 300 years ago, when the exchange of products and techniques between the Miao and Han peoples was encouraged.

Shi's grandfather, Shi

Guangyao, 81, said the village was famous for its tofu as far back as he can remember. He recalls that travelers would purposely pass through the village to buy tofu.

"As the old saying goes, there are three sufferings in life: poling a boat, forging iron and making tofu," Shi Guangyao said, adding that making tofu is extremely laborious and offers only skimpy profits.

Starting from the late

1990s, more young people — including Shi Guangyao's four children — left the village for jobs in cities. But he couldn't part with the stone mill he inherited from his father, so he continued to use it, making tofu for his children when they returned home for the annual Chinese New Year holiday.

In 2009, Shi Qingxiang, the family's youngest member, returned home and opened a restaurant with her husband,

using her entire savings from years of working in the city. Her flagship dish was her family's tofu recipe.

The market response was surprisingly good. "Some customers lined up hours just for a bite of our tofu," she said.

Shi Qingxiang's success inspired a poverty alleviation team to help her register and promote the Pinglang tofu, which the brand later added to the protection list of ethnic traditional culture.

Her food proved a hit in 2012 at a New Year's gift fair in Changsha, Hunan's capital, where she laid on a tofu-making presentation. This led to several business cooperation opportunities.

"We sold out of a week's stock on the first day," Shi Qingxiang said.

Through the efforts of the poverty alleviation team, the village's drinking water project was completed. Spring water now runs directly into every household. In addition, tourism-related infrastructure was built.

In December 2014, Shi Qingxiang and her fellow vil-

lagers started a cooperative and introduced advanced packing machines. Dried and vacuum-packed tofu products were developed to extend shelf life and boost sales.

Over 30 villagers, including 20 registered as low-income earners, have joined the cooperative. Last year, its earnings topped 800,000 yuan (\$120,000).

"I was embarrassed when people called me 'Tofu Beauty' in the past, but I now realize it's a compliment and I should continue to work hard to be worthy of it," Shi said.

XINHUA

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