

CHINA

Villagers aim to make splash on big screen

NANCHANG — In Hengfeng, a small county in East China's Jiangxi province, residents have a new way of greeting each other: "Have you applied for a film acting role?"

The county is the site of an ongoing movie production, and filmmakers are expecting to hire more than 400 extras to serve as background actors. Many villagers have been eager to apply for the role.

Local villager Ke Xiufa, 67, has already served as an extra three times on the production.

"I can earn 100 yuan (\$14) plus three meals a day, excluding overtime pay," said Ke, adding that more than 40 villagers like him acted on the very first day when the movie started shooting.

The county's film and television program production base is located at a former coal mine site.

The mine, built in 1958, witnessed declining production and financial losses after its peak production period in the 1990s. With a deserted colliery, a 5-kilometer railway line for coal transportation, and its vacant offices and dormitories, the mine was designated as a provincial-level industrial heritage site last year.

Located at the east end of Jiangxi, Hengfeng is near Hengdian, a film and television program production center known as "China's Hollywood" in neighboring Zhejiang province. "Many tourism and film and TV production companies favored our beautiful environment and well-preserved industrial heritage, which strengthened our determination to build a base for a film and television program production here," said Pan Li, Party chief of the county.

Two years ago, a Zhejiang-based cultural company invested 200 million yuan to turn the former coal mine into three filming locations in three different historical settings, developing a comprehensive base for both film and TV production and tourism.

Gan Xiao'er, a director who is filming a movie there, said he was thrilled to learn that many kinds of old trains can be moved inside the base, achieving an ideal shooting effect. "The scenes of moving vintage trains are rare at other shooting venues in China. The breathtaking rural landscape is also perfect for filming movies," Gan said.

The base has also injected vitality into rural vitalization efforts, bringing additional income to locals.

Since November, the base has brought on five camera crew teams and has hired more than 3,000 extras from villages in the area, said Zhou Zhongliang, who is in charge of the base's operations.

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Li Hao works in his workshop on the Luban lock in Tengzhou, Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Luban lock maker finds success

Inheritor of special technique transforms ancient toy into creative cultural product

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Jinan
zhaoruixue@chinadaily.com.cn

While demonstrating how to disassemble and reassemble a Luban lock, Li Hao, an inheritor of Luban lock-making techniques in Tengzhou, Shandong province, shared the history of this traditional Chinese folk educational puzzle and the ancient wisdom embedded in its structure.

"It's easy to take apart but challenging to reassemble, and that is the major feature of it," said Li, 39.

The Luban lock is believed to have been created by Lu Ban, a structural engineer known as the "father of carpentry" in China who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC).

The design of the Luban lock incorporates concave and convex parts that interlock seamlessly, drawing inspiration from the mortise and tenon joints used in ancient Chinese wooden architecture and furniture, Li said.

After dedicating 10 years to developing the Luban lock by blending tradition with innovation, Li has transformed it into a creative cul-

“As our country increasingly values the preservation and inheritance of traditional culture, I believe the future of the Luban lock is promising.”

Li Hao, an inheritor of Luban lock-making techniques

tural product that has contributed to the local cultural and tourism industry.

His company has created over 100 variations of the toy and has provided employment for more than 100 villagers in Jisuo town, with orders coming in from overseas as well.

In addition to the traditional six-rod lock, Li's team has designed a 24-rod lock adorned with patterns depicting elements of Tengzhou culture. By utilizing hardwoods such as

rosewood and incorporating techniques such as inlaying silver wire, they have transformed the puzzle into a trendy cultural and creative product.

Despite encountering challenges and setbacks in his innovations, Li said the experience he has gained from his determination to overcome those obstacles has enriched his life. His journey to establish his company began in 2009, when he started working as a village official in Jisuo with a mission to enhance the lives of the residents. The inspiration to develop the Luban lock as an educational toy struck him in 2010 when he saw a large one at the Shanghai World Expo.

"Tengzhou is the birthplace of Lu Ban, so why don't we develop the Luban lock as a toy that will not only educate villagers, but also serve as a way to preserve the wisdom of our ancestors?" he thought at the time.

He went to Jia Fuming, a local master woodworker, to learn carpentry techniques. Being skeptical of a college student's interest in learning this traditional craft, Jia rejected Li, believing his enthusiasm would be short-lived.

But Li was persistent and visited Jia several more times before eventually winning him over.

Starting from scratch, they worked together to produce a Luban lock within six months.

With support from the Jisuo government, Li secured a 50,000 yuan (\$7,000) loan and established a woodworking company, marking the beginning of their efforts to produce the Luban lock on a mass scale.

After finding initial production success, he encountered new challenges related to marketing and working capital, and the first batch of Luban locks made sat unsold in a warehouse. "We had been focusing on developing the product, but we ignored the marketing work," he said.

Li began participating in several trade fairs where the Luban lock was more well-known, and it soon became a sought-after product.

To further expand the company's production scale and create more employment opportunities, the town government helped him secure a 2,000-square-meter workshop.

He also obtained another loan for 300,000 yuan and raised over 1 million yuan to purchase woodworking equipment and high-quality wood materials, and to hire professional technicians to enhance the production process.

By 2011, the company was able to double its production capacity. Last year the sales reached 30 million yuan.

The impact of this initiative is evident in the lives of villagers like Kong Lingmei, who is responsible for polishing the wood used at Li's company.

By working at the company, Kong earns a stable income of around 3,000 yuan per month.

Recognizing the cultural significance of the Luban lock, the Zaozhuang government, which administers Tengzhou, has been organizing competitions focused on the design assembly-disassembly of the puzzle to promote its ancient wisdom and expand its reach.

"As our country increasingly values the preservation and inheritance of traditional culture, I believe the future of the Luban lock is promising," Li said.

School gardens may spark children's interest in nature

KUNMING — It is widely known that children's interest in nature is crucial for their mental health and biodiversity conservation efforts.

But how can parents and teachers foster children's interest in nature in the first place? The answer may lie in a garden.

Chinese researchers have recently revealed that a school garden with abundant natural components can be used to cultivate the interest of primary school children in nature while helping to alleviate their study-related stress.

In a study published in the journal *People and Nature*, a research team from Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden of the Chinese Academy of Sciences analyzed the impact of natural observation and inquiry-based learning activities in a school garden on the development of children's interest in nature.

The researchers conducted a series of teaching interventions over a semester in a campus garden of a primary school in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province. The program involved 24 fourth graders taking part in three 40-minute activities that were held weekly: natural observation with assigned tasks, natural observation with open-ended tasks and inquiry-based activities.

Participants maintained individual portfolios consisting of questionnaires, nature journals, observation descriptions and interviews. Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed to categorize children into three categories: those who developed an interest, those who developed an enhanced interest, and those not affected by the activities.

After four months in the program, the results showed that more than two-thirds of the 24 students were classified as either "interest initiated" or "interest enhanced," indicating a generally favorable outcome, according to the study.

The results revealed that the school garden, with its unique and safe environment, played a significant role in stimulating children's curiosity about the creatures in the garden. It also empowered children to learn and explore independently.

Given the current trend of children spending more time in front of screens and less in front of nature, school gardens offer potential solutions, the study said.

"Implementing a diverse school garden with informative labels and explanation boards, along with teacher support, represents a promising approach to cultivating children's interest in nature, par-



Students tend the garden at Gucheng Central Middle School in Gucheng township in Bozhou city, Anhui province, on Nov 7.

YANG ZHONGQIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

ticularly during the critical developmental stage of 9 to 11 years of age," said Chen Jin, a researcher at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden.

"We recommend implementing

mini botanical gardens and club activities in schools to bridge formal and informal education," Chen added.

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Hotline helps youth cope with mental, legal woes

In June 2022, a visually impaired youth surnamed Chen encountered difficulties in navigating train travel. To seek help, he called the 12355 hotline.

The hotline promptly contacted social workers to help Chen arrange his trip, and to address the young man's distress caused by his disability, the hotline also offered counseling from a psychiatrist.

Chen said that the service has greatly boosted the confidence of disabled people like him who need to arrange long trips.

Since its establishment by the Communist Youth League of China Central Committee in 2006, the hotline has helped hundreds of thousands of young people in China by providing much needed counseling for mental health and legal problems.

The 12355 platform has 115 hotlines across the country, offering legal and mental health consultations to about 600,000 people annually. These services can also be accessed around the clock through the 12355 online portal, which was established last May.

Catering to the needs of young people, the platform has diversified its services. In addition to offering counseling, it organizes special activities aimed at enhancing their psychological well-being.

For instance, during the senior high school and college entrance exam period last year, the platform organized a series of stress-relieving activities to ease the anxiety students have about taking the exams and boost their confidence.

The platform has also forged cooperation with various departments to protect the rights of young people in China.

In July, the 12355 platform in Shanghai received a distress message from an individual surnamed Ma who had been abducted and taken to Myanmar. Acting on guidance from the CYLC Central Committee, the mental health counselor maintained contact with Ma, gathering crucial information that contributed to the successful rescue of the youngster.

Meanwhile, regional authorities are adopting measures to maximize the platform's functionality, enabling it to play a more significant role in initiatives such as preventing delinquent behavior and enhancing the health and well-being of youths.

Moving forward, the platform plans to persist in innovating its service methods and enhancing its capacity to cater to the evolving needs of young people.

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