

CHINA



Jiashantou village at Longwan Lake rural vitalization demonstration area in Sishui, Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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At Longwan Lake rural vitalization demonstration area in Sishui county, Jining, Shandong province, visitors wander the village paths during the summer break. Nestled among the greenery are art galleries, a music hall, folk museums, workshops and rustic homestays where visitors can unwind and soak in the local charm.

It's hard for many to imagine that years ago, this area was an impoverished community, with many dilapidated houses and roads narrow and muddy, seldom visited by outsiders.

The demonstration area of 18 villages has undergone a remarkable transformation during the past decade to become a thriving tourism destination.

Last year, the area attracted over 300,000 visitors, generating a total revenue of 30 million yuan (\$4.21 million), according to the county government.

This success story is an example of a partnership development model spearheaded by Shandong province.

The model's core objective is to connect talented people, including entrepreneurs, experts, scholars and artists to develop rural industrial projects, making full use of underutilized rural resources and incubating new agricultural, cultural and tourism projects.

Under this model, local government authorities provide support in terms of land usage and the development of rural infrastructure like water facilities, sewage systems, waste management and 5G coverage.

Collaborating partners bring essential elements lacking in rural areas, such as capital and technology, to foster diverse and vibrant rural industries. They engage in entrepreneurial endeavors utilizing rural resources through leasing or profit-sharing arrangements.

To date, the province has collaborated with 702 rural vitalization partners, implementing 548 projects and creating employment opportunities for over 36,000 people, according to Shandong Provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security.

In July, the province unveiled 1,280 new rural projects to attract potential partners, spanning sectors such as agricultural and forestry production, the primary processing of agricultural goods and tourism ventures.

Discovering roots

A participant in the success of the Longwan Lake demonstration area has been Tian Bin, 49, a resident of Sunjiazhuang village.

After graduating from the Qingdao School of Arts and Crafts with a degree in daily product design in 1994, Tian worked as an interior designer.

After more than a decade working away from his hometown, Tian felt a pull toward his roots.

"At that time I wasn't sure what to do, so I returned to the countryside where I was born," Tian said.

In 2013, he and a few friends rented an abandoned granary in Jiashantou village, around 3 kilometers from Tian's home village, with the aim of converting it into an arts space.

"When we first arrived at this granary, it was overgrown with weeds, with crumbling walls, presenting a scene of decay. But this place made me feel like this might be where I would strive for the rest of my life," Tian said.

Over the next five years, Tian painstakingly renovated the granary. Today, it houses an art experience center for sketching, a rural museum, a restaurant, a library and a multimedia cultural exchange conference room, attracting artists, students and the public for creative inspiration.

"Initially, it was meant to be a meeting place for designers to discuss design concepts. But as more friends visited the granary, discussions on rural development initiatives began to take shape," Tian said.

"We gradually realized that although villages around Longwan Lake had the natural

Vitalizing rural areas through partnership

Dedicated individuals making positive difference in their communities



Clockwise from above left: Children try woodcraft at Longwan Lake rural vitalization demonstration area. A villager reads at a mini library in the area. PHOTOS BY ZHAO RUIXUE / CHINA DAILY
Zhang Xiaoxiao (center) checks scallions grown in a greenhouse. Tian Bin (second from right) and others who've helped develop his arts space in the demonstration area. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

advantages of green mountains and clear waters, the resources such as idle residential land and local specialty products were not effectively utilized," he said.

Recognizing the untapped potential of the region's natural beauty and resources, Tian's efforts caught the attention of the county government who proactively engaged with him and his team, seeking to explore new avenues of development through the partnership model.

Through discussions and collaboration, Tian found alignment between the direction of rural vitalization and the aspirations of his team.

He established a cultural development company in 2018 to capitalize on the ecological resources of the mountainous region to vitalize the villages.

With government support in infrastructure development, including roads, water supplies, drainage systems and village-wide computer networks, Tian's team embarked on a journey to breathe new life into neglected structures.

"The government supported our project by connecting two villages with a 5-km road, forming a cohesive area. It now takes less than five minutes to travel between the two villages," Tian said.

While repurposing around 50 disused houses into education bases, libraries and homestays, Tian has integrated local traditions and agricultural practices. Educational activities like landscape drawing, wood-working and clay work are offered at these bases, fostering vibrant cultural exchanges.

During this summer vacation, camps were held where activities such as traditional woodworking, pottery, tie-dyeing, batik and paper-cutting were offered, attracting groups of students to the area.

"While the government invests in infrastructure, we invest in industry, creating an incubator that transforms culture and art into productivity. Here, artists bring their ideas and ideals to life, transforming the villages into an artistic hub," said Tian.

Sweet success

Kong Yuan, a native of the county, returned to start a business in Dongzhongdu village in 2020.

She has cultivated a brand to promote local sweet potatoes by offering a variety of tempting snacks and pastries made from the crop.

Last year, the total sales revenue of her sweet potato business reached 1 million yuan.

Local government authorities have provided a lot of support for my business start-up, said Kong.

"The process of opening my store was completed in just two days. And we don't need to pay rent, instead we only share the profits with the owner each year," she said.

To make full use of idle land resources, the county government encourages farmers to participate in project cooperation by leasing their idle houses.

For example, at the demonstration area, three villages have provided 117 idle houses and 12 hectares of land that is unsuitable for farming for partner projects, creating a consumption district offering rural homestays.

These tourism facilities attract over 30,000 visitors annually and provide jobs for over 1,000 people, raising the average disposable income of villagers to 21,000 yuan per year, the county government said.

To promote local employment, the Sishui county government and the partners prioritize the recruitment of villagers.

Through tailored training programs such

as for e-commerce livestreaming, tie-dyeing and painting, villagers are equipped with specialized skills that align with the needs of partner projects.

Feng Yanjie, 39, and her husband originally worked in Beijing, leaving their sons, who were in elementary school, at home.

"In the past, if we didn't go out to work, we could only farm at home," said Feng.

With the rapid development of the cultural tourism industry in the villages, facilities such as libraries for study tours, pottery workshops and children's playgrounds have been built, providing jobs for villagers.

Feng chose to return to her hometown and secured a job at a library in 2020 with a monthly salary of 2,400 yuan.

Elevating agriculture

Zhang Xiaoxiao, 35, chose to contribute to rural vitalization by upgrading the traditional growing methods of vegetables with progressive technologies.

A graduate of the University of Alberta in Canada in 2012 with a degree in finance, she relinquished a lucrative career in finance in a bustling metropolis to return to her hometown in Anqiu, Shandong province.

"I was born in the countryside, and I want to do something to make our hometown better," said Zhang, underscoring her deep connection to the agricultural landscape that shaped her values and aspirations.

Recognizing traditional scallion planting, which was time-consuming and laborious, Zhang sought to revolutionize the process.

Leading the charge at Shandong Wohua Agriculture Technology Co, she spearheaded the development of a fully mechanized approach to scallion farming, streamlining production and reducing costs.

Over three years, Zhang and her team built

an intelligent scallion seedling center spanning 33 hectares, integrating advanced technologies for precise seeding, automated transplanting and intensive harvesting.

"These innovations not only boosted farmers' efficiency by over 20 times but slashed costs by 30 percent, mitigating risks associated with traditional farming practices," said Zhang.

In addition to upgrading the growing technologies, Zhang led her team to expand the company's business by developing scallion processing. Recently, her team has developed a preservative-free scallion-based sauce, which has performed well on the market.

"This business expansion not only created job opportunities for 300 local farmers but stimulated demand for scallions in the region," said Zhang.

Healthy living for tomorrow

Cao Xiushuai, 31, had the idea of venturing into rural business in 2020 after searching for organic vegetables for his son. At that time, Cao, a graduate in business administration from Wuhan University, worked in the real estate industry in Jinan, Shandong province, earning a monthly salary of 15,000 yuan.

"People are paying more and more attention to healthy food. So I thought why not develop a shared farm through which urban residents can choose a piece of land they like and entrust us to grow healthy vegetables for them, or they can grow the vegetables themselves," said Cao.

"Our customers can not only harvest the produce they grow but experience firsthand the growth process of crops," he added.

Encouraged by local policies on inviting partners to jointly develop rural areas, Cao directed his focus toward harnessing rural resources.

After six months of research, he identified Gongcun village in Jinan's Shizhong district as an ideal location for his project. Nestled in the mountains, the village lacked extensive arable land suitable for large-scale mechanized farming.

"The land that locals were reluctant to cultivate presented an excellent opportunity for urban residents seeking a rural farming experience," said Cao.

He then leased parcels of land from the village and established Chuhe Farm.

One day while setting up fencing for the farm, he noticed a person who was foraging for wild vegetables nearby. After a brief 30-minute conversation, the person signed up for a 60-square-meter plot, becoming Cao's first customer.

Within a week, he had 10 more customers.

During a hiking trip with his customers at a village adjacent to the farm, the stark contrast in scenery caught Cao's attention.

"There were lush mountains in the distance and neglected old houses up close," said Cao. He decided to expand the farm's development path and venture into the homestay industry.

Partnering with three villages, Cao renovated several idle houses and leased them to people wanting to experience rural life.

Besides paying rent to village homeowners, for each successful deal, the company contributes 10,000 yuan to the village collective entity and pays an annual property service fee of 800 yuan.

"This model not only provides urban customers with scenic retreats but also generates income for villagers from idle properties," said Cao.

Currently, the farm distributes 70,000 yuan in dividends annually to the Guangcun village collective entity, pays 70,000 yuan for land-use fees, and pays over 200,000 yuan in paying for employed village residents.

Zhang Tao, head of the Shandong Provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security, said during a news conference last year: "Talented people are crucial in vitalizing rural areas. We will improve policies to support them so that they can go on to achieve success, and so that this endeavor can become a model for others to follow throughout the province."