



Dressed-up Miao ethnic people dance at Yanu Festival in Fenghuang. PHOTOS BY WU WENXING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Taking traditional skills into the future

Editor's note: *Inheritors of many intangible cultural heritage items in Fenghuang county, Hunan province, not only practice what their ancestors passed down but also innovate and develop new products to meet consumer demands. Some shared their stories of years of effort to learn and promote their skills with China Daily reporter Zhang Zhao.*

XIANG XIUPING — MIAO EMBROIDERY

When Xiang Xiuping was a little girl, she lived beside a road that local Miao ethnic people traveled to go to the market, and noticed how beautiful and delicate their traditional clothes were. Since then, she has been interested in Miao embroidery, although she belongs to the Tujia ethnic group.

She began collecting Miao embroidery pieces in 1996. After she was laid off from a tobacco factory in 2000, she opened an embroidery workshop that organized other laid-off workers.

Over the past decade, she has worked managing companies, storehouses and restaurants, and used nearly all her earnings to buy embroidery for her collection.

"The works are not only art, but also a silent language that tells the history of a civilization," she said.

Xiang owns a shop in the old town of Fenghuang that sells and displays Miao embroidery. It has traditional Miao costumes, art pendants, toys and clothes combining traditional embroidery skills and modern designs.

The star piece in the shop is a 148-meter-long embroidery finished in March 2013. It was designed by Xiang and took 48 women, including Xiang, 26 months to complete.

The work shows an old man in a Miao village telling stories of the ethnic group's history from the pre-historic age until today. Xiang spent about 10 years collecting the stories.

YANG HONGJIANG — SILVERWARE MAKING

At only 27 years of age, Yang Hongjiang is already an expert in the Miao style of silverware making.

He started to learn the skill when he was seven, first from his father and then from other masters, and became a professional when he was 15.

Yang said similar skills are seldom seen elsewhere, and he would like to promote the handicraft nationwide.

A commonly used technique in Miao silverware is coiling thin silver wires to form shapes or patterns. A technician uses a mold with 52 holes of different diameters to process silver ingots into wires as thin as hairs, step by step.

"In each of the 52 procedures, you have to be patient and keep the force even — not too hard or too sudden," said Yang, adding that another of the difficulties in the traditional skill is to keep the welding temperature between 950 and 1000 C.

Even though a master, Yang some-

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intangible cultural heritage items
in Fenghuang county

times has to start over again if a mistake occurs.

A bracelet usually takes him two days to finish. He does not need a design on paper, for he carries all the patterns in his mind.

Traditionally, Miao silverware was used as jewelry, but Yang and his co-workers have developed new products, such as tea sets and dinner sets, which are as popular with tourists as the traditional bracelets and necklaces.

XIANG YUFENG — STRAW PLAITING

Xiang Yufeng asked for nothing as a dowry when she married, except a machine to make straw shoes. At 61 years of age, she is still using the same machine.

She said the basic patterns are firmly in her mind. "I can make shoes even with my eyes closed," she said.

Xiang has a straw handicraft shop in the old town of Fenghuang with a plaque that reads "King of Straw Shoes" written by famous calligrapher Huang Yongyu.

Her business was not good between 2006 and 2008. "Some people laughed at me, and I sometimes thought about giving up, but I couldn't. I know this is an art and part of our lifestyle that people should never forget," she said. "I believe I can make a difference."

She can make more than 100 different shoe patterns, some of which are modern styles. Based on the skills she learned making shoes, she has also developed other handicrafts.

"I'm a skilled worker but not a good designer," Xiang said, adding that her brother helps her design large pieces plaited from straw, some of which have won awards at domestic handicraft exhibitions.

WANG YAO — MIAO BATIK

Wang Yao was born in Guizhou province and went to Fenghuang in 2006.

"Fenghuang is a place that gives me inner peace and the local people are very tolerant, so I can create my own works," he said.

His grandfather owned a dyeing business, where Wang became interested in batik, a similar technique, some 30 years ago.



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Xiang Xiuping, inheritor of Miao embroidery



“In each of the 52 procedures, you have to be patient and keep the force even.”

Yang Hongjiang, inheritor of silverware making



“I know this is an art and part of our lifestyle that people should never forget.”

Xiang Yufeng, inheritor of straw plaiting



“An intangible cultural heritage loses its vitality if it is only preserved in the museums.”

Wang Yao, inheritor of Miao batik

County nurtures cultural heritage

More than 10,000 photos and 2,100 hours of video are part of an effort by Fenghuang county's intangible cultural heritage protection center since its establishment in December 2006 to seek potential intangible cultural heritage resources.

It has so far collected more than 2,600 such clues, including handicraft skills, music and drama, folk tales, medicine and sports.

The county is already home to 77 recognized intangible cultural heritage items. The center has opened six institutions to promote Fenghuang paperwork, blue calico, Tujia brocade, Miao silverware and Yangxi Opera, five intangible cultural heritage items in the county.

Led by the government with assistance from companies and local residents, the institutions train inheritors, collect and exhibit works and develop new products.

Some intangible cultural heritage items were traditionally passed down only to the male, but this norm no longer applies.

Fifteen other items have entered local schools in the forms of music, sport and handicraft lessons.

The center is compiling books on intangible cultural heritage. Two, about local dramas and traditional Miao medicine, have already been published.

The local government has organized many festival activities and exhibitions to promote ethnic cultures and protect intangible cultural heritage items.

One of the biggest days for the Miao ethnic group is the eighth day of the fourth Lunar month, known as the Yanu Festival. On that day, not only local residents, but also many Miao people from nearby provinces, dress up and gather in Fenghuang to sing and dance to commemorate their ancient hero Yanu.

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