

POVERTY ALLEVIATION



A tourist dresses in Miao traditional costume as she learns *muguwu* in Fanpai village, Guizhou province. *Muguwu* was listed as a national cultural heritage in 2006. YANG WENBIN / XINHUA

Cultural tourism brings renowned dancing village a step nearer wealth

Performances of traditional music and dancing are helping to raise living standards in an isolated settlement, as **Hou Liqiang** and **Yang Jun** report from Fanpai, Guizhou province.

Things are peaceful at night in Fanpai village. The only sounds are the babbling of water in the stream and the occasional bark of a dog. There are no streetlamps, so only moonlight and the ambient glow from a few homes illuminate the settlement in Taijiang county, Guizhou province.

Only one small corner of the village provides a contrast, the cultural center, where groups of residents often gather for discussions that often last until long after midnight.

Nobody can remember exactly how many discussions have been held, but the topic is always the same: finding a proper development mode for the village, which is famed for its cultural heritage but is mired in poverty.

Since the 1990s, Fanpai has been renowned for its rich cultural heritage, including *muguwu*, literally “wooden drum dance” after the *mugu* drum, together with multivoiced love songs. They are listed as national cultural heritage. The dance, which records the migratory history of the local Miao ethnic group, has been performed for tourists domestically and overseas, according to Wan Dexue, Fanpai’s former Party chief.

Fame has failed to bring major changes to the village. Most of the young people have left to work in big cities, and if the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation had not arrived in 2013 to help the development of tourism, the village would have vanished, he said.

According to the village committee, 115 of Fanpai’s 2,009 residents live below the national poverty line, which was 2,952 yuan (\$443) last year.

With 10 million yuan donated by China Minsheng Bank Corp in 2013, the foundation launched a project to help eradicate poverty by developing local tourism. A tourism cooperative was established in 2014, and each of the 20 groups to which residents belong can elect one or two representatives to be members of the cooperative’s council, according to Wan, who is director of the council.

The foundation covers the council’s operat-

ing costs and all profits are distributed among the villagers.

It’s not unusual to see outsiders controlling the tourist industry in many ancient villages. However, those responsible for Fanpai’s development are determined to allow the villagers to be the dominant force in tourism development to ensure the local culture is preserved.

When the foundation invited Liu Zhao-feng, head planner of Guizhou Architectural Design and Research Institute Co, to design plans for Fanpai, he initially refused because he thought a village as well-known as Fanpai would be too commercialized. Liu had visions of other renowned settlements, which are littered with traditional buildings damaged by poorly designed upgrades.

“However, when I arrived in the village, I discovered I was wrong. Though famous, it hasn’t been developed much,” he said.

Fascination

Liu decided to accept the offer and found a company that teaches residents how to raise their village’s profile and change their own destinies. He asked just 1 yuan for the task, because he was fascinated by the village and wanted to devote himself to its development.

In many ancient villages, planning and construction are undertaken solely for the benefit of tourists, Liu said. Instead, he took the needs of the villagers into consideration and planned the cultural center, construction of which began in 2014 and ended in May.

The center includes one room where the *lusheng*, a traditional Miao reed-pipe, is displayed and another where the history of the village is the centerpiece. The center also provides a gathering place for traditional events.

“The older generation is confident about their culture, but that’s not the case with younger people. They are at a loss, and some are abandoning their traditional culture. At this key time for cultural inheritance, I planned the cultural center in the hope that the younger generation will see their culture



Traditional buildings in Fanpai village are made of wood and retain ancient construction methods. HOU LIQIANG/CHINA DAILY

when they return and gain confidence from it,” Liu said.

The center is a bridge between the villagers and outsiders, and a guesthouse, which opened last month, provides accommodations for tourists, and academics and students researching rural development.

Che Maomao, the foundation’s representative in the village, said it has invited Xunmei, a tourism development company that has been running guesthouses in a Miao village nearby, to help run 10 rooms in the cultural center and two recently renovated houses.

Xiao Yifei, Xunmei’s general manager, said 30 percent of the revenue from the guesthouses will be given to the cooperative and the company will cover all the operating costs.

Irrespective of whether Xunmei makes money from the project, it guarantees the villagers a payment of at least 100,000 yuan a year.

dragged into the yard.

Holding a pickax with a rope wound around the top, a shaman cleared his throat and began chanting. The end of each section of the chant was signaled by the shaman hitting a sheet of metal with the pickax. Occasionally he scattered rice on the ground.

He chanted for about 30 minutes before the villagers headed to the mountain. Once there, the complex ceremony continued for more than two hours.

The piglet squealed continuously until it was slaughtered and cooked.

The ceremony — called *nonggui*, literally



Reporter’s log
Hou Liqiang

“driving the ghost away” — is performed when people believe spirits are bringing trouble. Usually, only 12 men participate.

Despite being an outsider, I was allowed to watch the full ceremony. I was treated well and offered food, except for one dish that was reserved for the 12 participants.

I would not have been concerned about the future of this “fairlyland” if I had not met a group of amateur photographers, guided by a professional lensman, who had paid the villagers for the privilege of taking shots of performances of the local cultural heritage.

They were a group of “overnight millionaires”, each with several long lenses hanging over their shoulders. From the moment they arrived, they began throwing their

Locals perform a dance to the music of time

According to *The Book of Fanpai Culture*, published by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, at one time *muguwu* was only performed once every 13 years, during a large traditional event. At other times, the wooden drum was stored in a special place and no one was allowed to touch it.

The dance comprises five sections:

Section one: Depicts how the ancestors of the Miao people migrated from the east to their current homes, crossing mountains and rivers, and forcing paths through a dense undergrowth of brambles and thorns.

Section two: Describes the heroism of the five Miao leaders who led the migration.

Section three: Explains how the early Miao settlers felled trees and cleared weeds to provide farmland, then gathered together to rest.

Section four: Shows how the people came together to celebrate harvests and holidays.

Section five: Recalls how Miao people who had moved to other locations returned and danced with their clansmen to commemorate their ancestors.



Online

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The cooperative has been in existence for three years. It mainly caters for tourists who visit to watch cultural performances or experience rural life. However, the money generated — several thousand yuan — isn’t enough to run the guesthouse, so Xunmei can provide help by bringing more tourists to the village, according to Wan, the council director.

History through song

The development of tourism has brought high hopes to the local people, who long to see the younger generation return and preserve and then pass on the traditional culture.

Wan Zhengwen, who has officially been named as an inheritor of two of Fanpai’s national cultural heritages, said it has been difficult to pass on the old knowledge and songs that record Miao history, mainly because the ethnic group doesn’t have a written language and its history is recorded through song.

“Most of the young people have left the village for work. I visit the primary school to teach the children about our culture, but when they graduate, they will leave the village for further education,” he said.

Change may be on the horizon, though. According to Wan Zhengwen, as more tourists have arrived, some of the younger people have expressed an interest in learning from him. “Many people have told me that if they had known tourists were interested in our traditional culture, they would have learned from me,” he said.

Yang Guangzhong and his wife performed *muguwu* across China, and in France and Portugal, for more than a decade. However, in 2013, Yang contracted pleurisy and was forced to give up dancing.

He said the villagers have benefited from the cooperative’s work by selling homemade wine, pork and other agricultural produce, and he has high expectations of increased success.

“We used to perform the dance outside the village. Many of the young people still do, but that’s just for local dignitaries and bosses. If more tourists visit, the younger villagers will return and we will dance to promote the development of the village,” he said.

Between 1995 and 2013, Zhang Xingrong performed *muguwu* at locations nationwide. Although the 46-year-old privately considers himself too old to perform the dance, he is willing to continue until tourism has developed to a point where it becomes profitable for the young people to return.

“*Muguwu* has been passed down for generations in the village. If we don’t develop tourism, it will either be lost or only performed in other places.”

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Progress, but at what cost?

My interest in traditional culture means I am always looking for places with well-preserved traditions and unaffected rural people.

To my mind, Fanpai village, Guizhou province, is definitely such a place. Row after row of houses on the mountain slope create a maze I would like to enter and lose myself in. The houses display the traditional characteristics of the Miao people — some are newly built, while others have stood for decades topped by moss-covered roof tiles made

from tree bark.

In the “maze”, dogs and hens, followed by chicks, searched busily for food, while water washed the stones in the stream that runs across the village. Occasionally, a rooster crowed and a few dogs barked.

As I took in the scene, the sudden squeal of a piglet led me to one of the houses. I didn’t imagine I would soon witness a traditional Miao ceremony.

A large jar of homemade wine, a bowl of rice with an egg on top and firewood had been laid out, and a black piglet was being

weight around, telling the locals “You do this, you do that”. They never said “please”. Some pressed the shutters of their cameras while holding expensive cigarettes.

They may not have realized that the local seniors don’t speak Mandarin, but that doesn’t excuse their rudeness when they failed to coerce a group of female seniors to pose for them.

One woman became annoyed and barked, “Just throw them a 100 yuan (\$15) note.”

While I understand that the development of tourism is one of the few ways for traditional villages to eradicate poverty, I am now concerned that ignorant visitors may contaminate these fairlyland villages across the country.