

French expat finds magical blessings in neighborhood despite pandemic

Zhou Anna

Inspired by the short videos featuring bless-giving Africans that have gone viral, a French magician called on his neighbors to create their own videos for Shanghai, setting off another trend.

Since moving to Shanghai 11 years ago, Nicolas Juge has had a strong attachment to the city and his neighborhood.

The property management staff refer to him as the neighborhood's "celebrity," as almost everyone in the community knows the friendly guy from Dijon, France.

Juge lives in the New Hongqiao Landscape neighborhood in suburban Qingpu District, one of the eight districts that have basically achieved zero community transmission of COVID-19.

The popularity of the blessing videos, featuring Africans dancing and giving blessings in Chinese, with accents, attracted his interest.

"I wanted to make one for our community, but I didn't want to pay for this," the Frenchman said. "So I'd rather make it myself."

On April 20, he asked for

volunteers in the WeChat group to help him create the video. Fortunately, he received a massive response from his neighbors, particularly some expats.

It was quickly decided that 12 people would be involved, including expats, property staff, and children. Although he knew only three of the group's French members, the planning went smoothly.

Juge, dressed up in his usual magician's outfit, invited others to dress up in funny outfits to add color and vibe.

They crafted sentences of blessings and also drew three hearts on a whiteboard. During the actual show, they exclusively used the theme song of Ultraman, pulling off some of the icon's signature moves.

"Ultraman is not famous at all in France or Europe," he said. "But as I have lived in China for so many years, I know all the kids love it. Who didn't have an Ultraman card or toy when he was a kid?"

It only took them one afternoon to make the video. Juge uploaded the video to his WeChat moments, and was delighted by the likes and positive comments he received.

In addition to being a

magician, Juge has appeared in several Chinese TV dramas and advertisements. He once studied as an exchange student at the Shanghai Theater Academy, where he got his Chinese name "Ma Dashuai."

"We once rehearsed a comedy play from the famous TV drama Ma Dashuai, and I was playing the role of Zhao Benshan," he recalled. "I made everyone happy, and the director always called me Ma Dashuai."

Juge loved the Chinese name because it gave him a sense of belonging, and now all his Chinese friends call him by this name.

He tried to maintain a positive attitude and keep himself busy following reports of COVID-19 cases in the neighborhood last month.

He said that he could almost get everything he wanted through various buying groups that were well organized by the neighborhood. The French baguette, which he eats for breakfast every day, though, is not one of those items that can be purchased.

So, after finding recipes online, he began learning to bake. And soon after, he discovered another use for his talent.

He put a table in front of his house, wrote "Ma Dashuai Bakery" and "Food Exchange" on a paper, and started a barter business.

To avoid direct contact, he also placed a paper bag on the table. Neighbors could put the items they wanted to exchange in it and then take the baguette.

Juge now bakes 10 to 20 French baguettes on an average day, depending on the needs of his WeChat group. As a result, his neighbors provide him with flour, vegetables, fruits, chocolates, wine, and



Juge bakes French baguettes each day to barter with his neighbors.

other items.

Every night, he has video calls with his parents in France. Due to the pandemic, he hasn't been back to France in over two years. Before that, he returned to visit them three times a year.

"I miss them so much," he said. "Talking is very important to make me not feel alone during this hard period."

Juge's wife is from Wuhan, central China's Hubei Province. They met at a French market in Shanghai six years ago and began their love story.

They traveled to Wuhan in early January 2020 to plan their wedding ceremony with their entire family. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the ceremony had to be canceled.

His Chinese in-laws are concerned about the current situation in Shanghai after experiencing the outbreak, which began in Wuhan.

"We told them we have enough food and supplies, and we are negative since the beginning. They wish the situation will be better soon, and we can go to visit them in Wuhan."



Scan the QR code to watch the blessing videos created by Nicolas Juge and his neighbors.



Juge acts as a French teacher in the famous TV drama "All Out of Love."