

# Attracting talent is key to rural development

Lotus Chen

For over two decades, Zuo Jing has been giving an artistic twist to the countryside in Zhejiang, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces.

Recently, he was instrumental in remodeling Dananpo, a village near Jiaozuo in Henan Province, resurrecting its art center, tea house, bookstore, market cooperatives, B&B hotels and auditorium.

South Korean pottery and local scenic photo exhibits are featured prominently in the art center. The bookstore and books are kid-friendly, while cooperative stores sell walnuts, dates, industrial products and groceries.

“Rural revitalization is indeed diverse and complex. Everyone begins with his or her own area of expertise, professional background and resources to figure out his or her own path for rural architecture,” said Zuo, a professor of journalism and communication at Anhui University who views rural society holistically.

He is, of course, driven by the desire to “serve the community” and “connect the urban and rural areas,” but focusing on art and art-related development in the countryside appealed to him the most.

During the Harvest Festival in September 2022, Zuo invited folk musicians to perform for the locals in Dananpo.

Sun Qian, curator of China’s largest art event, the Nanhai Field Art Festival, wants to see art in the fields and believes it can help promote tourism in the rural Nanhai Bay Area.

## Rebuilding effort

Cheng Liankun is among the recent graduates who have joined China’s rural rebuilding effort.

Despite its beauty, Xiaozhujia Village in Heilongjiang Province struggled to attract tourists. Most farmers relied on farming, and local rice was unprofitable.

This waterside village is now alive and thriving, thanks largely to the many youth who set up businesses in the area.

Cheng, who was raised in a village in Ning’an Town, participated in this extraordinary drive.

A graduate of Mudanjiang Normal University, Cheng returned to the town



For Brian Linden, China’s sense of place is based in its rural areas.



In a Phoenix TV program, Warner Bros Discovery Group Vice President Vikram Channa talks with Shi Bazhuan who lives in rural Hunan Province and is involved in poverty-alleviation policy. — Photos/Ti Gong

to start a business in 2014. But first, he had to sort out the village’s nitty-gritty details and other issues.

Cheng, a marketing major, believed residents should engage in the local community economy and share its development dividend.

His expertise and initiative put Xiaozhujia on a development path. The village took over planning, while enterprises ran specialized activities. Soon, the villagers transformed their houses into homestays and agritainment.

Cheng established a professional rice cooperative and processing facility in the village in 2018. He promoted local rice at big trade shows. He also partnered with Alibaba, JD.com and Kuaishou to teach villagers how to sell rice online and attract visitors through livestreaming, which increased local agricultural product sales.

The community now has nine farmhouses and family-run hotels, attracting 150,000 visitors every year.

Liu Ye, head of Bohai Town, said that farmers were now more willing to participate in such initiatives. Their income has increased significantly, and fewer people have left the village to work in the cities.

In 2021, rural Internet retail sales reached 2.05 trillion yuan, which was an increase of 11.3 percent from the year before. Online sales of agricultural products reached 422.1 billion yuan, an increase of 2.8 percent.

Video blogger and influencer Li Ziqi is predicting a “promising” turnaround of the rural economy.

“I have a very important job to do, which is to rejuvenate the countryside and develop a reproducible, spreadable, recyclable and replicable pilot project that can assist rural people in increasing their income,” Li said during a trip to Ganzi in Sichuan Province.

Early this year, Li was shortlisted as the first National Youth Pioneers for Rural Revitalization.

## Appealing to foreigners

Rural China is as appealing to foreigners as it is to the Chinese. Many foreigners who live in China are eager to contribute to the revitalization of villages.

The countryside can fulfill many pastoral goals of the urban middle-class, such as combining life and work and living in a better environment. Improving networks and transportation links can also help people achieve their entrepreneurial goals.

“Foreigner Villager Chief” Brian Linden, an American who has lived in Dali, Yunnan Province, for decades, moved to rural Xizhou Village years ago.

In his new book, “One Village at a Time,” he argues that China should maintain its regard for the soil. China’s sense of place is based in its rural areas, and its “soft power” originates from its lengthy history and culture, rather than what appears to be a sparkling new trend. He believes China should harness its 5,000-year history and wisdom to proudly interact with the world.

Vlogger Katherine, who posts about her life and experiences in China on her YouTube channel, “Katherine’s Journey to the East,” is also keen to relocate to rural Hangzhou while working in the city.

Linden encourages local rural residents to voice their hopes and concerns about the future of their areas when it comes to cultural tourism and rural development in Yunnan. In his opinion, the intangible values of their projects, such as a sense of cultural self-importance and commitment to local job creation, are more significant than swimming pools and baths.

Linden evaluates projects by studying each community’s vision and needs. He avoids established tourist markets with little social impact. Instead, he helps tourism-startup communities.

“At Linden Center, we value historic buildings, and our careful repair and repurposing of these buildings has instilled cultural pride among the local communities.”

In his book, Linden says, “I’m not going to coup the local culture to cater to the urban tourist market, and the villagers are proud of that.”

“The neighbors of Linden Center are the foundation of their on-the-ground project, and they live and work with neighbors and succeed with them.”