



PHOTOS BY JU CHUANJIANG / CHINA DAILY

Yang Luoshu, 88, the 19th generation of a Yangjiabu New Year painting family, shows off an ancestral woodblock of his family's dating back to the Ming Dynasty.

A FAMILY ART

Woodprint paintings are traditionally hung in homes around Spring Festival, but for the artists, creating the pictures is a yearlong activity and a lifetime of dedication. **Wang Qian and Ju Chuanjiang report.**

The Spring Festival has only just finished. But despite the festive celebrations having ceased for another year, a centuries-old folk art workshop in Yangjiabu village in Weifang, Shandong province, is still busy making Chinese traditional woodprint New Year paintings for customers.

In a dusty, somewhat cramped, residence-cum-studio, Yang Luoshu, 88, successor of the family workshop named Tongshunde, prints pictures one at a time, using a big brush made of palm fibers.

He applies colors to the raised surfaces of a carved woodblock, places a piece of rice paper on it, then brushes it smooth to apply the first color. After several rounds, a picture of figures from the classic Chinese novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* begins to take shape.

Advanced in years, Yang has a hunched back, but he is still quick with his hands. In half an hour, he has finished a dozen paintings with delicate patterns and bright colors. "These paintings will be well bound and sent to a customer in Hong Kong who just ordered 1,000 copies," Yang says with a smile.

"It's been a family business for hundreds of years." As the 19th generation of a painting family, Yang learned the craft when he was 7. He was named a "master of folk arts" by UNESCO in 2001.

Together with 15 experienced craftsmen, Yang's workshop makes 150,000 New Year paintings every year.

Tongshunde is one of about 100 such family workshops flourishing in Yangjiabu village.

With 300 families, Yangjiabu has been making woodblock-printed New Year paintings since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). It is now one of China's three production centers of traditional folk paintings, together with Tianjin's Yangliuqing and Suzhou's Taohuawu.

Local government records show that the village can produce 210 million single-sheet prints a year, which are sold across the nation and to countries such as Russia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

These paintings are no longer mere decorations for the Spring Festival, they are also fine works of art sought by international collectors.

"However, compared with the



Villagers work at their family New Year painting workshop in Yangjiabu village, Weifang, Shandong province.



A Yangjiabu New Year painting features four children ushering in a prosperous happy New Year.

village's heyday 200 years ago, when nearly 300 workshops and stores flourished, the figure today is very small," says Wang Yonghai, head of the Weifang municipal research institute on Yangjiabu New Year paintings.

Chinese people tend to decorate their homes with New Year paintings during the Spring Festival, to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck to the family throughout the whole year.

The origin of New Year paintings can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). The legend goes that Li Shimin, the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, often had nightmares about ghosts. Then he asked an artist to paint portraits of his two bravest generals and paste them on to the

door to guard him through the night, and his nightmares stopped.

The artist who painted for the emperor is said to come from Yangjiabu. When he returned to his hometown, many people asked him to make the same painting, and so "door gods" were created, and are still the most common subjects of Yangjiabu New Year paintings.

The themes of Yangjiabu paintings, from folk religion, auspicious symbols, historical personages, myths and legends, to current affairs, local customs and landscapes.

"They are all based on the lives of the people and sometimes are also used to express various sentiments," Wang says.

completed by hand," the 78-year-old explains.

"The most difficult step is the carving. One wooden board needs to be engraved for one kind of color. To master such a skill requires years of experience," says Zhang, whose palms show signs of wear, dyed yellow with thick calluses.

To show the versatility of the art form, Zhang spent four years engraving a total of 531 woodblocks and creating a 32-meter-long painting. Named *The Happiness of Chinese Farmers*, it vividly depicts more than 1,000 characters and 100 scenes. It is said to be the nation's largest woodblock-printed painting and is part of the collection of the National Museum of China.

"My work is a piece of art, which cannot be achieved by machines," he says with great pride.

Meanwhile, Zhang's much-younger peers at a local culture and art company are committed to breathing new life into the traditional art form.

"We are attempting to renew the motifs and forms of traditional Yangjiabu New Year paintings through combining diversified art styles, to cater to modern tastes," says 39-year-old Yang Zhibin, an artist with Weifang Fengtai Culture and Art Co.

One of his bold inventions is combining the traditional craft with the styles of modern oil and watercolor painting, bringing a modern touch to the folk art.

The local government has also taken a range of measures to popularize the art in recent years. A 146,000-square-meter folk art garden has been established in Yangjiabu, where tourists can see not only rural people's residences with touches of the Ming and Qing dynasties, but also see how New Year paintings are made.

"We invite tourists to come and buy our paintings. The number of visitors has grown to 800,000 annually from 20,000 in the 1990s," says Yang Gaozhi, head of the Yangjiabu village.

Professional courses have been set up in several local primary and middle schools to train new artists and foster young people's interest in the traditional art form.

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Music of whistling kites in danger of fading

By YANG YAO in Nantong, Jiangsu
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They sound like a hundred flutes, playing melodically as they dance among the clouds. As the Nantong whistle kites drift over the fields, you hear them before you see them. Banyao (*ban* means board and *yao* means snipe), the large, flat whistling kites, are large and flat with hexagon-shaped frames that flaunt exquisite decorations with vibrant colors.

Shan Juan is a kite specialist and her family is steeped in the traditions of kite art in Rugao, in Nantong, Jiangsu province.

She relishes every opportunity to explain the history of the folk art that was listed as an intangible cultural heritage by the State Council in 2006.

"Banyao kites are different from those in the north — more exquisite and elegant," Shan says. She says the kite is called "*yuan* (glede, a bird of prey)" in the north and "*yao* (snipe)" in the south.

"In the sky, the 'snipes' not only dance but also sing songs," she says, noting that the bright colors and the whistles represent aspirations and expectations for a happy life.

Kite-makers usually install between 100 and 300 whistles on each kite, but some kites can have up to 1,000.

"Westerners often call it a symphony of air," Shan says.

The process of making the kites demands a high degree of expertise. There are four basic steps: framing, covering, painting and flying.

The kites are fashioned from bamboo, silk, gourds and rice leaves, and the whistles are made from dried gourds and wood, with a slit carved in the top. They are lashed to a bamboo frame on the front of the kite. The kites are then painted with red, green and white geometric designs, or with dozens of small paintings of legends and scenery.

"Cloth and silk are used for the kites and the painting styles are always *gongbi*, the traditional Chinese realistic painting," Shan says.

Depending on the size of the frame, paintings can depict traditional patterns, immortals, figures and folk tales. In the past, Shan says, every family in the countryside would fly kites, and their music represented the families' dreams, while crowds gathered to watch and listen, with laughter echoing around.

Shan is a Banyao Kite specialist and daughter-in-law of Guo Wenhe, who devised the Guo kite, a leading design school of the Banyao Kite. Guo died in 2004.

Shan's kite shop has few customers these days, she says.

Her sons don't want to learn the craft, and she is worried that after her the knowledge of the art form, passed from generation to generation, will disappear. "There are only two people who know how to make the kites in the entire Guo family," she says.

Though the Banyao Kite is classified as a cultural heritage item, no special measures have been put in place by the government to conserve the art behind it, according to Yang Guoqiang, a local official.

"It will be really sad if no one knows how to make them," he says.

The local government does offer incentives to the Guo family, of about 1,000 yuan (\$160) a year. But Shan says that does not even cover a month's rent.



YANG YAO / CHINA DAILY

Shan Juan is among a few kite artists specializing in making the traditional Banyao Kite at Rugao, in Nantong, Jiangsu province.

FACT BOX

The Nantong Kite, produced in Rugao, is one of the six most popular Chinese kites. The others are the Beijing, Weifang, Tianjin, Jiangnan and Taiwan kites. The Nantong Banyao Kite dates back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and the kite was mentioned in manuscripts from that era.

A book from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), *The Observation and Study of Southern and Northern Kites*, written by Cao Xueqin, author of *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, recognizes the Banyao Kite as representative of southern kites.