

Designers breathe new life into China's dying folk crafts

By Kelvin Chan

AP Business Writer

GAORONG VILLAGE, China — Dipping a brass-tipped tool into a vat of liquid wax, Pan Xiu-ying painstakingly traces an intricate design onto a white cloth.

At her workshop in a remote valley in one of China's poorest provinces, Pan uses traditional techniques passed down for generations to create an indigo-dye batik scarf embellished with patterns inspired by her ethnic Shui minority. But her handicrafts aren't for family members. They're destined for affluent buyers thousands of miles away.

Pan's employer, Hong Kong-based Elaine Ng, is among the growing number of designers focused on ecological and cultural sustainability who hope to preserve skills of rural artisans that are fast vanishing in China's increasingly industrial society.

"A scarf that is made with 50 hours of love is different from one made by digital print in a factory," said Ng, whose strategy of using artisans fits right in with Beijing's push to shift away from low-end, cheap mass manufacturing toward higher skilled, more environmentally friendly industries.

Ng is helping to breathe new life into old crafts of minority tribes in isolated villages in south-central Guizhou province.

Many low-cost Chinese producers are fleeing to neighboring Asian countries like Vietnam, where they can pay lower wages, as the local labor pool shrinks and costs rise.

So garment makers that previously thrived churning out cheap clothes for overseas brands are revamping their sweatshops with smart, small-batch production methods such as 3-D printing and cloud computing.

Ng hopes her project, "Un/fold," run by her design studio, The Fabrick Lab, can pioneer a business model that might appeal to young people fleeing villages for easier and better paying jobs in distant cities.

This fall, she launched a limited edition of scarves, squat wooden stools, and hexagonal wooden wall tiles, the latter two decorated with batik patterns normally used only for fabrics. She's also working with a Shanghai company to create custom furniture that uses artisanal fabrics and woodwork.

Back in the workshop, after finishing her pattern, Pan dips the silk and cotton fabric three times into a vat of organic dye made from indigo plants grown higher up the hillside. Finally, the wax is melted away to reveal the scarf's design. It will



PAINSTAKING PROCESS. Ethnic minority artisan Pan Xiu-ying (top photo) uses wax to make a batik pattern on a scarf in rural Sandu in China's Guizhou province. In the bottom photo, artisan Pan Mi-shuang weaves fabric using a traditional method, also in rural Sandu. The two women and other village artisans are working with designer Elaine Ng to put new twists into traditional crafts created by Guizhou's ethnic minorities, as Ng hopes to build a sustainable business model that helps preserve skills endangered by China's rapid modernization. (AP Photos/Kelvin Chan)

"By and large, the mainstream fashion industry has become so bland, it's become a polyester rag," Dean said. "So we're seeing more and more emerging brands really revive artisanal craftsmanship around the world."

Guizhou is attracting other independent designers. Sharon de Lyster, also based in Hong Kong, has scoured its markets for her label, Narrative Made.

"This is stuff they have been doing for generations but it really is dying," said de Lyster. She said young people see no way to make money, so they don't invest time and energy in advancing those traditional crafts.

The cuffs on one of de Lyster's \$190 silk shirts have a black and white chili pepper flower pattern by a Miao master embroiderer with cross stitching that produces an identical pattern on both sides. The Miao and some other tribes have no written language of their own so they use embroidery to communicate their myths and folklore.

New York-based designer Angel Chang spent a year in Guizhou collaborating with Miao and Dong artisans for a 2013 capsule collection. Fashion editors loved her biker-style jacket, \$1,000 but now sold out, in cotton damask featuring hypnotic blue and white zig-zags and geometric birds.

It's a race against time: Only three grandmothers in the Dong village of Zhaoxing can weave that pattern, Chang said.

"Young people can't do it. So you have a knowledge that is already in decline," she said. "The current generation can't explain what all the symbols mean and the stories in the clothing."

Chang is partnering with two NGOs to pass on traditional textile-making techniques. She's also working on a new Guizhou-inspired collection, which requires establishing a proper supply chain.

"You have to realize there's no industry there. They've never really sold to anyone outside of their families. They don't know how to price these things," she said. "It's not like I can just say I need 100 meters in this color and it's here in two days. It's really starting from scratch."

eventually sell for \$235 online or in boutiques in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

In the next room, two village women weave fabric by hand, using a wooden spinning wheel strapped on to one of them. Outside, the valley's lush green rice terraces and wooden houses stretch into the distance.

Pan, 47, said she's eager for more work from Ng and the steady income it provides, especially since her husband died earlier this year. She learned batik skills from her grandmother, but laments that her daughter and other young villagers are not interested.

"Young people don't want to learn (the skills). They want to go to Guangdong," she says, referring to the wealthy province near Hong Kong where factories still employ millions of workers from the countryside.

"If people see that we are doing it and definitely making money, then they'll want to come and have the patience to learn," said Pan. "Things that are machine made are cheap but they don't look good," she added.

Landlocked Guizhou, 1,230 miles from

Beijing, has rich folk art traditions. More than a third of its 35 million residents are from ethnic minorities including the Shui, Miao, Dong, and other tribes known for their skill with batik, embroidery, silverwork, woodwork, and paper cutting.

Those arts are under threat as growth picks up in the province best known for its stunning karst limestone hills and its fiery Moutai liquor. A new high-speed rail line is opening up previously isolated towns to outside visitors, while government planners are encouraging the tech industry to make Guizhou a center for big data.

The province reported 10.5 percent economic growth in the first half of 2016, third-fastest among the country's 31 regions.

The renaissance of traditional apparel workshops is partly driven by a backlash against so-called "fast fashion" seen in retail chains like Forever 21 and H&M, said Christina Dean, founder of Redress, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes sustainability in the fashion industry. Similar trends are at play even in affluent Japan, which has rich textile and woodworking traditions of its own.

Michael Jordan wins China court ruling after years-long case

By Louise Watt

The Associated Press

BEIJING — Basketball legend Michael Jordan now owns his Chinese name, after China's highest court sided with him following a years-long legal battle over a trademark dispute.

The former National Basketball Association (NBA) star has fought a Chinese sportswear maker since 2012 over the name "Qiaodan," pronounced "CHEEOW-dan," the transliteration of "Jordan" in Mandarin.

Qiaodan Sports, a company based in southern China, had registered the trademark under which it was selling its own shoes and sportswear.

Jordan has been known by the Chinese characters for "Qiaodan" since he gained widespread popularity in the mid-1980s. He had previously argued unsuccessfully in Beijing courts that Qiaodan Sports had used his Chinese name, his old jersey

number 23, and basketball player logo to make it look like he was associated with their brand.

The Supreme People's Court announced it was overturning two rulings by Beijing courts against Jordan from 2014 and 2015 that had found there wasn't sufficient evidence to support the athlete's allegations over the use of his image, and that "Qiaodan" was the translation of a common family name as the Chinese company claimed.

It also ordered the trademark bureau to issue a new ruling on the use of the Chinese characters in the brand name "Qiaodan," effectively awarding the trademark to Jordan. The company can continue to use the Romanized spelling of the name, however.

Chief judge Tao Kaiyuan said there was an established link between Jordan and the Chinese characters for "Qiaodan," which are commonly used by the public when referring to the former basketball

player, meaning that Jordan was entitled to protection under the Trademark Law.

The court's judgement was shown live on its website.

Jordan said in a statement that millions of Chinese fans and consumers had always known him by the name Qiaodan and that he was happy the court recognized his right to protect his name.

"Chinese consumers deserve to know that Qiaodan Sports and its products have no connection to me. Nothing is more important than protecting your own name, and today's decision shows the importance of that principle," Jordan said.

In a statement after the ruling, the company defended its actions, but said it would

Continued on page 16



Mark your calendar!

The Year of the Rooster begins January 28, 2017.

Display advertising space reservations for our special Year of the Rooster issue are due **Monday, January 2 at 5:00pm.**

The Asian Reporter's Lunar New Year special issue will be published on Monday, January 16, 2017.