

WEEKEND LIFE

中国日报 CHINA DAILY | CHINADAILY.COM.CN/LIFE

COVER STORY

Mountain
feats of the
sisterhoodDrive for ecological and economic
change leads to women's
emancipationBy FANG AIQING
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In Jiabi village it seems that the sisterhood holds up at least half the sky, and a fair amount below it as well.

The village in question is located high up in the mountains of Dechen county, in the northwest of Yunnan province, and the women in question are a group that goes by the name of the Sorority.

Their participation in community affairs through the group has helped the village conserve its biodiversity and lift the living standards of its inhabitants.

It is something that excites Yin Lun, an ethno-ecologist who has done fieldwork in ethnic Tibetan communities in the eastern Himalayas, where the county is located, for 15 years.

In fact, so excited is Yin with the project that it occupied a large chunk of a speech he delivered at the Paris Peace Forum in the French capital that ran from Monday to Wednesday. More than 100 projects presented at the forum were selected from more than 700 candidate submissions from 115 countries.

The annual forum was initiated by French President Emmanuel Macron last year to discuss and debate global governance issues and solutions to problems in fields such as peace and security, development, environment, new technologies, the inclusive economy, culture and education.

Protection of biodiversity, an issue to which China and France attach great importance, was one of the forum's most important topics this year.

The two countries co-issued an initiative on biodiversity conservation and climate change on Nov 6 during a three-day visit that Macron made to Beijing.

In it the two reiterated their determination to ensure the Paris Agreement is implemented and to jointly work on preparing for the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity which, will be held in Kunming, Yunnan's capital, next year.

Among the many academics committed to protecting biodiversity and tackling climate issues is, Yin, 45, a researcher at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, who is from the Bai ethnic group and whose wife is an ethnic Tibetan. He is one of few people who have entered the field by observing the traditional cultural legacy of ethnic groups in China.

In Jiabi village the Sorority's counterpart for men is called the Arrow Association.

The original goal of both organizations was to organize and raise funds for village entertainment, and it later branched out to provide public services such as road building and clearing.

The Sorority was founded more than 20 years ago, and the values that the Arrow Association espouses have been around for many decades, being passed down through the generations. It was only after the Sorori-

ty was founded that the Arrow Association became more of a formal group.

The two organizations support each other with labor and funds, said Renchen Phuntsok, whose wife Choszom has been in charge of the Sorority for more than a decade. She speaks only Tibetan, and her husband interpreted for her when she spoke to China Daily.

Apart from Choszom, six other women, each from one of the village's 30 families, take turns shouldering the responsibility of things such as organizing group events, bookkeeping and handling money.

The members help each other arrange weddings and funerals and build their houses, the latter of which may take several years. As they do all of these things they are obliged to follow rules such as wearing traditional Tibetan attire during festivals and rituals. Great store is also put by punctuality, and anyone who is late for an event is fined.

Yin went to the village 15 years ago to do research on his doctoral thesis, on the Tibetan tradition of polyandry, in which a woman has more than one husband. He lived with Renchen Phuntsok's family and in busy times helped them with the farm work.

He also encouraged villagers to carefully note the characteristics of the local environment with their

own eyes and ears. In so doing they were able to record even the subtlest changes in nature over half a century.

In groups, men focused mainly on climate change, natural disasters and building traditional dwellings that requires using natural resources, and women worked on assessing forest fungus resources and controlling the excessive collection of *matsutake*, or pine mushroom.

The project was carried out under the auspices of the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge in Kunming, for which Yin served as a project assistant when the project began. He is now director of the center's project management department.

He recalls the first years in the village when the center helped villagers build irrigation systems and install plumbing and gave them financial support so they could buy and install solar water heaters. In that enterprise the women gave full play to their forte of being able to identify high-quality products and beat down the prices that suppliers were asking.

They also did well as forest rangers, catching those engaged in inappropriate wood chopping and medicinal herb digging, he says.

Yin says one of his prime goals was to encourage locals to take the initiative in such projects. He took them to Dali, Yunnan province, to see how the locals bred chickens and pigs, how they ran handicraft workshops, and how the community worked to support one another.

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1. 2. 3. 5. 6. Dechen county, with an average altitude of more than 3,000 meters above sea level and which consists of a collection of snow mountains, glaciers, canyon, meadow and lakes, has kept abundant species and is a representative of Yunnan province's rich biodiversity.
4. Local villagers tend to fields of vegetables. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY