



The water town of Guyan Huaxiang in Lishui city, in East China's Zhejiang province, attracts painters from around the country. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Picturesque town draws painters

Many artists are keen to capture on canvas the beauty of East China's Guyan Huaxiang

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Li Dawei is putting the final touches on his 10-meter-long painting — an artistic representation of an old cobbled street in Guyan Huaxiang.

The artwork portrays the guesthouses and coffee shops that line the town's main street. It also depicts a cat perched on a large elm and fish swimming in a river.

"I love the big elm standing at the entrance to the street," Li said.

"It's like an old grandma watching the people and things happening in this lively township. This is my first visit here. It was love at first sight."

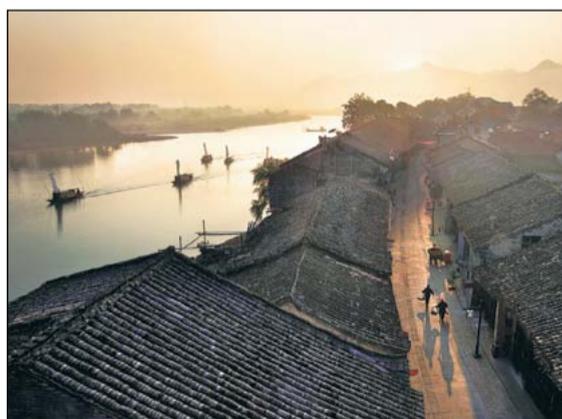
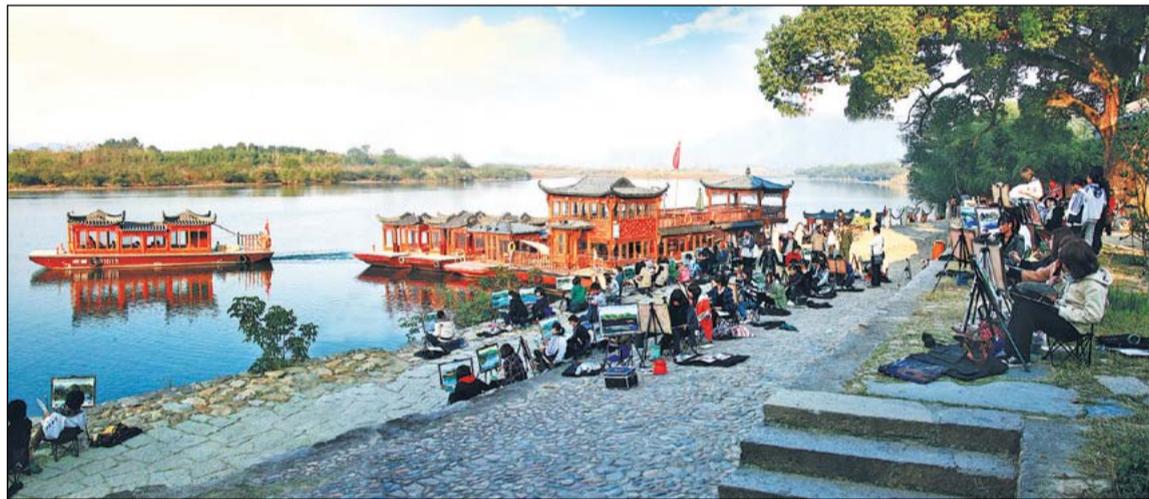
Guyan Huaxiang's name translates as "painting and dam town". And artists agree that the picturesque settlement in Lishui city, in East China's Zhejiang province, lives up to its name.

Creative types like Li have been drawn to the scenery along the Oujiang River, the 800-year-old Song Dynasty (960-1279) Tongjiyan dam, and the pristine peaks that fringe the town, since the 1980s.

The town staged an arts festival between Aug 13 and 19 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the founding of the local Barbizon Painting School.

The original Barbizon School was established by a group of French artists, including Theodore Rousseau and Jean-Francois Millet, who abandoned formalism. They drew inspiration directly from nature in the 19th century. Its leaders took the name from the village of Barbizon in France.

Fast forward to 1987. Chinese painters who had visited France brought the artistic approach to



Clockwise from top: Painters and art students set up palettes on the bank of the Oujiang River; children add colors to the initials of the village's name; old-style farmhouses line the streets of Guyan Huaxiang.

Guyan Huaxiang, which shares some similarities with Barbizon. They started to paint it in tribute to those French artists.

"Lishui's artists have inherited the Barbizon School's essence. So, they take their primary inspiration from nature," said Zhejiang Painting Academy's honorary dean, Pan Honghai.

"They're Guyan Huaxiang's artistic soul."

Guyan Huaxiang and Barbizon became sister cities in 2015.

More than 300 painters, including a growing number of art students, regularly visit the town to capture its beauty every year, Pan said.

Organizers of the recent festival invited a dozen emerging young artists with different specializations to host seminars and create new works.

International award-winning chil-

dren's book illustrator Fu Wenzheng was among the group.

"I found the sky is bluer and the river is clearer here," she said.

"And time passes more slowly."

Fu stayed in a guesthouse with artists specializing in clay sculpting, computer animation and doll-making. The guesthouse, which was opened by a local batik craftsman, is named Wu Ju Wu Shu, or, "No

restraints. No restrictions".

"We learn from one another. We play and create together. We become good friends here," she said, while sketching a stranger's portrait in the guesthouse.

During the festival, Fu hosted a class for kids and their parents about her new book, *Ash Dresses Her Friends*. It is a story of love and sharing.

"I hope they remember attending a drawing class in Guyan Huaxiang when they grow up," Fu said.

"If my story touches their hearts — well, that's what illustrating means to me."

Two exhibitions in the town's galleries showcased the best works that local painters have created over the past 30 years.

Thirty paintings and 30 photos capturing the people and the town were then transported to Paris' Center for Chinese Culture for an exhibition from Sept 4 to 20.

The art festival in the village culminated with a concert performed by folk musicians, including the band Landlord's Cat and singer Zhou Yunpeng.

Organizers said the influx of tourists had increased 70 percent compared with last year.

About 280 small pictures drawn by visitors and artists were hung together to form a large landscape painting in the town's central plaza.

Li finished his paintings, too. "I've portrayed all my feelings about the town and interactions with the tourists and locals," he said.

Collectors from home and abroad bought all the works he created in the settlement.

"Guyan Huaxiang's beauty has been shared through my paintings," Li said, smiling.