



SUCCESS STORY

Program Brings Black Pottery to Market

A family's 400-year-old craft is saved, finding new adherents from afar



Photo: The Mountain Institute

"Now my wife and I can tell tourists prices and basic product information in English," says pottery maker Zhaxi Pichu, known locally as Zhaxile. "I've sold several items to foreigners."

Dangzhen Pichu's family has been making Nixi black pottery for more than four centuries in the mountains of China's Yunnan province, an area best known as Shangri-La. While the region is as stunning as British author James Hilton described in his 1933 novel "Lost Horizon," it is equally remote.

Diqing Tibetan Prefecture's distance from markets marginalized its residents and made it difficult for Dangzhen's pottery company to survive.

USAID looked for solutions that would help the residents of Dangzhen's native village of Tangdui participate in China's economic boom while preserving their unique Nixi culture.

After interviewing residents and researching Nixi pottery in 2007, a USAID-funded contractor, The Mountain Institute, helped residents design brochures and take English-language classes so they could communicate with customers from distant lands.

The programs are reaping benefits. "The brochures resulted in numerous sales when I attended the China Import & Export Fair in Kunming," says Dangzhen, 35, whose monthly income has increased by 200 percent since the leaflets were printed.

This has had enormous impact on Dangzhen and his neighbors. Two-thirds of the village's 30 families have one or two potters contributing to their family's income. Most earn between \$400 and \$1,000 a year, more than they would as farmers.

Dangzhen is now training 20 apprentices in this ancient craft, teaching them to dig the red clay, form the vessels, fire them in a pit, darken them with sawdust and ash, and then seal their interiors with a mixture of yogurt whey and barley powder. "We'll maintain our culture of making Nixi black pottery and earn more for our families," Dangzhen says.

In Nixi Town, 11 entrepreneurs are now able to speak basic English. Sales of black pottery have increased – in stark contrast to just a few months ago when a group of Canadian travelers left empty-handed because they were unable to bargain with residents.