

China's smaller cities attract foreigners

When Aziz Ullah returned to China from Europe months ago, he headed straight home to Yiwu, a small city in east China's Zhejiang province.

"I feel at home in Yiwu," said Aziz, 39, from Afghanistan. He has lived in Yiwu for 15 years.

As China's urban and rural development balances, metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai are no longer the only places to live and work in for foreigners.

Aziz came to China in 2003 to make money. He chose Yiwu, well known as a production base for small commodities. Yiwu receives more than 400,000 overseas visitors each year and more than 10,000 foreigners live there.

"When I first came here, my Chinese was really poor," Aziz recalled. "I did not go far away from my home, since I could not read road signs and was afraid of getting lost."

Aziz registered a company in Yiwu in 2005, and has done well. His products, from household furniture to solar panels, are exported to nine countries.

After 15 years, Aziz speaks fluent Chinese, has become a foreign mediator for the local government, and has helped mediate six trade disputes between Chinese and foreign businesses.

"No matter how big my business gets, Yiwu will always be my second home," he said. "I had my dreams come true here. My career and friends are all in this city. It is safe and stable."

Besides doing business or teaching languages, small towns in China provide other career opportunities for foreigners.

Andrew Stokes did not achieve much back home in Australia after he graduated from the Australian Academy of Dramatic Arts. Years ago, he came to China by chance and has since been working as an actor in Hengdian, Zhejiang. Hengdian is a both a film making center and tourist attraction.

"Hengdian is a beautiful town, where my dreams of being an actor came true," Andrew said in fluent Chinese. So far, he has been in more than 30 movies and TV shows.

Improvements to small towns are encouraging foreigners to come.

Five years ago, Australian Tim Clancy came to his Chinese wife Chen Shuang's hometown Pujiang in Zhejiang, for the first time.

"He did not want to stay here for one more day," Chen said. Tim was always

complaining about the pollution.

But the environment has improved a lot. Tim and his wife now live there for several months every year. "We enjoy the beautiful nature and traditional Chinese culture here," Tim said.

Public services and infrastructure in small towns have also improved, making life there easier. "For example, people can use Alipay (mobile payment), rather than cash, almost everywhere in the town," Tim said.