

The hopes, concerns around Lantern Festival

Are you curious about the Chinese Lantern Festival? Do you have a vague idea and would like to know more? Archeologists and craftsmen could help shine some light on this yearly event.

A 1,400-year-old fragment of silk, about the size of a piece of A4 paper, depicts lanterns hanging on trees. Surrounding the trees are rams and chickens.

This scene is all about the Lantern Festival, confirmed Adliabulizi, a research fellow with Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum.

“Chicken and rams are homophones for the Chinese characters for auspiciousness,” he said. “This shows that people were celebrating Lantern Festival back then.”

The fabric was found in the Astana Ancient Tombs in Turpan, Xinjiang, in the 1970s. The tombs are 2km north of the ruins of an ancient city called Gaochang, which was active from the 1st Century B.C. to the 13th Century A.D. The tombs were the final resting place of officials and ordinary people of different ethnic groups in Gaochang.

Traditionally, Chinese make lanterns and rice balls, which represent reunion, on Lantern Festival, the first full moon of a new lunar year, which falls on Feb.11 this year.

Cao Zhenrong, 73, has been making festive lanterns since he was four. This year is the Year of the Rooster, and Cao has made almost 2,000 chicken-shaped lanterns.

It used to take three days to complete all of the 30 plus steps needed to finish just one lantern, as split bamboo and paper were the usual materials. Today wire is used.

“Not many of the younger generation are interested in lantern making,” said Cao. “There were more than 200 lantern workshops in Nanjing in the 1960s. Only 20 remain today.”

Cao is hoping to innovate the craft so that it does not die out.

“I cannot just make lotus lanterns all the time, so I have experimented with silk and electricity,” he said.

Lantern Festival marks the end of the Spring Festival celebrations. Duan Xujian insists on staying at home until Lantern Festival even though his company reopened on Feb. 3.

“This is how the Spring Festival holiday should end,” said Duan, 28, from

Nanyu Village, Qinyuan County in north China's Shanxi Province.

He was one of 400 villager who featured in a group photograph, taken Saturday morning. It was the first time the village has ever come together to have their photograph taken, according to 69-year-old villager Liu Guangming.

Aside from lion dances , rural folk performances, and lantern shows, villagers in Nanyu have prepared a zigzag pathway with wood sticks. All the villagers have to navigate it, in the hope that the road ahead is smooth in the new year.

Duan will return to work after this weekend. But for Chu Fengshan, the textile company that he works for in Jiangsu in east China is still struggling to fill its vacancies.

"We had 100 employment opportunities that we advertised at three separate job fairs in Henan province, but only recruited five people," said Chu.

More and more rural residents are looking for jobs closer to home, said Liu Peifeng, section chief in charge of rural workers at Henan provincial bureau of human resources and social security.

More than 28.7 million rural workers in Henan were employed within the province in 2016, more than the number of outbound migrant workers for six consecutive years, according to the bureau.

In east China's Fujian Province where the weather is much warmer, people are preparing to plough the fields. In Julin Village, Changting County, young men parade the fields holding a statue of the Guan bodhisattva on their shoulders to pray for a harvest.

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, "Tong Liang Huo Long," a dragon dance under a shower of melted iron, debuted in Taiwan.

Named a national intangible heritage originating from Chongqing, nearly 10,000 people went to watch the performance staged in Nantou County, according to Lin Ming-chen, the county head.

"We were all thrilled by the fantastic performance," said Lin. "It was a delightful cross-Strait exchange. We look forward to more like it!"