

Painting pictures through the pain

Artist who has been bedridden for 30 years finds solace in her work

By SUN RUISENG in Taiyuan and LI YANG in Beijing

With her withered limbs and meager muscles, Zhang Junli looks more like a sickly teenager than a 39-year-old.

She has chronic infectious arthritis, an uncommon condition that had paralyzed her by the time she was 9.

For the past three decades she has been bedridden, but despite being barely able to lift a paintbrush, she has spent that time perfecting her art.

Zhang has created thousands of pencil sketches and watercolors, hundreds of oil paintings and has even written two books: a full-length novel called *The Blazing Girl* and an autobiography titled *My Existence*.

Born in a village near Taiyuan, North China's Shanxi province, in 1978, she first showed symptoms of the condition that would later take away her mobility at age 6.

Her parents, rural middle school teachers, could barely afford the medical bills and exhausted almost all their savings paying for their daughter's treatment.

"One day, when I was 9 years old, I woke up and had piercing pain in all my joints," Zhang said.

"I found I could not move my body. The pain has accompanied me ever since. It even keeps me awake at night sometimes."

Due to her condition, regular schooling was not an option. She did try to attend the village primary school at first, but dropped out after six months because she found the physical act of attending class agonizing.

Treatments prescribed by village and county doctors did little to alleviate Zhang's symptoms, so she stayed at home, in bed, and taught herself painting, as her parents taught her the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

"I know my parents wanted a boy when they had me, but they always treasured me, even after I got sick," she wrote in her autobiography.

"Despite that, for a long time, I was very depressed. Sometimes, I felt I was on the brink of collapse."

Zhang's love of art was what kept her going and eventually propelled her toward her future career.

"I have loved painting since childhood, it makes me calm at heart and my pain even seems lessened while painting," she said.

Her big break came in 1996, when Zhou Xiaolu, her sister's classmate, first saw Zhang's paintings.

Zhou's father, an established science fiction novelist, was looking for an illustrator for his latest story, which would be serialized in a renowned Chinese fiction periodical.

So Zhang, age 17, read the text carefully and drew more than 20 pictures for Zhou's father, who commended her work, noting her "comprehensive ability to convey a writer's most delicate thoughts through the discourse of fine art."

All of the artwork was accepted for publication by the periodical's editors and Zhang received 600 yuan (\$87) as remuneration, almost three months' income for her family at that time.

With that revelation, the young artist decided she would strive to make a living from her art.

She was encouraged in her endeavors by a number of the periodical's readers, who became her pen pals.

One of them — a woman from Luzhou, Sichuan province, named Yu Yimei — still keeps in contact with Zhang to this day.

It was Yu who, in 2014, persuaded Zhang to take up oil painting, because "traditional Chinese ink sketches and watercolor paintings always make the bedclothes dirty."

By watching online videos, reading books and copying the works of Western masters, Zhang was able to teach herself how to paint with oils. In 2,000 hours, she has creat-



Zhang Junli (second from right) appears on a program on Channel 3 of China Central Television in Beijing, in 2014.

PHOTOS BY SUN RUISENG / CHINA DAILY

ed more than 200 oil paintings.

Her younger brother suggested she sell some online.

"I thought it was a good idea, as there was no place to store them at home and more important, I thought it could be a reliable source of income for my parents, who still have to work to support me," Zhang said.

Her e-commerce store "Lily's Easel" opened in February on social networking app WeChat and she sold her first painting on the second day, for 360 yuan.

The buyer was captivated by the artwork and told Zhang he would cherish it, a comment

that moved her to tears.

In the first two months, she sold dozens of paintings and also started to receive custom orders.

Not all the buyers knew about her condition at first, but after finding out they have been universally encouraging, Zhang said.

Still, her physical condition worsens day by day and she is mentally prepared for the end.

"I pray to God every day for more time. I am not greedy, I just want to have painted for 10,000 hours. That is my dream," she said.

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Zhang makes an oil painting in bed at home near Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

Around China

LIAONING Jealous husband gives himself up

A man in Shenyang asked police to place him in detention on March 23 for beating up the boss of his wife's former classmate. The husband, surnamed Zhang, had become jealous of his wife, surnamed Li, after she spoke with the former classmate, surnamed Jia, at a high school reunion party. Wang accused Li of still having feelings for Jia, which resulted in the two men having an argument. Later, Jia's boss — a woman who was dressed in man's clothes — approached Zhang, who beat her up, mistaking her for Jia.



CHONGQINGNEWS.NET

Former fugitive sold stolen baby

A court in Dalian has upheld the jail sentence of a farmer, surnamed Luo, who sold a 14-month-old baby to a couple from Fujian province for 3,000 yuan (\$435). Luo, who comes from Sichuan province, encouraged a fellow villager, surnamed Zeng, to steal the baby in April 2005. He was detained in Shanxi province on July 7 after 11 years on the run and was subsequently sentenced to 10 years and six months in jail, which was upheld by Dalian Intermediate People's Court.

CHONGQING Man shoots neighbor's cooker

A man in Fuling district has

been put under detention for three days after he shot a neighbor's rice cooker with an air gun. The man, surnamed Li, bought the parts for the gun online and retrofitted it with a powerful pressurized air canister. He said he shot his neighbor's rice cooker after the gun went off accidentally. Li was detained for illegally owning a weapon and the air gun was seized.



boy, aged 4 or 5, had fallen in the water from a cargo vessel that was owned by his father while playing with one of its fenders. The dog responded immediately, breaking free of its leash and jumping into the river to fetch the boy. It swam more than 10 meters back to the vessel, pulling the child along by his clothes. The father said the dog had lived aboard his boat for three years and was very loyal.

MODERN EXPRESS

Police arrest suspected con man

A man from Anhui province has been detained in Nanjing on suspicion of defrauding 18 people of more than 3 million yuan (\$435,000). The suspect, surnamed Zhang, is accused of roping in his victims by claiming his father was a senior government official who could purchase premium cellphones at cost price. One of the victims, a man surnamed Zhu who works in the mobile phone business, said he had given Zhang 280,000 yuan.

YANGTZE EVENING NEWS

HUNAN Woman driver wrecks luxury car

A woman who drove her car

off a 8-meter-high embankment in Changsha on March 22 walked away from the accident unscathed. The incident took place on a housing estate in the city's Yuhua district at about 11 am. The luxury car being driven by the woman overturned as it went down the slope and hit an SUV that was parked at the bottom, though fortunately no one was injured.



REDNET.CN

SHAANXI Homeowner finds unwelcome guest

A man in Xi'an has been detained on suspicion of burglarizing a house by hiding in a vacant upstairs room for three days. The suspect, surnamed Wang, was discovered by the house's owner, surnamed Zhao, on March 21. Zhao, who lives on the third floor of his four-story home in the city's Chang'an district, had intended to rent out the fourth floor but had yet to find a tenant. Wang told officers he had remained undiscovered

for so long on the empty floor by using only his mobile phone for light at night and frequently visiting a local cyber cafe during the day. Police found two stolen mobile phones and a selection of clothes, shoes and socks from Zhao's home in Wang's possession.

HUASHANG DAILY

SICHUAN Suspect accused of chicken thefts

A man in Chengdu has been detained after he allegedly stole more than 20 chickens from a research center at Sichuan Agricultural University. Police said the suspect was caught breaking into the center's feeding area one night. He told officers he had stolen chickens from the building previously and sold them at the local market for 150 yuan (\$22) each. A researcher from the university said the chickens were actually worth about 500 yuan per head and that their theft represented the loss of a host of invaluable research data.

CHENGDU COMMERCIAL DAILY



City in Anhui appoints 'toilet chiefs' team

By ZHU LIXIN in Hefei zhulixin@chinadaily.com.cn

Chaohu in East China's Anhui province has appointed 39 "toilet chiefs" to ensure high standards at all public restrooms, with Hu Qisheng, the city's Party chief, tasked with overseeing their work.

"As the city has 280,000 urban residents, we should have at least 100 public toilets,

but we're still far from that goal," Hu said, adding that the city has abundant tourism resources and is receiving an increasing number of visitors.

"Clean and easily accessible public toilets are a window to a modern and civilized city. Just increasing the number of toilets is not enough — it's also important to improve the sanitation standards at the ones we already have."

The toilet chiefs, who were appointed in September, are all officials with the city's urban administration department, according to Zou Dayong, the city's environmental sanitation director.

Zou, who is the toilet chief for Xiexiuyuan Park, said he is required to visit the toilet at least three times a week. "A cleaner arranged by a local property management com-

pany will always be present at the toilet," he said. "The toilet should always have running water and free toilet paper, and be free of foul odors."

The city government plans to invest 18 million yuan (\$2.61 million) in building and renovating 91 public restrooms in urban areas. In addition, facilities in 21 city buildings have been opened to the public.

A shortage of public toilets is

an issue faced by China, which has vowed to develop its tourism sector. The country's so-called toilet revolution is part of a 2-trillion-yuan investment plan announced late last year to develop tourism by 2020. In response to complaints about the sanitary conditions of such facilities, about 100,000 new public toilets will be built across the country during that period.

Offering disabled people meaningful employment

A pair of disabled entrepreneurs in Southwest China's Guizhou province are offering hope and employment to others who share their predicament. Ma Zhiguo, 52, lost four fingers on his right hand at age 19 while operating a machine that made coal briquettes.

He met 39-year-old Shi Kunjie, who lost his eyesight at age 11, at a conference for disabled people in 2012. "I used to make a living by selling vegetables and tofu at the market after I lost my fingers. It was very hard," Ma said.

Inspired by an advertisement he saw on television, Ma asked Shi, who was employed as a blind massage therapist at the time, to be his partner in setting up a commercial laundry and pot washing business.

"More and more Chinese care about the sanitary conditions in hotels and restaurants. They want cleaner bedsheets and tableware. We do a good job," Ma said.

Supported by the local government, the pair were able to secure a 4 million yuan (\$580,000) bank loan and raised a further 3 million themselves.

Construction of their two-story business began in 2015 on a barren piece of land near a sewage treatment plant, far from the closest residential area.

The company provides cleaning and disinfecting services for more than 300 restaurants and over 40 hotels and hospitals in Guizhou's Yaping Dong autonomous county. It has earned about 3 million yuan since operations began in February last year.

Among its 42 employees, 17 are disabled. "Washing dishes or bed-

sheets does not take much skill. People can be qualified to work after a few simple training sessions," Shi said.

In the company's main building, a banner carrying the slogan "Your trust makes us work more diligently" hangs on the wall.

"Disabled people find it difficult to secure jobs. Many have to stay at home," said Wu Yongying, a dishwasher with an injured leg who lives in the company dormitory. He eats at its canteen for free and earns more than 2,000 yuan a month.

Yang Xinwen, 48, who is partially sighted, works for the business during the day and learns massage at night. "I don't feel tired as long as I have chance to work diligently," he said.

There are about 85 million people living with disabilities in China and about 70 percent are in rural areas.

Poverty among the disabled is not a new problem, and China has poured enormous resources into addressing it in recent years.

According to the local government, companies in Guizhou can be exempted from taxes if more than 25 percent of their employees are disabled.

Moreover, the local disability federation provided a 100,000-yuan subsidy to Ma and Shi's company last year. It also organizes annual training sessions to teach information technology skills to their disabled employees.

The next step for Ma and Shi will involve hosting recruitment tours to expand their business and hire more disabled employees. "We should not forget where we are from and where we are going," Shi said.

XINHUA