

Guizhou artisan strikes gold making faces

Opera mask master carves brighter future for ancient craft

Nuo Opera, a ritual largely intended to ward off evil spirits, has transformed people's fortunes in Guizhou province. In rural Dejiang county, Wang Guohua teaches his apprentices how to carve ferocious Nuo masks.

"I wasn't respected by other villagers, as they didn't see carving masks as a decent job," the 52-year-old artisan said. "Now, it's big business."

The Nuo ritual has been practiced for thousands of years. Sacrifices and ceremonies pay tribute to ancestors, gods and goddesses while exorcising demons.

Over the ages it has spread among people of various ethnic groups along the Yangtze and Yellow river valleys and southwestern areas. Nuo rituals are widely performed during the Lunar New Year holiday.

Accompanied by drums and gongs, whip-bearing Nuo performers dance to mysterious tunes.

They wear colored masks — black, red and white — bearing varied expressions such as amiable, ferocious or fearful, and the ceremony has become more theatrical than spiritual in recent decades.

In Wang's workshop, wood, tools and masks of all kinds are strewn everywhere. Wang has been carving masks for 36 years and has created over 4,000.

Guizhou is famous for its variety of Nuo Opera styles. Whenever there is a performance in an outlying village, farmers trek dozens of kilometers along hillside paths to take it all in. Though some

elderly fans are still in awe of the Nuo dancing gods, few today fully understand the ritual.

Serious business

Guizhou is at the front line of the government's poverty relief campaign, with more than 3.7 million people still living below the official poverty line. Many men have left home for urban areas to seek work, leaving the elderly, women and children behind.

When Wang started making masks, no one understood why he did not find a "decent job", not even his wife, Qin Zhichan.

"Rural people were supposed to work in the fields instead of doing business, and when I married into his family from the neighboring village, we had financial difficulties," Qin recalled. "I felt I could not depend on him, and we quarreled a lot."

The wheel of fortune did not turn in an auspicious direction for Wang until 2003, when an international seminar on Nuo culture was held in the county. Foreigners were instantly drawn to Wang's masks.

"I made 2,000 yuan (\$300) with my masks at that time," Wang said. With the money, he bought a color TV. Suddenly, his wife and the other villagers started to take his business seriously.

With his amazing craftsmanship, business soared. In 2006, he was honored as "master of Nuo masks in Guizhou" and took his masks to exhibitions in France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Japan. In



Residents of Lyujia village in Dejiang county, Guizhou province, rehearse a performance of Nuo Opera. PHOTOS BY QIAO QIMING / FOR CHINA DAILY

2010, he registered a company and recruited apprentices.

The mask business easily lifted them out of poverty. Lyu Changhong, once a poor villager, was one of the first apprentices. In Wang's studio, he can make 200 yuan by carving a mask, 30 yuan for polishing a mask and 15 yuan for coloring. Lyu left poverty behind two years ago.

Facing the future

Over the past three years, Wang has made more than 2 million yuan and bought two cars, but he cares about more than just money. He has mem-

orized more than 200 mask models and can create them on the spot. He has also made his own variations, reinventing the masks at will.

"He is always thinking about new, different masks," said Zhou Guozai, another of Wang's apprentices. "Making masks seems to be more important to him than eating."

Wang is picky about the materials he uses.

"We usually choose poplar trees from local mountains. They are not only delicate, but are also believed to have a deterrent effect on evil spirits," he said. "Making a mask is not

easy. There are more than 20 steps, and everything is done by hand. Each stroke of the chisel is important."

In Wang's limited leisure time he enjoys going to a local school to teach pupils how to carve masks, to help pass on the practice. He also helped establish a gallery featuring ethnic handicrafts from Guizhou.

"We need to find a way to attract young talent to the craft," he said. "Only in this way can we guarantee the survival of the tradition."



Wang Guohua carves a Nuo Opera mask at his workshop in Lyujia village.

XINHUA

Around China

ANHUI Fake kidnapping uncovered

A man, surnamed Liu, who faked his own kidnapping to get his wife to pay him a ransom of 100,000 yuan (\$15,480) was recently placed in detention house for six days as punishment for disturbing public order in Chuzhou. Liu hatched the scam in a hotel room with a friend, surnamed Wu, after he lost money in the stock market. Liu fabricated a fake scene and sent photos to his wife in which he was bound to a chair by the cord of a desk lamp, a towel stuffed into his mouth, and somewhat bizarrely he was pantless. Liu's wife, however, called police and Liu's plan was uncovered by the hotel's surveillance footage.

SIXTHTONE.COM

HEILONGJIANG Monkey business leaves family hungry

A monkey that barged into a household was eventually caught after it had eaten the dinner of a family in Jixi. Family members used a fishing net to nab the uninvited primate, which rushed into their house at supper time. The monkey had eaten two steamed buns and other food before it was caught. Police arrived at the scene after receiving reports and took the monkey to a local zoo.

BTIME.COM

JIANGSU River mishap drives man to heroics

A man became a hit among netizens when he rescued a woman, surnamed Wang, who accidentally drove into a river in Yangzhong on Sunday. Zhu Xiaohua, 49, immediately jumped into the cold water when the accident took place in the morning. He then fas-



A man is earning more than

Racing time



Herdsmen take part in a camel race during a winter Nadam fair in Xilinhot, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, on Tuesday. Nadam, meaning "entertainment" or "recreation" in Mongolian, is a traditional sports festival. LIAN ZHEN / XINHUA

ANHUI Parents hit brakes on baby name

Parents in Huainan who named their infant daughter Ma Shaladi, meaning Maserati, are applying to rename their baby Ma Shala. They previously hoped their daughter would become rich, perhaps growing up to be able to afford a Maserati sports car thanks to the auspicious, though unusual, baby name. But now they regret the decision and want to rename their daughter. The local authorities have yet to approve their application, saying naming a child is serious business and urging parents to think it over carefully.

ANHUI DAILY

SICHUAN Swallowing snakes helps man raise son

A man is earning more than



100,000 yuan (\$15,500) a year from swallowing live snakes in Luzhou. His income equals the annual salary of white-collar workers. Liu Hong, 42, who hails from Jiangxi province, said the money has helped him raise his son. He said swallowing live snakes is tough work, and his tongue has been bitten several times. Nicknamed "the king of snakes", Liu has been performing for more than two decades, though he said he would give it up the day his son marries.

CHENGDU BUSINESS DAILY

Honest maid saves workers' pay

A hotel maid has touched hearts by returning the 390,000 yuan (\$60,630) in cash she discovered in a guest

room in Chengdu to its owner. Xia Yuanzhen found the money when she was cleaning a hotel room alone. The maid, who earns about 2,000 yuan a month, handed the money over to the hotel manager who called police. The owner, a project contractor surnamed Luan, was on the bus to another city when he was told by police he had forgotten his money. He said the money was to be distributed to his workers before the Lunar New Year holiday, which begins on Feb 16.

CHENGDU BUSINESS DAILY



Teacher's pets prove a hit with college students

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A college teacher has taken the innovative step of bringing animals such as a golden retriever, an iguana and even spiders to his class in Dalian, Liaoning province, to educate his students about rearing pets.

"This type of snake is not a protected species. It could be a good pet," Zhang Meng told his students while holding a corn snake.

Zhang teaches molecular biology at the Dalian Maritime University. He decided to offer the innovative course to raise awareness and appreciation of pets.

"Increasing numbers of urban residents are raising pets in China. However, few know how to look after them properly," said Zhang, who aims to address misconceptions and improve awareness about the correct treatment of pets.

Some 380 students applied for the course, so 120 were selected by drawing lots.

"It is fun," said Qi Fengshi, one of the 120 lucky students who can get full credit for the course while playing with animals in the class.

"I'm always late for other classes, but this one is an exception," he said.

Many other students choose to attend the class, although they will not get any credit. Some even come from a neighboring university.

Zhang designed the teaching program himself. He also invites seasoned pet owners to bring their animals to the class to share interesting stories and practical tips on raising pets.

The course has also attracted admirers on social-media platforms like Weibo and WeChat.



A red-eyed tree frog is used as a teaching aid at Zhang Meng's class at the Dalian Maritime University.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Zhang teaches his course about the treatment of pets.

"Such innovative courses should be encouraged," a Weibo user called Illusion and Reality said in a post.

Others suggested Zhang should teach the course online so more pet lovers can learn how to look after their animals.

Zhang said he is planning to launch an online course with support from the university.

"We'll make an effort to meet the demand of more students," he said.

Zhang is also cooperating with pet associations and hospitals to offer more professional training to his students.

"It would be wonderful if, as well as appreciating animals, they could also volunteer to help pets in some occasions," Zhang said.