

# KEEPING THE FLAME BURNING

Veteran actress Shao Zhiqing has devoted her life to promoting Guizhou's Huadeng opera, Fang Aiqing and Yang Jun report

*The Moon Shines on the Maplewoods Ferry*, a classic Huadeng opera play of Southwestern China's Guizhou province, is a landmark in the 300-year history of the local opera form. And it earned lead actress Shao Zhiqing, the Plum Blossom Prize, the highest theater award in China, in 2007.

Shao, a delegate to the 19th CPC National Congress — who was recently recognized as one of the representative inheritors of this national intangible cultural heritage by the Ministry of Culture — is a key figure in the development and promotion of Huadeng opera, which she has been involved in for 40 years.

Meanwhile, she has so far given more than 28 lectures on the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress, both in Guizhou and other parts of China, including Shanghai and Guangzhou, as a representative of the nation's literary and art workers.

Speaking about Huadeng opera, Shao, who aims to focus on boosting its repertoire and training, says: "President Xi's report to the 19th CPC National Congress has not only boosted my confidence in Guizhou's Huadeng opera, but also points to the future direction."

*The Moon Shines on the Maplewoods Ferry* depicts two decades in the lives of traditional winemaking families at the beginning of the 20th century. And without any villain or dramatic events, it showcases Guizhou's renowned wine culture.

The film version of the award-winning play was released in December. It was highlighted dur-

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**Shao Zhiqing,**  
Huadeng opera actress

ing the "Guizhou Cultural Week" at the 19th China Shanghai International Arts Festival in October.

As the director of the Guizhou Huadeng Opera Theater, the sole professional troupe of the local opera form, Shao pays a lot of attention to creating realistic plays.

As of now, work on two original plays is under way. One is set in Huamao village of Guizhou province, known for its poverty alleviation achievements, and which President Xi visited in 2015; while the other is based on rural doctors.

Meanwhile, Shao keeps herself occupied with opera performances both in Guiyang, the provincial capital, and at the grass-roots level.

Giving an example of her commitment, Cao Lijie, deputy director of the troupe, says: "Once she was locked in a toilet right before a performance. She then tried so hard to open the door that her hands were bleeding, but ignoring her injuries



Actress Shao Zhiqing won the Plum Blossom Prize, the highest theater award in China in 2007, because of her performance in the classic Huadeng opera play *The Moon Shines on the Maplewoods Ferry*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



she got onto the stage. "She has driven us to be practical and steadfast in our work."

Even a lack of infrastructure fails to put off Shao. And the troupe typically prepares several stage designs to suit

various surroundings. "We are even ready for outdoor performances with a couple of lights," she says.

Of all the 40 students recruited for professional training in Huadeng opera in 1978, Shao is the only one who remains in the troupe.

The next batch was enrolled in 1987, and it was not until 2013, with cooperation between the troupe and Yunnan Arts University, that there was a professional training class of 30.

Now, recruitment for the next batch in cooperation with the Beijing Vocational College of Opera and Arts, is on.

For the past 26 years, the troupe has had to recruit students that majored in singing, dancing or acting before teaching them Huadeng opera from scratch.

"It was hard for them," says Shao. "Sometimes I taught my students six to eight hours at a time, sentence by sentence. I could see that they were getting tired, but I had no choice."

And things may be about to change soon. Guizhou's provincial government has recently released its suggestions on the development of local opera forms.

And with more national and local support, Shao, who is still in the thick of things when it comes to Huadeng opera, says: "I will try my best to create high-quality works that are worthy of the times."

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# Documentary fosters deeper cross-cultural understanding

By REN JIE  
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She was not trained as a director. She has no stars in her crew, or even people with acting experiences. However, her documentary has become a big hit, especially with audiences in China and Africa.

Hodan Osman Abdi, a Somali academic who has lived in China for about 12 years, says she is trying to show the diversity of Africans in the eastern parts of China with her recent documentary film *Africans in Yiwu*.

The six-episode documentary film, which took more than two years to showcase the daily lives of more than 20 people from 15 African countries who live in Yiwu, an export-oriented city in East China's Zhejiang province.

Earlier in 2017, the film was selected as the opening movie for the Lusaka International Film Festival in Zambia. And it has been shown across the world on CCTV-4 and across Africa on StarTimes channels.

"The people in the film are not stars, not big figures. They are just normal people trying to lead better lives and fulfill their dreams. Just like you and me," says Abdi.

Many foreigners come to Yiwu, the city's Party chief Sheng Qiuping said in 2015, when he was the city's mayor — about 15,000 foreign residents from more than 100 countries and regions were in the city then.

In addition, more than 500,000 overseas businesspeople visit Yiwu each year.

The stories of Africans and the Chinese should be told and written by themselves, not by others, the Somali Ambassador to China Yusuf Hassan Ibrahim, said at a ceremony in Beijing which introduced the film.

Abdi, the Somali co-director of the film, also a lecturer in African film and media at the Institute of African studies at Zhejiang Normal University, says she believes the increase in the number of cross-cultural media products catering to both Chinese and African viewers, coupled with the



Hodan Osman Abdi, a Somali academic who presents the diversity of Africans with her documentary film *Africans in Yiwu*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

increase in their availability for mass audiences, is playing a positive role in boosting understanding between Chinese and African people.

"Showcasing the fact that both the Chinese and the Africans are diverse people with diverse cultures and habits is significant," she says.

"Ten years ago, the Chinese generally associated Africa with disease, famine and war," she says. "And the number of Africans living in China wasn't that big either. But now the general perception of Africa in China is gradually changing for the better."

"They no longer think Africa is a single country. And an increasing number of people are able to tell that it is a large continent with diverse people and diverse cultures.

Abdi also believes China's economic boom of the past 10 years has not only increased people's wealth but also opened their eyes.

Africa, which is now appreciated for its natural resources, business opportunities, wonderful weather and beautiful nature, has become a popular travel destination for business and pleasure. The cross-cultural communication that results from these travels is a key factor that has the potential to promote understanding, she says.

The media also plays a key role in shaping common perceptions and

misconceptions, she says. "The Chinese media engagement in Africa has been successful in promoting a better understanding of China. However, they still lack the ability to adjust to the specific cultural aspects unique to the African market," she says.

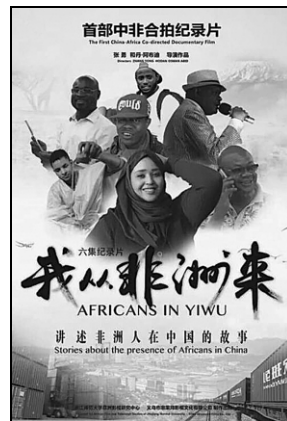
"So, there should also be a focus on the translation and adaptation of popular African literature, film and TV programs to encourage mutual understanding."

Abdi says in her own country, Somalia, most people consider the Chinese to be resilient and diligent.

"The general perception is that the Chinese are hardworking and never slack, and that is why they have been able to achieve the amount of success they have in such a short time," she says, adding that the older generation remember the complex and good-quality infrastructure projects constructed by Chinese companies and often praise their knowledge and abilities.

The biggest similarity between China and Somalia is that both countries are proud of their long history. The respect for customs and traditions is something they share, she says.

"The Somali people consider the Chinese to be their friends and companions and generally have a very positive image of China. They also



believe China is the home of knowledge and wisdom. This is one of the reasons large numbers of students from Somalia have been coming to China since the early 1980s to continue their higher education. And the numbers have been increasing, especially in the past decade."

Abdi traveled to Jinhua, in East China's Zhejiang province, in 2006 and then began her undergraduate life at Zhejiang Normal University, majoring in business administration.

She says she was influenced by her uncle, who had studied in China decades ago.

"I always used to hear fascinating stories from him that made me even more curious about the country."

"As soon as I arrived in China, I was completely mesmerized by the natural beauty, the people and the unique culture."

Abdi, who comes from a traditional Arab society, was able to feel the influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese culture and found it to be at the core of the Chinese identity, promoting many values similar to those within her own society.

"We share a common cultural ground with Chinese people, such as respect for elders, the importance of family, the collective way of thought, the cultivation of morality and self-restraint, as well as an emphasis on

“So, there should also be a focus on the translation and adaptation of popular African literature, film and TV programs to encourage mutual understanding.”

Hodan Osman Abdi, Somali academic

hard work and achievement. This helped my integration into the society and made me feel at home," she says.

After arriving in China, Abdi began to study Chinese and did well from the start.

Her track record of achievements includes more than 20 prestigious prizes in national and regional contests.

One of them was the 2010 Silver Award in the third session of *Chinese Bridge*, held by China Central Television.

She admits that her language abilities were key to her successful integration, but strongly believes that setting high goals and working hard is what got her to where she is today.

After completing the usual four years of undergraduate studies in just three years, she got a scholarship for her master's degree from the Confucius Institute, and was later recognized as an outstanding foreign student in China.

The prestigious Chinese government scholarship allowed her to begin studying for her doctorate at Zhejiang University, majoring in media and communication studies.

Abdi says she intends to focus on the China-Africa and China-Arab media and cultural exchanges.

"I hope to introduce the excellent literary and fine art of Africa and the Arab countries to China, as well as showing China's 5,000 years of cultural brilliance to African and Arab countries, allowing more Arabs, Africans and Chinese to cross cultural and linguistic barriers and get to know each other's rich and diverse cultures and their subtleties," she says.

For now, she continues to work in China to foster better understand-

ing between the two sides, "not only through academic output, but also through the utilization of popular media to promote a better image".

She says: "I believe it is my responsibility to utilize the knowledge I have gained from both my academic endeavors, as well as my other experiences to promote mutual understanding between my Africa and my China, both of which I consider home. For the time being, I believe that China is the best place to begin."

Abdi also believes that African students in China play a vital role in boosting China-Africa relations.

"African students in China are in a unique position in this day and age and are of more importance to China-Africa relations than they realize," she says.

Her belief is that students can help navigate the development of African countries in multiple areas by first "making the effort to better understand the historical, political and cultural aspects surrounding China's economic development".

She also believes that their role in changing the stigma surrounding Africans in China is extremely important. Through their communication with Chinese people, they are able to influence public opinion at the grassroots and spread a more positive image of Africa in China.

Through learning the Chinese language, culture and history, African students can better communicate their own cultural values and better influence their surroundings. They can also contribute to the development of China into a global power, while also using their knowledge to positively contribute to the building of a better Africa, she says.