



The horse tail embroidery of the Shui ethnic group is an intangible heritage in China. The village of Bangao in Sandu county, Guizhou province, is known as the hometown of the handicraft. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

DURABLE THREADS

A woman has made it her life's mission to promote the rare embroidery of the Shui ethnic group in Southwest China, **Yang Jun** reports.

Horse tail embroidery of the Shui ethnic group is an intangible heritage in China, and 53-year-old Song Shuixian has made it her life's mission to take it to a wider audience.

For starters, her clothes reflect the craft — flowers blossom from the collar of her top; dragons dance around the edges of her sleeves and intricate patterns adorn her pants. The embroidery needs both good texture and quality threads.

"It is an absolute treasure," says Song.

Like many young women from her community, she learned how to sew with threads made from a horse's tail from her mother when she was very young, and later honed her craft in the village of Bangao, the "hometown of horse tail embroidery" in Sandu county, Guizhou province, where she was taught by her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law.

"In the late 1980s, when I just got married, in my village during the non-farming season, you would see women, young and old, sewing everywhere — on their doorsteps, under trees, some even cradling babies," says Song.

The turning point for Song came in 1988 when she realized the craft that she was so proud of was in jeopardy. At the time, she heard about a foreign buyer trying to purchase a piece of the embroidery for 10 times the listed price. Song thought both about the fear of losing the craft and its staggering value. It was then that she decided to do whatever she could to preserve the heritage passed down from her ancestors.



Song Shuixian guides her daughter-in-law Wu Yongzhi in making a horse tail embroidery piece. The 29-year-old high school English teacher has volunteered to take the traditional craft to the classroom, teaching her students how to sew as an extra-curricular activity.

“I may be the first to apply horse tail embroidery to clothes.”

Song Shuixian, Shui ethnic woman

Her plan is multi-pronged — she collects, sews and sells.

She began by purchasing vintage pieces from local households in an effort to establish a private museum for the craft, which she succeeded in doing in 2010. In 1998, she rallied a team of capable Shui women to sew embroidered pieces and floral sachets that used to be sold in streets stalls to sell at Song's boutique store in the county. In 2010, she founded her own company and ventured to lay prints of the embroidery on

luxury clothing and handbags.

"Let me tell you this. I may be the first to apply horse tail embroidery to clothes," says Song.

In the past, the embroidery only appeared on small garments such as baby straps and aprons.

Song found places for the embroidery on everyday clothes, photo frames and notebooks, thereby increasing its commercial value.

To Song, her enterprise has always been as much about

breathing life into the traditional craft as taking the women of the Shui ethnic group with her. Over the past two decades of her career, Song has mostly engaged a team of about 20 local women by providing them with sewing work that allows them to both make a living and raise a family.

According to Wei Niang, a seamstress who has worked with Song for over a decade, Song never holds off from paying her seamstresses, even when she is cash-strapped. If

she is particularly pleased with someone's work, she won't hesitate to reward her with an immediate bonus.

"She really knows how to appreciate good work," says Wei, referring to Song as "teacher Song".

Beside the Shui community, her family is an important support system for Song. Her youngest son Wei Zutao is responsible for new product development at the company. The 29-year-old former animator sees in the ancient craft two possibilities — haute cou-

ture and "crowd favorites", alluding to business models of fashion houses like Gucci and Dior, and more down-to-earth retailers like Zara. Wei is in the process of soliciting design talent from fans of the embroidery to work on product branding that aims to appeal to the younger generations.

Song's daughter-in-law Wu Yongzhi serves as her part-time assistant. The 29-year-old high school English teacher has volunteered to take the traditional craft to the classroom, teaching her students to sew as an extra-curricular activity. Even though she started learning the craft from Song only five years ago, she considers it her responsibility to impart knowledge of the embroidery to her students.

Song has had one wish for a long time that by the time she's 60, she will have demonstrated the commercial and aesthetic value of the embroidery.

Now that her wish has come true much ahead of that age, she has two more wishes to fulfill. She wishes for a better venue than the current small wooden-structured museum to house her nearly 10,000 pieces of horse tail embroidery and a training school where she can teach young people how to sew.

Song says she has spent every penny she had on preserving the craft, but she didn't do it to win any trophies for herself.

"I'm doing something good for the country," says Song.

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Liu Yinglun contributed to the story.

Young talent shines at national ballet workshop

By CHINA DAILY

As Schumann's *Traumerei* for cello and piano flows slowly and softly out of the speakers, a ballerina starts to dance with a white veil covering her head and face. The piece of cloth floats in the air when she, as if blinded, stretches her limbs and tries to reach a male dancer across the stage.

The ballet, *I Owe My Father a Hug*, is one of the five works created for the eighth workshop of the National Ballet of China in Beijing.

This annual workshop gives young choreographers an opportunity to design original ballet scenarios to showcase their talent.

This year, two of the works tell the stories of young people and their loved ones.

"The ballet shows the process by which the younger generations, who once didn't understand their parents, are learning to understand them," says Su Yang, the 25-year-old choreographer of the ballet.

Su was inspired by his own life experience to create the work. Raised by his mother alone, he used to feel uncomfortable staying with his estranged father. As a result, he only visited him when he went to his grandmother's home during Chinese New Year. But things changed when Su's grandmother passed away last year.

"At the funeral, I saw my father crying," says Su. "I put my hand on his shoulder and then I suddenly noticed that he was old."

It took Su about a month to conceive and choreograph the work that reflects his understanding of parenthood.

The ballerina represents Su as a child while the male dancer plays the father's role. In the story, the veil which almost blinds the ballerina, had prevented the child from seeing her father even if they were just inches away from each other. Once the story moves on, the child takes off the veil and finally gets close



Dancers for the ballets *Treasure of Memories* (left) and *I Owe My Father a Hug* (right) rehearse for the upcoming eighth workshop of the National Ballet of China. The annual event that gives young choreographers an opportunity to design original ballet scenarios will include five new creations this year. PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

enough to his father to give him a hug.

Su uses the cloth as a symbol of the child's bias. He says bias, though vague, is what sets the child and the father apart. The child, just like the choreographer himself, later realizes that the father was always around but once her bias is abandoned, the veil drops off.

At the workshop, another young Chinese choreographer, Li Yang, tells the story of a couple from the Uygur ethnic group through his work *Scalding Flowers*. In the ballet, a young soldier had made a commitment to his girlfriend that he would return home and marry her when the flowers in their hometown next bloom. But he died

on the battlefield.

Li says he was inspired by a man who told him that although life can't always be happy, the Uygur people tend to share their joy and sorrow through song and dance.

In *Scalding Flowers*, a variety of Uygur dance movements have been adopted. The male dancers even roar and slap the ground to the beat of the hand

drum, or *daf*. The female dancers spin around on their toes. When the melody comes to a stop, the dancers pass on to another, as if they are sharing the gratification that comes with love.

Other works at the workshop include *Carps Leaping Through the Dragon's Gate* by Li Jun, *Homeward Journey* by

Zhang Zhenxin and *Treasure of Memories* by Slovakian choreographer Natalia Horecna.

The music for *Treasure of Memories* was taken from the original ballet scenario *The Crane Whisperer* by the National Ballet of China. Horecna fell for the music when she watched the show in Hamburg, Germany. She asked Feng Ying, president of the National Ballet of China, whether she could choreograph a new dance to the music.

"I said, 'Of course,'" recalls Feng.

Feng says she also wanted to work with overseas artists and make the show more meaningful on a worldwide level.

Treasure of Memories, along with the other shows presented at the workshop, will make their debuts at the Tianqiao Theater in Beijing over April 3-4.

Zhang Boning contributed to the story.