



The dance show *The Twelve Souls of Time* is inspired by the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

KEEPERS OF TIME

This weekend, Beijing Modern Dance Company will present a show on animals of the Chinese zodiac. **Chen Nan** reports.

On a recent humid afternoon in a rehearsal room of the Beijing Modern Dance Company, some 100 people sit on the floor chatting. Then they start to move under the guidance of 12 dancers.

"You tell me how you feel about this after the lesson," Gao Yanjinzi, the troupe's artistic director, tells the audience.

"You dance the way you want to. There is no standard."

The celebrated dancer-choreographer is giving a free lesson to interested people, and her dancers are demonstrating moves from the troupe's latest work, *The Twelve Souls of Time*, which will be staged at the capital's Tianqiao Theater on the weekend.

It will be the third round of performance of the show since it premiered in Beijing in May.

So far, the show has toured five cities on the Chinese mainland.

While the troupe, which was founded in 1995, has earned respect abroad, it still struggles to promote the art form at home.

Gao, a founding member who graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy with a

If you go

7:30 pm, Saturday-Sunday.
Tianqiao Theater, 30 Beiwei Road, Xicheng district, Beijing. 400-680-6215.

major in modern dance choreography, has been trying to promote modern dance in China for long.

In *The Twelve Souls of Time*, which Gao has choreographed, she tells a story of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, inspired by *Shan Hai Jing*, or *Classics of Mountains and Seas*, a collection of Chinese legends written more than 4,000 years ago.

Gao created this sleeping "mountain god" that the 12 animals try to awaken. Through six challenges, the animals conquer their fears during a long journey and finally meet the god.

In the process, the animals also become gods themselves and safeguard the wheel of time.

In the Chinese zodiac, the years are given different symbols represented by the 12 animals. People born in each year



Gao Yanjinzi performs in her 2004 production, *Jue Aware*.
ZHANG HEPING / FOR CHINA DAILY

are said to share some characteristics with the representative animal.

Gao has her 12 dancers imitating the moves of the animals through modern dance.

"Modern dance is different because you cannot categorize its moves. There are no limits. It's an art form that respects individuality. Both the dancers and the audience are required to be involved," she says.

"Audiences should abandon predictions about what they are going to see in a performance. The ability to imagine

and interact with the dancers is very important," she adds.

Before *The Twelve Souls of Time*, Gao released her choreography work in 2013, *Blooming of Time*, which was inspired by the rotation of the 24 solar terms on the traditional Chinese calendar.

The Twelve Souls of Time continues her idea to pay respect to time, which marks the cycle of life.

"The 24 solar terms and the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac are essential parts of Chinese culture, which display

the wisdom and philosophy of our ancestors," says Gao. "We want to introduce the ancient culture to the audience through contemporary dance."

Born in Guiyang, Southwest China's Guizhou province, Gao is a member of the Tujia ethnic group.

She has received a number of awards for dancing and choreography both in China and abroad, including the Grand Prix at the International Modern Choreography Competition in Belarus in 1999 for her choreography work *Worlds*.

She has toured the world with her dance shows.

In 2008, she was invited by German dancer-choreographer Pina Bausch to create and perform the solo work, *As I Heard*, which premiered at Bausch's festival in Wuppertal, Germany.

Gao's combination of elements from traditional Chinese culture and modern dance was highlighted in her work *Oath Midnight Rain* that premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2006 and used a score inspired by Peking Opera.

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Mongolian desert tale inspires dance drama

By CHEN NAN

When the dance drama *Kubuqi*, which is named after a large desert in North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, was staged at the Tianqiao Performing Arts Center in Beijing on Thursday, the audience was introduced to a lesser-known fable of the Mongolian ethnic group through folk music.

The fable is about a magical flower, which can cure diseases among the residents of Kubuqi, a place in Ordos. But after being saved by the flower, a man takes it away out of greed, an act that turns the area's beautiful land into a desert. His mistake also brings him trouble but no one wants to help him except a girl who helps the man make amends and the flower bloom again.

Performed by the Ordos Singing and Dancing Troupe, the dance drama aims to raise environmental awareness. It has been staged 20 times, attracting nearly 20,000 viewers, since it premiered at the Ordos Grand Theater a year ago. Its recent show in Beijing was to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of autonomous region in August.

"When we decided to make a dance drama to talk about the environment, especially combating desertification, we naturally thought of the fable, which best shows what we wanted to say to the audience," says composer Cha Gan, who is from Ordos and spent two years finishing the composition for the dance drama.

Growing up in a herder's family on the grasslands, Cha, in his 50s, recalls he couldn't see the sheep while they were grazing in his childhood because the grass was tall. But about three decades ago, his hometown was hit by desertification. Efforts were made by the local people and the government to tackle the situation and improve residents' living standards.



The dance drama *Kubuqi* focuses on the theme of environment protection. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“The desert's harsh environment resulted in poverty. But now ... we have got the grasslands back.”

Cha Gan, composer, *Kubuqi*

"The desert's harsh environment resulted in poverty. The loss of grasslands is painful for herders who live by raising livestock. But now that we have got the grasslands back, we should protect them," says the composer, who has used traditional Mongolian elements, such as the *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle) and *khoomei* (throat-singing), to tell the story in the dance drama.

The actors and actresses from Ordos are connected to the changes of the grasslands, and helped deliver the emotions better, says the dance drama's director He Yanmin.

She says borrowing the name *Kubuqi*, which is spread over 18,600 square kilometers, was an attempt to remind the audience that the once-barren area got greener in recent years — more than 6,000 sq km are turning green.

Zeng Han, a senior local government official, says the sixth *Kubuqi* International Desert Forum, held in Ordos in July, praised the green drive of *Kubuqi*.

The Conference of the Parties, established by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, will hold its 13th session in Ordos over Sept 6-16, with about 5,000 Chinese and foreign delegates likely to attend.

The dance drama will be performed four times at the convention.

Miao and Dong songs in limelight at unique choral festival

By CHINA DAILY
in Kaili, Guizhou

Two young women of the Miao ethnic group, clad in traditional dresses, sing on a boat that passes under an arched bridge over the Qingshui River in Southwest China's Guizhou province, raising the curtain for an international festival in the Qiongdongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture.

The 2017 China (Qiongdongnan) International Folk Song Choral Festival that ended on Saturday was held in Kaili, the prefecture's capital.

The festival's "world voices conference" drew 69 choirs from more than 20 countries and regions, including the United States, Mexico, Hungary and Russia.

It was perhaps the first time that traditional Miao and Dong songs were heard at an international event, according to Emily Kuo Vong, president

of the International Federation for Choral Music, one of the organizers of the festival.

"It is a great chance for cultural exchanges as the festival also brings the most beautiful voices of the world to Qiongdongnan," she says.

At the opening ceremony on Aug 10, local choirs, such as the Congjiang County Dong Choir and the Kaili Choir, performed songs with features of the two ethnic groups in Qiongdongnan.

"Now I have a better idea about traditional Chinese songs," says Paulo Lourenco, the conductor of the ECCE Ensemble from Portugal.

Regarding differences in folk songs of Portugal and China, he explains: "These Chinese folk songs are based on the pentatonic scale, which is typical in Asian countries, while we use more harmonic and diatonic scales. And the instruments we use are also different from each other.



Choirs from more than 20 countries and regions take part in the international choral festival in Kaili, Guizhou province. Singers from the Miao ethnic group (left) and Kentucky Harmony from the United States perform at the festival. PHOTOS BY XING WEN / CHINA DAILY

Although folk songs vary among regions, music is a universal language."

Susan Nation, the double-bass player of the Chuck Nation Band from the US says she finds similarities between the ethnic culture of Qiongdongnan and her homeland.

"I am from a part of America that is in the mountains and in the middle of the country. There is a very old mountain tradition. We have a similar history like the Miao and Dong (groups)," she says of the shared tradition of teaching songs from generation to generation.

With a history of more than 2,000 years, the "grand song" of the Dong people was derived from the sounds of nature, such as the chirping of birds or the flowing of rivers.

The song that eulogizes nature, labor and love was listed by UNESCO as an

intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2009.

"We Dong girls start to learn the chorus from around 5 years of age. People from different villages gather under the drum tower (a building) and practice singing after working in the fields. The chorus also bonds us," says Qiu

Xian, a local choir member.

Fan Ying, 50, a music lover from North China's Shanxi province, who was at the festival, says: "It was amazing to see the spectacular Dong chorus live. And the wonderful performances of foreign singers also broadened my horizon."

Many local choirs debuted at the festival.

Gan Wenhua, a singer from the Majiang County Choir, says his group had been gearing up for a performance by practicing more than five hours a day for the past month.

Sergio Quiroz, a singer from Mexico, says: "I was touched by the local voices. I hope our singing made them feel the same way."

The festival was held at the Kaili Cultural Palace of Nationalities.

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