

CHINA



Clockwise from top: Xiao Guanghua performs the traditional Nuo Opera skill of "breathing fire" in Cengong county, Guizhou province. Xiao displays his collection of Nuo Opera masks at his home. Xiao puts a mask on a member of his troupe before a performance. PHOTOS BY HU PANXUE / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ancient Nuo Opera regains former glory in Guizhou

Inheritor worked for 30 years to ensure revival and modernization of folk art

By **DENG RUI** in Chongqing and **YANG JUN** in Guiyang

A 56-year-old man in Southwest China's Guizhou province has worked to preserve and modernize Nuo Opera for more than 30 years and has also managed to pass the tradition on to others.

An ancient folk drama based on *nuo*, a form of folk religion, Nuo Opera performers wear masks and dance to ward off evil spirits. It is a recognized national intangible cultural heritage and is popular in many parts of the country.

Born in a Nuo Opera family in Kaikong village, Cengong county, Guizhou, in 1965, Xiao Guanghua started to learn from his father when he was 12. After 10 years of assiduous study, he became the 14th inheritor in his family of the Sizhou Nuo Opera tradition.

Cengong, which was called Sizhou in ancient times, boasts a long history of *nuo* culture, which dates back to as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). Different from many other forms of opera, it features unique styles of singing combined with acrobatic performances with evocative names such as "climbing stairs of swords", "plunging into a sea of flames", "biting a red-hot iron" and

"swallowing bamboo chopsticks". It was listed as a form of provincial intangible cultural heritage in 2005.

As a local *nuo* master in the 1990s, Xiao formed a troupe of eight and began to tour the countryside.

In 1992, the troupe performed in Beijing and became an overnight success. A year later, it was invited to perform in Japan, after Japanese scholars visited Xiao and dubbed Nuo Opera "the mystery of the East" and "the living fossil of modern drama".

Although the troupe was later disbanded because it wasn't earning enough money for members to make a living, Xiao didn't give up on his dream to protect and pass on the tradition to the next generation of performers.

In 2007, he set up a performance center and established a new troupe.

The pioneering folk artist also broke with tradition by recruiting female apprentices. "I'll pass it on to whoever wants to learn, whether they're men or women," he said. To date, there have been 45 troupe members, 15 of them women.

Now the troupe makes between 400,000 to 600,000 yuan (\$62,760 to \$94,140) a year, and members receive a monthly salary of between 6,000 and 8,000 yuan.



Xiao paints a Nuo Opera mask at home.

In 2016, Xiao's 25-year-old son Xiao Jianghe became the 15th inheritor of Sizhou Nuo Opera.

Xiao said that over the years, he has been approached by people from nearby townships and counties asking him for lessons.

Thanks to his troupe's lead, there are more than 100 *nuo* folk artists for performances, 500 *nuo* folk artists and nearly 100 Nuo Opera bands in Cengong.

"After generations of innovation, Nuo Opera is no longer seen as a form

of superstition. It is a unique form of folk culture that I long to bring to a wider audience," Xiao said.

For over 30 years, Xiao and his troupe have put on thousands of performances, over 100 of which were staged abroad, including in Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Australia.

He also came up with the idea of developing cultural tourism in his township, and in 2016, Kaikong village was listed in the second national batch of traditional Chinese villages. Last June, Xiao set up the Sizhou Nuo Opera Conservatory in his newly built house. It contains a small museum with several exhibition rooms on the first floor, where precious old masks, costumes, opera scores and other props are on display.

His troupe now serves an important role in promoting cultural tourism in the area.

To make the folk culture known at home and abroad, Xiao has been working on a study about its preservation. His book, *Introduction to Sanqing Nuo Culture*, is about to be finished.

"As a form of ancient culture, Sizhou Nuo Opera belongs to the nation and the world. It's great to see it regain the shine of its former glory," he said.

Wang Jin contributed to this story.

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Nail-less construction technique a bridge from past to present

By **HU MEIDONG** in Fuzhou and **LI HONGYANG**

Thanks to decades of perseverance by traditional craftsmen, a 1,000-year-old wooden arch bridge in Ningde city, Fujian province, has managed to survive, and the skills used to make it have been adapted to modern life.

The bridge, which resembles a rainbow in outline, is a mortise and tenon structure built without using a single nail or rivet. A roof protects the bridge from weathering by the rain.

Eighty-five-year-old Huang Chuncai learned how to build the bridges from his father and grandfather when he was 15. By the time he was 20, he was skilled enough to become a chief designer.

When Huang mastered the traditional skill in 1969, however, there were no opportunities to put it into practice, as modern bridges were taking the place of wooden ones.

Instead, he earned his living making wooden furniture and threshing machines until the National Cultural Heritage Administration researchers came to Ningde in 2003 and tried to revive the craft.

Ningde, which is located near the coast of the East China Sea, is an area of ridges and ravines crisscrossed by streams. It is home to more than 50 wooden arcade bridges, some of which have stood for hundreds of years.

In 2008, the technique of wooden arch bridge building was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage, and Huang was designated as the skill's national inheritor.

"Over the years, my father continued drawing designs of arch bridges. He intended to leave a paper record of the craft. Before him, nearly nobody did that," said Huang Minhui, Huang's 38-year-old son.

Huang Chuncai has tried to pass on his skill, and he used to teach students at art schools in Ningde. "But many could not endure the difficulties and left," Huang Minhui said.

So far, about six students are training at a workshop set up by Huang Chuncai. "I hope the craft will endure. Our workshop welcomes anyone who wants to learn," Huang Chuncai said.

Huang Minhui returned to Ningde's Pingnan county from Shenzhen, Guangdong province, in 2005 to work with his father and elder brother on the renovation of old bridges and build new traditional-style arch bridges.

He quit his printing business because he felt the craft of traditional bridge building was a more promising career. His father had also urged him to return a number of times.

"I didn't learn the skill handed down by generations of my family at first because there was no way of using it. Now, the local government is emphasizing the protection and passing down of the craft so we are taking on projects to build traditional bridges and pavilions in scenic spots," he said.

Since 2005, Huang Chuncai and his sons have built dozens of wooden arch bridges in Pingnan.

One of their creations, the Shuanglong Bridge, which is located in a geological park in Ningde, spans 66 meters over a river valley at a height of about 10 meters.

"Mastering the skill mainly depends on personal experience rather than theory. The blueprint must be precisely calculated. For example, radians (a unit of angle equal to an angle at the center of a circle whose arc is equal in length to the radius) must be the same on both sides. Otherwise, the bridge will collapse," Huang Minhui said, adding that learning takes physical strength and endurance.

"It is all about dealing with large pieces of wood. Our construction sites are often dangerous because we build bridges in mountainous areas where there are no shops or shelters."

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From top: A traditional wooden arch bridge spans a valley in Ningde city, Fujian province. Huang Chuncai draws the blueprint for an arch bridge at his workshop in Ningde. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Lifetime researching corn reaps national bounty

HAIKOU — For his 86th birthday, Cheng Xiangwen enjoyed a corn-shaped cake prepared by his colleagues.

"My birthday wish is to develop better corn varieties," he said. After the celebration, he set off on yet another trip to Sanya, in South China's Hainan province, where he has worked for a large chunk of his life.

The 86-year-old is an agronomist and has dedicated his life to studying and cultivating corn. He comes to Sanya every year in November and stays for six months.

Cheng's work is part of national efforts to strengthen agriculture and food security.

Over the years, China's policies on ensuring food security have played a significant role in elevating the living standards of its 1.4 billion people and have contributed to global food security. Ensuring food security will remain a national priority this year.

During the annual central rural work conference held last month, Chinese leaders reiterated that the country must maintain a secure food supply at all times and urged

all relevant parties to play their role in protecting farmland and stabilizing grain output.

Cheng is a native of central China's Henan province, a massive center of corn production. After graduating in 1963, he became an agronomist in Henan's Xunxian county. At the time, the national average annual corn output was a meager 750 kilograms per hectare.

Once, as he was conducting a field survey, a female farmer said to him in tears: "You graduated from college. Could you please find a way to

boost the corn output here? If the yields are higher, our children will no longer suffer from hunger."

Since then, Cheng has made breeding high-yield corn varieties his life's goal.

In 1964, he came to Hainan, where it is warmer, and began breeding work. He slashed the cultivation period and created hybrid corn breeds for the first time. With these new breeds, average corn output in Xunxian exceeds 3,750 kg per hectare per year. The farmers there describe Cheng's seeds as "golden beans".

Despite the beautiful coastline, the area where Cheng works used to be plagued by grinding poverty and poor traffic and was once known locally for having many rats, mosquitoes, leeches and poisonous snakes.

At the time, he did everything on his own. He went back and forth between the cornfield and a public toilet several kilometers away to collect manure, and lived in a village house for over 20 years. He often went deep into the mountains to chop firewood for cooking.

Cheng's hard work has paid off. Now, authorities have approved 14 new, high-yield corn varieties he helped develop.

Soon, he will celebrate his 57th

Chinese Lunar New Year at the cultivation center in Sanya. He now heads a research team of 10, and the research facilities have greatly improved.

The agronomist is dedicated to breeding high-yield corn varieties with greater resistance that are easier to harvest by machine. He still goes to the fields every day to observe and record the corn's growth.

"Cultivating seeds is like raising children. Only by careful parenting can you become familiar with their strengths and weaknesses and help them grow healthily," he said.

XINHUA