

# CHINA

## Woman seeks to showcase Dong culture

From recording dying songs to e-commerce and tourism, daughter inherits father's passion to protect her traditions

By ZHAO YIMENG  
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Zhang Guodan, an ethnic Dong woman from Liping county in Southwest China's Guizhou province, produces short videos showcasing the culture and life of people in her hometown and sells agricultural products via livestreaming to boost local industry and rural vitalization.

Dong choral singing, a polyphonic vocal tradition performed without musical accompaniment, often makes an appearance in the videos. The 32-year-old has been trying to become a recognized inheritor of this world intangible cultural heritage since 2015 and now promotes it through social media.

Perhaps unlike most other livestreamers, Zhang's first inheritance was her father's final wish.

After graduating, she was working in foreign trade in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, earning about 500,000 yuan (\$79,000) a year.

In the winter of 2015, she received news of her father's accidental death and returned home. While she was packing up his belongings, she found a lot of videos of Dong chorals, as well as songs recorded and written down by her late father, Zhang Xuecheng.

"The camera he used to shoot his videos was the only gift I managed to send him. My father was a rural doctor who felt deeply about our choral tradition. As the songs don't have lyrics and can only be passed on to the next generation through singing, he volunteered to record the songs from villagers, and transcribed the melodies in notebooks," Zhang said, adding that her father didn't get married until he was 40 because he was so busy with his collection.

Some of his notebooks were burned by her mother as part of funeral traditions, but Zhang insisted on keeping a few.

Her father's love for Dong choral singing and his unfinished work touched the young woman. "Let me



Zhang Guodan (right) sells local cultural products through livestreaming on social media in Liping, Guizhou province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Zhang poses with members of a Dong choral troupe in a village in Liping, after recording their performance on video.

sing, or the song will be buried with me," she recounts one old man saying in one of the videos. "By the time I watched it, neither he nor my father were alive. I realized then the importance of recording these songs."

Deciding to quit her high-paid job in Guangzhou, Zhang took over recording the choral songs. Her mother was not happy with her decision, saying that filming videos was not as good as a steady job in a big city and would not be widely accepted by other villagers.

"Even my father didn't ask me to take over from him while he was alive. My parents wanted me to live a better and wealthier life outside our previously impoverished village."

Zhang made a deal with her mother; if she could not make a difference in three months, she would go back to the office.

Both women underestimated the appeal of traditional Dong songs and culture. The videos of choral singing that Zhang posted on social media platforms soon became popular, earning her up to 600 yuan a day.

While she hadn't meant to profit from the recordings, the income came as a relief to her mother and family, and allowed her to continue.

Filming was not easy, because many elderly singers found it challenging to perform in front of a camera. Even those she finally

persuaded to perform sometimes suddenly went blank when the camera was turned on. And many refused outright.

"The time to make recordings was also limited. As many young people leave the village to work, the older folk left behind have to take care of their grandchildren and chores."

Zhang can record up to 20 songs a day if work goes well, but sometimes she only manages to record a few.

So far, she has increased her father's collection from 1,000 to 2,800 songs, and she is still working to record more.

"I haven't figured out what to do with the videos, but I know that I have to record all our songs," she said.

Apart from Dong choral singing, Zhang also posts videos of daily life on social media and video platforms such as YouTube. One showing two young Dong women dressed in traditional costumes preparing peppers to make sauce got 80,000 views on Douyin.

In 2019, after a netizen asked how they could buy some of the sauce, Zhang decided to start an e-commerce venture livestreaming on social media. She began selling pepper sauce, rice and other local agricultural products and crafts.

"Some city people said they really liked the taste of mountain products and urged us to produce more," she said, adding that local incomes have improved as a result.

Currently, she is developing a project to allow tourists to experience Dong culture and customs through activities including fishing and fruit-picking.

"Nearly 100 households have participated in the project. I hope it will attract attention and raise the confidence of Dong women," Zhang said.

Yang Jun in Guiyang contributed to this story.



## Tibetan's new chart helps make math easier

By PALDEN NYIMA and DAQJIONG in Lhasa

Gyaltsan, a Tibetan man from Nyingchi city in the Tibet autonomous region, has created a new type of multiplication chart that helps primary school students calculate faster.

As opposed to the small and big 9x9 multiplication charts, which are used nationally and make use of numbers, the new charts use 31 Chinese characters, including 11 referring to numbers.

Gyaltsan showed an aptitude for math at school 30 years ago, but he left before finishing primary school.

He is, however, good at devising new things, and in addition to running a Tibetan cafe with his wife in Lhasa, he has an interest in cultural preservation and has collected the histories and former names of 700 places in Lhasa that most people have forgotten today.

Gyaltsan has also written three Tibetan grammar books, which are suitable for students from primary to high school and are ready to be published.

Four years ago, based on the existing 9x9 multiplication charts, which use Arabic numerals, he began to devise a new chart based on formulas derived from Tibetan chess and dice games.

Through repeated experimentation with his daughters, the new system eventually worked. "I've heard that Indians are good at math, and as the Tibetan culture and alphabet are closely related to Indian culture, I thought that I could come up with a multiplication chart based on our culture," Gyal-



Gyaltsan (center) teaches students how to use his multiplication chart at a primary school in Lhasa, Tibet autonomous region. PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY

tsan said. "It takes about a month for a primary school student to master the oral formula and about 90 seconds to recite it, and it only takes around six minutes for a student to finish 120 multiplication exercises using my chart."

Even slower students take less than eight minutes to finish a 120 multiplication exercise, while it takes one of the best fifth grade students at Lhasa's Second Primary School up to 16 minutes to finish the same number of exercises without using his method, he added.

"It can take students who are not good at math around 30 minutes if they calculate using the traditional way," Gyaltsan said.

The chart is better suited to primary students between grades three and five, he said, but anyone can learn, and it contributes greatly to oral arithmetic skills.

Gyaltsan held test classes at home for a month, attracting the participation of many students.

Now, there are two versions of his multiplication chart, Tibetan and Mandarin.

"In the future, I want to publish both. The Mandarin version is targeted at students across the Chi-

nese-speaking world, and the Tibetan version is aimed at children in rural Tibet," he said.

At the moment, Gyaltsan is thinking of finding a Chinese publishing house to publish his chart so that more people can benefit.

His work has already been copyright protected, and recently, he was given a work registration certificate entitled the "Mathematical Secrets of Big 9x9 Multiplication Chart" by the Copyright Protection Center of China.

Legdron, Gyaltsan's youngest daughter, who is a fifth grader, is a direct beneficiary of her father's invention.

She said that she studied the chart during her winter vacation last year, and it took her about a month to learn it by heart.

"When we do multiplication, I am much faster than students who have not learned it, and I find it so convenient," the 11-year-old said.

"My math used to be poor, but since I memorized the chart, I've progressed, and my grades are now in the upper-middle rank in class."

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## With bedtime stories, teacher entertains, comforts and educates

By FENG ZHIWEI in Changsha and YE ZIZHEN

School nights for boarders at Caijiagang Middle School are never boring, because they get to listen to stories from the comfort of their dormitory.

For over 1,000 nights since 2015, Ma Xiaojuan, a teacher at the school, has been telling stories to her students, who are aged between 10 and 15.

Although a keen traveler, Ma spends her summer and winter breaks finding interesting stories to tell the students.

"The world is large enough to be explored at a later date, but the time I have to spend with each child is limited, so I want to spend as much of it as possible with them," she said.

Born in 1993 in Caijiagang town in Changde, Hunan province, Ma attended the Hunan First Normal University, graduating from the College of Music and Dance in 2015.

As a teacher at a rural school, she teaches a range of different subjects, including music and English, and is also a head teacher.

She knows all too well that school nights at rural boarding schools can sometimes be lonely.

"It reminded me of my own childhood. My parents worked away in big cities, so I know the students feel lonely sometimes. So I want to spend time with them and keep them company," Ma said.

That was how she started telling her students bedtime stories.

The stories aren't randomly chosen, and in some cases, she writes ones based on her own experiences and things that have happened around her.

"My sister is Teacher Ma's student, and she told me about her. I hope that one day, I can be her student so I can hear her stories, too," said Zhou Xiangyan, an 11-year-old

sixth grader. "The stories are full of details — not just plotlines, but things of value and significance."

One day, Ma noticed that some of her students were wearing their red school scarves the wrong way. That evening, she told them a story called *The Color of the Red Scarf*, so that they would better understand why they all wore them.

Occasionally, Ma tells stories about famous historical figures, including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai. To tell better stories, Ma spends her free time searching book stores for inspiration, and now she has written 168 stories.

Thanks to their teacher's influence, Ma's students don't just enjoy listening, they also enjoy telling stories themselves.

"I am the fourth student in my class to tell a story in public. To do a good job, I carefully observe the way Teacher Ma tells a story when she is with us in the dorm," said the student, surnamed Zhou. "My friend suggests to me where I can slow my pace and make my voice more emotional. Story-telling has changed me. I'm more communicative with my teachers and feel closer to my parents. They praised me after watching a video of me telling my story."

Through her daily interactions,



Ma Xiaojuan teaches English at Caijiagang Middle School in Changde, Hunan province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Ma gets to know each student closely. She also helps them with their daily lives and eats meals with them.

Her devotion to teaching and to her students is encouraging other teachers in Hunan.

"The nights she spends with the children shine like stars enlightening their thoughts," said Deng Yan, a professor at Hunan Normal University. "I still remember the first time I went to one of their story nights last October. Ma Xiaojuan's voice was gentle, and the light was warm," said Tian Fanghui, a peer, friend and colleague. "That night, I realized that storytelling is one way of teaching."

To record the scenes that left the deepest impressions, Tian made an oil-painting, which she has titled *Story-telling*. "Xiaojuan's passion for rural education and her major have greatly encouraged me," Tian continued.

For the gentle-voiced educator in Caijiagang, storytelling is something she is sure to continue to do for as long as she continues to teach.

Zhu Youfang contributed to this story.

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