

Visitor preserves village's harmonic heritage

Grand Song of the Dong has been handed down orally among the ethnic group for generations

By ZHOU HUIYING in Harbin and HAN JUNHONG in Changchun

The original, natural environment of 800-year-old Huanggang village, in the Qiongdongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture of Guizhou province, entranced Xu Zhengxue when she visited for the first time early this year.

The village, inhabited by the Dong ethnic group, is being slowly opened up for tourism and is preparing a submission for recognition as a World Heritage site in 2021.

The wooden cabins in the village are still constructed the old way, without bricks or nails, and the Grand Song of the Dong, which was recognized by UNESCO in 2009 as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, resounds in the air.

When Xu, who used to work as an intern for UNESCO, learned the village was preparing a World Heritage site submission, she decided to help.

Just a few weeks after going back to her hometown in the Yanbian Korean autonomous prefecture, Jilin province, the 28-year-old returned to Huanggang when others were still enjoying their Spring Festival holiday.

Xu worked for a year as an intern at the UNESCO Office for Latin America and the Caribbean in Montevideo, Uruguay, after finishing her master's degree at Jilin University in Changchun, the provincial capital, in 2016.

There were about 30 employees from all over the

world at the office, she said. She was the only one from Asia. "During office gatherings, I often presented the Korean ethnic culture, such as the costumes, food and wine," she said.

"Even though I am Han Chinese, I'm familiar with the Korean ethnic culture because there are so many ethnic Korean people around me. I found my colleagues were interested in such ordinary things in my daily life.

"They began to make plans to travel in China, but they didn't know much about the country except for the Great Wall. Then I told them there are so many charming and recommendable places in my motherland."

However, she was sometimes stumped when her colleagues asked her questions about China.

"I found that I didn't know much about my country, especially ethnic cultures," she said. "Therefore, after finishing the year of intern work, I decided to go around China, trying to get to know more about it."

She spent about a month traveling in the provinces of Shandong, Hebei, Hunan and Guizhou.

At the Guizhou Museum, Xu said she was fascinated by the cultural richness of the ethnic groups. Introduced by a local friend, she chose Huanggang village to experience the Dong way of life.

"Unlike the tourist attractions I saw, the undeveloped village provided me with a quiet world, and I believed the Grand Song was the most



Xu Zhengxue and young members of the Grand Song of Dong choir of Huanggang village prepare for a performance at the village in Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

beautiful melody I'd ever heard," Xu said.

After returning to the village, she began collecting information to bolster its submission for a World Heritage listing.

"Before starting the work, I thought it wouldn't take me a lot of time because the culture in the village was abundant and well-preserved," she said. "But when I started, I found it a difficult task due to the lack of written materials.

"The Grand Song, for example, is handed down through word-of-mouth from generation to generation because the Dong language has no written form. However, there are fewer young people willing to learn how to sing in the traditional way from an early age." Xu said performances and

competitions for Dong choirs have traditionally been arranged for festivals or to welcome honored guests.

"These occasions are also a good chance for young men and women to get to know each other, and they may fall in love through singing activities," she said.

Dong choirs are made up of multiple people singing different harmonies and require no conductor or musical accompaniment. Choirs require at least three singers; the more singers, the better the effect.

The imitation of natural sounds, such as the chirps and tweets of birds and the sound of flowing water are an integral part of Dong songs, reflecting their close association with nature.

"Most of the Dong singers from the village choose to earn money by performing in other tourist areas in Guizhou and the nearby Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region," Xu said. "The old people and children are left behind."

Soon after she arrived, Xu set up an extracurricular class so village children could learn about environmental protection, health and painting, and she also invited an experienced Dong singer to teach them the Grand Song.

"After several months' training, some children's performances were outstanding," she said.

In order to get more help and let more people know about the Dong culture, she took two children to Jilin University to join in the award cer-

emony for excellent graduate students at her alma mater in July.

The song by the children, dressed in traditional clothing made of hand-dyed cloth, complete with elaborate silver headwear and necklaces, won warm applause.

"The memorable experience made the children more clearly recognize the greatness of their ethnic culture and strengthened their sense of mission to inherit it," Xu said.

She said Jilin University had helped her collect about 34,000 yuan (\$5,000) for a Dong choir made up of young villagers.

A medical team and supporting education team also arrived at the village in the summer, providing the villag-

ers with great help in health services and their children's study, she said.

Seventeen young singers who had left the village have returned and joined the choir.

"After visiting almost all the families in the village, I found most of the migrant workers were concerned about their families, especially their young children," she said. "Therefore, I began to persuade them to come back to the village and set up their own Grand Song choir."

Xu has also tried to find the choir more opportunities to perform near the village.

"At the beginning, there were only three members, but we still persevered," she said. "Now more young villagers have chosen to return to their hometown."

Wu Chenglong, 41, an inheritor of the Grand Song tradition, quit a job at the Liping county cultural center, in the same prefecture, to return to the village as the choir's instructor in July. "In recent years, I've taught lots of students and participated in different performances outside," he said. "I felt it was a bit of a pity that I didn't personally contribute to my village."

As a result, when he got the news that the choir had been set up, he decided to return. "I am also deeply moved by this young woman (Xu) who has such great power," he said. "There is no reason for me to refuse to strive for the Dong culture."

Xu said, "As a nonnative, I can only try my best to provide support to the villagers. The heavy responsibility of cultural inheritance will ultimately fall upon them. I believe they can bear it successfully."

Contact the writers at zhouhuiying@chinadaily.com.cn

Shepherd sticks to border guard commitment, 54 years on

By MAO WEIHUA in Urumqi and ZHANG YANGFEI in Beijing



A wife, a radio and a herd of sheep are 78-year-old Wei Deyou's only companions on a vast, barren prairie called Sarbulak in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Stretching straight to the horizon, Sarbulak, near the border with Kazakhstan, has been Wei's home for most of his life because of a commitment he made 54 years ago.

Wei traveled to Xinjiang from Beijing in April 1964 with comrades in the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps to take on the mission of guarding the border.

There were many ways to fulfill the mission, but Wei picked herding livestock, tiresome work shunned by most others.

Choosing to run the animals meant waking up at sunrise and patrolling 20 kilometers of border. Swarms of gadflies and mosquitoes stung him through his clothes in summer, and blizzards piled up meter-deep snowdrifts that

made every step difficult in winter.

"We shouldn't be picky," Wei remembers telling his wife, Liu Jinghao. "Who else would go patrol the border if nobody was willing to graze the cattle and sheep?"

They settled 4 km from the No 173 boundary marker with their 2-year-old daughter and infant son, building a home from scratch to start their new life.

In the 1980s, Wei's unit in the corps was disbanded, and his comrades began to move away. But Wei was too stubborn to leave. Due to his familiarity with patrol work and the surroundings, he was recruited as a border guard by the frontier force. He told his wife, "I'll just patrol the border on my way while shepherding, it's no bother."

The first winter he spent alone, after all his comrades left, he was caught in a blizzard while on patrol. The snowstorm darkened the sky

and blurred his sense of direction. His clothes were iced hard, like armor, and the icy wind pierced his leather coat and pricked any exposed skin.

The blizzard showed no sign of stopping as night fell. Groping in the dark and with his energy just about drained, Wei saw a faint light flickering ahead.

He pulled out the emergency flashlight in his pocket and flashed it toward the light. It came from soldiers on duty at the border post, and they found him, saving his life.

Wei has maintained his dangerous daily routine for 54 years. He leaves home every morning with three necessities — a pair of old binoculars, a rusty kettle and a radio — and sets out on the same path that has broken 50 previous radios.

His children grew up and left home to build their own lives. Only Wei and his wife stayed put.

Over the past five decades, Wei has successfully dissuaded thousands of people from crossing the border illegally and helped return tens of thousands of livestock.

His wife retired in 1992 and he retired in 2001, at age 60. They had earned a monthly salary of 6,000 yuan (\$880) together, and their children scrambled to Xinjiang to try to take them back to their home province, Shandong. But Wei and Liu refused to leave Sarbulak.

"I'd feel uneasy if I couldn't walk along the border every day," Wei told his children.

Wei had a stroke in 2012 and was hospitalized, but nobody could persuade him to rest for long and he returned to Sarbulak as soon as he felt slightly better. "I thought this time he would finally move back," said former comrade Cao Guiying. "I never expected that he would go back to Sarbulak again just to keep guarding the homeland."

Wei turned 78 this year, hair silvered and face wrinkled. He and his wife still watch the sun rise and set every day from their home near the No 173 boundary marker between China and Kazakhstan.

Contact the writers at zhangyangfei@chinadaily.com.cn

Around China

HENAN Cancer kills bride on wedding day

A bride who had battled leukemia for eight years died on her wedding day at Henan Cancer Hospital in Zhengzhou on Aug 12. Xiao Hui, who was diagnosed in 2010, met her fiancé Yang Feng two years ago. He proposed a month before the wedding ceremony after learning it was Xiao's dream to get married. She died shortly before putting on her wedding dress. In her final moments, Yang placed a ring on Xiao's

finger and gave her a bouquet. DAHE DAILY

JIANGSU Angry pig tears farmer's scrotum

An elderly farmer, surnamed Li, has lost one of his testicles after being bitten by a female pig as he attempted to get a glimpse of her newborn piglets in Yangzhou. The man, 75, had rushed to the pigsty after his wife said their sow had given birth. However, the mother became angry when he tried to take a closer look and

attacked. Li was taken to the hospital, where doctors diagnosed serious trauma to his scrotum. His left testicle had to be surgically removed. KANKANNEWS.COM

GUANGXI Romeo storms airplane cabin

A man, surnamed Wang, rushed into a plane's cabin at Nanning Wuxu International Airport on Aug 25 in an attempt to dissuade his girlfriend from leaving. Wang chased his girlfriend, surnamed Chen, to the

airport at 9:30 pm after discovering she had bought a ticket to Chengdu, Sichuan province. He bought a ticket for another flight so he could enter the departure hall and then struggled past airport workers to board Chen's flight after learning she had boarded the plane. Wang refused to leave the cabin even after police arrived at the scene, resulting in the flight being delayed 10 minutes. Authorities said Wang had broken civil aviation regulations, and he was put in a detention house for a week. THEPAPER.CN

VISION CHINA
New Era, New Thinking

新时代大讲堂

40 Years on:
China and the World
改革开放再出发：中国与世界新愿景

Local time:
9:30 am, Sept 13
One Great George Street,
London, United Kingdom

- Liu Xiaoming, Chinese Ambassador to the UK
- Jim O'Neill, Chairman of Chatham House and the man who coined the term "BRIC"
- Fu Xiaolan, Professor of Technology and International Development, Oxford University
- Nikhil Rathi, CEO of London Stock Exchange Plc
- Martin Jacques, Author of the global best-seller *When China Rules the World*

Organizer:
CHINADAILY
中国日报

Partner:
KING & WOOD MALLESONS
金杜律师事务所

