

Art of Shaanxi storytelling honored

Province's version of *kuaiban* put on list of intangible cultural heritage

By CHEN NAN
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This is a typical day for Yang Jinlong.

At 9 am, he drives to primary schools and middle schools in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, to teach students about Shaanxi *kuaiban*, a form of Chinese traditional form of storytelling in the Shaanxi dialect to the rhythm of bamboo clappers, after which the art form is named. Sometimes, the classes involve rehearsals for performances and competitions.

Usually, his classes run until about 6 pm, and then he returns home to prepare classes for the next day.

On the weekends, he teaches for six hours each day at art education institutions in Xi'an. As a veteran Shaanxi *kuaiban* performer, he also spends time writing and rehearsing new pieces.

On June 10, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism identified 325 national intangible cultural heritage items in Beijing, increasing the list established in 2006 to 1,557 items.

Shaanxi *kuaiban*, which emerged during the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), has been included.

"*Kuaiban* has a large fan base in Shaanxi. There are many professional artists and amateur performers," said Yang, 45.

Yang has been teaching young people the art form since 2003 after graduating from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, where he majored in *quyi* performance. *Quyi* is a general term for Chinese folk art forms, including ballad singing, storytelling, cross-talk and clapper talk.

"Art education is important for students in China. Just as many students learn to play Western musical instruments like the piano and violin, there are many people learning traditional Chinese folk arts, including Shaanxi *kuaiban*. They are committed and passionate," he said.

Born and raised in Xi'an, Yang was introduced to the art form by his father, an amateur performer, when he was 6. Since his younger brother also practiced Shaanxi *kuaiban*, the two usually performed at schools together.

Yang was trained by Li Shaojie, whose father, Li Runjie, was a veteran performer and is credited with reviving the art form.

Kuaiban is popular in northern China, including Beijing and Tianjin. According to Yang, Shaanxi *kuaiban* was influenced by the artistry of different regions.

The art form can be performed by a group of performers or solo. With one or two pairs of *kuaiban* of different sizes in hand, the performers speak in the local dialect while telling stories, which are usually about martyrs.

"As a young boy, I was intrigued by the art form because many of the stories are about heroes. The performer tells stories while playing *kuaiban*, and it's easy for the audience to remember the stories since all the lines rhyme," Yang said.

In 2011, Shaanxi *kuaiban* was recognized as an intangible cultural heritage at the provincial level



WEI XUEMING / FOR CHINA DAILY

8.79 billion yuan

Amount the central government has spent to preserve intangible cultural heritage items since 2006

by Shaanxi. With the support of the government, the art form has been promoted and introduced to local schools as part of their art education.

The government offers Shaanxi

kuaiban inheritors like Yang funds every year to give performances and hold public events such as workshops and competitions to popularize the art form.

In July last year, an intangible cultural heritage preservation base for Shaanxi *kuaiban* was launched in Xi'an, with Yang as its head. The base has organized a series of programs to promote the art form, including commissioning Shaanxi *kuaiban* artists to write original pieces that tell stories about the province.

The new national intangible cultural heritage items released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism were selected from 943 nominations from around the country. The items fall into 11 categories, including folklore, traditional music, dance, sports, arts, medicine and diet, which is a new category.

According to Wang Chenyang, director of the ministry's Intangible Cultural Heritage Department, those categories are important aspects of Chinese society and con-

vey lifestyles.

So far, the central government has recognized 3,068 national intangible cultural heritage inheritors. At the provincial level, inheritors number over 16,000.

Since 2006, the central government has spent 8.79 billion yuan (\$1.35 billion) on efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage items. The yearly subsidy for inheritors at the national level has increased from 10,000 yuan to 20,000 yuan this year.

Policy Digest

Scientific achievement evaluations face reform

Cutting-edge technologies like big data and artificial intelligence have been chosen by policymakers to help the country better define the significance of the latest achievements made by scientific researchers.

The move is part of a guideline issued by the General Office of the State Council, China's Cabinet, on Aug 2.

The document aims to "improve the evaluation system for scientific and technological achievements" and spur the transformation of such achievements "into real productive forces" and stipulates that technical tools including big data and artificial intelligence should be adopted to "advance methodology studies" and "develop information-based tools" for evaluation purposes.

In addition, the guideline called for expanding the use of standardized evaluations for recent achievements and adopting review methods such as innovation competition and intellectual property evaluations.

It also sought the development of "a cross-industry, cross-department, cross-regional database" that will compile scientific and technological results, demands, cases and evaluation tools and methods.

China will issue a catalog that lays out scenarios for applying the latest technologies, the guideline added.

It will also advance signature projects that may lead to significant achievements in mass industrial production and will facilitate further evaluation of those achievements.

At the center of evaluations should be the quality of scientific and technological innovations, how the achievements can be used in applied technology and their contributions to socioeconomic development.

New buildings to better withstand earthquakes

Engineering countermeasures against earthquakes are at the heart of a regulation signed by Premier Li Keqiang that aims to protect the nation's new buildings from potentially deadly temblors.

In particular, projects for new schools, kindergartens, hospitals, nursing facilities and child welfare institutions should "align with seismic fortification measures" that meet standards set by authorities.

The standards also apply to the construction of new emergency operation centers, emergency shelters and broadcast facilities and are aimed at improving the earthquake resistance of projects under construction, reducing the risk of disasters and safeguarding lives and property.

The regulation was passed at a State Council executive meeting in May and will go into effect on Sept 1, according to a State Council decree dated Aug 4.

Design documents for future construction projects should include the maximum quake magnitude structure could endure, as well as measures taken to ensure seismic fortification.

In rural areas, renovations of dilapidated houses, migrant relocation projects and post-disaster reconstruction should also meet seismic fortification requirements, the regulation stipulated.

Cultural heritage sites limit traffic due to virus

The country's cultural heritage sites, including museums, will put a cap on the daily numbers of visitors in an effort to step up COVID-19 prevention and control.

According to a circular issued by the National Cultural Heritage Administration on Aug 5, venues across the country should implement disease prevention and control measures "on a regular basis".

The facilities are asked to take measures to reduce the number of people gathering and make better use of tools like online reservations, visitor-number limits and digital tour guides.

The circular requests indoor areas at cultural venues to be ventilated and disinfected on a daily basis and also requires that visitors undergo temperature screenings, show their health QR codes upon arrival, wear masks and maintain social distancing during visits.

ZHANG YUNBI

Kunqu Opera actors instill appreciation of ancient form in children

By CHEN NAN

The annual Gateway to Arts Summer Festival in Beijing is known for its live performances and mini-summer camps for children, who come to learn about art forms like classical music, traditional Chinese folk music and traditional Chinese opera.

This year, the festival introduced a new mini-summer camp program focused on Kunqu Opera. More than 100 children aged 6 and over participated in a two-day training course, held on July 26 and 27, that featured Kunqu Opera actors from the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater — the only professional theater in northern China dedicated to the Chinese opera style that dates back some 600 years.

Born in the regions south of the Yangtze River, which included today's Suzhou city in Jiangsu province, Kunqu Opera is performed in the melodic Suzhou dialect.

Combining singing, dancing and acting, the art form was listed as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001. Kunqu was among the first to be included on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China, which was released by the Ministry of Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) on May 20, 2006.

One of the teachers giving classes was actress Wang Liyuan, who is known for playing graceful female roles, or *dan*.

On the first day, she introduced

Kunqu Opera, teaching the children about its history, costumes, makeup and style.

The next day, Wang taught students to move, dance and sing like a Kunqu Opera actor, having them learn different styles based on the roles they would later perform.

The camp ended up with a show featuring a joint performance by students and teachers, including Wang.

"It was the first time I'd given classes to children," said the 34-year-old actress who graduated from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in 2013 with a master's degree in Kunqu Opera. "Most had never seen a Kunqu Opera performance before and didn't know about it. They remind-

ed me of myself when I first started learning as a child."

After graduating, Wang joined the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater, studying under Zhang Yuwen, a national inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage.

On July 27, together with other actors from the theater, Wang performed the classic Kunqu Opera piece, *Romance of the West Chamber*, one of the most famous Chinese dramas written by playwright Wang Shifu during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

It tells the story of young lovers Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying, the latter played by Wang, who consummate their love without parental approval.

"We want children to get to

know Kunqu Opera, which is a brilliant ancient art form," Wang said. "It's old, but it's still vibrant and making progress. Maybe some of them will become loyal fans in the future."

Xu Jian, general manager of the Forbidden City Concert Hall and organizer of the annual festival, said:

"We were concerned about feedback from audiences before we launched the summer camp. Since Kunqu is a very old art form known for its elegance and beauty, we were not sure whether the children would have the patience to concentrate on it. But many people applied to participate, and the camp was full. We were very excited."