

An unlikely man of letters

A former street peddler's obsessed devotion to the ancient Chinese language and literature has sent him straight from high school graduate to professor and media darling, report **Wang Qian** in Beijing and **Yang Jun** in Guiyang.

Cai Wei's childhood fascination with ancient Chinese characters has taken him a long way.

The 48-year-old scholar, who was born to a modest family in Jinzhou, Liaoning province, teaches three courses — ancient-Chinese writing, paleography and calligraphy — at Anshun University in Guizhou province.

He made national headlines in 2009, when he was accepted into a PhD program at the Center for Research on Chinese Excavated Classics and Paleography of Fudan University in Shanghai for his expertise in ancient Chinese literature, although he failed his college entrance exam years ago.

"It's unique to go directly from high school graduate to doctoral student," he says.

He graduated from Fudan University in 2015 and became a teacher at Anshun University. His students often remind Cai of younger versions of himself.

He has never told them about his days as a street peddler. He then used every break to read ancient classics, including works by Laozi, Zhuangzi and Han Feizi. He still remembers that he had to sell at least 50 popsicles to buy a second-hand book for 5 yuan (76 US cents).

Cai now spends most of his time in his office, indulging in ancient texts and trying to interpret the exact meanings of obscure scripts.

The field he's researching is *xiaoxue*, which is the general description of the philology, phonology and exegesis of the ancient Chinese language.

He has published about 10 papers, and his book was published last year. "If there is no academic significance, there is no need to write a paper. A good essay should solve a problem at least," Cai says.

He has gone viral on the micro-blogging platform Sina Weibo. Many netizens find his story inspirational and say his story proves the idiom, "Knowledge is power."

A classical obsession

His interest in Chinese characters started when he learned calligraphy in primary school in Jinzhou.

There were so many traditional characters that he didn't know and had to find in the dictionary. His classmates and teachers nicknamed him the "dictionary walker".

He later started reading Chinese poems and lyrics.

Cai was good at literature but didn't excel in other subjects, such as science and math. He never thrived in school but flourished at the library.



He says he read over 300 books at a local library in one year during senior high.

"I looked for any book related to the Chinese language and literature in the library, which opened my mind and made me figure out what I really wanted to pursue," Cai says.

But Cai failed the college entrance exam and became a worker at a local rubber factory in the early 1990s.

During the three years at the plant, he spent all his free time in the library, reading "nearly every book inside".

He was laid off from the factory in 1994. With no money, no degree and no skills, he didn't have many choices.

He initially took a temporary job making steamed bread at a canteen for 100 yuan per month. It lasted for a year. Later, he purchased a tricycle and started his street-vendor life.

He lived on the seventh floor of a building without an elevator. So, he had to carry 20-kilogram boxes of water and food, such as popsicles in summer and sunflower seeds in winter, downstairs every morning and upstairs every evening.

He could make hundreds of yuan every month and was happy that he had a lot of time to read while waiting for buyers. When he earned money, he'd go to secondhand bookstores, where he could find cheap, and sometimes good, books.

He couldn't even afford the cen-



tral-heating fee, which meant his home froze every winter. The indoor temperatures sometimes fell to nearly -20 C, he says.

"My wife always complained that it was no use studying such ancient literature, but I really love it," Cai says.

During his more than 10 years as a

street vendor, Cai immersed himself in books, especially titles related to ancient Chinese writing and literature. He copied ancient books that libraries couldn't lend out, page by page. It took him over 20 days to copy the Confucian classic, *Erya*, he says.

He learned so much about the

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PHOTOS BY WANG JINGSHUO / FOR CHINA DAILY

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Cai Wei, university teacher

field that he attracted the attention of prominent scholar Qiu Xigui, a professor at Fudan University who even made changes to his own work based on Cai's suggestions.

Cai had also communicated about academic issues with several scholars by mail since the 1990s.

"Many experts can't compete with him in the realm of classical literature," says Qiu.

Winning recognition

The internet also helped Cai get closer to experts and enabled more people to recognize his talent.

His online name is Baoxiao, which means devotion to ancient Chinese writing.

China Youth Daily quoted Dong Shan, a professor at the Peking University's School of Archaeology and Museology, as saying that Cai is intimately familiar with ancient classics and can always spot mistakes.

When his wife fell ill in 2007, Cai borrowed 50,000 yuan from relatives. To make ends meet, he had to work as a roadside peddler by day and a tricycle courier by night.

It was the first time he felt life was too harsh.

"It was a really difficult period, but my interest in literature didn't cease," he recalls.

When he mentioned his situation to Dong, he helped Cai to join a research project on ancient texts at Fudan University in 2008.

His outstanding performance impressed his teammates.

Qiu and professors Li Jiahao and Wu Zhenwu recommended that he apply for a PhD program at Fudan University.

After thorough discussion, he was accepted in April 2009.

In 2000, Fudan University announced changes to its admissions policy to give professors more leeway in selecting their PhD candidates. Previously, only those with at least a master's degree could apply.

At age 38, Cai began his studies for a doctorate in ancient Chinese language at Fudan University under Qiu's supervision.

He completed the degree six years later.

Cai then sent dozens of job-application letters and finally got an offer from Anshun University.

Although he's a media star, Cai says he just wants to live a quiet life and devote himself to the study of the ancient Chinese language and literature.

"It has been a long and plodding journey on my own. Being famous can bring no good," Cai says, smiling.

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Top: In the historical TV series *The Legend of Xiao Chuo*, actress Tang Yan stars as the protagonist empress during Liao Dynasty (916-1125). **Above:** Actor Jing Chao portrays Xiao's husband, Emperor Jingzong. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Empress set to impress in new TV drama

By **XU FAN**
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There's an old saying that behind every great man is a great woman.

This is indeed true in the case of emperor Jingzong. His wife, Xiao Chuo — also known as Xiao Yanyan — assisted him to propel the Khitan-ruling Liao Dynasty (916-1125) to the zenith of prosperity, making her one of a few legendary women who changed Chinese history.

The 48-episode TV series, *The Legend of Xiao Chuo*, has run on Beijing Satellite TV and streaming site Tencent Video since Nov 3, guiding audiences to examine the history and culture of the Liao, a dynasty that features less on domestic screens.

The series adapted from writer Jiang Shengnan's award-winning eponymous novel reached a 1.74 percent rating on the first day, soaring as the second most watched TV series then, and related topics have generated 880 million "clicks" on China's Twitter-like Sina Weibo.

The biographical story spans about four decades. It begins with Xiao's teen years as the carefree daughter of a high-ranking official's family. It depicts her romance with her childhood sweetheart, Han Derang.

But her talent and foresight in strategy and administration captivates emperor Jingzong, with their

marriage making her the country's most powerful woman and enabling her to fulfill her ambition to lead the Liao Dynasty to unprecedented stability and prosperity.

Actress Tang Yan, who shot to fame with the 2009 fantasy sequel *Chinese Paladin 3*, stars as Xiao. Actor Shawn Dou plays Han, who later becomes Xiao's most reliable official, and actor Jing Chao, who portrays the protagonist's emperor husband.

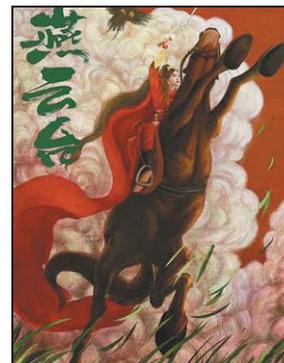
Interestingly, Xiao was depicted as a villainous figure, who led her army to fight against rival Song Dynasty (960-1279) troops in the 16th-century novel, *Generals of the Yang Family*.

As the novel is very popular and has spawned many operas, TV series and films, the new series has stirred controversy online.

Jiang, who also serves as the TV drama's scriptwriter, says she believes it would be fair to think about history from a different perspective.

While multiple regimes existed during the same eras in Chinese history, Jiang says it would help modern audiences to understand the periods with a more complete and profound perspective if the history can be told from all regimes' perspectives.

The Legend of Xiao Chuo marks such an effort. It is planned as one



installment of her trilogy to retell the story of China's turbulent period from the eighth to 12th centuries, an important chapter in which China's ethnic groups advanced integration.

The trilogy's two other stories are about Liu E, the wife of emperor Zhenzong, who became the actual ruler of the Song Dynasty in the early 11th century, and Mozang, the wife of emperor Li Yuanhao, who founded the Western Xia Dynasty in the 11th century.

Jiang, a native of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, traveled to Chifeng and Baarin Left Banner in North China's Inner Mongolian autonomous region, respectively the Liao Dynasty's birthplace and former capital, for research.

The Liao Dynasty was founded by nomadic Khitan tribes, who brought tents to move with seasonal changes and hunting prospects. Jiang says she has adjusted the writing style to make dialogue more straightforward and candid to match with nomadic literature.

Although China has surged as one of the world's largest TV-drama producers, small-screen tales about the Liao Dynasty remain limited, making props and settings a huge challenge for the crew.

In a recently released documentary about the drama, the creators recall that they consulted experts and visited museums to tailor around 800 costumes in nine weeks, as well as constructing nearly 50 dome-shaped tents decorated with lavish cloth to build film sets on Inner Mongolia's grasslands.

Khitan royals' and aristocrats' use of gold in daily life, including in tableware, jewelry and saddles — is also reflected in the drama.

"We hope the new drama could raise interest (in the Liao Dynasty), drawing viewers to know more about history," says Jiang. Despite receiving mixed reviews domestically, the drama has won popularity overseas, exemplified by its scores of 8.2 points out of 10 on MyDramaList and 9.3 points on Viki, two major fan sites for Asian TV dramas.