

LIFE

‘Normal’ is not boring is a lesson we should all acknowledge

The last few months have led many people to reconsider the value of many simple and “normal” things that they used to take for granted, and I am no exception.

Simple things like going to visit friends, going to a restaurant or having a nice trip to a scenic spot. During the novel coronavirus outbreak many of us had been eager to do things that we had previously never

even really given that much thought, or had totally taken for granted.

I like cycling, sometimes quite long distances, so the situation didn't really affect that (apart from getting used to wearing a face mask while riding the bike). In fact, cycling was quite a good way to exercise during the outbreak as you are always at a reasonable distance from other people and moving at a decent speed which ensures there is always a good circulation of air around you. Also, my cycling took me to places further outside the city, so I would be in more open spaces

and be at a greater distance from other people.

But some of the “normal” destinations of my cycling trips that I previously took for granted were off limits for a while: the excellent parks on the outskirts of Beijing, such as the Baiwangshan Forest Park and the Olympic Forest Park.

And even when those venues did reopen to the public, with the correct safety precautions enforced, I was still reluctant to return to them as I wasn't keen on going anywhere that could be unreasonably busy or crowded.

Therefore, something I did a few

days ago marked an important step in my own personal return to “normal”. I ventured back to the Olympic Forest Park for the first time since the start of the lockdown and the closure of public venues.

Before the outbreak I was a regular visitor to that wonderful scenic location with its 10km running track, and could be found there almost every week. So it was a great feeling to be able to enjoy something which I had previously taken for granted, and this means that I value it so much more than before.

And that gradual return to the “normal” which we used to take for

granted but now consider to be so valuable has also recently manifested itself in some other ways.

On Sunday, June 7, I walked through the main entrance of my workplace. What's so remarkable about that, you may ask? Well, that was the first time in several months it was possible to do that without the mandatory temperature check, as the risk level had been lowered in Beijing. It lasted for around one week until the outbreak related to the city's Xinfadi wholesale market was recorded.

Things are guaranteed to be different when the world eventually

gets through this arduous period, but many lessons will also be learnt: important lessons on hygiene and public health. Another lesson which I hope people will learn, as I have, is that “normal” is not boring, “normal” is not dull, and “normal” is most certainly not something we should merely take for granted.

“Normal” is something to be treasured and valued, for when we experience times that we are denied the gift of “normality”, we come to cherish it all the more.

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Candid camera: Night light



Visitors snap images of a light show and synchronized fountain at the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, a major tourist draw in Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, on June 11. Daci'en Temple, where the pagoda is located, reopened to the public on June 8 with a limit of 5,000 tourists daily. ZHOU XIN / FOR CHINA DAILY



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Heroic epic of the Miao people a success story

GUIYANG — In the Miao-Bouyei autonomous county of Ziyun in Southwest China's Guizhou province, locals are in awe of Chen Xinghua and his connection to a heroic legendary figure.

Chen, 75, is a national-level inheritor who recounts the sprawling heroic epic of King Yalu in the local language. The tale tells the story of King Yalu, a hero of the Miao ethnic group, and depicts the history and migration of the people.

The epic is usually presented on special occasions such as weddings and funerals. For more than 2,500 years, it was passed down orally in western Guizhou. Those who tell the stories of King Yalu are called *Donglang*, or singing artist, in the Miao language.

The epic has been listed as a major focus of the Chinese folk art heritage rescue project. It has come into the spotlight once again, as China observed this year's Cultural and Natural Heritage Day on Saturday.

“When I was just a boy, my elders demanded that I learn to sing and perform the stories of King Yalu properly,” Chen recalls. “They believed learning the epic was like learning to speak.”

During his teenage years, everyone in the village wanted to be a *Donglang* because it was deemed a sacred profession, Chen says. At the age of 16, Chen began to learn the epic from three local masters. With a strong memory, a good singing voice and oration skills, Chen soon understood the essence of the epic and by age 20, he had become a famous *Donglang* in the locality.

After learning the epic by heart, Chen began to perform it at funerals. He combined the stories he learned from his three masters and managed to piece together a long version of the epic. The abundant details he weaved into his version caught the eyes, and ears, of his fellow villagers.

As the Miao people do not have a written language, the epic was traditionally passed down in oral form. To help preserve the cultural heritage, Chen decided to transliterate the Miao words into Chinese characters. He scoured the county of Ziyun and visited many senior *Donglang* for different versions of the epic, trying to piece together as many stories of King Yalu as possible.

In 2009, Chen heard that the county's cultural museum had launched a program to compile the stories of King Yalu. He volunteered to participate, and sang the epic for four days so that the museum staff could record his version and translate it into the modern vernacular.

“As a national inheritor of the epic, I feel a heavy burden on my shoulders,” Chen says. “Now that times have changed, maybe our way of passing down our heritage also needs to be adjusted.”

In accordance with local Miao tradition, the masters only teach their apprentices about the stories of King Yalu in January and July on the lunar calendar. However, to better preserve the epic, Chen recorded his version and sent the recordings, as well as the Chinese texts, to his apprentices via smartphone so that they can learn more conveniently. His stu-

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Chen Xinghua, national-level inheritor of the epic story of King Yalu

1,778 singing artists

who tell the stories of King Yalu in the Miao language in the Miao-Bouyei autonomous county of Ziyun, Guizhou province

dents are also free to call him at any time if they have any questions, he says.

But the passing down of King Yalu's stories is not an easy task.

Chen's hometown Ziyun sits along a long belt of arid, stony land in the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan, and in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. The county of Ziyun is among the nine counties in Guizhou mired in grinding poverty. By 2019, Ziyun still had 12,940 people living under the poverty line.

The situation has forced many young people to go out and seek jobs in more developed areas of China.

“I have taught many apprentices in the past, but fewer than 10 of them have truly learned the essence of the epic,” Chen says. “They are all working hard outside the county to make money and live better lives.”

Fortunately, the government understands the importance of cultural protection and has taken a variety of measures to save the epic from dying out.

In 2011, the county government established a research center for King Yalu culture. The center compiles and translates the content of the epic and holds cultural exchange activities.

“We found that there are 1,778 *Donglang* in the county, and we have stored their stories in digital form,” says Yang Zhengjiang, director of the center. “We also hold storytelling competitions and cultural seminars on the epic.”

The center has also published a book containing 10,819 lines of the epic of King Yalu, Yang says.

In 2011, a cultural and tourism company was established in the county. The company has launched a variety of products based on the story of King Yalu, including embroidery and wax dyeing. It has provided job opportunities for more than 200 local people.

“I hope that more young people will join me in passing down the epic of King Yalu,” Chen says.

XINHUA

Blind masseur shows the benefits of TCM

By WANG RU
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As a visually-impaired masseur at Beijing Massage Hospital, 40-year-old Xue Nan has devoted himself to not only relieving patients of pain, but also promoting Traditional Chinese Medicine to foreigners.

Xue suffered visual degradation when he was young, and went to Beijing School for the Blind after he graduated from junior high school to learn massage skills. At that time, some English majors from the Capital Normal University worked as interns at his school. They taught Xue English and sparked his interest in the language.

“I bought some tapes to listen to every day, and insisted on the listening practice from then on,” says Xue.

After graduation, he was enrolled in the TCM college of Beijing Union University, where he received education in both TCM and modern clinical medicine.

His continuous efforts to keep on improving his English gave him an opportunity to engage in a project to demonstrate his massage skills in Ireland not long after he started to work as a massage doctor at Beijing Massage Hospital in 2002.

Sponsored by China Disabled Persons' Federation and the Irish Wheelchair Association, the project required him to work in a local hospital and offer massages to local people for seven months.

“People would pay 30 euros (\$34) to enjoy a 30-minute massage. They seemed to enjoy it very much, and I would receive eight to 10 people every day,” says Xue.

Xue says the experience helped him to learn a lot, especially in English. After he came back, he felt he “began to be qualified to do work related to foreign exchanges”.



Xue Nan, visually-impaired masseur at Beijing Massage Hospital, shows massage skills to some US students at a training session in 2011. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

He then worked as an interpreter when foreign guests visited the hospital.

Since Beijing Massage Hospital began providing training for foreign students, he has worked as a teacher in his spare time to spread knowledge about TCM, including massage skills in 2004.

Xue still remembers the first group of students he taught. “They were three Italian students, and I taught them at night. Although we didn't have high-tech tools like PowerPoint and I was inexperienced at that time, I prepared my lessons very carefully.”

Over the years, Xue has gained more and more experience, and explored a distinctive way to spread theories in TCM, which are related to Chinese philosophy and are difficult to explain to foreigners.

“I introduce TCM in vivid Chinese stories, and supplement and prove the TCM theories with theo-

ries of modern medicine,” says Xue.

For example, to clarify the TCM theory of “rapture harms heart”, Xue told the story of Fan Jin, a character in the ancient Chinese novel *The Scholars*. Fan was so overjoyed when he successfully passed the provincial civil service examination at age 54 after repeated failures that he became crazy. He was returned to normal after being shocked by his father-in-law.

“From the TCM theory, sudden rapture may lead to damage in the heart, and a sudden shock can relieve the patient from a manic state. From the modern theory, the shock can be seen as a psychological treatment,” he says.

Right now, he teaches more than 100 students every year, including medical students, nurses, midwives and those who want to learn massage for family members. They come from various countries like the United States, France, Germany and Canada.