



**Left:** An experimental show, *Chinese Shadow Puppetry*, which made its debut at the Xi'an Concert Hall last month, is received by a full house in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. **Above:** Wei Jinquan, a famed local artist, performs in the show. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Puppetry coming out of the shadows

Traditional art form adapts to changing circumstances and appeals to a younger audience, **Shan Juan** in Xi'an and **Chen Nan** in Beijing report.

A show that brings together the spice of modernity mixed with a good measure of ancient entertainment and marinated with a stand-up routine is always going to be a recipe for delight. This approach to 2,000-year-old puppetry has given new life to the ancient art and is appealing to a younger audience in Northwest China's Shaanxi province.

*Chinese Shadow Puppetry*, an experimental show, made its debut at the Xi'an Concert Hall last month, and was well received by the largely urban young audience, according to Hu Ruonan, director of the show.

The 60-minute show comprises two traditional shadow puppet plays — *The Happiness of the King of Hell* and *Monkey King Subdues White-Skeleton Demon*. These are interspersed by stand-up performances highlighting local traditional culture during the intervals.

Easy and well-known storylines have made the background opera, *Wanwanqiang*, a traditional dialect-based opera from Shaanxi province, easier to understand for the audience, including nonlocals. Subtitles are also available, broadcast simultaneously on screens both sides of the stage.

"I found the show to be a fun, artistic feast and quite modern," says a member of the audience surnamed Feng. The 29-year-old from Sichuan province attended with eight members of her family.

Traditionally, puppetry is mostly staged at night with the performer projecting shadows onto an illuminated white cloth, while musicians



Wei instructs a foreigner in the traditional art of operating shadow puppets.

provide a dramatic soundtrack, according to Wei Jinquan, a famed local artist who performs in the show.

"For hundreds of years, the show engaging five puppeteers to manipulate the hand-carved puppets, colored red, yellow, black, white, and green, as well as provide musical accompaniment, has been popular, especially in rural areas," Wei says.

"It entertains and, more importantly, enlightens by telling stories

that are easy to comprehend, especially among the rural audience."

As China rolled out massive urbanization programs, many of the traditional audience left for cities seeking better jobs.

"We had about 20 shows each month in the 1990s, which dwindled to three or four shows after 2010," he says. Decreased audience numbers and lack of exposure has left the traditional art form battling for survival.

As the show's director, Hu has joined in the effort to restore and pass on the skills and knowledge of shadow puppetry. Her team has an average age of 30.

"We know our audience and understood how to repackaging the show to amuse them and, more importantly, bring life to the treasure of our traditional art," says Hu.

In the new show, the live band has been substituted by recordings with largely improved sound effects,

while effects and props like huge flames, cloud-shaped screens and bright stage lights have been introduced to appeal to younger audience with more modern tastes in entertainment.

According to Hu, most of the audience are young people. "They enjoy it and can catch the 'old wit' in the show."

In *Happiness of the King of Hell*, the protagonist entertains the King of Hell by singing operas and, as a result, gets a longer life.

Liu Jiawei, a 12-year-old audience member, says: "The man is brave and calm, while singing operas to please the King of Hell. You never know when your expertise will help you."

For Wei, dedicated to making shadow puppet plays known and liked, he saw new hope.

"After the modern redesign, the show will reach out to a bigger audience, particularly the young. They are the future of the ancient art," says the optimistic artist.

Apart from performing, the 58-year-old also gives lectures promoting shadow puppet plays at local primary and middle schools.

Born to a local shadow puppetry family, Wei picked up the art as a teenager. With his own experience, he has seen the ups and downs of the art, and believes that with the engagement of young audiences and the artists' continuous efforts to produce modern adaptations, the traditional entertainment format will prosper again.

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## Sparking passion in popular science

BEIJING — For 11-year-old Li Jiaqi, a fourth grader at Huangyangmei primary school in the city of Yiwu, Zhejiang province, she learned for the first time that fluorescence is a luminescence in a popular science class.

Scientists and volunteers from 10 Shanghai-based research institutes of the Chinese Academy of Sciences recently brought popular science classes to two primary schools in Yiwu.

Fang Yuewen, a sixth grader from the same primary school as Li, has developed an interest in microbes. "It is amazing to learn more about microbes from the CAS scientists," she says.

In one of the science classes, two volunteers from the CAS' Institut Pasteur of Shanghai used simple terms to introduce the species and reproduction methods of microbes to the students.

They also guided the children to observe the microbes under the microscope.

## 20,000 students

and teachers benefited from popular science classes by scientists from the Shanghai branch of the CAS

Scientists from other research institutes also taught popular science classes covering fiber optic communication, nuclear power, lasers, thermodynamics, and drug development.

Zhu Fangyuan, from the Shanghai Advanced Research Institute, explains how a third-generation synchrotron radiation light source at the institute solves problems in life and science to the students.

"The children may have heard about the scientific device, but they may not know how it works," says Zhu, who hopes to inspire the students to be more interested in science.

"Many children dream of becoming scientists when they grow up," says Wang Hong, principal of Xinsilu primary school, one of the schools that had the popular science lessons. He also says that these would help children further explore science.

Zhang Wenjun, who is with the Shanghai branch of the CAS, says the purpose of the lessons is to help increase the children's enthusiasm for science in regions with relatively poor science education resources.

The Shanghai branch has held more than 20 popular science activities in eight years across several provinces, involving 20,000 students and teachers.

XINHUA

## Holistic treatment turns a Bulgarian patient into a firm believer of TCM

SOFIA — Every day, 52-year-old Mitko Stankov starts his day with *baduanjin*, a *qigong* exercise consisting of a sequence of slow, relaxing movements. This traditional, low-intensity mind-and-body exercise has been practiced for centuries by millions of Chinese people.

"I get started with *qigong* every day, and I do it again before going to bed," Stankov says. "I combine standard *qigong* with *baduanjin*. This is a 'secret course' my doctor advised me to follow."

Stankov got acquainted with traditional Chinese medicine 30 years ago. One of his friends, who was a judo athlete, got injured one day and had difficulty walking.

"Our doctors were trying to treat him, but he still couldn't kneel for a long time," he says. "There was a Chinese doctor in the neighborhood who offered acupuncture, and my friend went to his clinic."

After two rounds of treatment, things got better and Stankov's friend recovered.

"That was the first time I heard about TCM," says Stankov, admit-

“With this treatment, not just the specific ailments but everything connected to it can be fixed. The body parts form a connected system.”

**Mitko Stankov**, a Bulgarian man who launched a website introducing TCM

ting that he had doubts about its therapeutic effects back then.

A decade later, Stankov's stiff joints and sore muscles forced him to seek medical help.

Acupuncture combined with herbs eased his pain, and this experience converted Stankov to be a believer in TCM. He then began reading Chinese medicine books, which acquainted him with all

kinds of herbal remedies.

Stankov has now become completely captivated by the holistic approach of TCM.

"With this treatment, not just the specific ailments but everything connected to it can be fixed. The body parts form a connected system," Stankov says.

In Bulgaria, the locals have been using herbal medicines for ages, so it is no surprise that they have an affinity for TCM.

Though several herbs such as mulberries, ginger and daisies used in TCM are available in Bulgaria, Stankov realized that the locals are not necessarily aware of their medicinal uses. To help educate his compatriots, Stankov has launched a website where he introduces Chinese herbal medicines and their effects to his readers.

"Traditional Chinese medicine has a long history," he says. "Practitioners have been treating many ailments before modern medicine appeared."

XINHUA



## Wax printing makes impression

Wang Xinying (left), an inheritor of Miao-style wax printing, talks with tourists (bottom left) who display batik handkerchiefs they made at a training workshop on April 25 in Wang's store in Danzhai county, Guizhou province. Miao-style wax printing was among the first crafts on the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008.

Wang, 21, of the Miao ethnic group, cherishes the craft, not only because she began to learn it at the age of 6, but because it has played a key role in lifting her family out of poverty. She was honored as one of its county-level inheritors at 19. She now runs a business, training tourists and producing such items. Her mastery of the craft has given her celebrity status, and she was invited to attend the recent Shanghai fashion week. "The cities outside, with many high-rises, are beautiful, but my hometown suits me better. Only Miao wax printing enables me to go further," she says.

PHOTOS BY OU DONGQU / XINHUA