

TOP NEWS



College students and teachers from Guizhou Minzu University play the Chinese lute, or *pipa*, while introducing the Grand Song of Dong to children at a primary school in Guiyang, Guizhou province. QU HONGLUN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



Members of the Dong ethnic group perform the Grand Song of Dong in Sanjiang, Dong autonomous county, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, on April 13. GONG PUKANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



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Wu Chunyue, a Sanjiang resident and a Grand Song lead singer who conducts workshops to nurture young singers

To that effect, Sanjiang resident Wu Chunyue, another Grand Song lead singer, regularly practices with at least six team members and runs workshops to nurture young singers.

"The songs are a collective effort, and the more people sing them, the better they sound," said Wu, 40.

"We've known it all our lives and feel a deep responsibility to pass it on to future generations."

Long Xiaoqin, deputy head of Sanjiang's publicity department, said: "Our government attaches great importance to the Dong Grand Song. We believe this is what makes our Dong people special." She added that the songs complement the rich culture and pristine environment of the county, which draw millions of tourists every year.

"So far, we have more than 200 masters here. The government encourages them to pass on their skills to the young to keep the tradition alive," she said.

Pan Ming, general manager of the Guangxi Tourism Development Group, which runs the major Sanjiang scenic area where the ethnic group's Grand Songs are performed and promoted, said nearly 1 billion yuan (\$150 million) has been invested in the county in recent years to help preserve and pass on the Dong intangible cultural heritage.

"Local ethnic aspects such as the Grand Song of the Dong are integrated with the cultural and tourism industry to continuously improve the visitor experience, create immersive song and dance programs, and enhance the attractiveness of Dong culture," Pan said.

US ethnomusicologist and Guangxi University for Nationalities music teacher Ben Linde said he first experienced the Grand Song "through the studies, performances and cultural heritage transmission efforts" of Guangxi Arts University's department of ethnic arts in Nanning.

"They do a great job teaching this important genre of folk music to college students from all corners of Guangxi. Obviously, a personal visit to Sanjiang to listen to this music in its most natural setting is a priority for my future field research," he said.

The Grand Song is "unlike any other folk songs I've heard anywhere in the world. Its charming main melody floats over the harmony part, creating a delightful and gentle 'rocking' experience for the ear. Combined with the group nature of performance, often strikingly polished, this folk music genre must be shared, protected and passed to future generations", Linde said.

"As long as people from Sanjiang are supportive, fusions and new presentations" of its Grand Song "are a great way to increase the spread and enjoyment of this great art form", he added.

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TOGETHER IN CHORUS

Grand Song tradition gains popularity and continues to unite communities

Editor's note: From arts and crafts to knowledge and skills, China's intangible cultural heritage is invaluable embedded in its ethnic communities. This series looks at the latest efforts to preserve and promote the country's inherited traditions and living expressions.

By **ALEXIS HOOI** and **ZHANG LI** in Sanjiang, Guangxi

When Wu Jinyan, a singer of the Dong ethnic group, stepped off the stage from one of her first overseas concerts, she found it hard to mingle at the post-performance party.

"We couldn't speak the language and didn't really know what was going on. But people soon gathered around. They wanted to know more about us and our singing. We became closer through song."

The experience two years ago in a multi-stop United States tour became a highlight for Wu and fellow practitioners of the Dong ethnic group's traditional "Grand Song", marking its increasing popularity at home and abroad.

"The growing interest is very appropriate, because our songs have always been about the community; the more the merrier," she said.

Wu, 37, is a lead singer in Yandong, Liping county, in southwestern China's Guizhou province.

Her ethnic group is famous for its Grand Song, the folk music — described as polyphonic and a capella — of its members, with UNESCO recognizing the practice as an intangible cultural heritage. The millennia-old tradition is said to derive from the sounds of nature and singers' lives in their natural surroundings, such as the rush of rivers and the call of birds, with each group having as many as 1,000 singers.

Ethnomusicologist and music curator Mu Qian has studied the Dong songs closely and helped promote them worldwide. Mu traveled to the US with Wu's six-member team,



Members of the Dong ethnic group participate in a Grand Song of Dong chorus performance in Jiangkou county, Guizhou province, on April 10. PAN HUANGQUAN / XINHUA

taking on the role of emcee to introduce the cultural backgrounds and meaning of the songs of the Dong people, also known as Kam, combining ethnomusicological theory with his experience.

"The sounds of nature have a special meaning to the Kam people and are reflected in many Kam songs," Mu wrote in *Folklife*, the online magazine of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

"For example, the chirping of cicadas is a constant backdrop in the Kam area, and the imitation of cicadas can be found in many songs. In *During Daytime, I Go up the Mountain*, a young woman hears the sound of cicadas; to her ears, it sounds like weeping. She sighs at the memory of an

old lover," according to Mu, an editor at the nonprofit organization Repertoire International de Litterature Musicale in New York.

During their stop at the University of Michigan, "the group performed a full concert, but we also held workshops. We did this wherever conditions allowed, as workshops seemed the best way to introduce the natural and human environment of the Kam region and to teach the audience to sing," he said.

"By working close up, we could give people a deeper understanding of this musical culture so different from their own."

Wu Jinyan said "the face-to-face interaction and cultural exchange proved to be very important. These are all very valuable

experiences for me, helping to increase understanding of treasured aspects of our traditions."

Nurturing tradition

In the Sanjiang Dong autonomous county of Liuzhou in the neighboring Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, more efforts are also being made to preserve and promote the ethnic group's song heritage.

In late April, President Xi Jinping visited the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi in the regional capital, Nanning. Guangxi is a national demonstration area for ethnic unity, and the region should continue to give play to its exemplary and leading role, said Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee.

Tibet: Cultural preservation highlighted

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repeat my religious routines at home by lighting butter lamps every day," she said.

On special occasions, such as the Shoton Yogurt Festival or during the New Year Losar Festival, she visits different temples and monasteries.

Besides protecting religion, the government has emphasized the preservation and inheritance of Tibetan traditional culture, Wu said.

"Enriched with regionalism, unique Tibetan traditions have become a bright pearl in the treasure house of Chinese culture," he said, adding that Tibetan culture was formed in a process of exchanges and communication with Han ethnic culture and others.

To preserve Tibetan culture, the regional government has been investing heavily to collect and publish valuable Tibetan classics since the region's peaceful liberation in 1951. Key projects include the compiling of the Tibetan manuscripts in the Tripitaka Sinica, known as the Chinese Buddhist canon, and the preservation of the Epic of King Gesar.

Since 1951, the central government has

made Tibet a core protection area for Chinese traditional culture, with various rules and documents issued to that end.

For more than seven decades, at least 70 national-level and more than 600 regional-level cultural sites have been nominated for recognition, with the Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple and Norbulingka Palace each listed as a UNESCO World Heritage and the Lum medicinal bathing, Sowa Rigpa, a therapy in Tibetan medicine, recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in November 2018.

Also, the Tibetan language has acquired legal protections, becoming the country's first ethnic language to have international standards, Wu noted.

In July 1997, the Tibetan coded character set was officially adopted, and became an important part of the Information Technology — Universal Multiple-Octet Coded Character Set. The Tibetan language thus became the first ethnic-minority language in China with an international standard and a pass to the global information superhighway, according to a white paper on the peaceful liberation of Tibet and its development over the past seven decades, issued by the State Council Information Office in May.

"Customs also receive respect and support. Festivals include Tibetan New Year, Shoton and the Nagchu Horse Race. These are celebrated almost every year," he said.

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Response: Collaborative inquiry needed

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problematic variants of the virus.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has rightly warned that the next course of the pandemic will depend on global leadership. However, it appears that precious time is being consumed by other, extraneous actions that will only delay the supply of vaccines to communities most in need.

When United States President Joe Biden made the bold decision to rejoin the WHO in January, many people in the US and beyond expressed optimism that the move would bolster the global capacity to defeat the virus. However, the new administration is forging ahead with disavowed tactics only emblematic of the disastrous administration of former president Donald Trump.

A key concern regards the US approach to COVID-19 source tracing. The WHO had sent its own experts to Wuhan. Working alongside their Chinese counterparts, the WHO team made conclusions and recommendations in which a laboratory leak as a source of the pandemic was largely discounted. One of the recommendations of the team was that the search for the virus source should also extend to other countries besides China.

The US expressed dissatisfaction with the findings, and it proceeded to engineer new plans within the WHO to start the

It is indeed in the interest of all countries to get a proper understanding of the pandemic genesis, but such an endeavor should proceed within the purview of collaborative and inclusive scientific inquiry.

process that has led to establishment of the International Scientific Advisory Group for Origins of Novel Pathogens. The move by the WHO to abandon the outcomes of a joint study by its own experts has alarmed the international community. So far, more than 60 countries have written to Tedros, opposing politicization of the COVID-19 response and source tracing.

In an effort to circumvent mounting international pressure, the White House has ordered US intelligence agencies to firm up the "lab leak" theory by the end of this month. The use of intelligence agencies is against the scientific model, which is verifiable, reproducible and universal. It will be hard for the global community to buy into any results of such an investigation.

Politicizing the process also undermines the ability of the WHO to provide leadership on finding the source of the global health crisis and possible solutions to this and future pandemics.

Instead of a sustained smear campaign against some countries, Washington should be doing more on progressive ideas such as the recent move to donate vaccines to poor countries, while supporting efforts by the COVAX international initiative to deliver vaccines to developing countries.

A look at history tells a different story about epidemics. Nearly every corner of the world has been in the eye of the storm from time to time.

It is indeed in the interest of all countries to get a proper understanding of the pandemic genesis, but such an endeavor should proceed within the purview of collaborative and inclusive scientific inquiry. The blame game is only a showstopper.

The WHO offers the most appropriate platform for coordinating global efforts on COVID-19 source tracing and other aspects of the pandemic response. To succeed, however, the agency needs to be cushioned from external interference.

The writer is a scholar of international relations with a focus on China-Africa ties. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.