

Leading a song and a dance about heritage

Shaanxi province's Ansai county is a national base for the folk culture industry, which is experiencing both good and bad tidings. **Kang Bing, Chen Liang and Ma Lie** report.

There is a famous scene in Chen Kaige's award-winning *Yellow Earth* of 150 people beating drums at a parade as the dust swirls around. It made the Ansai waist drum and dancers famous around the world. Based in Ansai county, Yan'an, Shaanxi province, they have performed at events ranging from celebrating the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, and the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the founding of New China in 1999 and 2009.

Ansai waist drum dances date back 2,000 years and almost every village in the area has its own teams. But they are losing their traditional show grounds on the slopes and hilltops of the Loess Plateau because bushes and trees now cover the land following a 20-year arable land project.

The improved environment, changing lifestyles and fast economic development are having a mixed impact on the region's colorful cultural heritage.

Yan'an, because of its remoteness and poor transport, is rich in folk arts and customs, such as North Shaanxi folk songs, paper-cutting, dough modeling and waist drumming.

Peng Hui, deputy-director of Yan'an city's publicity department, says 104 items of intangible cultural heritage have been found in the city's 13 districts and counties.

More than 30,000 folk songs are still popular in the region, while tens of thousands of people can sing the folk songs or still do paper-cutting.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has named two of the region's folk artists as masters, while six folk artists have been named as national representative inheritors of intangible cultural heritage.

Of the districts and counties in Yan'an, Ansai is known best for intangible cultural protection. So the Yan'an government has been building Ansai into a national base for the folk culture industry.

Until the early 1990s, Yan'an was one of the most impoverished regions in Shaanxi. But in 2000, the area's GDP per capita started leading the province because of oil and coal production. In 2010, its GDP per capita amounted to 40,000 yuan (\$6,300) per year, surpassing many major cities.

"More rural people, especially the young, have moved into towns and cities. They certainly favor TV and the Internet instead of traditional recreation, such as singing folk songs and watching traditional folk operas," says Ansai government publicity department head Qu Yongfeng. "Some of our folk art forms are losing their fan bases."

Wang Xi'an, one of Ansai's master paper-cutters, says that her works used to decorate cave dwellings' windows for weddings or during traditional festivals.

"I gave my neighbors my paper-cuttings and they sent me a bowl of stewed pork, a cabbage or two cucumbers in return," she says. "Now my paper-cuttings are mainly for outsiders. And few people now live in cave dwellings here."



Cao Huairong, master drum dancer.



The majority of folk art masters are elderly. Paper-cutting artist Gao Jin'ai — one of two national representative inheritors of intangible cultural heritage in the county — passed away at 89 in 2010.

"That was a blow to our heritage protection," Liu Zhanming, vice-director of Ansai's culture bureau, says. "We are trying to promote Wang Xi'an as our new national representative inheritor for the art of Ansai paper-cutting but have to wait at least two years for State approval."

Local governments in Yan'an have paid particular attention to heritage protection and are trying to popularize it with money from the mining and energy industries.

Qu Yongfeng says Ansai government has spent 1 million yuan (\$157,000) on awards to folk artists who have won prizes at various national or provincial competitions since 2006.

The first-prize winner of a national competition will get 8,000 yuan, and the first-prize winner of a provincial competition will get 6,000 yuan, Qu says.

Since 2003, Ansai's government has added the county's four major folk

art forms — Ansai waist drumming, paper-cutting, farmer painting and folk singing — to the curriculum of art and music classes in the county's primary and secondary schools.

In 2008, this initiative was expanded to Yan'an city's primary and secondary schools.

"We hope to pass down our intangible cultural heritage to a younger generation in this way," Ansai No 2 Primary School's principal Wang Jinling says.

Every July, Liu Zhanming says, Ansai Mass Art Center holds an annual paper-cutting training course for young enthusiasts from the countryside.

"The one-week or two-week courses teach 40 to 50 participants not only paper-cutting, but also farmer painting," he says. "Many of them go on to become professional folk artists."

Chen Haili, Chen Lianlian, Du Huan and Guo Banzhuan have taken part in the training courses. Early this year, the four women, all younger than 30, opened a paper-cutting and farmer painting workshop at a residential building on the county town's main street.

"They all come from nearby villages and have been studying paper-cutting since childhood. They have won awards at paper-cutting and farmer painting competitions and are passionate about their profession."

"They charge 200 yuan for an album of small paper-cutting works, 200 yuan for a larger sized paper-cutting, and 500 to 600 yuan for a farmer painting."

"We can afford the rent of 10,000 yuan a year and still make ends meet," Chen Haili says.

As the head coach of Ansai county's waist drum dance team, Liu Zhanming has been to the United States, Peru, Japan, France, Germany, Italy and Thailand, with his more than 40 drummers.

"All of our team members are from villages and most of them are middle-aged," Liu says. "They have both strength and experience."

The 73-year-old Cao Huairong, who is the county's only national representative inheritor of Ansai waist drum dances, performed for former Chairman Mao Zedong when he was 8 years old, and did so again for President Hu Jintao in 2006.

Even though he is too old to travel abroad and perform these days, he can still dance well enough to teach more than 30 routines to his 10 grandsons and six granddaughters.

For this, the State gives him 8,000 yuan a year.



The Ansai waist drum dance has a history of 2,000 years and shows off the wild character of farmers on the Loess Plateau in Shaanxi province.



Busts and statues of Mao Zedong fill Wang Wenhai's home in Yan'an, Shaanxi province.

PHOTOS BY CHEN LIANG / CHINA DAILY

How Mao shapes lives spent shaping Mao

By KANG BING AND CHEN LIANG
CHINA DAILY

There's no TV, no refrigerator and no washing machine.

The three-room apartment's furniture comprises just a handful of items, including a worn couch and two simple wood beds.

But the hostess, Wang Yanhua, is unhappy about such questions as, "Why does the apartment appear so empty?"

She responds: "We have Chairman Mao Zedong everywhere and don't feel our home is at all empty."

She's not kidding when she says Mao is everywhere in their home.

Several hundred clay busts and statues of New China's founding father inhabit her shelves, desks, windowsills and even the floor and the bed. The figurines are like Xi'an's Terracotta Army but all with Mao's face.

The walls are covered with the chairman's visage, too. He stares out from the collage of paintings, old posters and yellowed newspapers that cover the walls.

The Mao statues are the handiwork of the couple in Yan'an, Shaanxi province. An unfinished red-clay Mao is still taking shape in the center of the living room.

Creating these works enabled Wang Yanhua's husband, 61-year-old Wang Wenhai, to leave his job as a Yan'an Revolutionary Museum guide 20 years ago.

He now works for two leading contemporary art galleries in Beijing's 798 Art Zone. Some of his works have been collected by overseas museums and galleries. His work has earned him acclaim as "Yan'an's King of Clay Sculpting."

Wang Yanhua has, in turn, gone from being a rural housewife to becoming her husband's assistant.

The couple and their two sons moved from their 20-square-meter mud hut to their 70-sq-m apartment in 1995. They also have a 100-sq-m studio in Beijing's outskirts.

"The love of sculpting and Chairman Mao has truly changed our lives," Wang Wenhai says.

A start in art

Wang Wenhai was born in Henan province but grew up in Huanglong county, near Yan'an. Since childhood, he has admired Mao, who lived in Yan'an from 1935 to 1947.

His carpenter father supported him through junior high. Wang's teachers considered him outstanding at art.

After graduation, he taught at the village primary school for a year.

Wang Wenhai was the only Huanglong resident recommended by local officials when the museum came to the county to recruit for guide training in 1970.

He was told only outstanding students would be employed. He was one of 20 to get the job after a month of training. The other 50 didn't make the cut.

"My better grasp of Putonghua (standard Chinese) helped," Wang Wenhai recalls.

The Henan dialect he spoke at home was closer to Putonghua than Yan'an's.



Wang Wenhai works on a statue of the former leader.

Soon after, he was assigned to assist the country's masters to sculpt Mao and other revolutionary figures for the museum.

He found he had a knack for working with clay and went on to sculpt cats, dogs and roosters.

But he never dreamt of sculpting as anything more than a hobby until the Spring Festival of 1987.

On the traditional holiday, the husband and wife hauled a cart all the way to Mao's old home in Yangjiaping to dig clay out of the hills.

"My sculptor friends told me that only the clay there was suitable for sculpting," the lanky man with long gray hair recalls.

Wang Wenhai decided to sculpt Mao with the clay upon returning home.



Everyone can imagine their own Mao. I hope my works can help people better understand this great man."

WANG WENHAI
YAN-AN-BASED FOLK ARTIST

"He was the person I knew best," he says. "Having been a museum guide for nearly 20 years, I had spent a long time in front of Mao's pictures and sculptures, and his features and expressions were engraved on my mind."

It took him just 30 minutes to complete his first rendering of Mao.

Wang Yanhua encouraged him to make the second and third likenesses. By the time he stopped — after midnight — he had created eight sculptures.

At first, Wang Yanhua only mixed clay. But her husband encouraged her to try her hand at sculpting, too. The results were delightful and even more vivid than her husband's, the couple recalls.

"I had the benefit of having tried traditional crafts like embroidery and paper-cutting when I was young," Wang Yanhua says.

The Wangs had finished about 100 sculptures of Mao by the time the holiday was over. They exhibited their works in their dormitory at the museum. The exhibition was staged year-round.

The Wangs' works became popular in Yan'an.

Wang Wenhai initially gave them to collectors for free and began selling them in the mid-1990s. "Many local businessmen and officials want my works as

gifts," he explains.

In 2000, the couple's elder son went to college in Beijing, and Wang Wenhai felt it was time to head for the capital.

"The chairman left Yan'an for Beijing," Wang Wenhai says. "I just followed suit."

Trading spaces

In 2001, the family moved into an apartment in the capital's 798 factory district, which was rising as a hot spot for artists but not yet for visitors.

There, Wang Wenhai met Long March Space curator Lu Jie and the Xin Dong Cheng Space For Contemporary Art's curator and owner Xin Dongcheng. He began cooperating with the galleries and took influence from their work.

He went from creating only traditionally realistic portrayals of Mao to also rendering Surrealistic and Abstract likenesses. These include Mao as a sleeping Buddha and as a pillow.

In 2003, Wang Wenhai made the 3.4-meter-high sculpture *Mao Zedong with Mao Zedong* in Beijing's 798 Art Zone's Long March Space. It was his "gift to Mao" to commemorate his 110th birth anniversary. The work presents an older Mao standing next to his younger self.

While his works have become increasingly abstract and unconventional, he says he has never tried to "make Mao appear ugly."

"Everyone can imagine their own Mao," Wang Wenhai says. "I hope my works can help people better understand this great man."

He believes people should cherish Mao's ideals, especially of serving the people and keeping their interests at heart.

Wang Wenhai recalls "wanting to slap" a foreign reporter, who used "offensive words about Mao" when asking the sculptor his opinion about the late leader's life.

In June 2004, *Mao Zedong with Mao Zedong* was displayed in the Contemporary Art Museum in Lyon, France. His works have since been exhibited in, or collected by, overseas museums and galleries.

His small sculptures sell to individual buyers for several hundred yuan, while one of his bigger works went for more than 100,000 yuan (\$15,000).

The couple used the money from the sale of nearly 2,000 Mao sculptures to buy an apartment in Beijing in 2007.

Wang Wenhai's next project, he says, is another Mao commissioned by a businessman from Henan province — that is, a 19-meter-long sleeping statue.

Ma Lie in *Xian* contributed to the story.

TRADITION'S PAPER-THIN CUTTING EDGE

By KANG BING AND CHEN LIANG
CHINA DAILY

Wang Xi'an and her daughter Hu Xiaoshan cut red squares of paper, while chatting with guests.

A few minutes and several scissor snips later, they hold up their handiworks.

Wang's creation shows four people joining hands, while Hu has cut out two intricate butterflies.

"I'm too old to make patterns with too many details," the mother says.

"My eyesight is going."

But Wang's works display a genuine and earthy quality that speaks to the indigenous culture of Shaanxi province's Yan'an.

That's exactly why the city's government has named Wang a candidate of the national representative inheritor of Ansai paper-cutting.

The 55-year-old started learning the folk art from her grandmother at age 12. She went on to win dozens of national and provincial prizes for both her paper-cuttings and her "farmer paintings", which is a folk art form appearing in the 1980s and derived from mural paintings and paper-cutting.

She is the first paper-cutting artist to appear on CCTV's New Year gala and has traveled to the Philippines and Germany

to demonstrate the traditional craft.

Her works usually depict everyday activities, such as carrying water, farming and cooking. They also portray special occasions, such as weddings and festivals, in the rural northwestern Chinese style.

She says nearly 10,000 visitors, mostly artists and art students, have visited her home since the local government allowed her family to receive foreign visitors in Ansai.

"My daughter majored in English to help me communicate with foreign guests," she says.

Despite the acclaim surrounding her work, she considers paper-cutting a hobby rather than a profession, she says. And she has never gotten bored with it.

"When I was young, I could spend a whole day cutting," she says.

"Now, I can do it for three or four hours a day."

She didn't sell any until the mid-1980s. Hu is the only one of Wang's four children who learned the folk art from her mother.

The 27-year-old started studying it at age 10. She started working as a professional paper-cutter and painter in 2003 in Shaanxi's capital Xi'an.

But she now works with her mother at home in Yan'an.

"We don't worry about the market for

our paper-cutting and farmer paintings," the daughter says.

They can sell more than 1,000 albums of their small paper-cuttings a year.

"Most of our customers are art dealers in Yan'an and Xi'an," Hu says.

"We charge more than 100 yuan per album. We charge a few thousand yuan for one of my mom's large-sized works. But we can usually only sell one every few months."



A paper-cutting by Wang Xi'an.