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MAGAZINE



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Photo: Liao Jiyong

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A YOUNG GIRL PLAYS AN ETHNIC
MINORITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENT IN
WENQUAN COUNTY, BORTALA, XINJIANG

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ



A YOUNG BOY LOOKS AFTER THE SHEEP
IN KANAS, ALTAY, XINJIANG

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ



ABOVE, KANAS LAKE, ALTAY, XINJIANG
PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ

BELOW, MIST RISES FROM THE FOREST IN NALATI, YILI, XINJIANG.
PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ

SUNFLOWER FIELDS IN TEKES COUNTY,
YILI, XINJIANG

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ





OFTEN REGARDED AS A DESERT REGION, ROLLING FIELDS (RIGHT) PRESENT A DIFFERENT VIEW OF CHINA'S XINJIANG UYGUR AUTONOMOUS REGION.

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ



(BELOW) SWANS ON SAYRAM LAKE, BORTALA, XINJIANG
PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ



(LEFT) SUNFLOWER FARMERS POSE FOR THE CAMERA IN BORTALA, XINJIANG

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ

TRADITIONAL KAZAKH HOUSES
PHOTO: MUHAMMAD AZHAR HAFEEZ



An Adventure in Ethnic Fashion

Photo: Fan Fan

Gao Hui is a costume designer and the director of a clothing apparel company in Xinjiang. When China Plus catches up with him, he is busy picking out clothes at one of his workshops located in the city of Changji, the seat of government for the Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, located just 40 kilometres northwest of the regional capital, Urumqi.

Gao Hui introduces one of his new designs, excitedly describing that, “The outfit this model is trying on has been made especially for the show at this year’s fourth Asia-Europe Fashion Week. Our four major styles for the fashion show cover designs for all four-seasons. The gown is a traditional robe from the Hui-ethnic minority group. Even though it is a traditional design, we try to incorporate patterns which have a modern look. For example, the trousers are loose pants which are popular this season. And we also use popular fabrics and other fashionable material.”

A member of the Hui ethnic minority, Gao says he believes the traditional designs of the Hui people in China are simple yet elegant. Gao Hui is in charge of the Changji New Rainbow Costume Company, which has many locations in Urumqi and Shanghai. Its focus is exclusively on designing ethnic Chinese outfits. Gao has been in the fashion industry for more than 20-years, entering the profession in the early 1990s, shortly after leaving college.

As Gao himself explains, “I majored in costume design. The company I joined is one of the first to make ethnic outfits in Xinjiang. I joined the company straight out of school, and have been here ever since. I have always been in the business of making ethnic outfits.”

Gao Hui’s home, Changji, is a city of around 400,000 people, and home to some 30 different ethnic groups. Gao says he enjoys the cultural diversity of the city and tries to include ethnic elements in all his designs. But as time goes by, Gao expresses his worries regarding a dwindling interest from the younger generation in designs which have an ethnic flavour to them. But Gao is trying to change this through his designs.

“Ethnic minorities have a splendid design culture. But in reality, less and less people are wearing ethnically inspired clothing. So, what’s the problem? One of the reasons is it’s somewhat problematic to dress in traditional clothing. Another problem is the clothes aren’t overly conducive to modern life, and don’t really blend in well with modern culture. Young people nowadays, even if they hail from an ethnic minority, want to wear something fashionable to express themselves. Unfortunately, they feel traditional outfits, as well as the accessories, lack that sort of thing.”

But Gao is hoping to change that. He notes that many of the traditional ethnic designs and dyeing techniques passed down over the years remain entirely unique, adding that it would be a great loss if those designs and techniques were to disappear over time. With this in mind, Gao is working on a number of new innovations to try to make ethnic Chinese outfits suitable for modern life.

“We are focused on two aspects. In one respect, we want to highlight some of the more attractive parts of the ethnic designs, while weeding-out some of the more typical elements. At the same time, we’re trying to combine them with popular fashion trends from both the domestic and foreign markets. We’re trying to tailor our designs to fit with what will be trendy, in terms of style and design, at the “big four” fashion weeks around the world.”

“Ethnic minorities have a splendid design culture. But in reality, less and less people are wearing ethnically inspired clothing.”

One way Gao Hui is trying to set his work apart is by using photographs to incorporate the landscapes in Xinjiang on scarves that he has been developing. Gao says the silk scarves have been selling well. “We put the spectacular landscapes of Xinjiang on them using modern digital dyeing and painting techniques. They’ve turned out to be quite popular, especially for tourists.”

It is domestic tourists that are providing Gao’s business with a boost as he points out. “We’re seeing more and more tourists coming to Xinjiang. They generally want to bring something back as gifts. The scarves are a beautiful gift to give to someone. They are also useful. I think this is what’s making them quite popular.” Gao Hui says he’s also hoping to look beyond Xinjiang as a market for his designs.

Gao believes there to be huge market potential not only outside of the region, but also outside China. The company he works for has already set up branches in a number of coastal cities in China. They’re also eyeing several overseas markets and Gao says Central Asia is one of the targets, particularly given the opportunities being offered through the “One Belt, One Road” initiative that the Chinese government has adopted.

“Certain ethnic groups in Xinjiang share cultural similarities with countries in Central Asia. The Kazakhs from Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz people from Kyrgyzstan and the Uzbeks from Uzbekistan share cultural similarities with their ethnic minority cousins in Xinjiang. This includes the way they dress. As such, we have very few issues when we deal with them in our line of business.” Gao hopes that with the “One Belt, One Road” program, they’ll be able to promote their products across Central Asia, and the rest of the world.



Photo: Fan Fan

Five decades in Xinjiang : Foreign Face, Chinese Heart

Bayanbulak Grassland is located in the hinterland of the Tianshan Mountain in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. With an altitude of more than 3,000 meters, the vast grassland surrounded by cloud-kissing snow mountains attracts a large number of geologists and tourists every year.

Geological expert Li Yizu, a silver-haired, spritely 77 year old introduces the spectacular and inspiring scenery of the area. With a typical Caucasian face, it is hard to believe that this man who speaks with a fluent Beijing dialect has lived in Xinjiang for more than 50 years. Li Yizu's life is anything but ordinary.

Born in a missionary hospital in Tianjin in 1938, Li Yizu's parents were among many Americans who left China when the war against Japanese aggression entered its fiercest period. He was adopted and raised by a Chinese family, who brought him to the capital city Beijing. Sitting in his office, the 77-year-old veteran geologist recalls his past.

Li introduced himself to China Plus, explaining, "My name is Li Yizu, I have been living in Xinjiang for 54 years. I have a typical Caucasian face, I don't know who my birth parents are. I was born in the LMS Hospital opened by a medical missionary in Tianjin. My foster mother took me to Beijing and it was my foster mother who raised me. I finished primary school, high school and college in Beijing."



After graduating university, Li went to Xinjiang to find work. According to Li, "Geological exploration was an undeveloped area in Xinjiang in the 1960s. All 330 of my classmates wanted to come here to put what we learned into practice and do something meaningful. I was my foster mother's only child. All of a sudden, I left her to go to Xinjiang; so far away. But my mother was an extraordinary woman. She didn't say, "don't go," or "what will I do without you?" She showed full understanding and support. But after I left her, she became ill. She didn't tell me until years later. After I came to Xinjiang I became a geological engineer with the No. 156 coalfield geological team."

From the Altai Mountain to the Gangdise Mountain, Li's footprints covered almost every corner of west China over the next 20 years, including the A-Li region in Tibet, where the altitude is above 5,000 meters.

"At that time," Li recalls, "with a map and a compass, we would travel over hills and dales; trying to reach every corner. We walked 30 to 40 kilometres per day but we never felt tired, because I was finding minerals underground through hard work. I felt so happy, it made everything worth it."

In a TV documentary about the wind erosion landform "Devil City" located in the Northwest Margin of the Junggar Basin, Li Yizu helped a scientific study team determine the rock composition. The life of geographical explorers can be very tough. It is common for them to set off with baggage, gasoline and explosives and stay in the wild for up to more than a year. One of Li's colleagues even died during a mission but sometimes the hardships they encounter can also lead to heart-warming examples of kindness from the area's locals.

Li recalls, "In 1975, in Zhaheba, a worker and I drove a truck. Our truck got stuck in a ditch in the middle of nowhere. There was a family approximately one kilometre away. We went there, it was a Kazakh family; two older individuals and several children. I told them about our situation and without any hesitation the old man took a mattock and called the children together."

"They helped us pull the truck out of the ditch. Afterwards, I drove back to his home and I took a picture of them as a thank you gift. The old man was very excited. He changed his clothes and fastened his top button on his collar. He put a pen in his pocket and sat down with his wife. Their children were sitting around them. I have many stores like this."

Li says he believes human beings are shaped by the land around them; the blue sky, white clouds, high mountains and wide horizons, such boundless glamour of nature influencing the lives there. Therefore, Li believes people from different ethnic groups in Xinjiang are unpretentious, passionate, bold and unconstrained.



The photo that Li Yizu took as a thank you to the Kazakh family that helped him

These characteristics deeply impressed Li Yizu, and led to him becoming one of the locals. He became an educator after retirement and has been to 56 counties and regions in Xinjiang to give some 800 lectures to almost 400,000 teenagers.

Explaining his motivations, Li says, "I became an educator for teenagers after retiring and began a new career in the classroom. Like the US philosopher Abraham Maslow says, 'Human beings need endless aspirations of aesthetic function.' This means every day is like a brand new one for me. Every day is a new beginning and I need to work hard."

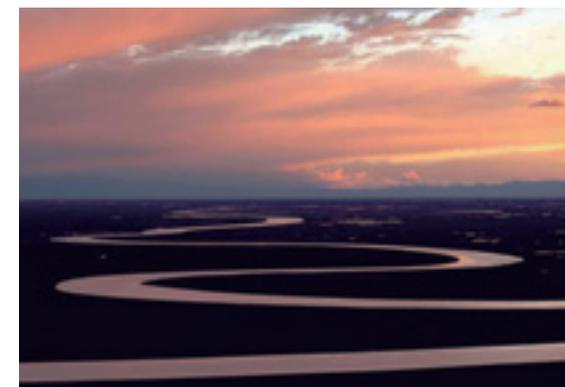
Li often travels to Xinjiang's Hongshan Mountain and takes photos of the sunrise and then waits until late afternoon to capture the sunset. Li then shows the pictures of the sun rising and setting on Hongshan to the children that he teaches.

"They ask me, 'Mr Li, we go to Hongshan Mountain all the time, why can't we find such beautiful views?' I reply, because you aren't able to appreciate it yet. You can't find beauty without a sense of curiosity. You must have a sense of freshness, then you can obtain new knowledge. I often tell them to live a meaningful life and I give them examples of successful people. There are multiple ways of leading a successful life. A meaningful life means you can do something useful for your country, and realise your own value and have a sense of achievement."

Li Yizu himself is a role model according to his own standards. In his 70s, he is still providing his expertise to documentary teams and geological exploration teams and sharing his knowledge with children. He says he is a man who remains foolish and hungry for knowledge, since he believes the best scenery of life comes from the endless climb which will take a man to new heights.

"People always say I'm so energetic when I'm outside. I have a special feeling when working in the field. The picturesque landscape of our country is very inspiring. Travelling long distances can be hard, but I never want to give up. Sometimes I feel tired and don't want to continue climbing."

"But when I look down and think of the mineral sources, I just keep going. I have been walking on my own for more than 70 years. All the things I have done, I just want to do them well, and try my best to be useful. People always say I am a man with a foreigner's face but a Chinese heart. But because I was raised by my Chinese mother, my heart will belong to China forever."



Images provided by Li Yizu

Xinjiang Stories: The Kazakh Horse Whisperer

Altay Prefecture lies at the feet of the Altay Mountain range's southern slope, north of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. The 118,000-square-meter area hosts only 640,000 residents, with half of them belonging to China's Kazakh ethnic minority. The Irtysh River and the Ulungur River run through the vast land, nourishing large areas of lush meadow pastures for herders to graze their cattle, sheep and horses.

For centuries, Kazakhs have maintained the tradition of herding. Although many of them have settled down, rapid integration into the modern world has not eroded their nomadic traditions as illustrated by the story of Muratbek Kykysha, a horse trainer and a herder who settled down on a farm miles away from Altay City.

Bowled over by a dashing horse, the trainer jumps up at once and rushes to his target, trying to catch the horse with a long rope. Having missed the chance a couple of times, he finally halts the horse. Having woken up early, this fearless man starts his day by feeding his horses and putting them through their paces. Muratbek caresses the neck of his horse while murmuring to it, seemingly talking with the horse which he has just tamed.

The 28-year-old has a sun tanned face and a stunning smile. He is now a staff member of the Golden Triangle Cattle and Sheep Cooperative. Most of the time he works as a horse trainer on a farm owned by the cooperative.

Muratbek tells China Plus about his work and introduced the young steed, explaining, "This horse is from Mongolia. We have trained it for two years. To harness the horse, first you locate your target. Make sure which one you want to catch and rope it. After you get the horse, hold its ears tightly and then saddle it. It's better to train the horse when it's a foal. It's much tougher to train once it's grown."



Muratbek Kykysha surveys his horses. Photo: Fan Fan

As a tradition, Kazakhs race horses on important occasions like wedding and festivals. Muratbek is proud of his previous record of horse racing and hopes his recently tamed horse can finish well in the coming race. "From 2013, I have been training two horses especially for racing. One is a three-year-old foal, and another is older. They won second and third places, respectively, in previous horse races. I was awarded 2000 yuan to 3000 yuan as a result. It's actually not a big sum. But I don't race for money. I just love it."

Muratbek adds that the method of training a horse for racing is different from the usual methods employed for other horses. "For example, I got the horse in August. In the first two months, I took it on daily training courses. And the horse was not allowed to drink too much water or eat too much grass. Every morning, I take it out and let it run for an hour. And then feed it some water and food. I usually let it walk around in the afternoon and let it run for two to three kilometres in the evening. After two months of intensive training, it could compete in a horse race. You do your best and put the rest down to luck."

Muratbek says he can feel his heartbeat quicken when he hears the horse neighing on the race course. He recalls an exciting moment during a competition in 2014, "When the horse walked onto the track, I almost had my heart in my mouth. It came third in a race during a wedding ceremony. The family of the bridegroom held the event. Around fifty to sixty horses ran together for about twenty to thirty kilometres. The winner won a camel, and the runner-up won a sheep."

Aside from the breathtaking moments, Muratbek insists that training or racing horses is also dangerous. Yet he has already become used to this sometimes dangerous pursuit. "The hardest part is trying to catch the horses. I have to catch them one by one. When you try to catch a horse with a rope, the horse will drag you. You have to hold on tight. If you let go, (the horse) will drag you along with the rope and you'll never catch it. It's dangerous. But we are used to it. We'll probably catch just one horse a day. We'll fall down to the ground quite a lot. It hurts but we're already used to it."

Muratbek has many memories of dangerous experiences in the past, pointing out that he once broke his legs while trying to tame a wild-running horse. "There are a lot of rocks on the mountain. It's really difficult to train horses in the mountains. When I was very young, perhaps twelve years old, after my father caught and saddled the horse, it jumped suddenly and threw me off its back. It ran wildly for nearly half an hour. I fell down and was badly hurt. I fell from the horse, hitting the rocks and breaking my legs. It was really painful. And there was no hospital in the mountainous area. But I wasn't afraid, because I loved riding."

Ma Guobao, of the Hui ethnicity and a friend of Muratbek's, is the director of the Golden Triangle Cattle and Sheep Cooperative. He highly appreciates the work of Muratbek, describing him as an incredibly talented horse trainer with a lot of courage and skill. According to Ma, Muratbek can deal with even the most mischievous horses, which other people are often afraid to catch.

"This young lad is quite capable. He can catch a steed all by himself. He has a very particular set of skills. He has a knack for catching horses. People like us can't do it. When he catches a horse, he has no fear of being kicked or bitten. He'll rush to the horse all alone. The guy is quite courageous and pretty smart."



Muratbek Kykysha demonstrates his roping abilities. Photo: Fan Fan



After the morning training session for his horse, Muratbek drives a number of sheep to the livestock fair in town to gather information about the market and to talk over prices. Negotiating prices with dealers, Muratbek says the market has declined dramatically this year compared with previous years.

"Now the price of a lamb is as low as 400 yuan. A lamb like this could be sold for 800 yuan last year, but we're only getting a little more than 400 yuan this year. The price has dropped by half."

Though the prices change, Muratbek doesn't seem to worry about his income. He says the prices of cattle and sheep have both peak and slack seasons. For Muratbek, the most important thing is he is doing what he likes. Among all the tasks of his daily routine, working with horses is his favourite aspect. Muratbek's passion for horse riding began during childhood, and the locals often claim that their children are born on horseback. Like many others in his hometown, Muratbek has been a consummate rider since he was a child.

"When I was a child, my family moved around in the mountains with flocks of cattle and sheep. I learned to ride horses when I was five. When we moved, we rode horses and camels. At the beginning of October, we started our journeys into the mountains. For two to three days, we moved along with the flock of sheep and cows and stayed awake all night."

Growing up in such an environment, Muratbek says he developed a connection between himself and his horses, saying, "When I was a child, I used to ride horses every day after coming home from school. The horses would run to me whenever they heard my voice." After years of a nomadic life, Muratbek has finally settled down with his family, and says they enjoy a stable flow of income and better living conditions as a result.

"In 2002, we stopped moving around. We would move to other places every four or five months and go back and forth. But the local government built some subsidised apartments for us. So we settled down shortly afterwards. We had little land before. Now we have 50 mu (about 3.3 hectares). We grow alfalfa and there is more land for the animals to graze. We can feed the cows and sheep in our own pens."

Local legend has it that the ancestors of Kazakhs were the descendants of "White Swans," representing purity, kindness and strong wills. For centuries, just like those migratory birds, the ethnic residents have long been struggling with tough environments and extreme weather while moving seasonally to various pastures with their livestock. Despite living standards having greatly improved nowadays, and though Muratbek Kykysha and his fellow Kazakhs may not have to cope with the harsh conditions of a nomadic lifestyle, their sense of courage, strong-mindedness and generosity inherited from their ancestors carries on to this day.

Defined by Ethnicity, United by Music

Chinese people use the word “Zhi Yin” to describe close friends who can understand each other deeply. The allusion originated from an ancient tale of Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi, who were attracted to each other and ultimately united by music. A similar story has taken place in northwestern China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region between a 70-year-old Han Chinese man and a 50-year-old Uygur, who became founders of a band with members from different ethnic groups.

“Butterfly Lovers” is a renowned piece of classical Chinese music. Telling a tragic love story, the score is normally performed by violin. But for one band in Xinjiang, the piece is played using an ethnic Uygur instrument, the Aijieck. The band member who plays the piece, Eshanjan Turdi, is a musician living in the city of Karamay, Xinjiang. After overhearing Eshanjan Turdi’s unique take on this classical piece of music, retired musician Ren Shuquan, belonging to China’s Han ethnicity, invited Turdi to join his band.

The 70-year-old Ren still remembers the first time he heard the music being played by the Uygur man Eshanjan, 20 years his junior. Ren recalls, “I had never heard this kind of musical instrument before. It is somehow like the violin or urheen, but still has its own characteristics. It is a unique instrument. You can feel a Xinjiang melodic flavour within the music as it’s being played.”

Both Ren and Eshanjan worked as professional musicians in Xinjiang. Their love of music, particularly string music, led to friendship despite differences in age and ethnicity.

Ren says his Uygur friend makes his multiethnic band possible. “We both love music yet we are good at different instruments. After retiring, I learned to play ethnic instruments in a band in my community. That is why I invited (Eshanjan) to join us to show us the tricks of playing the Twelve Muqams.” The Muqams Ren mentions have been the local melodies of Xinjiang for over a thousand years and have been recognised as examples of Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

Ren says the Han members of the band have learned a lot from their Uygur peers. As Ren explains, “The Twelve Muqams were basically new things for us. Our Uygur members wrote down the scores. Someone else did the translation so it was possible for Han members to practice. Uygurs don’t need the score book. They can play anytime they want. It is like they were born for music and dance.”

The band practices together at least once a week. Ten of its members are of Han-ethnicity while 20 are Uygur. The Uygur members play the Aijieck and some other Xinjiang instruments that few people know, like the Tanbuer, Dutaer, Sataer and Rewaqu. The Han members play the Urheen, cello or flute. In coming together and uniting cultures, the band has created something unique and refined.

Eshanjan also shares a mutual love for the tunes of Han music. “I love it, especially the urheen. I play string music so I know it. I like songs like Embroider A Golden Plait, Glowing Red Morning Star Lilies, The Jasmine Flower and The Flowers and Youngsters. I love the way the urheen presents ethnic songs. There is a piece played together by the Tanbuer, Dutaer, Dataer and the urheen. It is pure and beautiful.”

Meanwhile, Ren Shuquan says that the tempo and energy in Uygur music makes their works more lively. “Their tunes are more bright and faster. You have the tendency to dance with it. But it has a lot of half-steps which makes it difficult to learn. To master these ethnic tunes, one has to practice his abilities of fingering, singing and listening.”

Their ethnic-fusion performances have also managed to nurture a new audience. Ren points out, “It definitely brings us closer. In the past, we only played traditional Han-ethnic tunes. But now things are different. The audience has started to enjoy ethnic tunes.” Speaking of his friendship with Eshanjan, Ren says it benefits him a lot. “He is a professional so I can learn a lot from him about ethnic music. He always shows me the right way to play. So in a way, he is my teacher. It has nothing to do with age.”

As for Eshanjan, he tells China Plus that “(Ren) is the best in my eyes. He is 20 years older than me. We have something called ‘friendship between generations’. He is broad-minded, gentle and generous. I have never seen him get angry. I admire him so much.” Not so different from the story of Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi, the story of these two musicians once again shows that music has the power to unite people across ethnic divides.



Eshanjan Turdi, an ethnic Uygur, plays the Aijieck
Photo: Fan Fan



Ren Shuquan, organiser behind one of Xinjiang’s few multiethnic bands.
Photo: Fan Fan

The Imam in the Internet Era

China Plus presents an enlightening interview with Yang Jie, an Imam who has chosen to embrace technology within today's Xinjiang in an effort to benefit his congregation, despite opposition from fellow Muslims.

My name is Yang Jie and I became an Imam on May 27, 1993. I've been an Imam for 22 years. My daily duties revolve around hosting religious affairs in the mosque, including leading prayers five times a day. After I finish my morning exercises, it's already around 7 o'clock. I often check my WeChat group on my phone for more than an hour at that time to see what people are talking about; for example, if there are any questions for me to answer.

For instance, when someone gives birth to a baby they may ask me to name their child, or they might ask which name is better or which is more suitable. The parent writes down the names in the chat group and I give my suggestions; general things like that.

I began using a cellphone in 1998, 17 years ago. At the beginning, many followers and locals couldn't understand my motives for embracing technology. Some religious people and other Imams, they didn't understand either. Many believers said that only businessmen use cellphones and that it wasn't proper for an Imam to be using one.

But I withstood the pressure. I do things that I believe to be right. Imams present traditional culture. They are the carriers and the spokesmen of traditional culture, but I think they are also communicators and practitioners of modern knowledge.

What Imams say and do will have an impact, directly or indirectly, on the life and development of other Muslims. I often share verses from the Quran or the Hadith in my WeChat groups, words that exude positive energy. Some believers are illiterate but they can learn something positive by being in this chat group. Take a look, I just posted something in my WeChat friends circle (moments). Already, 14 people have commented on my post.

Most are asking questions about new things that they are encountering; for example they don't know whether Muslims can do or use these things according to the tenets of Islam. This is what most of the questions are about.

A few years ago people asked a lot of questions about the stock market. Many believers just did not understand stocks and shares. They saw it to be a kind of lottery or a form of gambling, believing that you bet on the stocks and gain money from it. This was their initial understanding of it; therefore, they thought Imams should not be investing in stocks. Those people said that investing in stocks and shares was the same as gambling, which goes against Islam.

At that time I told them that investing in stocks is a form of financing. In Arabic, we call it a business partnership, which is allowed by Islam. Through my explanation, based on interpretations of the Quran and the Hadith, my followers were able to accept it. I always read books here. I always have the Quran and the Hadith nearby. And here is 'China Muslim.'

I think I always need to learn more, I can't afford to relax. I will never stop trying to gain more knowledge. Even if you are outstanding today, your ability is only related to things in the present. Only through study can you gain a long-term perspective. Therefore, my goal is to keep learning and to keep pace with the times. No matter in what way and how fast society develops, I should always keep up with it. I can never let myself fall behind; that's how I approach life.

What Imams say and do will have an impact, directly or indirectly, on the life and development of other Muslims.

I do things that I believe to be right. Imams present traditional culture. They are the carriers and the spokesmen of traditional culture, but I think they are also communicators and practitioners of modern knowledge.



Imam Yang Jie checks his social networking app for new messages
Photo: Fan Fan



A MONK CARRYING OUT HIS DUTIES IN TASHILHUNPO MONASTERY
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN

INSIDE TASHILHUNPO MONASTERY
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN



(ABOVE) A STROLL THROUGH LHASA.
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN

(RIGHT)
SITTING IN CONTEMPLATION AT TASHILHUNPO MONASTERY
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN



THE POTALA PALACE IN LHASA,
THE CAPITAL OF TIBET
PHOTO: LIAO JIYONG



SILENT PRAYER IN LHASA
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN

PROSTRATED IN BARKHOR STREET, LHASA
PHOTO: CUI CHAOQUN



PREPARING FOR A JOURNEY
IN NGARI PREFECTURE
PHOTO: LIAO JIYONG



EXTREME OPPOSITES. ONE OF THE
MANY SNOW PEAKS WITHIN THE TIBET
AUTONOMOUS REGION ABOVE CONTRASTS
WITH THE SOIL FOREST BELOW.
PHOTO: LIAO JIYONG



MEDITATING NEXT TO NAMTSO LAKE AT
NAKCHU IN CENTRAL TIBET.
PHOTO: LIAO JIYONG



GUARDIAN OF THE WILD



Photo: Fu Chengkun

Guardian of the Wild

The Tibetan antelope, or chiru, is the wildest creature on the Tibetan Plateau. Well-known for its exceptionally fine fur, the species was rapaciously poached and driven to the brink of extinction years ago. But nowadays, these leggy, hoppy animals are making a comeback, thanks to people who dedicate their lives to safeguarding the breed.

Changtang, which means “northern wilderness” in Tibetan, is a vast, desolate highland stretching across the Tibet Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province. Due to its high elevation, even in the summer, the weather here is harsh and windy. But when the first sunlight washes over Nyima County of southern Changtang, 58-year-old Gagya Darma has already raced over on his motorcycle.

As Gagya Darma explains, “There is no regular hour for me to leave home. But basically, I take off for patrol around 7 or 8 o’clock in the morning and come back home around 6 or 7 PM. If there is a large number of chiru, I will ride to the snowy mountainous area, which usually takes me a day.”

Once a veterinarian, Gagya Darma has been a mountain ranger for the past 15 years. Gagya Darma’s items for a one day journey include a motorcycle, a telescope, a roll of bedding, plus a bag of rations. Talking about his duties, Gagya Darma notes that, “The size of my patrol area is around four hundred square kilometres, which is equal to two Tibetan counties. Since many people live nearby, I need to remain vigilant all the time. If someone drives a car or motorcycle into the reserve, I will question their motives and exhort them to leave.”

The area that Gagya Darma cruises around belongs to Changtang National Nature Reserve. Established in the 1990s, it is the world’s second largest nature reserve as well as a habitat for many endangered species, including chiru, Tibetan wild ass, snow leopards and black-necked cranes. Keeping a watchful eye on the local fauna is a ranger’s top priority.

Spotting the trace of a crowd of animals, Gagya Darma pulls out his telescope from his cloak and asks us to stop. “They are running away,” he says. “There are chiru scattering everywhere. But we can’t approach any further. Otherwise, they will scatter.” Making a note of the date, the antelopes’ quantity and sex ratio in a small booklet, the former nomad provides expert analysis on this magnificent creature.

“Chirus can be found quite frequently. In October and November, I can walk a little bit closer without disturbing them. But around this time of the year, the female chiru have just had their calves. If we go any further, it would be really dangerous for the young cubs, since the mother chiru will lead them to run without stopping.” Since Changtang is one of the five major pastoral regions in China, pastures overlap with the reserve. Here, humans, livestock and wildlife are drawn together in a close-knit way. How to go about balancing this relationship is one of Gagya Darma’s biggest concerns.

“Herdsman prefer to fence their pastures using wire, which can result in the imprisonment of wild animals. If that occurs, I need to teach herders how to release them. In normal circumstances, the grassland is a mix of livestock and wildlife. But coming into the mating and breeding seasons, chiru will require larger meadows to survive. I have to restrict grazing.”

Day after day, Gagya Darma ventures into the wild all by himself. He barely breaks off from this daily routine, even during the arctic winter when the average temperature can drop to minus twenty degrees centigrade. When fatigue hits, Gagya Darma will pick up rocks to build a stove and apply dried animal waste as fuel to boil water and enjoy a cup of Tibetan butter tea. That short break has become his most welcomed interval of the day.



Photo: Fu Chengkun



Photo: Fu Chengkun

But this burly middle-aged man rarely complains, pointing out that, “Ever since I became a ranger, I’ve always regarded myself as a guardian of wild animals. I tell others that protecting wildlife is everyone’s responsibility. When I first started this job, we only had 60 chiru around here. But thanks to the support of forestry policemen and other patrols, the number of chiru here has risen to over three thousand.”

In Gagya Darma’s Tibetan-style house, three posters on the wall catch the eye. Each of them is painted with the pictures of different wild animals and their names. Although the head of this household is not very talkative, he is willing to show his fervent love towards wildlife through his actions. “I can’t leave those animals behind,” Gagya Darma proclaims, “As long as I am fit, I won’t retire. I have a son. Hopefully, he can become a ranger one day.”

According to Nukhyung, head of Nyima County Forestry Police Bureau, the local government has recruited over 130 patrolmen from local herdsman so far. This year, the quota will increase to more than 200 and more conservation stations will also be built.

“Without these wild animals, the climate and ecosystem of Changtang will change fundamentally. As a land belonging to man, livestock and wildlife, Changtang will never be the same if we leave any party behind. That’s why we are doing our best to protect the wildlife here,” says Gagya Darma.

And wildlife protection can and does work in China. For instance, compared with the 1980s, when the Tibetan antelope was on the verge of dying out, the sum of that species has already reached 200,000 in recent years; a true testament to the work that Gagya Darma and others like him carry out on a daily basis.



Photo: Fu Chengkun

A Tibetan Homecoming



Photo: Cui Chaoqun

Yeshe Palden returned to Tibet from Switzerland in 1994 after 35 years of being away from his home. Before returning, Yeshe had tried to imagine how the situation had changed in Tibet. A devout Buddhist, Yeshe Palden, now 76, left Tibet for India in 1959 fearful that the Communist Party would deprive Tibetans of their religious freedom. In 1967 he moved to Switzerland and began a secular life.

Language barriers meant he found himself doing manual work in paper mills or doing the most menial of care work for the sick and elderly. In the late 1970s, China's reform and opening became the talk of the world and prompted Yeshe Palden to start thinking about returning home. "I knew Tibet had changed," Yeshe said, it was now time to find out for himself.

From the moment he and his wife stepped off the plane, change was obvious. Before he left Tibet, Yeshe was regarded as superior. Bowing down before Yeshe Palden, former Lama of Drepung Monastery, was once the normal form of greeting this once sacred man. Meeting him at the airport, followers, friends and family simply shook his hands and hugged him.

"No individual should be considered superior to another," he told them. Life abroad taught him that all people are created equal. That the idea of equality was now ingrained in the hearts of the people of his remote plateau homeland came as both a shock and a surprise. Tibetan women and men sat together in the tea houses of Lhasa, something that the ageing returnee had never witnessed in his homeland before. In Yeshe

Palden's day, only men had the right to visit tea houses. In 1994, women owned the tea houses; they weren't just frequenting them. "It was then that I knew I made the right decision," Yeshe said. After coming home, Lhasa's railway station has become Yeshe Palden's favourite place since the Qinghai-Tibet Railway opened in 2006, linking Tibet with the rest of the country.

Zigme Cedain, 32, returned to Tibet from India with his parents in 1984. He owns a clothing shop in Lhasa and knows all too well how the easy land connections to the "Roof of the World" benefit Tibetans from a business perspective. A railway connecting Lhasa with Xigaze went into operation last year. "It halved my transport time to the Nepalese and Indian borders," he said.

There have been many changes in Tibet after 50 years of autonomy. Last year, per capita disposable income for rural residents in Tibet hit 7,359 yuan (around 1,200 US dollars), with double-digit growth for 12 consecutive years. Average life expectancy has jumped from 35.5 years to 68 over the past 50 years, while the infant mortality rate has dropped from a quite staggering 430 deaths per 1,000 live births to a mere 12. At present, there are around 200,000 overseas Tibetans in more than 40 countries and regions including India, Nepal, the US and Switzerland.

Yeshe Palden takes his daily prayer walk around the Potala Palace or Jokhang Monastery for four or five hours each morning, turning his prayer wheel, counting his beads and chanting. If he is tired, he rests on the roadside benches and shares his home-made pancakes with the pigeons. Nowadays, he cares more about issues like the environment and protecting his culture. As in other parts of China, changes and modernization bring benefits as well as new problems. Tibet is no exception.

QUINOA

Quinoa: The Tibetan Wonder Food

An unusual-looking crop with dark-red spikes and purple-green leaves is flourishing along the banks and valleys of the Lhasa and Yarlungtsangpo rivers, despite a lasting drought on the roof of the world. "A bumper harvest of quinoa is expected this autumn on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau," explains Gongbo Tashi, a professor at the agricultural college of Tibet University, who is credited with introducing Quinoa to China.

A 3,000 mu (200 hectare) plot of quinoa will yield 250,000 kilograms of grain according to Huang Zhaogang, president of a quinoa company and Gongbo Tashi's business partner. Quinoa has been cultivated in the Andes in South America for over 5,000 years, however, its health benefits, such as its high protein and mineral content, have only recently garnered worldwide attention.

The so-called super grain is highly nutritious, drought resistant and salt tolerant, making it popular with many industrialised countries. It is so nutritious that NASA feeds it to its astronauts on space missions, making it a candidate for the Controlled Ecological Life Support System in spaceships which grow crops.

Experts say that quinoa responds well to controlled environments with large increases in seed production, maintenance of short canopy stature, and increased harvest index. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation named 2013 the International Year of Quinoa in recognition of its "potential contribution to the fight against hunger and malnutrition."

Gongbo Tashi first had the idea of introducing the crop into Tibet after reading a report about it in an English newspaper in 1987. He noted that quinoa was quite adaptable and would be suitable for high altitude areas, usually 3,000 or 4,000 meters above sea level, making the Qinghai-Tibet plateau a desirable new home for the plant. "It will help improve the health of locals," he says with much pride. Meats and barley are the core foods eaten by Tibetans in the cold and rigid highlands, but they are not comprehensively nutritious and are often believed to be a factor affecting the life expectancy of the people who live in the region.

Gongbo Tashi sought technological support from a leading quinoa producer in the United States in 1987 and then went to study in the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre in Mexico in 1988, where he attended the classes of Norman Borlaug, the 1970 Nobel laureate who was referred to as "the Father of the Green Revolution" and "Agriculture's Greatest Spokesperson."

Gongbo Tashi brought seeds back with him to Tibet and in the early 1990s the Tibetan government approved the quinoa cultivation project. After a few failed experiments, Gongbo Tashi and his team cooperated with Huang, and they successfully grew the crop in Qinghai Province. Since 2010, they have planted quinoa on a large scale in the Tibetan counties of Lhoka, Chushu and Lhatse. Over the past 20 plus years, his team have bred several new varieties to suit the environment and condition of the plateau, and named one of the variants "Quinoa Tibetan Dream."

Gongbo Tashi was born into a farming family in 1959 in west Tibet. He was the only Tibetan student enrolled by China's Northwest Agriculture College in the late 1970s and earned his master of science from the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 2006. Gongbo Tashi notes, "As a Tibetan scientist, I haven't wasted my life; I brought quinoa into Tibet and made it thrive."

Meanwhile, Huang points out that his primary goal was to ensure quinoa's benefits reach ordinary Tibetans while meeting consumer demand nationwide. Ultimately, Gongbo Tashi and Huang have helped Tibetan farmers engaged in the production of quinoa, and doubled those farmers' incomes as a result. The next goal: for quinoa to become the first Tibetan-grown food to be exported overseas.

Aid-Tibet: Providing Technical Aid to the Tibetan People

Agricultural experts with China's "Aid-Tibet" program have offered technical support to residents in Ngari Prefecture of southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region. Han Junwen, an Aid-Tibet program agricultural expert from northwest China's Shaanxi province, brought with him seeds to the remote area in 2005.

When he first came to the county, he was shocked by what he saw — large plots of barren land. Since the county is short of rainfall, Han persuaded villagers of Gar New Village to plant alfalfa, a cold-and-dry-resistant plant. As Han explains, "The alfalfa seeds are as small as sesame seeds. A single seed is too small to break through the soil, so we decided to sow between 30 and 40 seeds in one pit."



At first, we had no trust in alfalfa. Later, in the following two years, we found that alfalfa is highly valued and popular amongst our livestock

However, in spite of government subsidies, some villagers at first declined to plant alfalfa as they had doubts about the new plant. A villager named Migmar was finally persuaded and decided to give it try. Within two to three years, he harvested 2,500 kilograms of fresh grass which brought him a small fortune. As Migmar himself admitted, "At first, we had no trust in alfalfa. Later, in the following two years, we found that alfalfa is highly valued and popular amongst our livestock."

Migmar's success helped persuade other villagers to plant alfalfa, and since 2010 both the planting area of alfalfa and the number of dairy cattle have increased rapidly. At present, nearly 2,000 hectares of alfalfa is planted and almost 600 cattle herds are being raised for sale; being fed alfalfa as part of their feed. Gong Bu, a village head in Gar County, says that with the help of Han Junwen they have started to lead a stable life.

"We plant alfalfa and raise cattle," Gong Bu tells China Plus. "By selling the harvest as well as dairy products, the whole village earns over one million yuan each year." So far, the annual per capita income has reached 20,000 yuan in Gar County, extraordinarily higher than it was ten years ago. However, Han Junwen says his team plans to further extend the alfalfa planting and ensure that each person has two herds of cattle within three years.

"We plan to build a feed-processing plant to store food for the animals in case of winter scarcity. That can provide great relief for the local government." China launched the national Aid-Tibet program in 1995 to improve people's livelihood in the autonomous region. Since then, over 6,000 experts and officials from the country's other provinces have been sent to different parts of Tibet to help develop the local economy.



Han Junwen, an agricultural expert with the Aid-Tibet program
Photo: Xinhua



Photo: Fu Chengkun

Preserving the Wilderness

Dubbed "The Roof of the World," the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau encompasses Changtang, the largest nature reserve in Tibet. The reserve is located in the northwestern part of the Autonomous Region, covering the foot-hills of the highest points on earth, as well as part of the Tarim Basin and the extreme western regions of China. Situated more than 5-thousand meters above sea level, and making up an area of nearly 300-thousand square kilometres, Changtang is almost 3-times the size of the eastern Chinese province of Jiangsu.

Karma Tsedrup, one of the local Environmental Protection Officers, says Changtang is ecologically unique, in that it affects the entire region around it and, "is dominated by a special paramos ecosystem. This means the region plays a key role in how climatic changes evolve both here in China and in other parts of Southeast Asia."

Changtang is among 47 nature reserves in Tibet which cover over 400,000 square kilometres in total. Tibet is one of the areas of China which possesses abundant water resources. Lakes in the region cover a total area of more than 25-thousand square kilometres. The autonomous region is also the source of both the Yangtze River and Yellow River.

Changtang is home to more than 100 different kinds of mineral deposits and around two-fifths of China's copper reserves are located in the area. Large amounts of lead and zinc are also found in Tibet. But despite the opportunities for large scale

mining, Zhang Tianhua with the Tibetan Resource Management Bureau says that authorities prioritise maintaining the natural environment in the region. As Zhang explains, "We will never choose to develop the economy at the cost of the environment. When it comes to environmental protection, we do everything we can to make sure it is safe."

As part of the government's environmental commitment, no new mining projects in the region have been approved over the last 2-years. A number of existing mining operations have also been closed. At the same time, steps are also being taken to try to limit desertification of the region, which lies on the southern edge of the Gobi Desert.

Jia Qinqing, a forestry official from Shandong who was sent to the region to try to help create tree-breaks in the desert areas, says of the process to prevent desertification, "At first, most of the trees died not long after being planted. But now, keeping trees alive isn't a problem thanks to our improved watering, fertilising and maintenance techniques."

One issue still posing a challenge to authorities in the Changtang Region of Tibet though is a lack of people willing to take the leap out into the wilderness. Zong Ga with the Regional Environmental Protection Bureau says a lack of personnel is becoming a significant problem, noting that, "The staff at all our natural reserves in Tibet totals less than 400 people. Each of them has to take care of more than a thousand square kilometres of land." In an attempt to try to bridge this gap, money has already been set aside this year to hire an additional one-thousand rangers to help patrol the protected areas of Changtang.

Protecting an Ancient Art Form: Xuan Dance

Xuan is an ancient Tibetan dance for which the origins can be traced back a thousand years. Combining narration, singing and fixed dance routines, it was developed on the basis of worshipping nature and was usually performed in front of a royal audience.

However, this national intangible cultural heritage is on the verge of disappearing altogether. Located in western Tibet's Ngari region, the towering ruins of Guge Kingdom have a similar status as the Giza Pyramids, but are located on the roof of the world. Founded during the 10th Century, this once-mighty regime mysteriously collapsed after 700 years of rule, leaving us with only a few frescoes and statues to reminisce its former glory.

But in the eyes of local conservationist Pasang Tsering, there is one thing from the Kingdom that has managed to withstand the test of time. Pointing at a piece of a mural which profiles ten women crossing arms, he explains, "This is a kind of religious dance. It is said that the dance was first performed at particular rituals. Other studies show that the dance originated from Bon, a Tibetan indigenous religion, since dancers would spin counterclockwise like their prayer wheels do. Gradually this ancient dance spread among common people. After all these years, we still have people inheriting this particular dance."

The dance Pasang talks about is the Xuan dance. Compared with most Tibetan dancing styles that are fast-paced and lively, Xuan is more gradual, graceful and controlled. As a ritual dance, it assimilates singing and narration while every motion and gesture is strictly regulated. Eighty-four-year-old Drolkar learned the routines and lyrics some sixty-odd years ago. But at that time, due to Tibet's governing practice of feudal serfdom, her affinity to Xuan dance was not developed out of love or interest.

As Drolkar explains, "In those days, every serf family had to offer one girl to study the dance with local officials. Since Xuan is a court dance, not every woman was allowed to study it except for those chosen individuals. Learning was not very difficult. But I was so scared, because I knew if I failed, I would have been punished and become the concubine of some official."



Drolkar is the oldest surviving Xuan dancer
Photo: Liao Jiyong

But things took a dramatic turn in 1959 when all serfs were freed. For Drolkar and her peers, dancing was no longer a corvée. In 2008, this particular dance was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage and Drolkar, as the oldest surviving Xuan dancer, was appointed as a national-level inheritor. A sense of mission drove her to take on nine apprentices. "With the help of the government, I started to recruit students," Drolkar pointed out to China Plus. "Despite fatigue and tiredness, I never stop my teaching."

Traditionally, the Xuan dance is composed of thirteen segments. Drolkar admits that as time goes by, her memory has faded, but the veteran dancer did not hesitate to share her knowledge. "I could do all thirteen segments, but the movements and lyrics I remember are incomplete, except for nine parts. They demonstrate our history and have specific plots, so I taught them the tunes and routines without any adaptation."

Nowadays, at the Toling Monastery, where Drolkar and other serfs were forced to perform for wealthy nobles decades ago, her apprentices move their bodies in a slow rhythm and chant the ancient odes out of their love for traditional culture. In this trance-like environment, one might feel like the dancing girls on the mural of the ruins of the Guge Kingdom have come to life.

35-year-old Yangjen is one of Drolkar's apprentices. After nearly a decade of study, she says the dance has already become a part of her life. "Many parts of the dance praise religious themes, such as the monastery, Buddha, and the monks. Some lyrics are related to where we live, our parents and surroundings. I'd say that Xuan dance covers everything in a Tibetan's life."

Though her disciples show unquestionable zeal, Drolkar is still worried. As the tempo of life increases and people's lifestyle changes, she wonders whether today's younger generation are still interested in the ancient eulogies and andante motions of the Xuan art form. In the rehearsal hall of the Zanda County Folk Art Troupe, China's sole Xuan dance society, troupe members are busily preparing for a dance drama. Compared with traditional routines, their movements are wilder and faster.

Head of the troupe, Kelsang Yudron says that since the troupe was first founded by the local government in 2011, Drolkar has paid regular visits despite her old age and declining health.

When China Plus visited the troupe, Kelsang explained, "Today we are rehearsing for a dance drama. She comes and provides us with some guidance. Since the play is made up of four acts, I explain every act to her, and then she will offer us some advice as an expert."

Sitting in the corner of the hall and supporting herself with a cane, 84-year-old Drolkar quietly observes every move of the young dancers. Due to recent surgery, Drolkar is no longer capable of dancing, but her face is calm and she is clearly satisfied with what she sees.

"Dancing and singing have always fascinated me," she says. "I don't feel exhausted at all; watching these young people dance and sing brings me so much joy. Now, the society is progressing every day. As I see them, I feel like returning to the past when everyone knew how to dance. It makes me very happy." Drolkar says she doesn't mind if today's dancers speed up the routine's movements or change the pace of their chanting. As long as their love towards this ancient art is genuine, Drolkar believes this thousand-year-old Xuan dance will never fade away.



Photo: Liao Jiyong



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