

# In step with aging society

Square dancing is becoming more popular as China's population gets older, giving rise to competitions and business opportunities

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She may be a 64-year-old retiree, but Yang Suxian certainly does not lack things to occupy her time.

Unlike many of her peers who spend their days looking after grandchildren and hanging out in parks, Yang, from Tangshan, in North China's Hebei province, is heavily involved in organizing an amateur dance troupe that has about 80 members.

Her team, Carnation, is scheduled to participate in 100 events this year. More than half of them are provincial- or national-level contests attended by thousands of middle-aged "gyrating grannies", commonly known as *dama*.

"Competition brings out the best in us. Square dancing gives us seniors an incentive to get up every morning, and the competitions provide us with a reason to keep dancing," said Yang, who no longer dances, due to a back injury. She founded the troupe in 2001 with seven neighbors and colleagues.

Looking for China's Most Beautiful Queen of Square Dancing, a competition sponsored by Mighty, a sunflower oil brand from Taiwan, is one of the largest events of its kind in the Chinese mainland.

It lasts almost six months, and more than 35,000 dancers from 25 provinces and regions take part. Carnation was one of 10 teams from 3,500 troupes that made it to the finals held in Shanghai in December.

Dressed in traditional emerald green costumes and jet-black sunglasses, the team's performance was inspired by Chinese shadow puppetry, an ancient form of entertainment and craftsmanship believed to have originated in Tangshan.

Carnation finished third in the competition, which pleased Yang. "We are happy with the result, considering that we spent less than two months preparing for the contest. Besides, none of us started dancing to become a dancing queen. We just want to exercise and kill time," she said.

Square dancing started to gain popularity in China in the 1990s. At the time, it was a casual activity that required little organization and, like today, it took place across the nation's parks and pedestrian streets.

The name derives from these urban locations, and the activity should not be confused with the traditional dances performed in the United States.

Despite the origins of the dance, some *dama* have performed overseas at landmarks such as the Louvre in Paris and Red Square in Moscow.

Today, the activity is so popular that it has even been considered a sport in China. Last year, square dancing was included in China's National Games, which took place in Tianjin, for the first time.

According to Li Xiangru, a professor at Capital University of Physical Education and Sports, at least 10,000 provincial- and national-level competitions were held across the country last year.

Moreover, the State General Administration of Sports estimates that there were around 180 million active square dancers in China at the end of last year.

"Regardless of the social and entertainment functions of square dancing, it is essentially a sport. And sports need judges, ratings and winners to keep them moving forward," Li said.

The activity's popularity has also translated into business opportunities for many enterprises. At the first Square Dance Development Forum, held in the southern Hainan province in November, Peng Qiang, founder and CEO of WYZ Sports in Beijing, called square dancers "walking wallets" during a speech in which he addressed the activity's business potential.

"In China, dancing grannies are usually the accountants of their household. Reaching them means reaching the bank accounts of millions of families in the country," Peng said.

Peng's agency, established at the end of 2016, links sporting activities with corporate sponsorship. Last year, WYZ Sports helped 20 clients sponsor more than 40 sporting events, half of which were marathons.

He noted that while square dancing is unlikely to reach the size and value of marathons in China — about 500 marathons were held in the country last year, and each attracted sponsorships of more than 5 million yuan (\$777,000) — the activity has its own appeal.

"Square dancing has the clearest



Carnation, a square dancing team formed by retirees, performs at the Looking for China's Most Beautiful Queen of Square Dancing competition in Shanghai last year. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY



Dama strut their stuff on stage during the Beautiful Bozhou City competition, in East China's Anhui province, last year. LIU QINLI / FOR CHINA DAILY

and most precise participant profile — middle-aged and elderly Chinese women," said Peng, who added that healthcare companies, beauty salons and banks selling investment products make up the lion's share of sponsors for square dancing contests in China.

He believes the amount sponsors are willing to provide could rise in the future. China is home to the world's fastest-growing aging population, and 480 million people aged 60 and older will account for about 35 percent of the population by 2050, according to media reports. If the sport maintains its popularity, the number of square dancers will obviously rise as the population ages.

Even though the activity is massively popular with middle-aged and senior people, others have taken issue with square dancers hogging public areas and playing loud music early in the morning. In recent years, the controversial side of square dancing has often made headlines.

In March 2016, a man in Yangshuo, in the southern Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, was arrested for shooting a square dancer with

an air gun. The man, who claimed to be annoyed by the volume of the music, claimed he was aiming at the loudspeaker but accidentally missed and hit the woman instead.

In June, several square dancers, with an average age of 63, were involved in a violent altercation with university students over the use of a public basketball court in Luoyang, Central China's Henan province.

In November, the General Administration of Sports attempted to address the problems by issuing a regulation that banned square dancing at certain venues. The administration also urged dancers and sports organizers to work together to maintain social harmony.

Wang Qianni, an anthropology postgraduate at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, argued that young people and the media view the gyration grannies through "tainted glasses".

After interviewing 20 square dancers over the course of six months in 2013, Wang wrote in her thesis, *The Making of Guangchang Wu* (square dancing) Stigma, that the activity has

## 480 million

Estimated number of Chinese aged 60 or older by 2050, which would account for 35 percent of the population

become the butt of jokes on many talk shows.

According to Wang, many of the dancers belong to the "first generation of mothers of single children", who are lonely because their only child, or husband, is often away from home in search of opportunities to make money.

This description of square dancers rings true for Yang, cofounder of the Carnation team. Her husband died from diabetes in 2009, and her son is in the military and is only allowed to return home every two months. Her daughter-in-law, who is a television producer, is rarely home because she frequently travels for work.

Although Yang no longer dances with Carnation, she has little opportunity to take care of her 7-year-old grandson, who is usually cared for by his mother's parents.

Now, Yang laments the opportunities she missed to bond with her family's youngest member. It is the only downside to her hectic years of travel and dancing.

"It seems that I became too occupied with square dancing. It feels as though my grandson needs to make an appointment weeks in advance before he can visit me. I have failed to be a good grandmother," she said.

"But every time we return home from a competition or a performance, my son, if he is around, offers to pick me up from the airport or railway station. When we exit the gate and see families greet us with flowers and cheers regardless of the outcome of the competition, we feel like Olympic champions."