

Joyous jump across the decades

Sudanese acrobats sent to Wuhan for training in the 1970s celebrate reunion with their Chinese instructors

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More than four decades ago, a group of Sudanese acrobats were sent to the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe and underwent three years of professional acrobatic training from 1971 to 1974. It was part of the Agreement on Sino-Sudanese Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation signed by the Chinese and Sudanese governments in August 1970.

Four decades later, nine of the Sudanese acrobats have returned to China and once again met their beloved instructors in Wuhan, capital of Central China's Hubei province, between Nov 18 and 20.

From barely knowing each other to establishing a deep affection, the protagonists of this story mark their beginning at the No 3 Courtyard in Dongting Xiaolu Street of Wuhan, where the Sudanese got their first taste of Chinese acrobatics.

"A total of 50 trainees between the ages of 8 and 15 were sent to Wuhan in late October 1971. I was the youngest girl in the class, and had no idea what an exciting life experience I was about to enjoy," Nahed Shrhabel Ahmed Mohamed said in halting Chinese.

The 55-year-old was the only female acrobat in the Back to China tour. These days, she is head of the training department of the Sudan Acrobatic Troupe and a noted gymnastic acrobat in Sudan.

She has three daughters, and the youngest, age 9, is studying gymnastics in her spare time.

"She is such a cool girl who likes to mix the rhythms of pop music with gymnastic movements, and I think it is a breakthrough for acrobatics," she said, smiling.

Mohamed did not expect to revisit China at all, until she got the invitation letter from an officer of China's Ministry of Culture one night in September.

She was overcome with joy reading it, she said. "China has undergone such tremendous changes in many aspects over the past four decades, resulting from its reform and opening-up policy, and I couldn't wait to see those miracles, and most of important of all, my kind instructors.

"The moment I saw my instructor Yao Jinmei, I was moved to tears. The feeling of long-awaited reunion was so amazing. And I hugged her tightly," she said.

Born in 1938, Yao Jinmei was called "Mother Yao" by Sudanese acrobats, due to her professional teaching standards and meticulous care for each trainee.



This photo taken in 1981 shows the graduation ceremony of the second batch of Sudanese trainees who came to Wuhan, in Central China's Hubei province, to learn acrobatics. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Clockwise from top left: Sudanese acrobats look at publicity boards at the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center; Sudanese acrobats come back to Wuhan and meet their acrobatic instructors; Nine acrobats from the Sudan National Acrobatic Troupe with their instructors at the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe on Nov 18, 2017.



"At first, I felt pressure after accepting the task to coach these foreign children. Cultural differences, the language barrier and homesickness were all a big challenge for me," Yao recalled. "I still remember the astonished look they had when they saw the Chinese acrobats set an example for them. But I kept telling them Rome was not built in one day, so they have to be persistent and patient."

According to Yao, Sudanese acrobats had a tough training life in Wuhan, as the city is burning hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. They had to train in a single posture again and again in such conditions. "If they want to succeed in the future, they have to endure the hardships. After all, no pain, no gain."

Apart from Mother Yao, "Father

Zeng", whose real name is Zeng Qinglin, was another star Chinese instructor. And Yasir Mohamed Musa Abdelrahman was one of his trainees.

The 50-year-old man expressed his gratitude for Father Zeng on many occasions.

Abdelrahman's parents were not willing to send him to learn acrobatics initially, as they thought it was too dangerous and their son may be out of work after returning.

Zeng had to talk to his parents several times to persuade them, and they were moved by the Chinese coach's sincerity.

At present, Abdelrahman serves as the permanent acrobatics coach in Sudan and helps many locals realize their acrobatics dreams.

"To be honest, I was a little afraid

of 'Father Zeng' in the beginning, as he was strict in his teaching. But because of him, I have realized the smallest negligence in daily training could lead to disaster in stage performance," he said.

"However, he was a considerate man. He once took the whole class to the Lushan Mountain scenic spot, and I loved the spectacular natural scenery there."

Zeng, 81, still remembers those Sudanese acrobats.

"I have been teaching acrobatics for more than four decades, and the promotion of Chinese acrobatics in African countries is definitely the thing I would like to be remembered for most," Zeng said.

Zeng trained three batches of Sudanese acrobats in the 1970s, contribut-

ing to the birth of the first national-level acrobatic troupe in Sudan.

"I often flew to Sudan in those years and selected candidates one by one. Many Sudanese boast good physical condition and have an edge in plyometrics exercises, which is a solid foundation for becoming a qualified acrobat," he said.

Thanks to the joint efforts of Chinese instructors and Sudanese trainees, the students mastered more than 20 acrobatic techniques, including aerial acts, the pagoda of bowls, wire-walking, tightrope-walking, trick-cycling and hand walking.

It is worth noting the trainees finished their tasks half a year ahead of schedule. In May 1974, they returned to Sudan and founded the first acrobatic troupe the same year.

"It was not an easy task for us to establish the troupe starting from scratch. But our 'Chinese parents' provided all the performance props, stage clothes and basic stage settings for free, and it really helped us a lot," Mohamed said.

The brand-new troupe at first had difficulties recruiting proper students. The locals had misgivings about such a unique art form.

To tackle the problem, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe sent some Chinese acrobatics coaches, including Father Zeng, to teach overseas. They also set out to find new ways to promote acrobatics.

It worked. More and more young locals showed interest in learning acrobatics, which helped keep the troupe alive and blossoming.

Reputed as the "flower" to signify friendly relationships between China and Sudan, the Sudan National Acrobatic Troupe is well-received both in its homeland and African countries as a whole.

"Each time the audience bursts into thunderous applause, I just know I am so lucky to choose the best job I ever had in my entire life," said 60-year-old Sudanese acrobat Ibrahim Abdalla Ali Abdalla, who also visited China last year.

Since its birth, the Sudan National Acrobatic Troupe has performed on many important diplomatic occasions and become one of the most influential art troupes in Africa.

The late Sudanese president Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiry considered the troupe the "Art Card" of Sudan.

In the name of the national government, he also honored each Chinese acrobatics coach who participated in training work with a medal for the great contribution Chinese acrobats had made in the development of Sudanese culture.

"Chinese acrobats from Wuhan have made great contributions to consolidating the friendship between China and Sudan," the late president once said.