

SPOTLIGHT

By HE QI and LIN SHUJUAN

Yu Hanyi and his wife Liu Liyuan were getting particularly concerned about the weather in Shanghai.

Typhoon activity in the region had brought downpours to the city, and rain that weekend would mean the couple would have to drop their performances — one on the Saturday afternoon, the other on Sunday night — at a corner of Jing'an Park in downtown Shanghai.

As two of the city's 123 licensed street performers, the couple, usually with Yu on guitar and Liu on drums, is allowed to perform at designated hours in the park, where they have constantly drawn crowds and earned a loyal following.

Neither of them are professionally trained artists but performing music on the streets is more than a hobby — it is in fact part of Yu's full-time pursuit as a singer-songwriter. The 26-year-old, who holds a university degree in agriculture, once landed a job in the local government of his hometown but quit shortly after he realized that his true calling in life was music.

He currently sings renditions of popular songs, as well as his own creations — along with his 29-year-old wife Liu, who performs only at the weekends. Liu, a real estate analyst, developed a passion for street performances during her university years in New York City in the United States.

Yu and Liu met in Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang province, when both of them were invited to perform live shows at a friend's store. Because of their similar experiences and hobbies, they soon fell in love and got married. According to Liu, she and her husband can earn a combined 5,000 yuan (\$720) per month for their street performances.

The exposure they get performing on the streets has also created alternative income streams from commercial gigs and songwriting commissions.

Authorities in Shenzhen, in South China's Guangdong province, followed suit in 2015. This year, Chengdu, the capital city of Southwest China's Sichuan province, did the same.

According to its director Wei Zhi, the Shanghai Performance Trade Association consulted street art administrations in other countries and regions before the launch of its licensing program in Shanghai.

Countries like the US, Australia and Spain have long regarded street performers as a recognized occupation. In New York City, for example, street artists whose livelihoods depend on performing are required by the government to showcase their talent in specified areas after acquiring their licenses.

It took Wei and her colleagues several months to evaluate the candidates for the first batch of licensed artists. The criterion was based on the level of talent and professionalism. Those who passed this round of evaluation had to undergo another audition.

As information about the program spread, more street artists including Yu and Liu came forward to apply for a license.

The money they earn from all these sources, in addition to Liu's salary as a full-time analyst, has allowed the couple to lead "a life that is comfortable but far from being well-off".

"While we envy the salaries of our friends, they are also jealous of the fact that we're doing what we really enjoy," Liu said, referring to how most of her former classmates are currently in well-paying jobs.

"You don't choose to become a street artist because you want to make lots of money. You choose it because this is what you love."

Shanghai is well-known for its biting cold in winter and extreme humidity and heat in the summer, and performing in such conditions has always been a challenge. Liu said she would seek reprieve from the cold in a nearby convenience store so that her hands could stay warm enough for her to perform.

In summer, the couple is usually standing in a puddle of their own perspiration. The rainy season also poses worries because an unexpected downpour could damage their sound system which they have spent much of their income on.

But the couple said they have little to complain about, as being able to lead a life as street artists has always been what they desire and the very reason they moved to Shanghai.

Most cities in China prohibit people from carrying out commercial activities in public places. However, in 2014, Shanghai became the first city on the mainland to regulate street performances by issuing eight licenses to artists. The license is issued by the Shanghai Performance Trade Association, which is in charge of the regulations regarding the management of local street artists.

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FOR THE LOVE of MUSIC

Despite the irregular income and challenging weather conditions, an increasing number of young Shanghai artists take to the streets to showcase their talent



Yu Hanyi and his wife Liu Liyuan are two of Shanghai's 123 licensed street performers. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A performance by South Korean band Harmonica attracts a crowd.



Getting the license is not the most difficult part of a street artistic career. Being accepted and understood is much harder.

Being accepted and understood is much harder than that," said Yu.

Street performance is not novel in Chinese society. It has a long history in the country, as documented in literary works describing how people used to make a living by performing stunts in public places. Gradually, beggars adopted this method of income generation, usually playing the *erhu* (Chinese traditional two-string bowed instrument) or flutes.

Till today, many people associate street performances with begging. The couple recalled that they once met a man who expressed his intrigue that two young and well-educated individuals would resort to "selling arts on the street like beggars". There were even times when passers-by would leave steamed buns in their box of tips.

According to Luo Huaizhen, a playwright who spent 10 years leading efforts to legalize street performances in Shanghai, street artists are a distinctive sight in some American and European cities and are able to "color the city with a sense of humanity and vitality".

"It is what our cities lack and expect," said Luo, also a political adviser of the Shanghai municipal government, in his first proposal to push for street performances as a legalized profession in 2004.

"With the introduction of certificates for street performers, the city shall be able to attract high-level street artists for this purpose and make street performances a respectable profession in the city."

Four years after the licensing took effect, street artists in Shanghai now have higher education backgrounds and professional performance experience. Two-thirds of all licensed street performers are young artists aged between 25 and 35.

According to Wei, these 123 performers are showcasing their talent at 17 designated areas around the city.

"Authorized street performances have become a moving landscape and part of the Shanghai brand," said Wei. "We will look for more suitable places for them to show their talent to locals and tourists from all over the country and the world."

For another performer Cai Xiaoyuan, becoming a licensed street performer means both dignity and responsibility.

An IT practitioner-turned-street musician, Cai started performing on the streets in 2012. After more than five years of cat-and-mouse games with urban management officers in downtown Shanghai, he eventually teamed up with a few like-minded street artists to form a band called Wuxian, which literally means "infinity". Last year, they became the first band to receive a license in the city.

Despite being a seasoned performer on the streets and at commercial events, Cai recalled that he was so nervous before the audition that his hands trembled.

"I was so looking forward to get-

ting the license," he said, explaining why he was a ball of nerves. "When we are certified, that means we represent more than just ourselves, but also the city."

For him, having a license also means having a responsibility to uphold the legalized status of street artists.

Cai has volunteered to manage the performance and rehearsal schedules for street artists at Jing'an Park, which was made the first official base for street performers in May. Performances and rehearsals are allowed at the park every day from 3 pm to 9 pm.

On days when his band is scheduled to perform, they would always arrive at least 20 minutes ahead of schedule so as not to keep the audience waiting. The band's popularity has grown rapidly over the past year, in part thanks to the accessibility of online streaming services.

They have been offered deals by various streaming platforms that pay them more than their street performances. They once earned more than 30,000 yuan performing a song that a fan ordered through a streaming service, Cai said.

However, after spending time in the recording studio for the streaming platforms, Cai realized that he preferred performing in public. For him, playing on the streets has become a lifestyle, and it allows him to find inspiration and make friends.

"I can't find a better stage than the streets where I feel so free and inspired. My music becomes alive as I can interact with passers-by," he said.

Yu shared the same feelings. "The audience on the street has the most critical ears," said Yu. "They will leave if you play a wrong note. But they will stop for a song as long as it's well written, be it familiar-sounding or not."

Contact the writer at heqi@chinadaily.com.cn



Licensed to focus on the performance

Group of South Korean classical musicians playing on the streets of Shanghai enjoys protection under the city's regulations

By HE QI

Harmonica, a South Korean classical music band, has been winning hearts in Shanghai with moving performances.

But you are unlikely to find this group at record stores or in conventional theaters. These musicians ply their trade in public, along the streets of Shanghai, as buskers.

"I still remember that a beggar cried during our band's first performance, and the little girl who sells flowers along the Bund gave us a flower as a gift," said Han Jong-su, the band's violinist. "Within 20 minutes, we received about 400 yuan (\$57.5) from the audience. Everyone was applauding us."

A graduate of the Seoul Institute of the Arts, Han came to China in 2012 to explore the opportunities in the music industry. He ended up spending a few years at local universities studying Chinese before landing a full-time job at an institution where he conducts violin classes.

His first experience as a street performer was at Pudong Riverside Avenue in 2013 where he managed to draw a large crowd. The reception to his music spurred him to continue performing on the streets, and he eventually met fellow Korean musicians, which led to the formation of Harmonica.

But Harmonica's captivating performances drew another group of individuals — urban management officers.

According to Han, five officers surrounded the band during a subsequent performance and informed them that performing along the Bund was prohibited. Members of the public even jumped to their rescue, arguing with the authorities that the band members were not beggars, he recalled.

"I still remember the officer's answer. He said that he wanted to listen to us, but we have to come back

after midnight when he was off duty, or else he would get into trouble with his supervisor for not enforcing the law," laughed Han.

The officer recommended a place that the band could perform. But Han later discovered that the location on South Tibet Road was already filled with buskers, and the noisy environment that was near the main road was not ideal for their instrumental performances.

However, a Chinese band he met there advised him to apply for a street performance license to make life much easier.

"At first we did not believe them because we always thought it was unrealistic for a foreign group to play on Chinese streets legally, but we later learned that there are German and US artists who managed to get licenses. That is when we decided to apply," said Han.

In April, five of the regular members of the band, including Han, received licenses that allow them to perform at designated areas, such as Jiang'an Park and Wujiang Road. The band, which currently comprises men and women aged between 25 and 40, can earn up to 1,000 yuan per day.

"Most of our team members graduated from art-related colleges in South Korea and have a job in Shanghai now. All of us have the same goal, and that is to play our music for people who really want to listen to us," Han said.

Being licensed has also helped remove the likelihood of running into trouble with the rules. And it has resulted in a change in dynamics, Han said. Rather than expel the musicians from the premises, the urban management staff now protect them.

"We feel safe and respected here," he said. "More importantly, we are now playing to people who really like our music and the only reason for them to stop is because they enjoy it."



Han Jong-su (second from right) and fellow Harmonica band members.