

Keeping in tune with tradition

Considered a national cultural treasure, Heyang folk songs dating back 6,000 years are being preserved by dedicated locals

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Born in Phoenix Town, Zhangjiagang city, in East China's Jiangsu province, Heyang folk songs became listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and are being carried forward and promoted by dedicated locals.

With a longer history than *Shi Jing*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, Heyang folk songs date back more than 6,000 years and are considered the precious "living fossil" of traditional Chinese folk music.

As a representative of Wu folk songs — traditional songs from southern regions of the Yangtze River associated with labor in the rice paddies and travel along the waterways — Heyang folk songs are sung in Yuxi dialect, part of the Wu language.

Wu Song is also a national intangible cultural heritage. Regarded as the land of fish and rice, the Yangtze River Delta has traditional cultural heritage that goes hand in hand with local dialects, ethnicities and regions.

Originating from Phoenix Mountain, which was previously known as Heyang Mountain, located in the south of Zhangjiagang city, Heyang folk songs cover every aspect of life and labor like planting, fishing, trading as well as historical legends.

Since ancient times, the region has had a tradition of antiphonal singing during the spring and autumn seasons, which was particularly popular in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

According to research by Zhou Weizhi, former chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and 16 other experts, the earliest Heyang folk song called Cutting Bamboo Song depicts how ancient people traced and hunted animals.

To preserve the cultural treasure, the Heyang Folk Song Hall was established in Gangkou Town in 2005 to showcase the history and development of folk songs.

In 2009, the Heyang Folk Song Hall relocated to Zhangjiagang city with an investment of 50 million yuan (\$7.2 million) from the local government and Phoenix Town administrative department.

In the hall are academic research and hard copies of the folk songs.



Heyang Folk Song Hall moved to Phoenix Town, Zhangjiagang city, in East China's Jiangsu province, in 2009 and was renovated with an investment of 50 million yuan (\$7.2 million). PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Visitors can learn how the interpretations and performances of the songs showcase the splendid Heyang cultures.

To provide a firsthand indigenous cultural experience, several inheritors of Heyang folk songs perform in the hall and interact with visitors.

Yin Lifen, inheritor of Heyang folk songs, is now 71 years old. She still sings on stage to visitors all over the world. "I also teach Heyang folk songs to students from primary schools to universities," Yin told China Daily.

Yin had learned the songs from her grandparents. "When I was young after school and had nothing to do, my grandmother would teach me how to sing the folk songs," Yin said. "And I could always memorize them, even now. But if you ask me to learn songs now, I could easily forget if I don't sing (every day)."

Heyang folk songs were inherited in the old times through family or

apprenticeship. Gradually, locals started to preserve them by writing them down into hard copies.

"In the past, it's hard to write down the songs because the folk songs were sung by local people impromptu while they were doing farm work," said Zhen Ye, manager of Phoenix Cultural Tourism Ltd in Zhangjiagang.

Copies of Heyang folk songs that have survived numerous disasters are precious artifacts of cultural heritage left by the predecessors. Up to 2002, there were 1,146 written records of Heyang folk songs. The 1.1-million-word *China, Heyang Folk Songs Collection* was published in 2006.

In recent years, as well becoming a well-known historic and cultural spot, Phoenix Town has become regarded as a cradle of Jiangsu folk songs, Chinese folk arts and Wu folk songs.

To pass on the historical and indig-

enous culture, primary and middle schools in Phoenix Town offer students Heyang folk song courses. On a cultural basis, Heyang Folk Song Hall also provides study tours to schools.

"Recently, we held a singing competition called Who is the Folk Song King? The participants ranged in age from 5 to 70," Zhen said. "There were also newly produced Heyang folk songs, which were based on the previous rhythm but with modern elements."

Keeping abreast of times, the preservation of Heyang folk songs takes on various other forms. A sticker package of two animated characters whose names are Heyang and Hetian was recently released on WeChat. They wear traditional Chinese clothes and sport ancient hairstyles.

A cultural and creative shop to promote Heyang folk songs featuring the Heyang and Hetian theme is also being planned.

Model village capitalizes on reforms

Yonglian implements China's opening-up policy, stands out as an example for other rural communities

By PAMELA LIN

Built on the Yangtze river shoal in 1970, the reclaimed village of Yonglian was once Zhangjiagang city's smallest and poorest with the lowest population density. However, the village's fortunes looked up with the launch of China's reform and opening-up policy in 1978 — it brought economic vigor and development to the village, which is now one of the richest communities in the city.

As part of its industrialization strategy, Yonglian village — in East China's Jiangsu province — concentrated on the development of steel industry.

Currently, the village has an aver-

age annual income of 40,000 yuan (\$5,770) per person a year. In 2017, it recorded sales revenue of 40.3 billion yuan and tax plus profit of 7.8 billion yuan. The disposable income of the village was 156 million yuan.

Wu Dongcai, the fifth Party branch secretary of Yonglian village took office in 1978. Since then, the village got on to the fast-track of development. Wu believes that the rural economy cannot achieve prosperity without industrial development. He led the villagers to establish factories that make cement pre-products, furniture and several other several small products.

Having tasted success, Wu realized that the priority of the villagers had

changed to the construction of houses, which required steel products. So, in 1984, he decided to establish the village-run enterprise Jiangsu Yonggang Group Co, which focused on the steel rolling industry.

In the next year, Yonggang produced about 6,000 tons of construction steel and reported a profit of 1.54 million yuan. The village paid off all its debts and poverty was soon history.

With the total assets of more than 40 billion yuan, the steel manufacturer now has 10,000 employees with a steel production capacity of 9 million tons. Yonggang has sold its steel to more than 100 countries around the world.

In 1978, there were only 254 households and about 700 villagers in Yonglian. Currently, the village has a population of 30,000, which comprises 10,000 local villagers, 10,000 migrant workers and a floating population of 10,000.

Since 1995, Yonglian village has significantly expanded its infrastructure and facilities. In 2011, the Village Assembly Hall was built to enable the villagers to hold discussions and take decisions on various issues. To date, it has witnessed the signing of more than 20 pieces of village regulations and non-governmental agreements.

Today, the community has shed its obscurity and poverty to emerge

as a nationally recognized and prosperous village. Yonglian continues to transform and adjust its industrial structure by developing the logistics, property, finance and tourism sectors.

The village's 8,000 acres of farmland contains a modern grain base, seedling base and farming cultural park that uses modern technology to achieve automation, mechanization and informatization.

In the 40 years since China launched its reform and opening-up policy, Yonglian stands out as a model for other villages in the country. It has been awarded several titles such as "National Civilized Village" and "National Democratic Legitimacy Model Village".