Inspirational Journey

Artists from across Europe and Asia ventured into the remote Chinese countryside to seek inspiration from the Miao Ethnic group

By JING XIAOLEI

“I've never been to Asia before and everything is strange and wonderful: supermarkets and shopping malls, even the airport seemed exotic!” wrote Ula Sickle, a choreographer from Poland on her blog under the name “chopstick diaries.”

Ula was one of the 18 foreign and domestic artists participating in a cultural exchange project called the Pointe to Point: Asia-Europe Dance Forum. It aims to empower aspiring young artists from Asia and Europe to reflect upon their views of contemporary society through their individual artistic expression.

“I learned about this project from one of my friends and I was interested in it so I submitted my resume, and they accepted me,” said another participant Olivier Gabrys, a dancer and choreographer from France.

The Pointe to Point Project, which was started by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), has been held four times since 2002, in Singapore, Germany, Japan and Poland. It emphasizes the significance of dance as an art form and a medium of communication that reflects changes in society, raising issues that promote cultural dialogue and exchange.

Greatly inspired

Committed to providing young people with a process-oriented platform for artistic exchange and dialogue through the arts, organizers decided to take the fifth session of the project to one of the world’s oldest countries—China.

“We sent an inspection team to last year’s project in Poland. Feeling greatly inspired, we decided to invite the project to China, a country that enjoys diverse and abundant dance cultures,” noted Feng Shuangbai, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Dancers’ Association (CDA), which is co-organizer of this year’s project.

In contrast to previous projects, which have taken place in cities, organizers of the China event decided to venture into the countryside. Departing from the busy capital of China, Beijing, the group traveled to remote rural areas of Guizhou Province where the Miao Minority lives and has preserved their ancient traditions of dance and music.

“Susan and I had a dinner in Paris and she talked about the interesting topic of old rituals in China. That topic inspired us to come up with the idea of taking this year’s project to rural regions where traditional rituals have been preserved,” ASEF Project Manager Kateřina Verstraete told Beijing Review, referring to a dinner she had with Susan Buirge, a French choreographic researcher whom she invited to be an artistic advisor for the project.

Once the decision to go into the countryside had been made, it was the co-organizer CDA that came up with the suggestion to go to Guizhou where the Miao ethnic people have lived for generations. “The local new year falls in the middle of November, so we
were able to see traditional celebrations with folk dancing and singing instead of some shows arranged for tourists,” said CDA Vice Chairman Feng Shuangbai.

Feng further added that Guizhou, as one of the poorest regions in China, has preserved its traditions well due to the remote geographic location of the province.

The observations and impressions gathered in Guizhou served as food for thought to explore new ways of expression, employing dance and music, for each artist on the trip. The countryside setting for the project helped the artists examine the relationships between traditional and contemporary, as well as urban and rural dance and music.

**Exciting and enriching**

On their first day in Beijing, each participant in the project was given 10 minutes to present him or herself and share their experience in relation to dance and music.

The framework of the process was explained by the artistic advisors, who later suggested splitting up the participants into three groups, each with four choreographers and two composers.

Afterwards each artistic group traveled thousands of miles to remote Guizhou to explore Miao ethnic dance for five days, accompanied by local cultural officials and experts.

For most participants it was their first time in China, so the whole trip was an exciting and enriching experience for them.

Seong Hee Kim, a South Korean choreographer who served as artistic observer for the project, was excited to see the original bronze drum dance in Zhang’ao Miao village. “I never knew about this kind of activity before, but I think it’s very profound and beneficial to study a dance in its original place,” she commented.

For five days in the villages the artists were presented with local dances that have been passed down through generations. The artists even joined local dance groups to study and understand them better.

"The dance movement is simple, but you have to listen to the drum carefully as there are slight changes in it, and that is the magic part," said Hartati, a dancer from Indonesia.

"It's easy to learn their body movements, but what can't be learned is the heart and soul that they put into their dance," noted Wen Hui, an artistic advisor for the event.

**Tension and arguments**

“‘The most interesting thing to me is that we don’t know each other, but we are supposed to collaborate to work out a dance,'” said Artur Vidal from Spain.

Back in Beijing following the field trip, each group was given three days to work together to come up with a presentation, which was then presented on stage at a public theater in Beijing.

"Their final presentation might be rough and unfinished, but it is the fruit of inspiration and collaboration between our observing and attentive artists," said project observer Jan Goossens from Belgium. There was tension and arguments when the artists tried to co-create something based on both their collective and individual experiences. "The final resolution was negotiation, taking in everybody’s contributions to the presentation," he said.

Aside from furthering artist exchanges between countries the project also raised the issue of cultural preservation. During the five days in Guizhou a discussion was held almost every night after dinner on the day’s experience. The topics of the discussion ranged from detailed dance techniques to profound reflections on protecting local traditional culture.

Huang Zegui, a local researcher on Miao culture, who accompanied the tour, enlightened the artists with her rich experience and close observation of traditional Miao culture, which she said was "withering off day by day."

"We are gradually losing the precious dance and singing treasures of Miao culture as the young generation in villages tends to migrate to urban cities to make money, leaving few to inherit traditions from the old," Huang told Beijing Review.

The artists acknowledged the issue as a global one and said they would do what they could to help. "This project is a starting point for every one of us, an event that will certainly make a difference in our future, in work and life as well," said Sickle.