

# Fly over the Rainbow

Exploring more opportunities for people to discover their talents and create possibilities for a better life

*By Xu Qian, General Secretary of the Shenzhen Chorus Association and event organizer*

An impressive performance by the Vienna Boys' Choir at the Shenzhen Concert Hall thirteen years ago touched the hearts of the Peking University alumni. It was an awakening to music's potential to conserve cultures and transfer them through the medium of choral singing. Our country of many nations is rich in traditional culture and music. But with the onset of urbanization and civilization, many traditional cultures are on the verge of being lost.

The performance that warm spring night sparked a lively discussion, culminating in the decision to launch a public charity foundation. The Shenzhen Green Pine Growth & Care Foundation would serve as a central entity, enabling schools from various nations to form their own choir groups and continue singing the traditional songs of childhood. The project's name was **Fly over the Rainbow**. With the establishment of the Shenzhen Concert Hall that same year, the culture of China's youngest city turned a new page, and the advent of the new choir project led to the realization of a multitude of colourful future dreams, changing so many people's lives and gracing the city with much more than anyone would have imagined.

Just one month after the foundation began, the first Fly over the Rainbow children's choir formed on 6 June 2007 in Tibet. Years later, on the 7th night of November 2019, the Green Pine Foundation presented the first national children's choir festival in Shenzhen, hosting 36 member choirs from 28 different ethnic groups in nations throughout China, including

the Taiwan province. In the final moments of the concert, the foundation's organizers could hardly hold back their emotions. The event brought back the countless failures and moments of doubt and even the risk of the project's running aground. But in those final moments, it had all become worth it.

Over the 13 years of hard work, Fly over the Rainbow has cultivated a healthy group of loyal sponsors for each of the ethnic nations' choirs. The project's first donors consisted of a group of enterprises owned by Peking University alumni. More enterprises, institutions and even individuals joined in as, one by one, additional choirs appeared, and the project's significance became clearer. It was more than a cause for charity but rather an increasing sense of shared responsibility to protect human heritage. Now, each choir would have one or more associated enterprise as a regular sponsor that would make frequent visits to promote understanding and a sense of purpose. This distributed system of donors resulted in a more stable and efficient sponsorship for the project's continuation.

Fifty-six separate nations exist in China. The majority of these are Han nations, which as a whole make up more than 91% of China's population and one of the more enduring nations in the world, lasting for more than 2000 years. The remaining nations reflect the minority, which exists in all parts of China. However, only those populations that live deep in the mountains or in villages are likely to retain their unique languages and cultures. Through the course of history, many minority groups have lost their traditions and begun to take on the customs of the Han nations. Urbanization has also caused many people to lose their lands and immigrate to the city. Lifestyle changes bring cultural changes.

The Fly over the Rainbow project itself originated in Shenzhen, a municipality that transformed a small village into an international world-class city in only 40 years. A legend within the country, Shenzhen distinguishes itself as the

“Silicon Valley” of China and a destination representing high potential for the future. Millions of talented people immigrate to Shenzhen, and more than 15 million now live in a city where the average age is only 26. Ironically, one of the most important projects to conserve China’s oldest cultural heritage was born in a city with the youngest of populations.



Ta Cheng Primary School “Fly over the Rainbow” (Naxi Autonomous County in Lijiang, Yunnan Province)

The secretary-general of the Green Pine foundation and director of the Fly over the Rainbow project, Ms Wang Fang states: “Teaching orally has been the way of Chinese traditional artists in past centuries. We are the first to bring it to a school”. An interview with the director brought further insight:

**Bringing traditional arts education to the classroom is a breakthrough.**

In China, most people in villages share the same family

lineage and name. This ancient form of society, based on passing traditions on to subsequent generations, is an important part of life in small villages. For example, a talented dancer may develop a group of capable dancers. Through generations, dance becomes a significant village tradition. The original dancer relied on oral instruction to teach students or family members during the process of daily living. It has been a typical means of transferring traditional arts in China for over 1,000 years.

The significance of a family name, however, has not remained as an important part of modern life in recent decades, especially when most of the younger generations give up their lives in hometowns to find a new life in the city. But, because their previous poor standard of living in traditional agriculture and their minimal educational background make it difficult to find better employment, their new lives in the city start from zero.

During the past 13 years, the Green Pine Foundation has been among the first to recognize people who possess special talents in traditional arts and bring them on as teachers. The foundation may have discovered them working as masons in urban construction or washing dishes at a restaurant in a railway station, but it's because of these new arrivals that some of the traditional arts have survived.

And life changes for them as well. They acquire new jobs and receive a regular salary from the sponsors, but most importantly, they come to realize that their jobs are meaningful. Over years of teaching, they develop a strong sense of dignity and pride in their work. A teacher here is considered to be "the inheritor of traditional culture" and a treasured resource.

The teachers' lack of formal education, however, has led to difficulties in teaching students in a logical way. To overcome this hurdle, the Fly over the Rainbow project has

extended its plan to include teachers' training. Nevertheless, for some of the artists, study at one of China's musical conservatories can negatively affect their self-confidence. A highly-popular teacher from a Kazakh national children's choir with unquestionable musical talent can find it particularly embarrassing to struggle when first presented with a musical score in Prof. Wu Lingfen's classroom. Everything that appears at first to be a given is fraught with inherent complexities.



Hong Yuan Children's Choir "Fly over the Rainbow" (Zhuang Autonomous Region, Hong Yuan County, Si Chuan)

Despite difficulties, many people have offered their assistance over the past 13 years, including professional conductors and music teachers from all parts of China who work with the ethnic choirs as volunteers. In collaboration with the "inheritors of traditional culture", these volunteers experiment to find the right path forward in education.

**The long path ahead in education.**

In the process of urbanization, rural areas become separated. Many children must remain at home with their grandparents while their parents work at jobs 1,000 kilometres away to provide better income for their families. The children often only meet their parents once a year at most. The younger generations in those areas have no option but to suffer increasing loneliness, sensitivity, lack of self-confidence and fear and insecurity. They make a great sacrifice for the sake of the country's urbanization.

At the same time, an increasing concentration of high-quality educational resources is found in big cities. To bridge this gap in child-fostering resources, Fly over the Rainbow carries a special mission. The Fly over the Rainbow volunteers are more than a group of famous teachers and conductors. The high-quality arts education they provide also serves as grounding for psychological self-improvement and healing of the heart through the intrinsic qualities of art.

The conductor of the Shenzhen high school Lily Girls' Choir, Ms Manxue Hu explained: "I began as a volunteer teacher in the Yunnan province in 2014. At the time, I found it quite difficult. To be honest, I wasn't sure what I should teach. Conducting class in the same way I taught in Shenzhen definitely didn't work, but I also knew nothing about the local culture. What I could do was inspire them and let the process go at first, find a balance and let them find a better way to sing beautifully and hear each other. I had to discover a solution step by step. And each step might be an unexpected challenge. Despite this, I felt I had gained much more than I had given during my stay. I really appreciate this project!"



Aichai Children's Choir "Fly over the Rainbow" (Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Wen Chuan, Si Chuan)

It was definitely a life-changing trip for Ms Hu. The project fascinated her, and she has continued to visit at least one ethnic choir every year since. In the process, some very precious things that might otherwise have been lost were regained: the blooming vitality of a person at the beginning of life, the heartfelt sense of music, the expression of a nation's character in a way that could never be achieved through language.

If you've known about the Lily Girls' Choir, you will have

noticed the choir has changed a lot in recent years. Not only is Ms Hu an active contributor, but she is also a beneficiary of the project. Those amazing works in shining performance by the Lily Girls on the international stage were inspired by her trips. Ms Manxue Hu has become one of the leaders on the Fly over the Rainbow artistic board, and she retains great enthusiasm for her career.

For years, a lack of good works has plagued musical education in China. At the same time, thousands of good compositions remain hidden in the rural areas, destined to eventually to be lost. Fly over the Rainbow hosts a group of master composers who have begun recording the precious melodies. They've started saving the unique instruments and collecting the musical elements to ultimately render amazing musical pieces.

Mr Liu Xiaogeng is one in their company. His hometown is in the Yunnan province, a region in which 26 different nations live together, 15 of them unique to Yunnan. His primary life's work is to explore and conserve folk music, and his cooperation with Fly over the Rainbow is legendary in the Chinese choral world. He started composing folk music when he was young, but after collaborating with Fly over the Rainbow, his career reached new heights. Hundreds of his works have not only been used by the local children's choir but are also popular in the whole of China at the moment. A 2019 review to discover which songs were performed most often by choirs in China revealed Mr Liu Xiaogeng as the undisputed champion. His work is a remarkable contribution to Chinese arts education.

## **Identity and respect**

If you ask the teachers what constitutes the most difficult part of their jobs, they don't always respond that it comes down to the teaching method. Nowadays, the advent of the television has opened a window to the outside world. But for these young children, television is a strong influence when parents are not around, which could potentially lead in bad



directions. The astonishing truth is that many local children have felt ashamed of their own traditions. They prefer jeans to their own “ugly” traditional costumes; they like pop songs more than the traditional songs; they admire the popular lifestyle. It’s hard for the volunteer teachers to persuade them to avoid these paths.

In 2008, the first Fly over the Rainbow concert dedicated to multi-nations children’s choirs, “Harmony between Mountain and Ocean”, took place in the Shenzhen concert hall. Since then, the concerts are held regularly in Shenzhen every year. Each time, with cheering and applause, the Shenzhen audiences show great and sincere admiration for the performances and even a curiosity about the participants’ lives in their respective hometowns. It’s a thrill for the children as well. They come to realize that perhaps jeans do not have the same appeal or convey the beauty of their own ways, that their music and culture is mysterious and that they are something special!

Exchange and communication are always a good form of education. The participants have found self-identity through communication with the outside, and Fly over the Rainbow remains hopeful that the choirs will, one day, perform on the international stage and represent not only China but a colourful China!



Aichai Children's Choir "Fly over the Rainbow" (Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Wen Chuan, Si Chuan)

At its heart, Fly over the Rainbow is the process of enabling everyone to reflect back on their homelands and recognize the genealogy of their cultures.

China has made great strides in the eradication of human poverty in the past decades. It's an unbelievable accomplishment for a country of over 14 billion people. However, though we have achieved fantastic results, we must confess that alleviation from spiritual and educational poverty is far from adequate. The wide gap between urban and rural areas still exists, and the road ahead promises to be very hard and long. That Fly over the Rainbow – a completely non-governmental organization – has taken the first step in these unbalanced circumstances is unusual in China.

You'd never imagine that little kids from Lu Quan (a small

town in Yunnan Province and home to the Yi and Miao minority groups) could continue rehearsal for 8 hours without feeling tired at all. But life for them is already tough enough. Suffering through daily work is much harder than rehearsal. Arts education brings balance to their lives and spiritual power, and that holds great significance! **“What we can do is explore more opportunities for people to discover their own talents and create possibilities for a better life”**—Ms Wang Fang (director of Fly over the Rainbow)

In 2019, the Shenzhen Concert Hall hosted the first Fly over the Rainbow multinational children’s choir. Two hundred seventy-eight children from Shenzhen city were recruited that year to sing in the choir, which will continue to work regularly with various choirs from ethnic nations to produce a concert each year. Ms Manxue Hu is the choir’s current Artistic Director.

In a gesture of mutual learning, children from Shenzhen and the border areas will join in collaboration. Generally speaking, people from developed areas have the natural advantage of standard education, but here, the children from Shenzhen will be asked to learn from the ethnic nations’ group, including its language, dance and songs. Whether on a proactive level or out of circumstance, the intent is to equalize the terms.

For the kids from Shenzhen, there really is no practical necessity to learn the Tibetan language, but on a level of respect, it’s very necessary. They live in a developed city and naturally have more access to resources than others, which presents an inequality. It’s an obligation to let them know that, **the more you have and the stronger you are, the greater the responsibility in the world.**

The “Sounds from Ancient Lands” – the highlight of the first national children’s choir festival – was a milestone in the Chinese choral world. The audiences came from all parts of the

country, and the tickets sold out very quickly. The veteran fans and new friends alike shared 2 tearful hours, moved beyond words.

For most western countries, it's very hard to see a complete picture of China. Although people know there are 56 nations in this land, what they most likely see are the similarities from a narrow perspective. It's of great value to us to go deep into each ethnic group and dig into the historical lineage of its culture to help the world recognize that China is a unified and diverse multi-cultural country.

Human beings have music. It's like a rainbow that transcends the distance between time and space, breaks down the barriers of language and allows wisdom and civilization to flourish. If you want to know how far it is from my heart to your heart, the answer is: the length of a song!

Note□The "Sounds from Ancient Lands" concert in Shenzhen Concert Hall, 9 November 2019.

Nine choirs from different nations performed together. Thirteen cultural inheritors came to the stage to sing and dance. The Shenzhen Concert Hall Fly over the Rainbow multi-nations children's choir and the Shenzhen Senior High School Lily Girls' Choir also joined in the performance. It was a highly-creative concert, in which could be heard the ancient tone of the Naxi from 1,000 years ago singing together with "Days of Beauty" by Ola Gjeilo. The amazing songs sung by the 87-year-old singer known by the local people as the "Goddess of Snow Mountain" pierced the sky. The performance of a whole village of more than 100 guitar players was the distant outcome of a western missionary who lost his way in the mountains and stayed on at their village for 30 years and taught the whole town choral music and guitar. The Lily Girls' Choir also performed some specifically-composed songs from distant nations. The Lily Girls also plan to perform this special list of programs at the 12th World Symposium on Choral

## Music in New Zealand.

There were many wonderful stories that touched many hearts in this absolutely kaleidoscopic concert of Chinese traditional culture. We hope these photos can convey some sense of that unforgettable night!



*Xu Qian is in her tenth year of work as an organizer of choral events. From 2011 to 2018, she worked as project director at the Interkultur China office and head of the education department as well. She organized hundreds of international choral directors' workshops & masterclasses in over 20 cities in China. She also served as the committee member for more than 10 international choir festival projects. Since 2019, Xu Qian has been elected as General Secretary of the Shenzhen Chorus Association. She has received high praise from the Shenzhen government for her work as the director of international affairs & PR for the committee with the Shenzhen choir festival. She started the Shenzhen Xinghan Culture and Arts Development Company, working for the benefit of choirs in the China worldwide concert tour, involving such groups as the Shenzhen Star Bright Choir, the Shenzhen senior high school Lily Girls' Choir, the Shenzhen middle school Golden Bell Youth Choir and the Peiyang Chorus of Tianjin University. In addition to her business in Shenzhen, Xu Qian is also the artistic consultant for different events, including the Hainan Maritime Silk Road Choir Festival and Hunan Huanglong choral arts week, and she has received an invitation to serve as the international academy office director for the China Choral Association's online choir college. Her majors in college were English Language and Business Management. After graduation, however, her work have been primarily directed toward Choral events organizations. Email: [qianxu999@hotmail.com](mailto:qianxu999@hotmail.com)*

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