



Tibetan dancer-choreographer Wanma Jiancuo (middle) with dancers for his new work *Shambhala*.

PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

Essential elements

Tibetan dancer-choreographer Wanma Jiancuo says his new work *Shambhala* depicts the spiritual pursuit of tranquility, balance and happiness. **Chen Nan** reports in Beijing.

Tibetan folk dances and songs are widely performed at national galas as they are thought to be mysterious and charming, attracting millions of tourists to explore the country's Tibetan areas. However, Tibetan dancer-choreographer Wanma Jiancuo says it's not the real Tibet that is being portrayed.

"I have choreographed and performed Tibetan dances for some big extravaganzas, such as CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, which requires colorful, grand costumes and cheerful, uplifting moves. However, when I finished dancing, I couldn't help wondering 'Why did I dance like that?'" says the 34-year-old from Hainan Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Qinghai province.

"Those superficial decorations cover the essence of Tibetan culture."

He has also choreographed a 60-minute dance, *Shambhala*, which means pure land and blissful heaven, in the Tibetan language, depicting the spiritual pursuit of tranquility, balance and happiness. He calls it a "private work", expressing his emotions for Tibetan culture.

"For many people, *Shambhala*, or Shangri-La, is a popular tourism site. But for Tibetans, it's a spiritual resting place, not something tangible or concrete," he says.

"When I was a kid, my parents told me that you should be a virtuous man and then you will find your Shangri-La," Wanma Jiancuo recalls. "Everyone has his own Shangri-La in their heart."

The dance will be performed at the National Center for the Performing Arts on Aug 15 and 16, as part of Chinese Dance Masterpieces, a month-long event featuring six dance shows by Chinese dancers and choreographers.

On a scorching afternoon, Wanma Jiancuo and eight Tibetan dancers gather in a dance rehearsal room at Minzu University of China. Sitting around an incense burner, they relax. "I need them to be focused, serious and show respect to the dance," says Wanma Jiancuo. "It's a rite of passage."

As one male dancer rings a bronze Tibetan hand bell and walks slowly, the others follow him with their eyes staring forward. They pick up some objects and worship them sincerely, such as a horse saddle, wooden box, and the beam of a house, which were collected by Wanma Jiancuo from Tibetan families.

Most of the time, there is no music but



Dancers rehearse in Beijing.



deep, slow Tibetan chanting. The only sounds are the dancers' feet stepping on the floor and their heavy breaths. Their costumes are simple and gray.

"The clothes at galas are not worn daily by Tibetans. We only wear formal dress during festivals," 22-year-old dancer Tsering Norbu says.

The big-eyed curly-haired young man has studied dancing since childhood and now works at Song and Dance Troupe of Tibet Autonomous Region. He is a big fan of Wanma Jiancuo and volunteered to perform.

"Like the costumes, the dance overturns Tibetan dance impressions. It's real and powerful. Usually I dance on national occasions and assigned missions to celebrate some event. I have to smile happily and dance like it's a festival. But this is anything but conventional," says the dancer, who arrived in Beijing

a month ago from Lhasa.

The choreographer also invited Tibetan eagle flute players to perform. The flute is made from the wing bones of eagles.

The choreographer first had the idea for *Shambhala* when he studied at Minzu University in 2000, to express his love for Tibetan culture and his pursuit of freedom.

"I hate being constrained by restrictions. That's why I quit from a stable job at a national dance troupe after graduation. It was like setting free a bird from a cage," he says. "My dance works were all from my roots — Tibetan culture. *Shambhala* is a landmark in my career."

Wanma Jiancuo's name means "sea of wisdom" in the Tibetan language, and was conferred by his father, who was the director of Song and Dance Troupe of Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and the only choreographer in the troupe then.

His father hoped he will carry on his career. However, Wanma Jiancuo says that it was not love at first sight with dance.

Running with friends among mountains and grasslands, he had a happy and close-to-nature childhood.

His father sent him to a kung fu class at Minzu University of China, at age 12. However, when he enrolled he realized that kung fu was just one part of the classes and most courses were about dancing.

Though reluctant and unhappy, he studied there for six years and entered the folk dance department of the university.

"You know, I learned various dance genres, such as ballet, folk dance and modern dance, and the influences were unconscious," he says. "Dancing is like my second language."

"I appreciate his resilient spirit as a Tibetan dancer. He is pioneering and really found his role, and that's truly amazing for independent dancers in China now," says Tanzhou Dorje, a 56-year-old folk dance professor at the university for 30 years, who taught Wanma Jiancuo and considered him one of his best students.

In 2003, Wanma Jiancuo founded his dance studio, Beijing City Shepherd Studio, together with four like-minded friends. Like many independent artists, besides choreographing dances for the studio, they also made shows for companies and governmental events to make ends meet.

In 2011, Wanma Jiancuo stayed in Yunnan province for several months to create a dance show for a tourism company.

"Those dances require interaction with the audiences. Dancers would step off stage and communicate with audiences through their dancing. However, what I want in my own work is not like that," he says.

"Dancers and audiences are equal. I don't want the dancers to serve the audiences. I want something abstract, leaving a space for the audiences to think and imagine."

As a veteran dancer and choreographer, he has another crucial mission — cultivating young Tibetan dancers, who will carry on his ideas.

Laba Zaxi, a 21-year-old Tibetan dancer, won a gold award at Seoul International Dance Competition 2012 for his performance in *Silent Marnyi Stone*, a dance work choreographed by Wanma Jiancuo.

"He can barely speak Mandarin but when he dances, you can feel what he wants to say," Wanma Jiancuo says. "I am glad that the young Tibetan generation is passionate about its culture. Though urbanization and globalization influence them and they wear hip-hop clothes and dye their hair, they still reserve a respectful place in their hearts for Tibetan culture."

On an express train to stardom

By CHEN NAN
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Singer-songwriter Qu Wanting says she lacks nothing if she has music in her life.

The 28-year-old has released her debut studio album, *Everything in the World*, in Beijing. It contains 16 Chinese and English songs, written and composed by her in the past seven years.

The skinny, chic young lady's voice ranges from husky and mature, to high and powerful. Her talent attracted Terry McBride, CEO and co-founder of the Network Music Group, which owns Canada's largest independent record label, Nettwerk Productions.

Qu first caught McBride's attention when she sent him an e-mail of demos. He was immediately captivated by the honesty of the lyrics and the authentic music.

"She has the wonderful ability to seamlessly blend the cultures of East with the melodies of the West," says McBride, a veteran manager, who helped establish a number of big-name stars, such as Sarah McLachlan, Avril Lavigne and Coldplay. In 2009, Qu became the first singer-songwriter from Asia signed by Nettwerk Productions.

"Wanting's music is borderless. One of the best parts about her is she writes her own music, which makes her voice connected with the lyrics and tunes," says McBride, who came to Beijing for Qu's album release.

Her energetic pop songs like *Admit and Life is Like a Song* and love ballads, like *Drenched* and *You Exist in My Song*, which were recorded for the soundtrack of movie, *Love in the Buff* — directed by Pang Hochen and starring Miriam Yeung and Shawn Yue — have enabled Qu to become one of the most promising Chinese singer-songwriters this summer.

Her national tour will kick off in Shanghai on Sept 15 and will take her to other cities like Beijing, Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

"I've been hoping to be recognized by others and kept on trying to improve my music. The process might be tortuous, but when you want something badly and make great efforts for it, you'll be magically rewarded," Qu says.

Born in Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang province, Qu started to sing before she could even talk. Her mother recalls: "You would know when she was awake because she'd be singing the theme song from the Chinese TV series *Undercover Cop*, loudly in bed, to the ceiling, every morning."

Due to her good sense of music, her mother bought her a piano when she was 6. But music was never considered a career for Qu.

At 16, Qu's mother sent her to study international business in Canada. The loneliness of a strange environment and adolescent rebellion made her unhappy. It didn't take long, however, before she realized her true passion and dream was to become an influential recording artist.

She taught herself to play the guitar and tried to write her first song, *To Markus*, which was dedicated to her then-boyfriend.

In 2005, she started her band, The Wanting Band, and sang at clubs and restaurants. "My mum didn't want me to pursue music as a career, just like she hated my boyfriend then," Qu says. "So everything about realizing my music dream was secret then."

She went on to earn her business degree, but also tried her hand at songwriting in both Chinese and English and began performing in the Toronto area. She relocated to Vancouver, continuing to write and perform at events. It was there that she caught the attention of Network Music Group.

She is a productive songwriter and is preparing for her second album.

It seems that Qu is on an express train to musical fame, but says she hopes to hop off that train at some point in the future.

"Before I signed the contract, I felt confused and even thought about giving up. I didn't know where I was heading," she says. "Now I've released the first album and received some attention, I am still the person I started out and I believe I will stay the same."



Qu Wanting is one of the country's most promising singer-songwriters.