

# YOUTH

## Pole star leads the way

A new breed of dancers and athletes help to elevate a once stigmatized art form into a growing fitness trend, **Xing Wen** reports.

The music rings out, starting with a cacophony of gongs, cymbals and bamboo clappers, as a topless, handsome man in long, red silk trousers steps on stage. After performing some stylized movements reminiscent of Peking Opera, the dancer leaps onto a vertical pole, spins gracefully, then suddenly flips himself upside down, scissoring his legs to perform the splits. Testing every sinew of his chiseled musculature, he whirls, spins, crouches and flies, alternating between the two silver poles, rippling with the vigor of a man in the prime of his life.

The dancer, Jiang Lei, 28, through this athletic display of control and strength, is trying to tell the beautiful, yet sad, story of Cheng Dieyi, a fictional Peking Opera performer with an obsession for both the art and his love — a bittersweet tale based on the role played by Leslie Cheung in the popular movie, *Farewell My Concubine*. This unique interpretation won Jiang the top prize at the second China Pole Sports Championships, which took place in Beijing on July 14.

"I want to combine the skills of pole sports with elements of traditional opera and classical dance to express specific plots and the character's feelings within them," says the pole sports athlete.

Once a student of classical dance at Taiyuan Normal University, Jiang felt that he could not compete with his classmates, so he made the decision to move on to a fresh genre, jazz dance, in 2012. It was at the jazz dance studio where he was exposed to the physically-challenging art of pole dancing,



Jiang Lei, a 28-year-old pole sports athlete, performs at the 2019 China Pole Sports Championships on July 14.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

which, in his own words, gave his career a new lease of life.

"Because male pole dancers are scarce in China, to improve the gender balance, I was persuaded by my instructor to climb onto a pole and try to pull off some of my tricks and turns," he recalls.

From then on, Jiang spent his lunch breaks in the studio practicing spins, climbs and hangs using a pole, all while hiding his newfound passion from his friends and family.

"At that time, it was easy for them to associate pole dancing with strippers at late night establishments," says Jiang. "I just wanted to avoid any potential misunderstanding and judgment."

Fortunately, pole dancing has enjoyed a boost to its public profile

and popularity as an effective aerobic workout thanks to its introduction in dance studios, gyms and leisure centers since the early 2000s. Its proponents have strenuously campaigned to remove the sex-related stigma from pole dancing and promote it as a sport by enriching the variety of its movements and techniques and by creating scoring and judging criteria.

In 2009, the International Pole Sports Federation was founded by Katie Coates, a British pole dancing instructor, with the aim of providing opportunities for individuals to develop and realize their potential within all aspects of the sport, regardless of their age, background, ability or disability. After years of efforts, the IPSF passed a milestone

in 2017, when it was granted membership of the Global Association of International Sports Federations.

China has also embraced this emerging fitness trend that combines acrobatics and dance, when the Chinese branch of the IPSF was set up in August 2017 and the first China Pole Sports Championships was held last May in Beijing.

Jiang is just one beneficiary of these endeavors.

He became the first professional Chinese pole athlete to participate in an international pole sports competition in 2016. Now an accomplished pole performer, he has since visited Japan, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom to attend competitions, which has far exceeded the young man's expectations when he took his first tentative spins around the pole all those years ago.

"I have become more willing to share this hobby with others and I would like to change people's negative perceptions of pole dancing," says Jiang who regularly posts videos on platforms such as Kuaishou.

He now runs a pole fitness center in Changsha, Hunan province, where nearly 20 students aged between 13 and 50 learn how to grip the vertical pole with their arms and legs and safely execute the moves.

"I hope I can break people's stereotype of the sport by getting them closer to it. To me, it's an expressive art that combines strength and beauty," he says.

Chen Yu, 24, also a contestant in the recent contest, was guided into the world of pole sports by Jiang.

Last summer, purely by chance, Chen discovered that a regional pole sports event was being held near her home in Chengdu.

Out of curiosity, she sneaked in and caught the sight of Jiang, who was in the middle of performing an intricate maneuver, hooking the pole with his legs and spinning elegantly.

"His firm and well-defined muscles were so impressive to me, a plump and unfit woman at that time," recalls Chen who was then a music performance major at the Sichuan University of Culture and Arts.

She went to talk with Jiang about how he achieved such a toned physique

and they exchanged contact details. Encouraged by Jiang, she joined a local studio last August.

"To be frank, I found the training quite rigorous, as it required a high level of both upper body and core strength," she says. "However, an overwhelming sense of fulfillment would come to me after I tried and succeeded in performing a new trick, and that's what spurred me on."

In that way, Chen has learned, step by step, the fundamentals of the art, such as how to slide down the pole correctly and perfecting techniques to arch her body backward.

During the process, she lost more than 15 kilograms and, more importantly, she has learned how to exercise properly, enjoy a healthier diet and improve her quality of sleep.

"I feel more confident, especially when I beat my male friends in arm wrestling matches," she jokes.

She says that, compared to more widely recognized sports, the international competitions in pole sports are more accessible for both professional and amateur athletes alike, as the sport is just taking off.

Shi Xi, a Beijing-based office worker who took up pole sports in 2015, says that the rising number of dance studios offering pole classes over the past four years demonstrates the growing popularity of the fitness form.

As a regular gymgoer, she points out that she can often attain a more effective workout on the pole than by using the normal gym facilities. Shi also adds that the sport allows her to keep fit, while at the same time harnessing her feminine charm.

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Chen Yu, 24, has become more confident and physically healthier after a year of pole sports training.

## Competition lauds the oldest swinger in town

By XING WEN

Almost immediately after the second China Pole Sports Championships wrapped up on July 14, a video posted with the title "73-year-old granny performing pole dancing" became a trending topic on Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent to Twitter.

People's comments on the video, in which septuagenarian Dai Dali performed spins, hangs and inversions with a pole at the championship, are full of praise for the woman's radiant face, curvy figure and brisk moves.

"I'm glad to see these positive

comments, which shows that people have become more open-minded and no longer judge pole dancing or pole sports," Dai says.

This is not the first time that Dai has found herself in the public eye. She once competed in *Asia's Got Talent* and later was invited to perform on the American TV show, *Little Big Shots: Forever Young*, hosted by Steve Harvey.

Wherever she performs on the pole, Dai, who's always stayed young at heart, often elicits a standing ovation from her audience.

The Chengdu native has regularly attended a gym to keep fit and pass

the time since her retirement, and that's where she took up pole dancing nine years ago, making use of facilities the gym had for pole sports enthusiasts to practice.

"There are several poles installed in the gym," recalls Dai.

"Initially, I had no concept of the sport; I tried it just for fun."

"Later, I found I was really into the feeling of swinging all the way around the pole."

For an elderly beginner like her, though, it wasn't easy to keep up with other, younger learners. She regularly suffered from physical exhaustion and from painful fric-

tion burns from the pole.

Dai, however, seems to have a spirit of iron and developed her habit of striving for perfection in her youth. Despite the bruises on her thighs, she was determined to try out more new tricks and test her ability by heading to a pole dancing studio, sometimes as often as four times a week.

With years of persistence, she found that, apart from enriching her life after retirement, the fitness form has benefited many other aspects of her life.

"I seldom suffer from tendon inflammation and lower back pain

now," she says. "I have also become less shy, more talkative and willing to share my experience with others."

Ren Fei, head of the Chinese branch of the International Pole Sports Federation that organized the recent championship, says that Dai, as the oldest amateur pole athlete in China, has already been invited to perform at the annual event twice. Ren explains that Dai's skill shows the public that it is not a dangerous or difficult sport only suited to young people in prime physical shape, and encourages people not to be put off by negative perceptions about pole sports.

"I also hope that Dai's story will encourage young people to be brave enough to deal with the frustrations and pressures they might encounter in their daily lives," Ren adds.



Dai Dali, 73, practices pole dance as a way of staying young and energetic. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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