

Left: A handwritten manuscript collected by Hu Chongjun in Shennongjia, Hubei Province. Above: Hu Chongjun visits local people to collect folk songs.

NOTE From Xinhua and staff

BEIJING Words of hope

The editorial board of the colossal picture album "Chinese Landscapes" has collected "words of hope," which show support for the Chinese mainland's peaceful reunification with Taiwan...

GUANGZHOU Solo exhibit

Zhao Huasheng, an artist specializing in painting large-sized political figures and scientists, is holding a solo exhibition in South China's Guangdong Province.

Chinese creation epic in spotlight

'The Story of Darkness' may be the Genesis of the Han people, experts say

By YU NAN China Daily staff

"The Story of Darkness," compiled by Hu Chongjun, published by the Changjiang Art Publishing House, 18 yuan (US\$2.2)

"The universe was once nothing but gas and looked like a dark egg. After millions of years, a man named Jiang Gu created water."

Researchers in China have long wondered why China, one of the four ancient civilizations that include Babylon, India and Egypt, didn't have its own epic creation story of the world.

But with the publication of "The Story of Darkness," by the Changjiang Art Publishing House later this month, a myth

based on newly gathered folklore, will fill in the blanks, since it is now recognized by many as an epic of the Han people.

At 5,500 lines, the epic vividly integrates a series of Chinese mythologies which begins from chaotic state and progresses into a creation of human beings.

"This epic can be defined as the Han Chinese Genesis story and will contribute to the study of Chinese mythology," said Liu Shouyi in his preface for the book.

"The Story of Darkness" will also enrich the multi-ethnic culture of China and add a new title to the list of ethnic epics in the country, including "Gesar" of the Tibetans, "Jianggar" of the Mongolians and "Manas" of the Kirgizes.

"Then a dewdrop grew up steadily and finally was small"

lowed by a man named 'Langdangzi.' He died after he ate the dewdrop and his body was separated into five pieces, which turned into the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Thus, seas and mountains appeared..."

For Hu Chongjun, who collected stories for the epic, the publication of "Darkness" is the culmination of 20 years of work, ever since he accidentally discovered a hand-written manuscript in Shennongjia, in Central China's Hubei Province, in the early 1980s.

Working at the local culture centre of Shennongjia, Hu took to collecting local folk songs.

In August of 1982, Hu was visiting an old local farmer's house when he was handed a booklet.

Written with brush and Chinese ink, the booklet looked like a song book, with about 3,000 lines of seven Chinese characters each. Reading the tales, he found himself reading familiar Chinese mythologies of primeval times.

Hu had heard that local people used to sing folk songs and beat drums when somebody died. The libretto they were chanting spoke of legends for the creation of the universe, the world and human beings which sounded eerily similar to the copy he found.

"Pan Gu, who was born in the Kunlun Mountains, took up a broad axe and wielded it with all his might to crack open the dark egg."

"The light clear part of the egg floated up and formed the heavens, the cold, turbid matter stayed below to form earth."

"Pan Gu stood in the middle with his head touching the sky and his feet planted in the earth. The heavens and the earth began to grow little by little every day, and Pan Gu grew along with them."

Hu began to study and gather the manuscript. Soon the first copy of the ballad of

"Darkness" collection

Liu Shouyi, a professor at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at East China Normal University, read the manuscript and expressed his interest in the oral form.

Encouraged by Liu, Hu started to search for old manuscripts

and earned a meager living around the corner of Shennongjia. He visited about 200 old singers and finally found four copies of "Darkness" and noted their different versions.

In 1982, Hu started to collect the overall collection of "Darkness" and published it by Hubei Education Press. The collection attracted great attention from experts inside and outside China.

Yuan Ke, an eminent scholar in Chinese mythology who died last year in Beijing, carefully studied the original materials and supported Liu's suggestion that "Darkness" is a folk epic.

Yuan said that the discovery of "Darkness" could be regarded a historic event in the folklore history of the Han people.

Meanwhile, Yuan suggested that some people should further study the different versions and rearrange with care and caution, the manuscripts into an integrated epic, without ruining its original flavour.

"After thousands of years, the sky was higher, the earth thicker, and Pan Gu stood between them like a pillar so that they would never join again."

"When Pan Gu died, his breath became the wind and clouds; his voice the rolling thunder."

Hu was the best man for the job of compiling this massive epic.

It took Hu nine years before he finally finished his collection. With 5,500 lines, the new edition was the best of the many different versions, com-

as published in a Shennongjia.

Many experts were worried that the new edition may have changed the original words and plots.

But Liu, who has read most of the original material, said in his preface, "So far, the content of this edition is the richest one. Compared with other versions, this edition is more beautiful and is in the linguistic style."

"Pan Gu's one eye became the sun and the other the moon. His body and limbs turned into five big mountains and his blood formed the roaring water. His veins became far-stretching roads and his muscles fertile land."

"The imperishable stars in the sky came from his hair and beard, and the flowers and trees from his skin and the fine hairs on his body. His marrow turned into jade and pearls. His sweat flowed like the good rain and sweet dew that nurtured all things on earth."

The same year, 16 publishing houses competed to buy the copyrights to "The Story of Darkness" before the Beijing-based Hualian Publishing House in Beijing finally won the competition.

But due to financial problems, the publishing house delayed the publication of "Darkness" year after year.

In 2000, Zhou Baiyi, publisher of the Changjiang Arts Publishing House met Hu Chongjun in Shennongjia and asked about the book.

When Zhou discovered that such a valuable book was still shelved after five years, he persuaded Hu to end his former contract and gave rights to his publishing house.

In 2001, Hu signed a new contract with Changjiang Art Publishing House and went to Wuhan for some final corrections. The final edition of "The Story of Darkness" would finally see the light of day.

"I believe the book's publication will spark a strong response from both readers and the re-

searchers," Zhou said.

One of the most frequently-asked questions will be why such manuscripts survived in Shennongjia.

Located in the remote north-western part of Hubei Province, Shennongjia National Nature Reserve has arguably the wildest scenery.

The name for the area was translated as "Shennong's Ladder" to commemorate a legendary emperor, Shennong, believed to be the forefather of traditional Chinese herbal medicine and agriculture.

As part of a more modern legend, Shennongjia is also known for the sightings of wild, ape-like creatures — the Chinese equivalent of the Himalaya Yeti or the North American Bigfoot.

Above all, the place has been considered the confluent point of the Ba culture, an ancient state in the eastern part of what is now Sichuan Province and the Chu, a powerful state more than 2,000 years ago that covered today's Hubei and Hunan provinces.

Some funeral singers said the oral form of "Darkness" could date back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907).

Some reports said "Darkness" already had a wood copy in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Some elderly people in Shennongjia claim that they had once seen it. But Hu couldn't find that copy.

Hu said that the mountains and nature have protected it from modernization and enabled "Darkness" to be handed down from one generation after another.

"Until Pan Gu's death, there were no human beings but only lords. The endless fights between lords enmeshed the whole world with evils. Monstrous floods came to wash all evils away and carried a big gourd that protected a brother Fuxi and his sister Nuwa inside."

"They got married and gave birth to all the lords who then created human beings."

'Guangzhou Tonight' runs every night

GUANGZHOU: The third round of "Guangzhou Tonight," an annual art performance that started in 2000, spins off in late April and will run year round.

The shows, performed either by top-notch foreign or home-grown art groups, dancing, spoken drama, Cantonese Opera, music concerts, acrobatics and puppet shows.

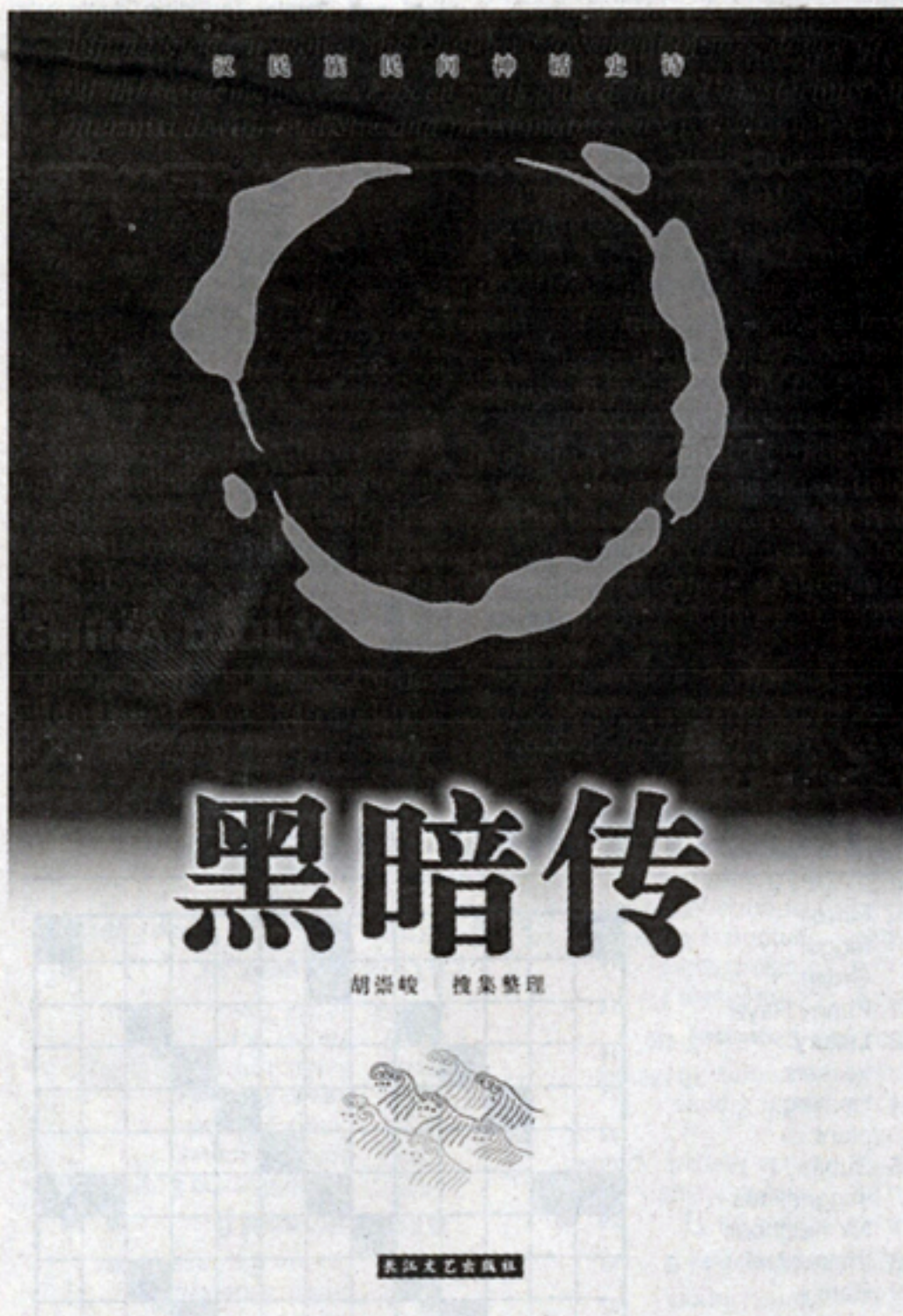
More than 100 performances are expected. Among those showcased is the innovative remake of "Turandot," a ballet version of the famed opera by the Guangzhou Ballet Company. Also featured is the frenetic comeback of acrobatics by the Guangzhou Acrobatics Group which translates thrilling traditional acrobatics into a modern show.

Cantonese Opera buffis will savour a number of new repertoires like "Flower Moonlight and Shadow," "Assassin," and "Princess," which are performed by local Cantonese performance groups.

Art groups outside Guangzhou will show their skills, among them are China Central Ballet, China Children's Drama Theatre and the Shanghai Circus.

Imported performances include a pop violin concert by Vanessa Mae, the string quartet Bond from the UK, James Last Orchestra and Broadway shows.

China Daily news



The cover of "The Story of Darkness"

CLASSICAL MELODY, CONTEMPORARY RHYTHM & PULSING VITALITY, TOUCHING EXPRESSION, UNIFIED VARIATION & OVERWHELMING PASSION, EVERY ELEMENT COMES INTO THE GREAT TURKISH DANCE, WHOSE CULTURAL HISTORY DATES BACK 10,000 YEARS.

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All these elements have been well mixed into a mysterious and romantic illusion intermixed with realistic and passionate glory...

SULTANS of the DANCE

Time: 7:30 pm, April 26 and 27, 2002 Venue: The Great Hall of the People Price: RMB200, 300, 400, 600, 800, 1,000, 1,500

Organizers:

Poly Culture & Art Co., Ltd. Beijing Xiandaren Culture & Communication Co, Ltd China National Precision Machinery Import & Export Corporation

Media Assistance:

Beijing TV Station, Legend Universal Film & TV, Pepsi Universal Music and China Daily

Information Inquiry:

67193922/23/24, 67179177, 67123358, 65958497, 65065345

Official Airlines: Turkish Airlines

Official Hotel: Beijing Grand View Garden Hotel