

# Poetry then, songs now

Composer Gu Jianfen launches tour of colleges. Chen Nan reports.

Over the past six decades, Gu Jianfen has emerged as one of the country's most prolific composers, with hundreds of songs, including *The Kiss From Mother*, *Missing* and *Young Friends Come Together*. She has also mentored pop stars, such as Na Ying and Mao Amin. But now Gu is looking for new challenges.

"I have had many offers to write pop songs but I turned them down. I want to do other things," says Gu, 82.

Since 2005, she has composed 50 songs with classical literature as lyrics that are meant to deepen the understanding of traditional culture among children and the youth.

*San Zi Jing*, or *The Three-Character Classic*, a 13th-century text for children on Confucian philosophy, and *Di Zi Gui*, or *Standards for Being a Good Pupil and Child*, written in the 17th century about Confucius' teachings, have been turned into songs. Many ancient poems, including *A Spring Morning* and *A Traveler's Song* by two Tang Dynasty (618-907) poets have also been made into songs.

The China Oriental Performing Arts Group will perform many of the songs in Beijing on May 31. Ahead of the Beijing concert, Gu and the group launched a tour of Northeast China on April 15. The performers sang songs composed by Gu in college campuses, including Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin Engineering University, Heilongjiang University and Northeast Forestry University.

"I hope the songs will be included in educational material in schools. This could be my final contribution," says Gu.

Gu got the idea of combining traditional Chinese text with music more than a decade ago when a friend told her that children here have few choices in music — "they either listen to pop songs for adults or songs from cartoon films".

"Music is important for the development of a person, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood. As a younger mother, I wanted my children to listen to good music," she adds.

Gu started her project with six Tang poems. Then, after she met a girl who was recording a song adapted from *A Traveler's Song* in a studio in 2005, she decided to work on such compositions even more.

"When the 6-year-old told



Veteran composer Gu Jianfen instructs children who will perform her songs based on classical literature. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY



Performers sing songs composed by Gu at the rehearsal hall of the China Oriental Performing Arts Group in Beijing.

“**Music is important for the development of a person, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood.**”

Gu Jianfen, veteran composer

me her grandmother has read the poem to her many times and she knows what the poem is about, I thought I should continue with the project," says Gu. "These traditional texts contain Chinese philosophy, culture and history, all great material for education."

While composing the songs, Gu went through a tough time — her husband and daughter died in 2016. Gu then suffered from depression and stopped working for a year.

"I underwent medical treatment but I knew it was music that would heal me. When I sat down in front of the piano to compose, I felt better," says Gu.

She says her late husband

and daughter had been supportive of the project, and she doesn't want to let them down by not going through with it.

Born in the Japanese city of Osaka, Gu returned to China with her parents in 1942. She loved music from childhood and her parents bought her a piano when she was 10.

In 1955, Gu graduated from Liaoning province's Shenyang Conservatory of Music and started working as a composer for the China National Song & Dance Ensemble, which was then known as the Central Song and Dance Ensemble.

She has been writing pop songs since the early 1980s. *Young Friends Come Together*, released in 1980, has been

incorporated by UNESCO into its music teaching material for the Asia-Pacific in 1983.

At the fourth international pop music festival held in 1987 in Belgrade, Gu's work — *The Green Leaves' Love for the Root* — performed by pop star Mao Amin there, won the third prize, the highest award a Chinese pop song received at a global event then.

As a member of the National Committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, she has used her image to raise awareness about copyright protection for musicians.

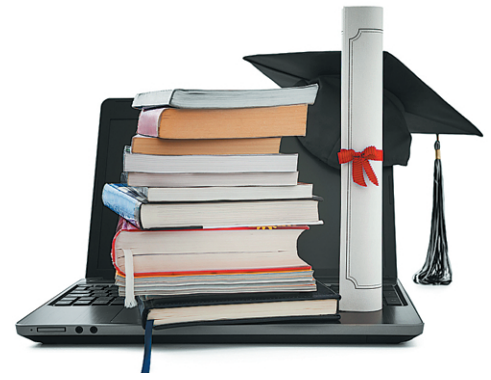
Song Guanlin, the general manager for the China Oriental Performing Arts Group, says when he visited Gu to discuss the project, she told him that he should know promoting songs for children would be hard.

"The music market is dominated by commercial pop. Few companies want to invest in children's music, which is not profitable. The situation is disappointing but Gu never gave up the idea," says Song.

In 2005, the China Oriental Performing Arts Group was formed after the merger of two national platforms for singers and dancers — the China National Song & Dance Ensemble, set up in 1952, and the China Oriental Song & Dance Ensemble, founded a decade later.

"Some young, talented people in our group will perform in the concert. They will turn Gu's compositions into a reality on the stage. It's a great honor for them to perform," he adds.

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## Survey: US online learners more likely to complete lessons

SAN FRANCISCO — A study indicates that a simple writing activity, lasting about eight minutes, increased completion rates for people from individualistic, but not collectivist, cultures among those taking online learning courses.

Online learning has surged in recent years with the proliferation of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, which provide learners of all educational, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to glean knowledge from experts and scholars around the globe.

While more than 58 million people have enrolled in MOOCs between 2011 and 2016, according to researchers who published their findings in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, course completion rates are only about 10 percent, and just 25 percent for learners categorized as "highly committed".

Rene Kizilcec, a Stanford University doctoral candidate in communication and the study's lead author, and Geoffrey Cohen, a professor at Stanford's graduate school of education and department of psychology and the study's co-author, cite a lack of external or social pressure to complete courses and little support or guidance as reasons for high attrition in MOOCs.

By analyzing individualist cultures, such as the United States, and collectivist cultures, their study involved 18,000 participants from more than 80 countries who enrolled in two Stanford online courses.

"Educational researchers have studied students either by observing them in classrooms or through controlled laboratory experiments," says Kizilcec.

"For the first time, we have a lab in an authentic learning environment with large and diverse groups of people participating."

Built on Kizilcec's prior research, which shows the benefits of psychological intervention strategies to

support online learners based on their socioeconomic status, they devised a two-part writing activity based on a psychological strategy that involves weighing positive outcomes against obstacles in the way and identifying ways to overcome those obstacles.

First, participants wrote about two positive outcomes and two obstacles regarding their online course.

Second, they crafted "if-then" plans for overcoming the obstacles. For example, "If I'm too tired to study after work, then I'll make coffee."

When examining the entire data set, Kizilcec and Cohen found that the writing activity had no substantive effect.

But when they analyzed the effect along cultural lines, they saw that learners in individualistic cultures were more likely to complete the course following the intervention.

By contrast, learners in collectivist cultures did not benefit at all from the intervention.

In addition, they found a specific group of online learners that benefited the most: online learners from individualist countries dealing with easily surmountable obstacles, such as work or family obligations.

Those learners were 78 percent more likely to complete the course following the intervention.

But when dealing with practical constraints such as no internet connection or a lack of time, the intervention did not have an effect.

"If you're in a less-developed country and the internet is out for two or three days, there's not much you can do, even if you plan ahead," Kizilcec was quoted as saying in a news release from Stanford on April 17.

The findings support the need for tailored online education strategies based on cultural backgrounds and are expected to help millions of learners worldwide.

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International Education Column

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