



Paul Just and Chloe Hurst of the Yang Zuhe duo perform on popular TV talent show, *Star Way*.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

MY CHINA DREAM | PAUL JUST AND CHLOE HURST

Fabulous foreign talent

He's from the United States, she's from Canada, and they sang their way into the hearts of their Chinese fans. **Valerie Ng** finds out why this operatic duo is looking forward to more in China.

Few foreign artistes have captured the imagination of an appreciative audience like Yang Zuhe, or the Western Ensemble as they call themselves. They left an indelible impression on many Chinese hearts when they took part in the earthy grassroots talent quest program, *Xingguang Dadao*, or *Star Way*, by the China national television station CCTV.

Paul Just and Chloe Hurst were one of the highlights of the finals this year on the third day of the Spring Festival holidays. They did not win China's most popular talent quest program on television, but they sang *I Love You, China*, and an extract from *The White-haired Girl*, two numbers that are familiar to all Chinese.

The audience was won over by their perfect enunciation and heartfelt delivery.

Yet, both admit that they don't speak a word of Chinese, and that their singing careers in China are on hold at the moment, as they sort out their futures.

Just, who received his training at St. John's University in Minnesota, is getting married in August and currently busy planning his wedding and honeymoon. He is also involved with some projects and a few auditions.

Hurst is busy with a concert version of Vincenzo Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, and preparing for her lecture series that will begin in September. She has a master's degree in music from the University of British Columbia in her native Canada.

But back in China, there are many who still remember their legendary performance in the finals of the *Star Way* program. They came, they impressed, and they conquered hearts. And if things go right, they may be back soon to wow more fans.

Just and Hurst first came to China in January 2011 for a concert in Hunan province. The duo ended up staying a year, culminating in a performance on *Star Way*, where they had the audience cheering them on as they competed against local contestants.

"It's incredible to think that we have such adoring fans who have supported us from the beginning, especially since we are from so far away and completely unknown," says Just, in an e-mail reply. "We thank each and every one of our fans for their support while we were on the show and even today!"

Star Way has enjoyed sky-high ratings since its debut in 2005. The program offers a channel for grassroots talent to showcase their songs, dances and other unusual skills,

and it also provides a platform where foreign contestants get a fighting chance at fame.

Yang Zuhe became *Star Way*'s December champions and earned themselves a place in the finals. Their superb rendition of *I Love You, China* and an excerpt from the iconic revolutionary opera *White-Haired Girl* had the audience on its feet.

"My favorite role was the character Xier in *White-Haired Girl*. I also enjoyed singing *I Love You, China*, because I got to connect with the audience on a personal level through the beautiful lyrics," says Hurst.

Yang Zuhe was brought to China by North Star Performing Arts Management.

The duo members were classmates doing their master's degrees at the University of British Columbia and were already performing as a duo in Canada. A mutual friend introduced them to the talent scouts.

"North Star heard us perform at a concert in 2010 and signed us up," Just says. The talent company came up with the idea of Yang Zuhe and brought them to China. The rest is history.

The duo first performed in Hunan province on a cultural exchange concert organized by North Star, where they pulled off a mix of traditional Chinese music, Chinese pop and Western opera. Following that, they shuttled between Canada and Beijing to take part in the *Star Way* auditions and contest.

Their first duet on air was *Juhuatai* (Chrysanthemum Balcony), which also happens to be Just's favorite.

Sheer hard work with the coaches at North Star pushed them to the *Star Way* finals, where they were ranked sixth in the formidable competition.

"Since they did not know any Chinese, it was extremely challenging to help them understand and interpret classical poems and lyrics," says Joan Yang Liqiong, their language and cultural coach.

"I tried to translate every character, word, and then sentences, and finally explain the whole poem to them. Some Chinese rhetoric is difficult for singers to understand," adds



Star Way host Bi Fujian (left) and the duo on the show.

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Yang, who lectures in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia.

Language was not the only challenge. The differences in culture also posed difficulties in the way the duo interprets the songs.

"Initially, Paul was puzzled that in *White-Haired Girl*, when the father comes home after a long separation, the father and daughter did not hug, like how Westerners would. We had to explain to them that in traditional Chinese culture, a man and woman don't hug each other even if they're father and daughter," says Liu Zhenyu, the North Star director and voice trainer who selected their repertoire.

"We worked hard to ensure that their performance was truly authentic. The audience must feel they've grasped the essence of both song and music."

The strategy worked. As soon as Yang Zuhe sang the first notes, the audience started clapping.

They came backstage, they hung outside the studio, outside the main door and they wanted autographs, and a photo with Yang Zuhe.

"They cheered and applauded anywhere and everywhere. In Canada, the United States and Europe, audiences are more reserved. Another thing that sticks in my mind is the attention from the people backstage. I feel like I must have had my photo taken at least a thousand times," Just recalls.

One of Yang Zuhe's fans, nicknamed "Call a Spade a Spade," wrote on a *Star Way* fan blog online: "I fell in love with the program because of Yang Zuhe. The pair's singing skill is so marvelous, they can perform different styles of songs quite well. Another trait that attracts me is, you can feel that they're fully immersed in the characters of the opera (referring to *White-Haired Girl*)."

Even Bi Fujian, the seasoned host of *Star Way*, was very impressed. He says Yang Zuhe amazes him because of their versatile singing talent.

"Not many foreign contestants can master Chinese songs ranging from folk to pop songs like they can," he says.

Performing in China has been an exciting journey for Yang Zuhe, where they learned not only a new language, but Chinese music, food and history.

"It was an experience both of us are so thankful to have had. It has opened our eyes to a whole new world of knowledge and opportunity, to understand more about such a fascinating place," Just says. He adds North Star is currently in talks to secure some contracts in China. If the plans come true, many of their fans will be made very happy.

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Sun Li and Matt Erspamer contributed to the story.

It's ladies first for me even in an age of equality

Since the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, at least, the tradition of helping women and children first in an emergency has been part of the rescuer's creed.

The torrential rain that poured down on Beijing recently was like a raging sluice. Thousands were at risk and unfortunately some perished in the rising waters. Commendations went out because of the heroic actions of the many that saved hundreds of people from drowning.

But in today's age of equality does the tradition of "women and children first" still apply? Giving children the priority is a no-



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brainer — sure there are some kids who have the wits and common sense to pull themselves out of a predicament, but with four grandparents and two parents looking after their every need, chances are the average child in China couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag unless *nainai* (granny) opened the sack for them.

A series of media photos of the flood showed a scene where students were evacuated from a military training center in the Fangshan district of Beijing. Each middle-schooler was carried individually by a soldier through the knee high waters while students held onto a bottle of water and snack bag given to ease the trauma of the journey. If only some quick thinking individual from the military administrators ordered the students to wade through the waters as a training exercise instead, they could justify charging parents extra for an authentic boot camp experience.

It's easy to see why women were perceived as needing help in Victorian times. Not only were they not allowed to attend university, vote, or keep property but 20 kg of undergarments and dresses with bustles dragging behind them handicapped normal movement let alone kicking down a door to escape a room on fire. These days, not only can a woman get a degree and run for office, she can wear exactly the same outfit as a man or in many cases — a whole lot less.

And since the 80's when Jane Fonda led a revolution to whip middle class women into aerobic shape, it's realistically and politically incorrect to describe them as the weaker sex. There are millions of women who crunch abs, twist themselves daily into the "feathered peacock" pose and run weekly marathons; Herculean women who can single-handedly take down an intruder with one blow.

But what about the delicate reprobrates like me? Those of us who with good intentions buy a work-out DVD at Christmas only to ignore it every day, the plastic shrink-film wrapping still intact. I'd like to think that if a situation ever erupted, all my years in China has prepared me for the emergency. Like a two-for-one soybean oil special at the hyper-mart, I would charge into the scrum and backed by my six hamster-powered strength, cut to the front of the line. There I'd be waiting for the chivalrous nature of my rescuer to put me ahead of the pot-bellied guy waving a bag of money in his face. Note to self — always carry extra cash, lots of it.

So should women and children still be given priority in an emergency? Children — yes, but how do we separate the gender-neutral aspects of the feminist woman over the panicky feebleness of women like myself? It's easy ladies, for those of you who want to be treated equally, please step aside, as for me — I've got a lifeboat to catch.

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