



A figure rises with the flames of a Phoenix. — All photos by Ti Gong

Dressing up in folk characters brings ancient legends to life

Ke Jiayun

In the South China Sea, there is a clan of Jiaoren, or Chinese mermaids, whose teardrops become pearls after they fall. To the north of Kunlun Mountains, there's a monster called Xiangliu, which has nine heads with human faces but the body of a serpent.

These magic creatures from the ancient book of mythical legends "Shan Hai Jing," or "The Classic of Mountains and Seas," which inspired JK Rowling for her "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them" series, now are brought back to life by two young women using beautiful makeup and costumes.

Zhang Xin, 26, who learned painting as a child, said she started dressing up for photo series to commemorate the days she spent with her grandma.

Every night before she went to sleep, her grandma told her stories in "Shan Hai Jing."

"I remember, especially in the summer nights, my grandma stayed outside to enjoy the breeze," Zhang said. "She sat on a rocking chair while I counted the stars and listened to her stories."

These stories opened her mind to an imaginative world with fantastic creatures.

Prior to her "Shan Hai Jing" tour, Zhang mainly drew illustrations for children.

To design the makeup and look, she checked documents and combined the images with the appearance of animals.

She used various means and materials to make the items look like horns or tails.

"I used to make horns with



Zhang Xin, dressed in *hanfu*, or traditional Chinese clothing, is poised to take photos.

clay by hand or with 3D printing technology," Zhang said. "I also used real yak horns. It's difficult to fix them onto the head and face of models, as they will drop. So it takes a long time."

She chooses places whose geographical conditions meet the descriptions of the creatures for photos.

"For instance, some creatures live in areas surrounded by rocks, so I will try to find such place," she said.

She once carried a large piece of glass and climbed up a mountain for six hours. Another time, her car broke down in a desert at night.

"Once when crossing a river, the water rose up halfway and I nearly got stuck," she recalled. "Another time when I climbed a snowy mountain, I found I didn't wear enough clothes; It was really freezing."

Recently, Zhang is working on another two photo series about the 24 solar terms and Chinese food.

"I'm happy that more and more people are now paying attention to and falling in love with traditional Chinese culture," she said.

According to Zhang, there are also many foreigners showing interest in the "mysterious" Eastern culture, so she hopes that her works can attract more of them to the Chinese classic.

"In the future, I will create more works on traditional culture," she said. "Besides photos, now I have turned the stories of 'Shan Hai Jing' into stage plays and installation art. I think the traditional culture and arts have infinite possibilities."

Another mythical creature player Jia Ling from Zhangjiagang, Jiangsu Province, has also created a series of "Shan Hai Jing" videos and photos with two of her friends, Xiang Yang and Da Ke, from Shenyang, Liaoning Province.

The trio, born in the 1980s and 1990s, spent about three years traveling to 82 cities across China filming the series.

While Jia dresses up as the mythical creatures, gods and goddesses, Xiang does research, writes scripts to make the difficult classical Chinese content understandable to the public and dubs the videos. Da is in charge of filming and editing.

"Shan Hai Jing' is so beautiful," said Xiang. "Its rich content and geographical records are beyond our imagination. We think such treasure