

LIFE



Dancing in step with history

Masterpieces, from paintings to bronze wares, brought to life through the performing arts, **Wang Kaihao** reports.

Only one painting is confirmed as being by, and credited to, Wang Ximeng, but it is enough to grant him immortality in Chinese fine art history. In the imperial painting academy of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the moment when the prodigy Wang created the blue-green scroll painting, *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, at the age of 18, an artistic milestone was erected.

About 900 years later, the painting, resplendent and dynamic, was explained to its admirers in another form.

Playing Wang in the dance drama, *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, Zhang Han, a dancer in his early 20s from the China Oriental Performing Arts Group, seems to have a dialogue stretching back across time and space.

"I was excited to get the chance and I did a lot of research and preparation," Zhang recalls. "So I was confident to play this young genius well."

However, after rehearsals began, the situation was unlike his expectations. The rigid demand of the choreographers for accuracy of movement and a vivid reflection of Wang's characteristics meant that Zhang failed to establish the right ethos at the beginning.

"Failing to find the feeling, I was almost on the edge of a breakdown," Zhang says. "However, when I tried again and again, I gradually nurtured an emotional resonance with Wang."

As the inscription on the milestone painting records, Wang's unsatisfactory scripts were continuously turned down by his teacher. After repainting many times, he finally presented what is considered perfect splendor on silk.

"Wang Ximeng entered the painting academy when he was a kid and he devoted his life there," Zhang says. "That also echoes my years learning dancing. I honed every movement day after day."

An excerpt of the dance drama is shown on the stage of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures: Show Season*, a spinoff of a popular variety show by China Central Television.

The first season of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures* was released in December 2017 and soon became a cultural phenomenon thanks to its blend of cultural heritage knowledge and mass entertainment.

In each episode, three key exhibits from a museum were selected and were introduced by celebrities by way of short stage dramas or comedies, and the vivid behind-the-scenes stories surrounding the relics were later unrolled by experts and their conservators.

Three seasons of the variety show, highlighting 81 cultural relics, have been aired, with each receiving a rating above 9 points out of a total 10 on Douban, China's major film and TV review platform.

In its current *Show Season*, which was premiered in October, some of these treasures return to the stage in another form.

A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains was the first cultural relic to appear on the stage of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures*. Nevertheless, when Zhang moves in dance to reflect Wang's despair and ardor, audiences may develop a new understanding and appreciation of this cultural grandeur.

"We have rich historical treasures like



Cultural relic-inspired dances are staged as part of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures: Show Season*, a spinoff of a popular variety show produced by China Central Television. Among them are *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* (top), *Five Stars Rise in the East* (middle) and *Li Hua Xing* (above left). **Above right:** Dancer Zhang Han (center) plays the lead in *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

this painting," Zhang says, adding that today's generation should learn to appreciate them, or they may vanish.

"It behooves us to retain these legacies through creative forms," he says.

Success of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures* enables its production crew to explore the possibility of building a franchise, and *Show Season* is the first attempt at that.

"In previous seasons of the variety show, cultural relics are the absolute main stars," Yu Lei, director of the program, says. "All our expressional methods, invited guests, and all the other elements in the show have to center on the relics. We cannot detract from their luster."

"But we also want something different in the *Show Season*," she continues. "Other than the relics, the performers and artists are also in the spotlight. The new visual design is to better present the beauty of the show."

During the dance, *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, for example, a flowing and digitized version

of the painting is projected on the stage to create an immersive environment for the performers.

"We'd like to be more sentimental in this season," Yu says. "The previous seasons are based on rigid research of historical files. This time, however, artists are able to further express their inspiration triggered by the cultural relics."

As the director points out, the *Show Season* will encourage more performers to be inspired by cultural heritage and thus bring more relevant performances to the stage.

"These performances can also encourage greater creativity among museums and the cultural heritage sector in the future," Yu explains. "This process is mutually beneficial."

Thematic dances on cultural heritage became a trend on social networks this year. For Spring Festival, *Night Banquet in Tang Dynasty Palace*, a five-minute-long dance on Henan Satellite TV went viral online. Dancers from the Zhengzhou Song and Dance Theater dressed in Tang

Dynasty (618-907) costumes and they were inspired by the ancient glazed pottery figurines in Henan Museum. Follow-up clips were released for other key traditional Chinese festivals this year.

However, for choreographers, it is not easy to turn the aesthetics of cultural relics into a smooth dance production.

"Most references to movements of ancient dances come from frescoes and pottery figurines," says Han Zhen, a choreographer of the dance, *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. "We can find many such references from the Tang Dynasty, which showcase flamboyant aesthetics and can more easily be adapted for modern stage, but speaking of Song Dynasty dance, existing reference points are insufficient."

"Song people's taste is elegant but sort of introverted," Han explains. "So we set a relatively slow and quiet atmosphere. Modern audiences will find something familiar, but they'll also feel slightly detached. That subtle emotion can lead us into that idyllic picture."

In *The Legend of A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, tea-drinking, incense-burning, floriculture and other elegant lifestyles of Song Dynasty literati are portrayed as a reflection of refined cultural taste.

Creators of other excerpts also had the idea to bring cultural relics to life through dance.

For example, a famous Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) brocade piece, which was unearthed from the Niya ruins site in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, offered inspiration for artists to create a story of communication among different ethnic groups along the Silk Road through dance drama *Five Stars Rise in the East*.

The brocade piece, which was first used as an arm protector, is best recognized for its woven characters, which roughly translate to "five stars rise in the east and benefit China". It was introduced in the second season of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures*.

"In the dance, the leading protagonist wears this arm protector as a symbol of unity of various ethnic groups and cultural communication between the western region and Central China," says Xu Rui, a writer of the dance drama. "And we also want to express warmth between people through the dance, which will resonate with modern people thousands of years later."

The dance excerpt also illustrates the friendship between the protagonists of different ethnic groups, which was inspired by another culture relic — a wooden slip for recording documents, also unearthed from the Niya ruins site. On it, archaeologists found four characters: *xing wu xiang wang*, meaning "Fortunately, we haven't forgotten each other."

"The stage provides us a flexible space to show this emotional connection," Xu says.

The so-called Shangzhou Shigong, "the 10 tributes from the Shang (c. 16th century-11th century BC) and Zhou (c. 11th century-256 BC) dynasties", is a set of bronze wares, which was used to pay homage to great educator Confucius during a national-level ritual of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

Though it seems difficult to adapt this group of cultural relics into dance, these aged artifacts covered in verdigris, now housed in Confucius' hometown of Qufu, Shandong province, still set the imagination of the choreographers free.

Another dance excerpt inspired by the 10 artifacts, *Li Hua Xing* (Rites Civilize Deeds) focuses on portraying a sacrificial ritual honoring Confucius, and a solemn yet mysterious aura is brought by the group of dancers, who wear the inscribed patterns from the bronze wares.

"Thanks to introductions made in the previous seasons of the variety show, *The Nation's Greatest Treasures*, people have had some basic understanding of the relics and their historical importance to humanity from various angles," says Wang Shengfeng, a choreographer of the dance excerpt, *Li Hua Xing*. "And now they can better grasp the core of classical dancing. Such a variety show is also a good way to promote dancing as an art form, which is a hybrid of tradition and modern aesthetics."

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Ancient tombs excavated in capital of Shandong province

JINAN — Archaeologists in East China's Shandong province have excavated 29 ancient tombs, 11 of which date back some 1,800 years to the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220).

The tombs, believed to span the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), were discov-

ered in Laiwu district of the provincial capital Jinan, says Li Ming, head of the city's archaeological research institute.

More than 90 cultural relics were unearthed, including pottery jars, bowls, dishes and bronze coins.

Four of the Eastern Han tombs were brick-chambered. More than

11 ancient tombs

the number of sites recently excavated in Shandong province that date back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220)

10 types of bricks with different decorative patterns and images were found in the tombs.

Clear images of the moon and the Big Dipper were found on some bricks, with images of rabbits and toads visible on the moon. Both these animals are mentioned in the Chinese myth about

Chang'e, the goddess of the moon, and her palace.

"These images have proved that the moon palace fable was already popular during the Eastern Han Dynasty," says Li.

The discovery has revealed the historical features of the burial system and burial customs of different

periods in the area and enriched the information about burials during the period spanning the Eastern Han Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty in the Jinan area, providing valuable new materials for relevant research, Li adds.