

YOUTH

A glimpse into the past

Viewers given an intriguing insight into the formalities of daily life as dynastic era plots unfold, **Wang Kaihao** reports.

Television or online streaming can offer tantalizing glimpses of bygone eras. Costume dramas, by definition, show the fashion of yesterday in stunning clarity. But, aside from the clothes, social mores, politeness, manners and deference provide an elegant backdrop to unfolding plots. *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, broadcast over the summer, was no exception. The historical thriller, aired first on online streaming media platform Youku, put into sharp focus the intricate aesthetics of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Viewers were gripped by the rituals, cuisine, architecture and daily life of the era.

Royal Nirvana, a 60-episode series, began airing in November also through Youku, and again assuaged the viewers' appetite for, what is literally, traditional appeal.

It tells how Xiao Dingquan, a timid prince, grows into a brave leader who is devoted to the country's stability and prosperity, and how he overcomes the various crises that arise with alarming frequency.

The story, adapted from a popular online novel, is set in a fictional ancient Chinese dynasty. However, the clothes, decorations and rituals all point to the Song Dynasty (960-1279), a period renowned for its elegant yet simple artistic style. It is generally considered a boom time of cultural brilliance and social prosperity.

Yang Wenjun, director of the series, admits that like many successful fictional historical dramas

of the past decade, the producers of this show wanted to have a production that is authentic in its depiction of the time.

"It may be fiction, but historical detail is essential," director Yang said during a recent public screening of the series at a Beijing cinema. "It was essential to follow convention, particularly when we borrowed rituals from the Song Dynasty."

Only by so doing, he says, can an expression of beauty become more "implicit", and better fit into the context of traditional culture.

Yang mentions that "China is a land of propriety". This puts an onus on a director to portray ceremonial rituals, as well as the observed formalities in interpersonal relationships.

Rites have been a core element of Confucianism. Sages, who've been widely worshipped in traditional culture, have been role models who could practice their philosophical principles in everyday life, even in trivial details, says Gao Jing, chief ritual director of the series.

For example, Xiao the protagonist is inspired by Confucian principles when tackling serious situations. When Xiao falls into a fatal dilemma, he still takes some time to straighten up without fear, following the behavior codes like that of ancient Confucian sages. And when the lead female role, Lu Wenxi, meets her beloved, like every maiden of that time in a traditional Chinese family, she communicates not face-to-face, but sitting behind a folding screen, as was required by



The drama, *Royal Nirvana*, shows the rituals and costume styles of the Song Dynasty and tells the coming-of-age story of a royal prince, starring Luo Jin (above). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the societal rules of the period.

Gao says the production team was able to draw on ancient knowledge. The Twenty-Four Histories, collective term to describe 24 officially-compiled history books, has 56 volumes elaborating on "rites"; Gao says. In *History of the Song Dynasty* alone, there are 28.

Besides history books, other Song-Dynasty literature provided references, ranging from the 12th-century official list of rites released by the royal court, to the famous prose collection, *Reminiscences of the Eastern Capital*, and *Shilin Guangji*, an

encyclopedia for everyday life.

Detail is all-important. For example, in scenes involving drinking tea, *Daguan Chalun*, a book written by emperor Zhao Ji of the Song Dynasty — a notoriously weak ruler but a talented follower of the fine arts — highlighted how to roll tea powder and properly add water. The sipping of the liquid provided a chance to communicate rather than drink.

Besides the depiction of the tea ceremony in the series, the handwritten letters by the prince followed the style of the emperor's calligraphy.

How actors walk, swing their long sleeves gracefully, their posture and bowing correctly also enhances authenticity, actor Bao Dazhi says. "These rites are far removed from modern life, but it's good to learn how to act out the history. It's a must for professionalism."

He recalls one scene where he had to dance while holding a *hu* before talking in the royal court. In ancient China, a *hu* was a piece of wood used to remind high officials of their talking points when meeting emperors at the palace.

To give audiences a fuller picture of that time, grand ceremonies were acted out in the show, like the crown prince's coming-of-age ceremony, his royal wedding, and his teacher's funeral, although lengthy ceremonies were simplified, Gao says.

It may be of the past, but the series can offer inspiration for modern times, Gao adds.

"People generally follow Western business etiquette today," she says, but also points to a revival of traditional customs.

"The values of traditional customs were based on respect and order, and this essence of traditional propriety may get more highlighted in our current everyday life."

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Harvard professor honored with award

NEW YORK — Harvard University professor emeritus Ezra Vogel was honored by the China Institute here last month with the annual Blue Cloud Award for his contribution and dedication to enhancing China-US relations.

The 89-year-old China scholar was honored with a special Lifetime Achievement Award under the Blue Cloud Award. In a video of his acceptance speech, the professor said the opportunity to work with China is very important for Americans "who care about it".

He also praised the institute's efforts to bring together people from the two countries, especially by "making efforts to hear real Chinese voices".

"I think hearing the voices of the people who live in China and how they view America is very important," said Vogel.

Chinese Consul General in New York Huang Ping delivered a keynote speech at the gala, expressing his confidence in good China-US relations.

Huang appreciated the institute's commitment to bringing people from both sides of the Pacific together over the past 93 years.

"I believe if we keep this confidence and courage, we can move ahead and have another 93 years or even more of friendship," he said.

The China Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing understanding and strengthening trust between the United States and China.

According to its website, the institute presents the Blue Cloud Award to "people whose exceptional achievements contribute significantly to US-China friendship and understanding".

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