

# Bringing ancient treasures to life

Artists use modern technology to study murals from tombs, thus shedding light on a bygone era

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**H**ow did aristocrats in fifth-century northern China treat guests at an outdoor feast?

For a start, there were colorful draperies which divided the dining and food preparation areas. The greater the number of hangings, and the longer they were, the wealthier the host family was deemed to be.

And while the guests enjoyed the food, they also watched performances that included dancing and acrobatics.

The kitchen had several divisions: Some dealt with the butchering and cooking of animal meat, some were used to make alcohol, some were used for boiling water, while another area housed a pestle and mortar for husking grains.

This scene was depicted on a mural inside a tomb of the Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386-534).

Over the past two years, the mural has been reproduced by artists and archaeologists. And it is now on show at the Arthur M Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University.

The original mural, with vivid details, astonished archaeologists who excavated the tomb and 11 other tombs nearby that belonged to the same period, in Shaling village near Datong, in North China's Shanxi province, in 2005.

Datong, then called Pingcheng, was the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty before being replaced by Luoyang, in Central China's Henan province, in 439.

According to the inscriptions on broken lacquer pieces found in the tomb, the burial site dated from 435 and contained the remains of a woman surnamed Poduoluo, indicating she was from the Xianbei nomadic group. The group's Tuoba clan founded the Northern Wei Dynasty.

The inscriptions also said Poduoluo was the mother of a general and minister responsible for receiving the emperor's important guests.

Besides the feast painting, archaeologists also found inside the tomb nine other murals bearing different motifs. Their life-size reproductions are also on show at the Sackler museum, together with photos of the tomb and objects found there during excavation work.

These murals are part of an exhibition, titled *An Imaginative World of Afterlife*, which showcases life in a period nearly 1,600 years ago.

Zhang Zhuo, dean of the Datong-based Yungang Grottoes Research Academy, which manages the pres-



An artist reproduces a Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386-534) mural found in ancient tombs in North China's Shanxi province.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The life-size reproductions of the murals found in tombs in Shanxi province are on show at the Arthur M Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University.

ervation of the Poduoluo tomb, said the exhibition title suggests that although the bulk of the murals depict how the Northern Wei's ruling class enjoyed a life of extravagance, some expressed a wish for continuing prosperity in the afterlife.

Zhang said one example of this wish for the afterlife is the three barns painted in the feast mural. He said it is unlikely that in real life there were three barns set up for an outdoor feast.

The Northern Wei Dynasty unified northern China through assimilation, and according to Wang Yanqing, a researcher at the academy, the dynasty was short-lived but brilliant.

She said the Poduoluo tomb murals show that the Xianbei rulers adopted an all-embracing attitude toward other cultures.

She added that while there were indications of Xianbei's customs, such as men and women wearing

hats to keep warm, the arrangements of the feast and the riding troops, as well as the tomb's layout, showcased elements of Han culture.

She also said that the depiction of people sitting with their legs crossed implied a growing influence of Buddhism.

"The Xianbei people came from the dense forests of the Greater Hinggan Mountains. And they fought hard for centuries to survive, eventually establishing their own dynasty," she said.

Wang goes further to say that the group had their own spoken language but no written characters; and that as they were surrounded by more advanced groups they had to blend in by absorbing the essence of these cultures.

"Just imagine what a marvelous scene it must be on the streets of Pingcheng," Wang said, referring to the blending of cultures.

"There would be people in vari-

ous kinds of outfits, which indicated many ethnic backgrounds — the Han people and nomadic tribes and traders from central and west Asia."

The Poduoluo tomb was listed among the top 10 archaeological discoveries of China in 2005.

The top 10 discoveries have been listed in an annual appraisal carried out since 1990, and supported by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.

Separately, Wang said studies of the dynasties established by nomadic tribes in northern China, like the Xianbei group, have made much progress in recent years.

But she said this is not only due to major archaeological discoveries like the Poduoluo tomb, but also due to the cooperation of artists who have copied ancient murals and the introduction of computer technology which has helped archaeologists.

The reproduction of the Poduoluo

tomb murals was undertaken by Wang's academy in collaboration with a muralist team led by Yao Zhiqian, an associate professor at the Baotou Normal College in North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, since 2016.

Yao said his team uses pigments similar to those used by ancient painters, and thus was able to re-create a texture resembling the original murals.

Wang also said that while working, the artists helped her team discover more details in the murals.

She added that as Yao's painters re-created one of the murals on show, *Traveling on Horses and Carriages*, which depicts a grand scene of rows of horse-drawn carts, the archaeologists found that leading riders were also beating drums.

"We wouldn't have noticed this tiny detail if we had not worked with Yao's team," said Wang.

Speaking about the re-creation process, Zhang said they did not fill in missing sections of the original murals if they could not find accurate academic references.

He added that re-creation is an important element in the preservation of tomb murals, since it causes little direct damage compared with restoration, which is difficult and risky. And with the combined assistance of quality reproductions, photos and computer technology, stationary artifacts, such as murals and statues of great weight, can be seen by an audience from hundreds of kilometers away.

The current exhibition also showcases artifacts and 3-D printed copies of Buddhist statues at the Yungang Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage site of cave art from the fifth and sixth centuries. The artifacts have patterns and motifs similar to those found on murals and objects discovered in the Poduoluo tomb. And virtual reality, or VR, allows viewers to see three large upright statues from cave 18.

A headset and a controller takes the user to the cave: When they "look up", they can see a 15.5-meter tall Buddha in between two of his followers, standing 10 meters tall on either side.

Then, if the user presses buttons on the controller, they can "step forward" to see dozens of smaller figures in nearby niches and then "ascend" on an artificial lotus pedestal to the height of the Buddha's head, to enjoy a panoramic view of the cave art.

Wang said she is still enthralled by these Buddhist statues even though she has worked at the academy for many years.

"They remind me of a Chinese idiom: *Xiang you xin sheng* (one's face reveals his mind and soul).

"They (the statues) have the most beautiful faces in the world. Their smiles move me to tears."