

[ART JOURNAL]

China's history in bronze and ceramics

The National Museum of History's selection of pottery, ritual vessels and figurines from its permanent collection provides an excellent introduction to the broad sweep of Chinese civilization

BY **NOAH BUCHAN**
STAFF REPORTER

A country's plastic arts reveal much about its development as a civilization and the preoccupations of its people throughout history. This is the underlying theme that informs the National Museum of History's exhibit of antiquities from China.

The museum has selected more than 400 objects from its permanent collection of 56,000 to mount The Museum's Collection of Huaxia Artifacts (館藏華夏文物展), which is located on the third floor. Neolithic pottery, Shang Dynasty bronze ritual vessels and Tang Dynasty clay figurines share space with porcelain plates from the Sung and Ming dynasties and silver ingots from the Qing Dynasty. Every six months some of the items on display are replaced with other pieces from the permanent collection.

Detailed introductions in Chinese and English along with maps, chronological tables and a documentary of excavation sites add depth to the exhibit. The recent addition of two interactive touch-screen monitors provides further information about the objects on display. The exhibit focuses mostly on ceramics and bronze ware to emphasize the functional purpose of the earlier objects and the ritualized use of the later ones.

The section titled Prehistoric Painted Pottery displays pottery from the Neolithic period that was excavated from burial sites along the Yangtze River. It consists of earthenware bowls, ewers and tall vases and suggests a practical rather than ceremonial use for the artifacts. The fine craftsmanship of these vessels is enhanced by decorative geometric and stylized designs.

The practical function of pottery during the Neolithic period gave way to the ritual use of vessels made from bronze during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a transition that is amply demonstrated in The Glory of Bronze Ware Culture. The objects featured in this section would have been placed in temples and palaces and were used for various types of worship, banquets and rituals.

The earlier stylized motifs here become more detailed in form through the use of relief. According to this section's introduction, the inscriptions on the side of the bronze ceremonial objects relate to a complex variety of social affairs such as land exchange deeds, clan symbols, decrees, dowries, conflicts and disputes.

The combination of the practical and the ritualistic found in the section on Shang Dynasty bronze ware provides an interesting transition to the funerary figurines and sculptures found in the section titled Pottery Sculpture.

The rapid social and economic changes occurring during the Qin and Han dynasties influenced the funerary practices of its people — the most famous, of course, being the terra-cotta warriors, discovered in 1974 near the city of Xian. The development of a special kind of glaze pottery allowed for the creation of molded ceramics — everything from farm



This tri-color chimeric dating from the Tang Dynasty was probably placed in a tomb to protect the dead from malignant forces.

animals to domestic scenes such as kitchens or mills — that could be buried with the deceased. As funerary practices and ancestor worship became a ritualized part of daily life, this section implies, the sculptural creations of artisans become more refined.

The otherworldly preoccupations of the exhibit's earlier bronze and ceramic works give way to detailed sculptural renderings of officials, warriors and the marketplace in the Tang Dynasty Artifacts section.

Here, a Rabelaisian admixture of figurines depicting marketplace characters such as acrobats, musicians and farmers stand alongside large molded statues of nobles and scholars.

But the people of this period remained deeply preoccupied with the hereafter as suggested by the chimeras on display. An impressive example of this mythical beast, which was thought to protect the dead in the afterlife, sits majestically at the beginning of

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: The Museum's Collection of Huaxia Artifacts (館藏華夏文物展)

WHERE: National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號)

WHEN: The exhibit is ongoing. Open daily from 10am to 6pm, closed on Mondays. Tel: (02) 2361-0270

ADMISSION: NT\$30

ON THE NET: www.nmh.gov.tw



This beautifully decorated vase dates from the Neolithic period.

this section.

This part of the exhibit also features several figurines and statues of court ladies in ornate dress. Along with displays of gold and silver jewelry, these figures provide detailed examples of the period's idealized concept of feminine beauty.

Much of the rest of the exhibit, with perhaps the exception of the section on jade — which displays objects from most of the dynasties throughout Chinese civilization — breaks with the main theme of cultural continuity.

The section on Tibetan Tankas (portable paintings depicting religious themes) shows how the traditions of other cultures exerted a profound influence on China — though some might balk at the implication that Tibetan culture forms one part of Chinese civilization.

Next to these wall hangings is a brief, though informative, section about China's earliest form of writing done on oracle bones. Art Treasures From the Chinese Scholar's Study presents curios such as intricately carved ink brush holders and chops — tools of significant importance for scholar-officials.

Viewing so many objects in such limited space can be an overwhelming experience. Fortunately, next to the exhibition area is a large sunroom with wooden chairs and benches that provides a spectacular view of the museum's pond and gardens below. Resting here for a few minutes provides a comfortable respite from a few hours' viewing of this excellent survey of Chinese civilization.

Celebrity Interview

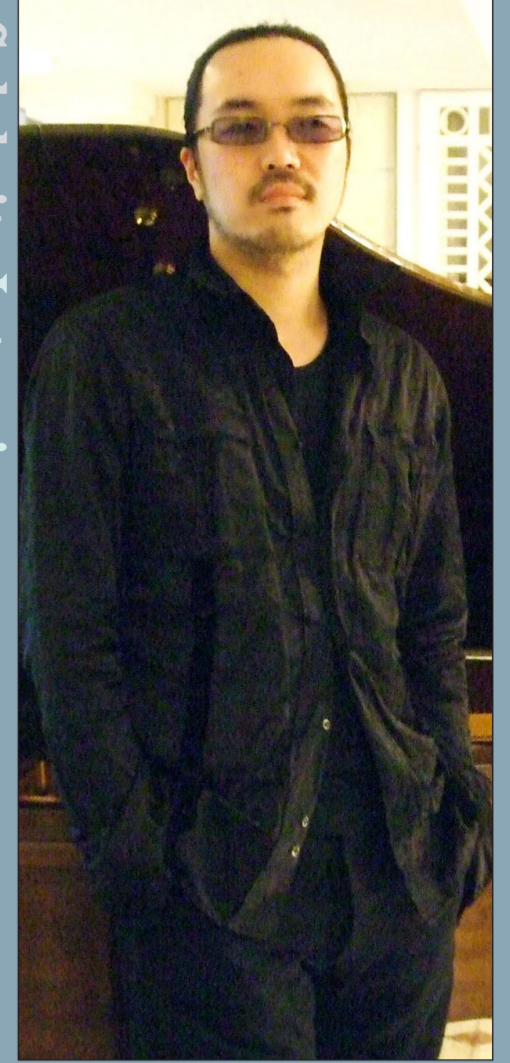


PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA

Computer

CONTINUED FROM P14

TT: You mentioned at the press conference for Beautiful Crazy that you also want to make films. What would your first movie be like?

YH: I am not qualified to make a film yet. I need to gain more life experiences and wisdom for that. I travel intensively. I go to places for the sake of working, performing and traveling. But if [not for] those purposes, why am I there? I want to make a film about the search. If it is a road movie, then can the purpose of the journey be that I have no reason to stay where I am now?

TT: What is your relationship with classical music?

YH: Musically, I was not academically trained. To challenge an academic genre is in itself an adventure to me. In classical music, it is one person who commands dozens of others with a music score that is buttressed by exact theories. How to marry that theory with my own ideas is a challenge.

(Hanno was commissioned to perform Maurice Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess* with the New Japan Philharmonic orchestra in 1998. In 2007, he was invited to work in Switzerland and created his first symphonic work *Wake*, performed by Winterthur Symphony Orchestra later that year.)

TT: What is the difference between improvisational and classical music that strikes you as the most interesting?

YH: When I make jazz or hip-hop, sometimes it is difficult to make musicians understand what kinds of emotions I aim for. Sometimes they are technically unable to achieve what I want. Musicians in classical music, on the contrary, are trained to play. They have a tradition, history and musical scores to follow. I find that 99 percent of the intended effects can be realized in classical music. It opens up a new direction for me.

TT: You have produced music under the names of RADIQ and Multiphonic Ensemble and collaborated with other artists in side projects such as Dartrix. Does this enable you to maintain your flexibility and test different styles?

YH: Painting all kinds of colors onto a canvas won't make good art. I like all kinds of music, but to put them all together in one place isn't necessarily good. Musically, I am still in the phase of experimenting and learning. I try to maintain a space for development.

TT: Which musicians have you been listening to recently?

YH: Curtis Mayfield. He was a famous American musician in the 1970s, and my all-time favorite since high school.

TT: You listen to oldies a lot?

YH: Yes. As far as the pop music goes, I like American rock from the 1970s. I know contemporary musicians and their music mostly through other musician friends. I am not into new stuff because it relies on the computer too much.

TT: Considering you're known as an electronic musician, isn't that preference incongruous?

YH: Over the years we have studied and explored electronic music, and some of us have even written software for that purpose. I am no longer keen on the genre. Acoustic, more human music interests me more.

TT: If from now on, you could only make one type of music, what would that be?

YH: (Long pause.) Classical music.

TT: What are your thoughts on the impact of technology on the future of music?

YH: The impact will be huge. My prediction is that 90 percent of music will be ruined by digital technology, and the remaining 10 percent will become even better. Permit me to use a metaphor here. If you are a chef, today's computer technology is advanced and powerful enough to chop up the ingredients and do the cooking for you. All you need to do is to move your fingers around, and you get the end product. The chef will lose all skills and abilities because everything is achieved way too easily. To those who start to learn to make music, creativity and originality are born out of all those small steps such as how to select and collect your material. If the whole process is bypassed, there will be no music.

'Younger Than Jesus' and more cyber-savvy

The artists showing in the New Museum's first triennial shun rebelliousness for guilt-free voyeurism

BY **KATYA KAZAKINA**
BLOOMBERG

A young woman naps on a pedestal-like bed, unperturbed by Soviet-era propaganda music and sensual Latin melodies playing a few meters away.

The setting is the New Museum in New York and the sleeping beauty is a living sculpture by Chinese artist Chu Yun. For the next three months a rotating group of women fueled with sleeping pills will recreate Chu's island of serenity — snapping photos is allowed — as part of the museum's lively first triennial, The Generational: Younger Than Jesus.

Guilt-free voyeurism and exhibitionism are common threads among the works by 50 international artists born after 1976 (hence the title reference to Jesus, crucified at 33). No surprise here. This crowd grew up in an era where it's perfectly acceptable to share the most intimate or mundane details of your life on the Internet.

There's not much rebellion in Younger Than Jesus. This cyber-savvy generation instead remixes vast quantities of visual information from all kinds of sources to construct its own reality, all to spirited effect.

Armenian artist Tigran Khachatryan's aggressive, fast-paced video weaves grainy, black-and-white footage from Soviet avant-garde films with shots of teenage skinheads fighting, giving Nazi salutes and jumping away from speeding trains.

China's Liu Chuang approached strangers on the street, offering to buy everything on them for US\$500. It's unclear how the handoffs took place, but at least three people said yes. Their personal items — from



An installation by Chinese artist Chu Yun at the New Museum in New York. The installation consists of a living person sleeping while programmed background sound including blaring Soviet-era propaganda and sensual Latin music plays.

underwear and socks to makeup and credit cards — are neatly arranged on three platforms. For this group, anything can be displayed as art.

VIDEO DOMINATES

All mediums are represented, though video and photography dominate. More unusual

experiments include Mark Essen's video game, projected onto a wall that visitors can play with; Icaro Zorbar's collage of three turntables surrounding a fourth one playing Latin music and Ruth Ewan's jukebox with 1,200 protest songs.

Painting doesn't seem to be popular among the 145 works on display.

One exception is Poland's Jakub Julian

Ziolkowski whose imaginative, painstaking canvases contain labyrinths but almost no empty space. *The Great Battle Under the Table* is a large maze of tiny warring soldiers, barbarians and dragons. The scene recalls Hieronymus Bosch; the layered compositional intricacy brings to mind a Persian rug.

THUMPING MUSIC

Many of the artists have an affinity for videos that either dwell on images of ultimate doom or move at time-warped speed while playing thumping music.

In his animated *Panoptikon*, Turkish artist Emre Huner's post-apocalyptic scenes are a mix of science-fiction imagery with patterns from Turkish textiles and ceramics. French artist Cyprien Gaillard's footage of gangs of fighting young men on the outskirts of St Petersburg, Russia, bring to mind Khachatryan's manic youths.

Gaillard's video is set to a fabulous dance soundtrack by the French musician Koudlam. Like the music, the actions of the men have a repetitive, meditative quality. The correspondence between the sound and images makes the piece engaging.

Philadelphia-based Ryan Trecartin's hyperactive videos depict a world populated by hysterical characters with ambiguous genders. They speak gibberish at breakneck speed in digitally manipulated voices. Many sport blue teeth and garish makeup.

Trecartin has a huge following on YouTube. I got a headache 10 minutes into watching it. But that could be because I am two years older than Jesus.