



A scene from *Dream in Peony Pavilion*, the latest dance drama co-directed and choreographed by Li Xing and Huang Jiayuan, which is touring internationally. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

‘Love begins without reason, and once begun, runs deep; The living may die for it; the dead may live again.’

Four centuries ago, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang Xianzu wrote these lines into his classic play *The Peony Pavilion*, giving Chinese literature one of its most feverish declarations of emotion — a love so intense it overturns life and death.

On a winter night in Beijing, that love story returned. Inside the theater, the stage did something unexpected: It stretched forward, a mirrored platform cutting through the darkness and extending straight into the audience, as if the pavilion itself had stepped off the page and come looking for an audience.

This is the set of *Dream in Peony Pavilion*, the latest dance drama co-directed and choreographed by Li Xing and Huang Jiayuan.

After finishing his acclaimed dance drama *A Dream of Red Mansions*, adapted from the novel of the same title by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) novelist Cao Xueqin, which premiered in 2021, Li told himself he needed distance.

“I actually thought, ‘don’t do another classical adaptation so fast,’” he says.

He deliberately immersed himself in contemporary writing and realist subjects, searching for something grounded in the present.

Then, almost by accident, *The Peony Pavilion* found him.

“One day I reread interpretations of the *Dream Interrupted* scene and listened to some Kunqu Opera music,” he recalls. “Suddenly, I felt something very strange. That scene about young love — it wasn’t just romantic. It was full of life force.”

“That’s when I realized we shouldn’t treat *The Peony Pavilion* as an old classical story. It’s extremely contemporary,” he adds.

That recognition, he says, felt like a creative impulse strong enough to “bring a flood”.

“I found my point of entry. And I knew — I have to make *The Peony Pavilion*,” he says.

The creative team spent nearly 20 months developing the production. Rather than faithfully staging Tang’s

Adaptation of play gives love a revival

Renowned writer’s classic inspires a new version as a dance drama that focuses on the fearless strength of the protagonist, rather than as a tragic character, **Chen Nan** reports.



Hu Jie (front) stars as Du Liniang alongside Luo Yuwen as Liu Mengmei in the dance drama *Dream in Peony Pavilion*. Li Xing views the production not simply as a love story, but as a reflection on existence itself.

script, Li made bold cuts. The story is distilled to six essential figures: Du Liniang, Liu Mengmei, Chunxiang, the Flower Goddess, Chen Zuiliang, and the Judge.

The focus is sharper now: a young woman’s awakening; and her decision to love at will.

“We weakened the historical conflicts with feudal society,” Li says. “That’s background. What matters more today is the individual — the passion for life, the desire to be free.”

In other words, this isn’t just a love story. It’s about existence itself.

In the story, Du Liniang, a beautiful young woman who lived in a time when women were often confined by rigid expectations of virtue, family duty, and submission to social norms, falls in love with Liu Mengmei, a handsome scholar she meets in a dream.

After waking, her longing for him becomes so overwhelming that she dies from unrequited passion. In the

underworld, Du persuades the Judge to grant her permission to return as a ghost so she can find him. After locating him at the temple where she is buried, their love affair rekindles. Liu’s love is so powerful that when he opens her coffin, she comes back to life, and they live happily ever after.

Huang Huihui, one of the dancers portraying Du Liniang, says that the young woman isn’t tragic. She’s fearless: “What stayed with me most was her bravery and her determination, and the awakening of her self-awareness as a woman.” To Huang, Du Liniang is not merely a young lady yearning for love inside the confines of a noble household. She is someone who gradually comes to recognize her desire, her will, and ultimately, her identity.

“People see it as a love story,” she says. “But for me, it’s also about learning to cherish yourself.”

For dancer Wang Shengxi, the

character Liu is not a fragile, romanticized scholar, but an ordinary young man driven by extraordinary sincerity. “I was drawn first to Tang Xianzu’s dreamlike poetry and then focused on translating the character’s inner world through the body,” the dancer says.

He built Liu’s literati temperament from subtle details — restrained posture, measured steps, a quiet gaze — before revealing the courage beneath the calm. “Hesitant yet steadfast, this Liu dares to defy fate and even descend into the underworld for love,” Wang says.

Playing Chunxiang, Du’s devoted maid, is dancer Ma Chi. “It’s a process of gradually realizing the bond with Du through rehearsal after rehearsal, performance after performance.”

Initially, she saw Chunxiang as simply lively and cheerful, but over time, she added depth: “The emotional expression between Du and

me ... was gradually cultivated and felt.”

Sitting backstage before the premiere on May 30, 2025, is a moment that stands out. Ma recalls, “I felt like I was in a daze that, finally, I’m going to meet the audience. The whole process is like a plant you have been carefully nurturing.”

In 2026, the dance drama continues touring at home and abroad, including the Hong Kong Arts Festival in March.

Li hopes the show carries something distinctly Eastern with it — a quietness, a restraint, a poetic density. “It’s different from Western classics,” he says. “There’s an inner flavor, a kind of controlled beauty that belongs to Chinese culture.”

But he resists grand claims about it being a cultural export. Instead, he offers a gentler metaphor.

“Every production is just a seed planted in a dancer’s heart, or in an audience member’s heart,” he says.

“Maybe it becomes love for contemporary art, maybe for classical literature. We don’t know.

“But once the seed is planted, it will grow,” he says.

Though classical literature has become one of his signatures, Li doesn’t see himself as a “period” choreographer. His artistic life runs on two parallel tracks.

One is literary dance dramas like *Dream in Peony Pavilion* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, in which he searches for the contemporary pulse within old texts.

The other is what he calls his “urban dance theater series”. Works like *The Hotel* and *The Station*, which take place in modern architectural spaces — transient places where strangers brush past each other, carrying private emotions.

“The most important thing,” he says, “is truth in people.”

In September and October 2025, the Global Masters’ Showcase brought together the finest international creations and the strength of 24 outstanding Chinese dancers. The project, touring Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, staged three dance works: *I Wonder Where the Dreams I Don’t Remember Go*, Yoann Bourgeois and Marie Bourgeois’ collaborative work with Netherlands Dans Theater 1 (NDT1); *Cacti*, a representative work by Alexander Ekman; and *Minus 16* by Ohad Naharin.

“The experience opened a whole new world to me as a dancer,” recalls Huang, whose participation in the project allowed her to experience contemporary dance for the first time.

“I grew up training in classical Chinese dance, and I have been dedicated to portraying different roles. But with this project, I explored myself with lots of impromptu movements, which was a process of self-discovery as a dancer,” adds Wang.

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Lantern festival illuminates innovation and cross-cultural exchange

CHENGDU — The 32nd Zigong International Dinosaur Lantern Festival has turned Chengdu, Sichuan province, into a luminous sea of over 200 lantern sets, drawing inspiration from fairy tales, children’s drawings and, most fittingly, the dinosaurs whose fossils were unearthed there.

Blending local paleontological heritage with Chinese mythology, the festival showcases amazing creations, such as majestic beasts from the ancient Chinese story *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Among them stands a commanding, nearly four-meter-tall winged creature, lion-like in shape, with a mane woven from straw that softly glows as embedded LED lights cast a warm golden radiance through its natural fibers.

Not far away, two more extraordinary works catch the eye: a fiery phoenix pieced together with 15,000 red chili peppers, and a *qilin* — a benevolent Chinese mythical creature — crafted from 46,000 recycled medicine bottles.

This luminous artistry is deeply rooted in a centuries-old tradition. During the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, Zigong, then a

prosperous salt-producing hub, cultivated the custom of making festive lanterns to celebrate Spring Festival, symbolizing hopes for abundance and happiness.

Over time, the tradition evolved from simple lanterns into a sophisticated art form that blends paper-cutting, painting, embroidery and sculpture. Today, the Zigong lantern show is recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage of China.

In modern times, this lantern tradition has been revived through innovation and environmental awareness.

“All kinds of materials, such as porcelain, recycled bottles, chili peppers, straw, and foam boards, can be turned into part of a lantern set,” explains Liu Juncai, a 60-year-old cultural heritage inheritor of Zigong’s traditional lantern artistry, as he points to the golden beast inspired by *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

The festival’s magic also resonates with international visitors. “These are the most beautiful lanterns I’ve ever seen. The Zigong lantern festival feels like magic. It’s incredible,” says a student from Zimbabwe.

One particularly eye-catching



Left: Lanterns crafted in Zigong, Sichuan province, illuminate the riverbank of St Petersburg, Russia, on Feb 15. The panda display is one of the 10 installations. **Right:** A French student poses with a mysterious beast lantern at the 32nd Zigong International Dinosaur Lantern Festival on Feb 9. PHOTOS BY XINHUA

piece is the *Music Robot*, based on a drawing by Jayden, an 8-year-old boy from the United Kingdom. It is part of a special exhibition in which Zigong artisans brought to life more than 6,000 children’s drawings from over 40 countries, ranging from a mechanical horse leaping through colorful clouds to a panda venturing into outer space.

Today, Zigong lanterns have evolved into a dynamic example of cross-cultural exchange. At an

international lantern exhibition held in a Dutch zoo, motifs from Chinese folklore and intangible cultural heritage stood alongside iconic Dutch windmills and tulips, attracting over 1.5 million visitors.

The lantern industry itself continues to thrive. With an annual output value exceeding 6 billion yuan (\$875 million), Zigong now boasts more than 2,000 specialized companies, forming a complete industrial chain.

As a cultural heritage inheritor,

Liu has witnessed this remarkable expansion over the past four decades, as the craft continues to shine on the global stage.

“The government has streamlined procedures for Zigong lanterns to enter the global market. It takes about a fortnight to obtain an export license; and shipping via the China-Europe Railway Express reduces costs by roughly a third,” Liu says.

“There’s a growing appetite overseas for traditional Chinese



elements,” Liu adds. “Whether it is classic Chinese pavilions or mythical themes, they are warmly received abroad. Lanterns have become an important medium for sharing Chinese culture.” His team is currently preparing a customized lantern set inspired by *Classic of Mountains and Seas* for the United Arab Emirates, scheduled to debut in May.

From the Magical Winter Lights in Houston, Texas, to a lantern carnival in Kuwait, Zigong’s artistry has now illuminated over 500 cities across more than 80 countries and regions.

This thriving industry has fueled local prosperity. In Zigong, a city with over 2.4 million residents, an estimated 100,000 people are employed in the lantern sector, supported by tax incentives, financing support and talent development initiatives.

Zigong’s lanterns go beyond festive decorations, serving as modern expressions of an ancient tradition that brings Chinese stories to the world. Each dazzling display celebrates a shared appreciation for beauty and creates a luminous cultural dialogue spanning the globe.