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Blending ancient and modern to explore the role of women

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Early on during its performance last night at the Brown Theatre, the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company established a simple vocabulary of expressive human shapes. The first movement of choreographer Cai's four movement "Dynasty Suite" was "Basket Girls Dance from Zhou." Arrayed in profile, the troupe, all women, formed a runic tableau – bending their elbows in brutally sharp angles, dangling their willowy wrists in supple curves and flexing their rumps in muscular arches.

The company later offered the World Rhythms Series audience an ever-expanding vocabulary that grew to include elements of modern dance and ballet, but always harkened back to Cai's vision of an aesthetic that began to emerge 2 ½ millennia ago.

Beginning with "Basket Girls," working women who created robust vertical shapes by bearing aloft wicker baskets on long, flexible poles, the "Dynasty Suite" explored the changing role of women in China in a series of tableaux. In "Dance from Tang," the dancers were supple and athletic, using flowing silken ribbons to create exuberant rippling shapes. In "Dance from Qing," they strode across the stage like brittle, courtly puppets, wearing pedestal shoes and gigantic headdresses that turned them into gilded ornaments. The "Straw Hat Girl" featured a sensuous, mysterious solo dancer, brazen and modern. The "Basket Girls" had stood in stark profile; the others had maintained a coy, indirect demeanor. When the "Straw Hat Girl" faced the audience head-on, she created a bold feminine challenge that was only accentuated by the large straw hat that veiled her face.

Finally, the dancers joined in a closing segment that pitted them against one another in a sequence that highlighted the common and contrasting features of these notions of beauty and femininity.

The next selection, "Begin From Here," represented Lily Cai's own tale of immigration from Shanghai and her struggle to adapt. Beginning with dissonant music and gloomy torpor, the dance developed into one of the most stunning images of the evening.

The final selection, "Candelas," culminated in an eye-pleasing human candelabra.