

Masters of Chinese Literature - Tang Xianzu

Tang Xianzu, a native of Linchuan, Jiangxi, was born in 1550, the 29th year of the reign of Emperor Jiajing in the Ming Dynasty. He passed the provincial civil service examination at the age of 21, and the imperial examination at 34 obtaining the academic degree “Jinshi”. Over time he held official positions of “Taichang Boshi” (erudite in the Chamberlain for Ceremonials) and “Zhanshifu Zhubu” (secretary in the Supervisorate of Imperial Instruction), and up to “Libu Zhushi” (officer in the Ministry of Rites). In 1591, the 19th year of the reign of Emperor Wanli (grandson of Jiajing), he wrote “Memorial to Impeach the Ministers and Supervisors” in which he criticized the imperial government. Infuriated, the emperor banished him to the Xuwen County of Guangdong in Leizhou Peninsula, and demoted him to “Dianshi” (a low-level jail warden). On his way to Xuwen, he saw the Church of St. Paul. It is said that the church was originally a “warehouse-like structure built on planks and bricks”, located in the center of Macao.

In his play “The Peony Pavilion”, Tang Xianzu deliberately referred to Catholicism in Macao as Buddhism, Western churches as Chinese temples, St. Paul as “Duobao” (a transliteration of St. Paul), and catholic priests as Buddhist monks and abbots to shun politics.

Tang Xianzu, with such an unusual trip, made him the first to have reached the area of Macao before other famed Chinese literature masters. He wrote four seven-character quatrains, all of which depict the history and society of Macao in the period of Wanli, Ming Dynasty. Two of them are titled “Listening to the Translators at Xiangshan” (Xiangshan, Xiangshan’ao, all refer to the present Macao), one of which has the following lines that can be deemed as the first Chinese poem ever to portray an occidental female: “A 15-years-old young foreign girl, with rose-flavor perfume in her morning ruddy cheeks; She is the rising crescent moon above the sea, and the good-smelling vernal hanging parrot on the twig.”

The third one is titled At the Scented Goods Inspection Office at Xiangshan, with lines: “Tireless sea dragon play amusing, gigantic fish exude hibiscus flowers in the spring; A mountain of gold for a piece of scented wood, only to bring the ones in the palace a joyful mood.”

This indicates the once prosperous economy of scented goods and the fact that the imperial government set up the Scented Goods Inspection Office at Macao to examine and acquire exotic scented goods such as ambergris, eaglewood, and palisander wood, etc. Great demand boosted the price, and the government had to pay large amounts of money.

The fourth one, titled “Meeting Foreign Merchants at Xiang’ao”, describes the resident foreign merchants as: “No farming in the fields, no silkworm rearing by the mulberry trees, In dashing clothes, they stroll under the towering masts in their ships; With the starry brilliance of jewels and pearls, they adorn the sky, And appreciate the moonlight at the dazzling riverside.” Similar descriptions can also be found in his masterpiece, The Peony Pavilion.

The Peony Pavilion was finished in 1598, the 26th year of the Wanli period of Ming Dynasty, 7 years after Tang visited Macao. Tang blended his experiences in Macao with the plots in two scenes, A Dismal View and Meeting the Envoy.

Tang Xianzu witnessed with his own eyes the downfall of the Ming Dynasty.

Emperor Jiajing was addicted to elixir and large-scale constructions, and his successor, Emperor Wanli, lived on the fat of the land and extracted wealth from the people by imposing exorbitant taxes such as the notorious mining tax. All these are reflected in *The Peony Pavilion*, which, marvelously, records his trip to Macao. The play has been cherished as cultural heritage for generations.

The sea ships, the Portugal merchants, at Xiangshan'ao we see,
The church, an eye opener we believe.
Exotic and illusionary it appears,
Of legends, of fantasies, the dream bewitches.

Thus, inspired by his extraordinary experiences, Tang Xianzu wrote the four “Yuan operas” (including “*The Peony Pavilion*”, “*The Legend of the Purple Hairpin*”, “*The Dream of Nanke*”, and “*The Story of Handan*”) which later earned a global reputation for their wealth of contents and literary values.

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