Sima Xiangru was the greatest writer of *fu* (rhapsody) in Chinese literary history. His *fu* became a model for emulation but also a target of criticism. His critics included Confucians who feared that the “healthy” content in his literature is overshadowed by excessively ornate depiction of scenes and objects.

Sima Xiangru (byname Zhangqing) was the greatest writer of *fu* (rhapsody), a poetic genre that thrived during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). A native of Shu (modern Sichuan Province), he took a junior post during Emperor Jing’s reign (157–141 BCE). But because the emperor did not like *fu*, Sima left the post and became a member of the salon of King Xiao of Liang (d. 144 BCE). This salon played a pivotal role in the *fu* genre’s development, sustaining many famous *fu* writers such as Zou Yang (mid-second century BCE) and Mei Cheng (d. 140 BCE). Under the patronage of King Xiao, Sima composed the famous “*Fu* on Sir Vacuous.”

Upon the king’s death Sima returned to Shu. Sima was fond of swordsmanship. He was also famous for his romance with Zhuo Wenjun, whom he met on his homeward journey to Shu. When passing by Linqiong, he won the heart of the new widow Zhuo with his literary talents and seductive zither music. But Zhuo’s father refused the marriage; the lovers thus eloped to Sima’s hometown, Chengdu. Poverty pressed them to return to Linqiong, where they ran a wine shop. Zhuo’s father finally accepted their marriage and subsidized their livelihood. Adaptations of this story appeared in many works of literature in later ages.

Han emperor Wu (reigned 141–87 BCE) was an admirer and patron of Sima. Enraptured by Sima’s “*Fu* on Sir Vacuous,” the young emperor resolved to track down the author, who subsequently composed the “*Fu* on the Imperial Park.” This work earned him the post of gentleman.
He was later commissioned to a diplomatic posting in southwest China but lost favor after being charged with bribery. Soon thereafter Sima died of diabetes.

Sima brought the fu genre to a historical zenith. The word grandiose best defines his style. This style is achieved by the extensive use of descriptive phrases, hyperbole, and panoramic perspectives. Himself a lexicographer, Sima strove to find the most fitting word in the juxtaposition of spectra of colors, fauna, flora, buildings, plants, as well as in objective and emotional depictions of various objects. Carrying on the dialogue structure characteristic of the genre, Sima’s fu typically begins with a debate between two interlocutors, one of whom finally wins the debate. Sima also wrote in the Sao style of fu, which more closely adheres in form to the “Lisao” (Encountering Sorrows) by Qu Yuan (early third century BCE). Some of Sima’s famous Sao-style pieces are his fu on the abdicated empress Chen, one on the Great Man, and a lament for the second Qin emperor (reigned 210–207 BCE).

Sima’s fu became a model for emulation but also a target of criticism. His critics included Confucians who feared that the “healthy” content in his literature is overshadowed by excessively ornate depiction of scenes and objects.

Timothy Wai Keung CHAN

Further Reading


