

TANG Xianzu

Tāng Xiǎnzǔ 汤显祖

1550–1616 Late Ming dynasty dramatist

Attuned to the contemporaneous intellectual trends of political reform, philosophical experimentation, and literary innovation, Tang Xianzu invested song-drama with a new philosophical seriousness. His resulting oeuvre, particularly the romance entitled *Peony Pavilion*, has earned him a lasting reputation as one of China's most accomplished dramatists.

Confronted with the highly autocratic politics, intellectual ferment, and literary experimentation characteristic of his era (the Ming dynasty, 1368–1644), Tang Xianzu transformed song-drama from a vehicle of entertainment, moral didacticism, or political allegory into a literary-yet-accessible, serious-yet-comic medium for the consideration of new philosophical ideas. Born into a scholarly family in Linchuan, a town in the rapidly commercializing region south of the Yangzi (Chang) River, Tang quickly earned the lower civil service degrees at ages fifteen and twenty-one before eventually achieving the highest rank of palace graduate (*jinshi*) at the age of thirty-three. But his unwillingness to ingratiate himself with the powerful and ruthless grand secretaries had not only delayed his metropolitan examination success until 1583 but also precluded any high-level appointments thereafter. More poignantly still, in 1591 a scathing memorial directed at the machinations of one of the grand secretaries incurred the wrath of the Wanli emperor and precipitated Tang's demotion to a lowly post at the southern periphery of the empire. He was eventually reinstated

as a district magistrate in 1594, but even his voluntary resignation in 1598 did not spare him the humiliation of being stripped of all titles in 1600. From 1598 until his death he primarily resided in his native Linchuan.

Even if Tang was too forthright to succeed in the fractious realm of late Ming dynasty politics, his studies and his career nevertheless brought him into close contact with the intellectual avant-garde of his day, who would in turn influence his plays. Tang became the disciple of the Wang Yangming-inspired neo-Confucian Luo Rufang (1515–1588), befriended the luminaries of the political reform movement such as Gu Xiancheng (1550–1612) and Gao Panlong (1562–1626), had lifelong ties to Buddhist notables such as the Buddhist master Zibo Zhenke (1544–1604), conversed and corresponded with other aspiring dramatists such as Mei Dingzuo (1549–1618), Tu Long (1542–1605), and Zang Maoxun (1550–1620), and avidly read the freshly printed works of the iconoclastic thinker Li Zhi (1527–1602).

Tang's extended sojourns in Nanjing shaped both the form and content of his literary activities. Apart from encountering popular performances and printed dramas in the city, Tang was also exposed to older northern ritual music and newer southern-style performances during his service under the auspices of the Board of Rites. Inspired by a quest for moral integrity and by the potential of new literary forms on the one hand and increasingly disillusioned by the realities faced by public-spirited scholar-officials on the other, Tang elevated *chuanqi* song-drama to a new level of ethical expressiveness and aesthetic sophistication. After earlier dramatic experiments with another play, he completed *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudanling*)

From *The Peony Pavilion*

The soliloquy of one character, referred to as Bridal, in the play Peony Pavilion. She refers to another character, Fragrance.

Bridal (*Character speaks*): Fragrance has left me. Ah heaven, how stately were the pools and pavilions where yesterday my dream took place. How I long for that bygone dream in exchange for this newfound sorrow! Pursuing my thoughts through endless twistings, all night I lay sleepless. Now I can seize my change to give Fragrance the slip and search the garden alone (*She grieves*). Ah, for me, truly,

in dreams “no fluttering side by side
of splendid phoenix wings,
between hearts the one minute thread
from root to tip of the magic horn.”
(*She begins to walk*).

Here is the garden. Luckily the gate is wide
open and the gardener is nowhere to be
seen. See how the ground is carpeted
with fallen petals!

Never till now did spring so stir the heart
High and low over the plastered walls
no place but springtime longings dance
and fly.

(*She stumbles*).

Oh, the hawthorn catching at my skirt—
like my heart, it will not let me leave.
And this little meander of a stream! Can it
be that
faery lovers trace again
the source of the Peach Blossom Spring?
Here too flying petals fleck the ripples.
The Lord of Heaven need pay the florist
nothing,
but for us below, what grief for fallen
blossoms
as springtime passes unfulfilled.

Source: Tang Xianzu. (2002 [originally written 1598]). *The peony pavilion (Mudan Ting)*, translated by C. Birch and C. Swatek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 57.

in 1598 and went on to compose two more song-dramas in short order, all of which would collectively be known as the *Four Dreams of Linchuan*. The instant and enduring critical and popular success of *Peony Pavilion* eclipsed Tang's attainments in other literary forms. Several recent highly acclaimed versions of *Peony Pavilion* staged in China and abroad have cemented his standing as one of China's most accomplished dramatists of all times.

Patricia SIEBER

Further Reading

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