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Shashibiya, meet Tang Xianzu

How China uses Shakespeare to promote its own bard

There is flattery in friendship

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The balcony scene of the East

LIKE many countries, China had a busy schedule of Shakespeare-themed celebrations in 2016, 400 years after his death. There were plays, lectures and even plans announced for the rebuilding of his hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon, at Sanweng-upon-Min in Jiangxi province. But as many organisers saw it, Shakespeare was just an excuse. Their main aim was to use the English bard to promote one of their own: Tang Xianzu. Whatever the West can do, their message was, China can do at least as well.

Tang is well known in China, though even in his home country he does not enjoy anything like the literary status of his English counterpart—he wrote far fewer works (four plays, compared with Shakespeare's 37), and is not as quotable. But no matter. The timing was perfect. Tang died in 1616, the same year as Shashibiya, as Shakespeare is called in Chinese. President Xi Jinping described Tang as the "Shakespeare of the East" during a state visit to Britain in 2015. The Ministry of Culture later organised a Tang-themed exhibition, comparing his life and works to those of Shakespeare. It has shown this in more than 20 countries, from Mexico to France.

The two playwrights would not have heard of each other: contacts between China and Europe were rare at the time. But that has not deterred China's cultural commissars from trying to weave a common narrative. A Chinese opera company created "Coriolanus and Du Liniang", in which Shakespeare's Roman general encounters an aristocratic lady from Tang's best-known play, "The Peony Pavilion". The musical debuted in London, then travelled to Paris and Frankfurt. Last month

Xinhua, an official news agency, released an animated music-video, “When Shakespeare meets Tang Xianzu”. Its lines, set bizarrely to a rap tune, include: “You tell love with English letters, I use Chinese ink to depict Eastern romance.”

The anniversary of Shakespeare’s death is now over, but officially inspired adulation of Tang carries on (a musical about him premiered in September in Fuzhou, his birthplace—see picture). Chinese media say that a recent hit song, “The New Peony Pavilion”, is likely to be performed at the end of this month on state television’s annual gala which is broadcast on the eve of the lunar new year. It is often described as the world’s most-watched television programme. Officials want to cultivate pride in Chinese literature, and boost foreign awareness of it. It is part of what they like to call China’s “soft power”.

Shakespeare’s works only began to take root in China after Britain defeated the Qing empire in the first Opium War of 1839-42. They were slow to spread. After the dynasty’s collapse in the early 20th century, Chinese reformers viewed the lack of a complete translation of his works as humiliating. Mao was less keen on him. During his rule, Shakespeare’s works were banned as “capitalist poisonous weeds”. Since then, however, his popularity has surged in tandem with the country’s growing engagement with the West.

Cong Cong, co-director of a recently opened Shakespeare Centre at Nanjing University, worries that without a push by the government, Tang might slip back into relative obscurity. But Ms Cong says the “Shakespeare of the East” label does Tang a disservice by implying that Shakespeare is the gold standard for literature. Tang worked in a very different cultural environment. That makes it difficult to compare the two directly, she says. Officials, however, will surely keep trying.

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