

Painter or Missionary: Life of Lang Shining in the Forbidden City

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ABSTRACT

Lang Shining (1688-1766) was originally named Giuseppe Castiglione and was born in Milan, Italy. At the age of 26, he was sent to China as a missionary by the Jesuit. When he came to the Chinese Qing court, he was appointed as a court painter. After that, he lived in China for fifty-one years, painted for three Chinese emperors until he died. During this time, he even created a unique art style which combined eastern and western art style. Most Chinese people thought that Lang Shining was only a court painter. However, he saw himself as a missionary from Italy. During his whole life, although he could only live in the court and paint, he still tried his best to help the Jesuit and spread western culture. His achievements proved that he was not only a painter but a great cultural communicator.

Keywords: *Lang Shining, Giuseppe Castiglione, Cultural Exchange, the Qing Dynasty, the Jesuit*

1. INTRODUCTION

Lang Shining (1688-1766) was a Chinese court painter in the Qing Dynasty. He was originally named Giuseppe Castiglione and born in Milan, Italy. When he was young, he accepted excellent training in painting and joined the Jesuit after grown-up. At the age of 26, he was sent to China as a missionary. When he came to the Chinese Qing court, he was appointed as a court painter by Emperor Kangxi. After that, he lived in China for fifty-one years, painted for three Chinese emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, until he died[1].

During Lang Shining's whole life, he painted hundreds of works, which made him be a famous court painter in Chinese history. However, as a missionary sent to China by Italian Jesuit, his talent was far from just painting, and he took more actions more than a painter. And these actions let people understand who was he in fact. As a foreigner who lived in the Qing court for fifty-one years, Lang Shining's identity and life are important to the research of cultural communication and cultural difference between China and western countries.

2. LANG SHINING'S EXPERIENCE

Lang Shining spent almost two thirds of his life in China, and it is this time that makes him famous. But

before going to China, his experience in his motherland Italy, laid a foundation for his achievements in China.

2.1 The Experience in Italy

In 1688, Lang Shining was born in Milan, Italy. His parents named him Giuseppe Castiglione. During his childhood, he learned to paint with a famous local artist and showed his excellent artistic talent. At the age of 19, he joined the Jesuit and was assigned to Genoa. He painted several oil paintings about Christianity for churches, these paintings may be the earliest as well as the only existing works of Giuseppe Castiglione on his motherland[2].

At that time, all missionaries who wanted to go to the Far East must set out from Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. So after a two-year novitiate in Italy, he was sent to Portugal and began his travel as a missionary. In Lisbon, he was asked to paint for chapel and royal family because of his artistic talent[3,4]. In 1714, he finally sailed to China and arrived here the next year. After that, he lived in China for fifty-one years.

2.2 The Experience in China

In 1715, Giuseppe Castiglione arrived in Macao and learned about Chinese and ceremonies related. In the same year, he went to Beijing and was presented to Emperor Kangxi by Matteo Ripa, whose Chinese name

was Ma Guoxian. Like other foreign missionaries, Giuseppe Castiglione gave himself a Chinese name Lang Shining and this name he used in the next fifty-one years. Lang Shining was appointed as a court painter by Emperor Kangxi. He worked for three Chinese emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong. During his fifty-one years in China, as a foreign court painter, Lang Shining not only painted for emperors but brought western culture and skill to China. Besides, as a member of the Jesuit, he never forgot his original identity.

2.2.1 As a Court Painter

Undeniably, court painter was Lang Shining's most important identity in China. During his life in China, he painted hundreds of paintings. Because there were huge differences between Chinese and western paintings, Lang Shining also created a unique art style that combines methods of Chinese ink painting and Western oil painting. His unique style of painting was also one of the reasons why he could be appreciated by Chinese emperors.

Excepted painting, Lang Shining also taught Chinese people methods about western painting. He even helped one of his friends, Nian Xiyao, publish the book *Shi Xue*, which told about western perspective. At that time, Lang Shining made more and more people learn about western paintings.

2.2.2 As an Architect

When Emperor Qianlong was in power, he was into European stuff, so he asked foreign missionaries to design European-style palaces built of stone in the Old Summer Palace, including his favorite court painter, Lang Shining.

Lang Shining designed a variety of famous buildings in the Old Summer Palace, such as statues of 12 Chinese Zodiac in front of the Hall of National Peace, the maze named *The Flower Array* and other western buildings and fountains. At that time, fountains and maze only could be seen in European gardens, so bring these to Chinese garden was a great and bold idea.

Although the emperor was interested in European architecture, he could not allow those western style stuff appeared in his garden. Lang Shining also used his unique art style when designed architecture. For example, statues of 12 Chinese Zodiac were designed based on western animals, but they all wore Chinese traditional clothes.

2.2.3 As a Missionary

During his life in China, Lang Shining did not perform his duty as a real missionary, for example preached. But he never forgot his responsibility in his

heart and he still saw himself as a member of the Jesuit. Since he could not preach, he preferred to use his artworks to cater to emperors and made friends with princes and officials. For example, Nian Xiyao, who was mentioned before, was Nian Gengyao's brother, and Nian Gengyao was Emperor Yongzheng's favorite officials.

Ju Rui Tu was the first painting Lang Shining painted for the Qing court. At that time, the court had a bad relationship with the Jesuit. In this case, Lang Shining first decided to paintwork as a gift for Emperor Yongzheng[5]. In the painting, he drew plants which represented peace and luck in China. It was obvious that he used this Chinese way to paint because he wanted to make Yongzheng pleased so that he could change his mind on the Jesuit and Christianity.

3. LANG SHINING'S IDENTITY IN FACT

Although Lang Shining was appreciated by Chinese Emperors, he did not actually like this kind of life. As a member of the Jesuit, on his way to China, he might think that he could be a great missionary. However, when he came to China, he could only be a painter, who could not preach as other missionaries. And a Christian who had a pure heart for God and was eager to introduce Christianity to more people. But his dream was damaged when he took his first step. In this case, he could not be satisfied and even felt depressed and disappointed.

But as a court painter, he still could not create what he wants. Because he lived and worked in the Forbidden City, he had to take orders from emperors to survive in a foreign country. One of the important reasons why Lang Shining created that unique art style was that emperors did not like his western art. He once mentioned in one of his letters, he thought this kind of art was priceless[6]. When it comes to architecture, though those buildings Lang Shining designed in the Old Summer Palace looked like European buildings, their roofs were still Chinese traditional roofs. And when he designed the statues of 12 Chinese Zodiac for the fountain in front of the Hall of National Peace, he first planned to design naked women, not Chinese Zodiac, only because Emperor Qianlong did not accept this plan. As a foreigner who lived in China for decades, when Lang Shining was asked to design western buildings, he might thought this was an opportunity for him to relieve his homesickness, but when he was told that he still could not create western style works, it was a strike for him. But in order to live in the Chinese court, he had to "be more like Chinese than Chinese"[7]. Every time when he saw those "half-western" buildings, he might think about his motherland again and again.

However, in his motherland, few people knew Lang Shining or Giuseppe Castiglione. Even though some of the other missionaries mentioned him in their own

letters, there were only read by their families[8]. At that time, missionaries were not allowed to express their personal emotion in letters for their family. That is to say, he could hardly tell his family how much he missed his country and family. In the last years of his life, he created Chinese first copper plate etching *Battle Scenes of the Quelling of Rebellions in the Western Regions*, with other painters, when paintings were ready to send to Europe in order to be carved on copper plates[9], Lang Shining once mentioned that he wished they could be sent to Italy. Undeniably, he mentioned this because he wanted people in his country could see his works and knew a great Italian artist was living in China. But unfortunately, those paintings were sent to France, and Lang Shining died before the copper plate etching was completed.

Lang Shining was one of the Chinese emperor's favorite missionaries, especially Emperor Qianlong. But every relationship in the court was not pure. Even though he had emperors' trust, he still had to think about himself. Unlike other missionaries who came to China with him, since he worked in the court, he could not do what he liked and went where he wanted. He painted several paintings about horses when worked for Emperor Qianlong. As we all know, royal horses must be healthy and strong, but in his works, there always be several horses which seemed sickly thin and lonely. Sometimes, this kind of horse was also followed by a horse trainer. This might a way for Lang Shining to express his real feeling about his life in the court. As a foreign court painter, he was different from other people, at the same time, he had to take the order from emperors[10]. No one understands him and, he also must be restrained. Even the person who liked him most Emperor Qianlong could not know what he wants.

It was true that Chinese emperors only took him as a painter, but sometimes, Lang Shining still thought maybe he could speak for the Jesuit. Actually, in emperors' heart, they had separated him from the group of missionaries, they only thought it was no need for him to speak for the Jesuit since he had had a comfortable life but did not understand his power of belief and sense of mission. It was this kind of unequal and misunderstood relationship that made Lang Shining felt helpless and isolated in the Forbidden City[11].

4. LANG SHINING'S ACHIEVEMENTS AND INFLUENCE

No matter whether Lang Shining liked it or not, he definitely made great achievements during his fifty-one years in China. In the Qing Dynasty, he created a totally new and excellent art style which combined Chinese and western art form. He also introduced western culture to people at that time. Besides, he also tried his best to do everything he could to help the Jesuit and missionaries to complete their duties of preaching.

Nowadays, in the Forbidden City, a significant portion of painting collections was painted by Lang Shining. And the 12 Chinese Zodiac, which were designed by him and lost over a hundred years ago, were now cared by almost all the Chinese people. He left China with colorful artistic works.

And as a foreigner who did not like life in China very much, there were various reasons that he could not come back to Italy. For example, his sense of mission and love for God, he was working for emperors and the law for customs at that time. No matter why he lived in China for decades, during these years, he used his great ability to learn to understand Chinese culture, and his experience and result of learning also gave people nowadays enlightenment of understanding western culture and the process of cultural communication.

5. CONCLUSION

Lang Shining spent almost two thirds of his life in China. Here he used his talent and lonely, isolated but bright life to help and speak for the Jesuit to comfort himself as he also fulfilled his mission as a missionary not just painting. He made great achievements and left the later generations colorful and shining artworks.

But as a foreigner, things he left for the later generations are not only artworks. He also inspired people nowadays by his experience. During the process of cultural communication, there are differences and misunderstandings between different cultures, the most important thing is not making others accept a different culture, but standing in different positions to understand the reason people in different culture cannot understand each other and then explain.

Lang Shining was not only a messenger of the Jesuit or art, he was also a messenger of culture and time. His artworks can bring people enjoyments of art, but it is his life in the Forbidden that arouses people's reflection on cultural communication.

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