



## The Archways of Tangyue

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Tangyue (棠樾) is a very small village near the foot of Huangshan in the southern Anhui province of China. Huangshan (黄山) low Mountain is, of course, world famous for its extraordinary natural beauty. It is a UNESCO world heritage site.

My wife and I, together with another couple, came to this tiny place in the middle of March 2007. We had earlier visited Huangshan and a few ancient villages in its vicinity. Tangyue was one of the ancient villages in our itinerary.

It was the archways of Tangyue that had attracted us there. Archways are actually quite common in China. They are found all over the country in one form or another. So what was so special about the archways of Tangyue that made us travel all the way there just to look at them?

Archways are monuments. The practice of erecting an archway to commemorate a person's good deed started during the Tang dynasty about 1300 years ago. Initially, the archways were constructed of timber. Later, more durable materials like stone were used in place

of timber. Even then the archways rarely lasted for more than a couple of centuries, and therefore, had to be reconstructed if they were to be preserved for posterity.

The unique feature about the archways of Tangyue is the fact that there are seven of them in a row, all constructed to commemorate prominent members of the Bao family over a period of about 300 years straddling two dynasties. The oldest archway was constructed in the year 1520 during the Ming dynasty, and the latest in 1814 during the Qing dynasty.

The Bao family started to live in Tangyue during the Song dynasty. Over the generations, many members of the extended Bao family became extremely successful in business and many of them became very senior officials in the imperial court. However, even though the family had immense wealth and enjoyed a great reputation, they could not build memorial archways as and when they liked. They first had to obtain the imperial consent.

Out of the seven archways, two were named after members of the Bao family who exhibited exemplary virtue of loyalty to the

imperial court, two for high filial piety, two for complete dedication to the husband, and one for profound benevolence. Those virtues of the feudal society of the past, however, may not be totally accepted and appreciated nowadays.

For example, the third archway from the village commemorates a woman from a Wang family who was married into the Bao family. Her husband passed away when she was only 25. As was expected of her, she did not remarry. She demonstrated great respect for her parents-in-law and looked after them very well.

At the same time, she worked extremely hard to bring up her only son until he became a high official in the imperial court. Just when the son was ready to repay her love and give her a comfortable life, she fell ill because of years of overwork and eventually passed away at the age of 45. In these modern times, some people may not bestow on her such high esteem for her personal sacrifice.

The archways of Tangyue is not just a tourist attraction, they are the glories as well as tears of China's colourful history. ■

