

BEYOND THE FRAGRANCE: THE SYMBOLISM OF CHINESE FLOWERS AND BIRDS

Liu Yang

Flowers and birds are ubiquitous motifs in Chinese art. The endurance and resonance of these motifs arise not only from their natural beauty, but also their cultural associations. Often they are suffused with poetic overtones or imbued with social and political allusions. It is probably not an overstatement to say that an understanding of the social, political and religious background is required to illuminate the artistic statement.

The symbolism of flowers and birds derives from observation of their natural qualities: their shape, their habits, and, in the case of plants, from the seasons of the year in which they flower or are most conspicuous. Other factors contributing to symbolic meanings include their medicinal properties, their appearance in myth, legend, and literature, and in some instances, the association of the flower or bird with particular deities or famous people.

The symbolism that accumulated around flower and bird motifs was determined, intellectually and practically, by the imperial court, Daoists and Buddhists, with each adding different layers of meaning. The enthusiasm for these subjects was prompted not purely by a simple desire to enjoy the beauty of nature, but also by social and political motivations. The 'high' culture of the literati played a key role in elaborating the symbolic contexts of these subjects, and in making them a focus for literature and art. Their cultural constructs were passed on to, and in many cases vigorously adopted by, other groups in society who in turn enshrined them in popular culture.

FLOWERS AND FEMININE BEAUTY

The natural beauty of flowers easily led to an equation with female beauty. In Chinese art and literature, flowers are common symbols of feminine beauty, of love and affection. The poetic convergence of flowering blossoms and blossom-like beauties is evident as early as the time when the popular odes of

the *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*) were collected (c. 1000–c. 600 BCE), as exemplified by the following line from a lyric from the 7th century BCE Zheng Kingdom: 'I travel with a girl who is as beautiful as a Rose of Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*)'.

In literature flowers and women often share the attributes of refinement, delicacy and fragrance; and poets often tease the reader's imagination to flit between the two kinds of 'flowers', the plant and the human. Artists also enjoyed this interplay (fig. 1). In Wen Zhengming's painting, *Cotton rose* (cat. no. 5), the beauty and sensibility of the flower, as well as its allusion to a court lady, is captured in the combination of visual and poetic imagery. The poem describes equally well a cotton rose or a court lady. The flower and the woman compete with each other in beauty and tease admirers to choose between a blossom's beauty and that of a woman.

The short time span when it was appropriate for a woman to be married was compared to the blooming of a flower or the ripening of fruit. In literature, women who died at a young age or were forsaken by men were described as 'withered flowers'. A popular poetic genre known as 'lamenting the flowers' was used to signal the fatal destiny of either flowers or women. In the poem *Pitying the peonies* by the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi (772–846), the short life of a peony's delicate blossom becomes a metaphor for the transience of feminine beauty:

*The forlorn faded red petals lowered towards the rain,
torn beauties scattered to the wind.
Seeing them distressed, fallen on the earth
and tossed in the mud, disturbs my mind.*

Many floral motifs refer specifically to women: the begonia, for example, is the symbol of a lovelorn lady. The *shuixian* (lit. water-fairy), or wild narcissus, that requires the most sensitive brush to be properly interpreted, symbolises a fresh and unsullied maiden beauty; the orchid is a metaphor for a lovely girl

'living in seclusion'. The expression 'finding a delicate orchid in a secluded valley' was a distinctly erotic reference to an encounter with an especially enchanting courtesan. The *xuancao* (*Hemerocallis graminea*), a species of day-lily, is related to ideas of fertility and the bearing of sons, while the many seeds in the red fruit of a pomegranate, whose red blossom was used to ward off evil, symbolises the hope for numerous male offspring.

FLOWERS AND MORALITY: THE ORCHID

The orchid gives us perhaps the best example of the way in which the natural attributes of flowers came to symbolise moral qualities in humans. The *Yijing* (*Classic of Change*), a text dating from the 11th – 8th centuries BCE, used the orchid to express the serenity of spiritual and emotional rapport between like minds: 'If two people speak with one mind, their words will have the fragrance of the orchid.' This comparison resulted in phrases such as 'orchid relations' and 'orchid friends'.

The most famous and long-standing symbolism of the orchid, which associates the flower with a life of pure seclusion, comes from Confucius. Coming upon an orchid flourishing amongst the grasses in a secluded valley, he saw in the flower a mirror of his own situation of being unemployed for lack of a king to recognise his talents. He noted that although the flower grew untended, it still did not fail to cast a fragrance: 'Though growing in the depth of a hidden vale, unseen and unappreciated by men, it never discontinues its sweetness. Though living in poverty, unrecognised by society, a gentleman is content, nevertheless, and he never fails to cultivate his mind.' The orchid was thereafter a perfect symbol of the gentleman who, though his talents go unrecognised and his political ambitions unfulfilled, still maintains his integrity. In fact the flower has come to be called 'the recluse orchid'. Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BCE), one of the earliest great poets in Chinese history, was probably the first person to be linked with the orchid. Like the wild orchid, his talents went unnoticed and he languished far from the court.

The fragrance of the orchid was thought to be ethereal yet so pervasive as to steal into one's sleeves almost unnoticed. Its subdued but indelible perfume led Confucius to further comment that 'Associating with a virtuous man is like walking into a room of



Figure 1. Detail of a hanging scroll by Gu Jianlong (1606–?), showing a lady reading beside flowers. Ink and colour on silk, 148.5 x 46.5 cm, collection of the Guangdong Museum.

orchids. One barely notices the scent though as time passes, a subtle influence is exerted on one's mind.' [*Kongzi jiayu* (Family Conversations of the Clan of Confucius)].

Ever since Confucius set the tone for the orchid by associating the flower with a life of pure seclusion and Qu Yuan became the first orchid-like moral example, the orchid has been an emblem of the triumphant purity of a noble man. Intellectuals and officials without exception emphasised their enthusiasm for orchids and claimed raising orchids as their hobby.

A grouping comprising the orchid, the plum blossom, chrysanthemum and bamboo, became known as the Four Gentlemen. Another tradition recognises the plum blossom, together with the pine and bamboo, as *suihan sanyou*, the Three Friends of the Cold Season, in another association with the virtuous gentleman. The symbolism derives from the natural qualities of these plants: the plum blossom defies winter and triumphs over cold; the chrysanthemum flowers in autumnal solitude, embodying purity in its yellow blossoms; the upright pine remains green throughout the year; the

bamboo bends but never breaks. These form an emblem of Confucian virtue, a moral grouping of exemplary plants which endure when all others have succumbed.

POLITICS AND FLOWERS: THE PEONY IN THE TANG DYNASTY

For the imperial court the maintenance of symbolic values was also the maintenance of political and economic influence. Court elites dominated flower-and-bird culture and utilised this aesthetic to enhance their prestige and authority. The impact of politics and the imperial court on flower symbolism is best seen in the case of the peony.

A Tang dynasty writer Duan Chengshi (d. 863) traced the history of the peony and claimed that the flower was seldom mentioned before the seventh century. According to him, in the late Kaiyuan period (713–741), the peony was first cultivated in the capital Chang'an and became a highly appreciated flower during the Tianbao period (742–755) [*Youyang zazu* (*Assorted Notes from Youyang*)]. Perusing the literature and art of the period, one finds that the peony suddenly blooms in poetry, painting, and the decorative arts. The most obvious factor in this sudden enthusiasm for the peony in the Tang dynasty was the imperial preference for this flower.

According to an episode during the Kaiyuan period, when the peony was cultivated for the first time in the imperial garden, Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) paid a visit to the garden when the flowers were in full bloom, accompanied by the imperial consort Yang Guifei. Just as the court musicians were about to perform, Xuanzong stopped them saying 'On this rare occasion of enjoying the twin beauties of flower and concubine, who could bear to listen to old songs?' The renowned poet Li Bai (701–762), who served in the imperial household at the time, was called in and ordered by Xuanzong to compose a set of three lyrics to honour both Yang Guifei and the splendid peony. In these poems, the peony was likened and identified with the imperial favourite woman. The third poem in this set reads:

*The most famous flower and the noblest beauty
rival each other,
Both attract His Majesty to engross himself in*

great pleasure.

*At such time, leaning against the railing on the
northern side of the Fragrant Pavilion,*

*What kinds of worry and grief could not be
dispelled?*

[Yangfei waizhuan (The Unofficial History of Yang Guifei)].

Horticulturalists specialising in the peony were in great demand to serve at the imperial gardens. A certain Song Danfu was favoured by the Emperor because of his capacity to cultivate thousands of species of peony. He was dubbed by the courtesans as the 'Immortal of Flowers'. Yang Guifei was also responsible for the popularity of a particular species of peony called 'Yang's Red' (*Yangjiahong*). The name came from an incident in which Yang Guifei left her rouged fingerprint on a peony blossom. Xuanzong was amused by the 'accident', and ordered this particular peony to be cultivated in the imperial garden, thus creating a new species with red marks on the petals.

The wave of enthusiasm for the peony that emanated from the imperial court can be seen in the stories, poems, and official records of the Tang dynasty. The admiration for this flower is at its most extreme in the writings of poets and the fervent gardeners of the times. Bai Juyi wrote in a poem entitled *Buy the flowers*:

*In this imperial city, the spring is about to end,
Chariots rumble and roll, horses whinny and neigh,
Everyone says it is the season of the peony,
they vie with each other to buy flowers ...
Every cluster of flowers in dark colours,
attracts ten poets to compose verses!*

Bai Juyi wrote in another poem: 'Within the twenty-day period of the blooming and fading of the peony, everyone in the city is just about crazy.' Historians also validate the poetic accounts: 'In Chang'an people favour the peony; it has been over thirty years since the enthusiasm started. Every year in late spring, numerous chariots turn out full of people crazy for peonies. Society maintains it is shameful if someone doesn't follow the vogue. Both Buddhists and Daoists have planted numerous species in temples in order to make a profit. The expensive ones are worth several ten-thousands in cash.'

[*Guoshi bu* (Supplement to the Tang History)].

The peony motif swept through Tang literature, decorative art and painting, eventually crossing all economic and social barriers. The royal association led the flower to be charged with political overtones and to be used as an emblem of imperial strength. Blessed with majestic elegance, splendour and aristocratic associations, the peony is hailed as the 'King of all Flowers', the reigning beauty of celestial fragrance (*guose tianxiang*), and 'A beauty which can overthrow a city or a country'. It is one of the most enduring and pervasive images in Chinese literature and art, standing firmly as the symbol of honour, wealth and nobility.

FLOWER-AND-BIRD SYMBOLISM IN MYTH, RELIGIONS AND POPULAR CULTS

Flower-and-bird symbolism is also derived from Chinese superstitions and religious beliefs. Many plants played a role in the traditional idea of a portent (*chen*) or omen, as well as Daoist theories concerning the methods of acquiring longevity and immortality. Some plants were also believed to have talismanic qualities.

The prophecies of strange things to come had a longstanding tradition in Chinese history. A prophecy might concern, for example, a dynasty's downfall or the appearance of a new king from among the people. One prophecy involving flowers related that when Wang Jian (r. 907–918), the king of the Shu kingdom, was about to die, the *wuhuaguo* (*Ficus carica*) on Mount Emei all suddenly put forth their white bloom. There was another belief that if a special species of herbaceous peony, with petals a mixture of red and yellow, appeared in a city, a genius who would pass the highest imperial examination would soon emerge there. [Liu Ban (Song), *Shaoyao pu* (*Treatise of Herbaceous Peony*)] (fig. 2).

Some plants were long believed to possess magical capacities that could endow one with longevity and immortality. The chrysanthemum, for instance, was mentioned in early pharmacopoeias as a safe and beneficial medicament equal to an elixir. Legend has it that the chrysanthemum flower growing alongside a mountain spring conferred upon its waters the qualities of an elixir of immortality. Many immortals in the Daoist texts were said to ascend to Heaven after partaking of the blossoms. Similar



Figure 2. An album leaf by Huang Shen (1687–1772), illustrating the story of a special species of peony, the appearance of which prophesies a genius emerging in a city. Ink and colour on silk, dated 1737, 33.5 x 24, collection of the Guangdong Museum.

properties were ascribed to both the lotus and the peach. A certain plant, the *lingzhi* or fungus, combined the ideas of portent and immortality and was said to grow and flourish when the monarch was merciful and humane. During the Tang dynasty, the Ministry of Rites ranked *zhizhao* or the portent of fungus among the middle auspicious tokens. At the same time it often figured as a key ingredient in elixirs with the promise that whoever ate it attained eternal life.

The talismanic quality of plants underlies the belief that planting certain flowers near one's home or placing them on the gates would protect the household from evil. The long-bladed grass of the sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*) with its strong aroma is believed to ward off poisonous insects and other evil forces. Therefore it was customarily hung on doors on the occasion of the May (or Duanwu) Festival on the fifth day of the fifth moon. The 'peach charm', consisting of a spray of peach blossom, was placed on the doors of houses at the new year to prevent evil from entering.

The depth added to flower symbolism by the coming of Buddhism is best seen in the example of

the lotus which is among the first flowers to appear in *The Book of Songs*, which dated to the period 1000–600 BCE. The lotus has played a significant part in Chinese literature and in folklore. In the Han dynasty and thereafter, as the immortality cult rose to an unprecedented height, and stories linking flowers and birds to mysterious phenomena flourished, the lotus was believed to possess the magic power of immortality. The enthusiasm for the lotus not only became a religious, literary and artistic fashion but found expression in the daily life of the elite and the literati. Lord Donghun, the sixth sovereign of the Southern Qi dynasty (r. 499–501), had lotus made of gold-leaf strewn upon the ground for his concubine Pan to dance upon, and rapturously exclaimed, 'Every step makes a lotus grow!' [*Nanshi (History of the Southern Dynasties)*]. This remark thereafter became a cliché describing a woman's elegant walking style.

Supported by such a rich cultural background, the Indian Buddhist associations with the lotus as a symbol of purity, perfection and spiritual attainment were easily assimilated. To Buddhists, the lotus flower blooms above the water just as Buddha is born into the world but lives above the world; its fruits are said to be ripe when the flower blooms, just as the truth preached by Buddha bears immediately the fruit of enlightenment. After the spread of Buddhist belief in China, the lotus was thus touched with religious implications and known as the sacred flower of Buddhism. The great popularity of the lotus in China during later periods however, was not merely derived from its Buddhist connections, but also the more general belief that the lotus, which grows out of mud but is not defiled, can be identified with noble purity and unflinching courage.

Religious and superstitious beliefs are aligned even more closely with representations of birds. In Chinese myths, the roles played by birds range from the progenitors of whole groups of people, to the agents of gods, to the companions of ancestors and heroes. Furthermore, some ancient sages in Chinese legends were euphemised versions of bird deities: many mythological and legendary heroes were in reality chiefs of ethnic and social groups having birds for totemic ancestors. In the Han dynasty, a bird was considered variously as a heavenly messenger, a heavenly helping spirit, the soul of a deceased person, or, in the case of a blue bird, a messenger of the Queen

Mother of the West, the chief deity of the period.

When religious Daoism emerged during the second century CE, it absorbed the foregoing traditions associated with the birds. Furthermore, the Daoists had a tendency of linking birds with their divinities, and with the concepts of longevity and immortality. According to Daoist texts, when a man became an immortal, a crane, or sometimes a dragon, always came down from Heaven to greet him. The story of Wang Ziqiao, a Han dynasty man of letters, who ascended to heaven riding a crane after taking an elixir is well-known. Similar cases can be found in many records of the immortals. By riding the crane, the adept demonstrated his transcendence from his earth-bound existence.

PUNS IN FLOWER-AND-BIRD MOTIFS

In popular culture, there has long been a convention of using plants or animals to embody certain propitious meanings. The symbolic meanings sometimes depend upon puns and word plays which are partly tonal, partly phonic, partly allusive. Used in the decorative arts, these puns become rebuses.

A painting genre called 'A pure offering for the New Year' has traditionally been a favourite subject with artists. The motif consists of a combination of different plants, all associated with auspiciousness. Such paintings were hung in the main hall of a house on the occasion of Chinese New Year. Another type of painting is symbolic of long life, good health and wealth, and would have been suitable for a birthday or other congratulatory presentation. In both these kinds of paintings, artists of different generations have taken the liberty of bringing together flowers (or plants) of different seasons based on the meaning of characters homophonous with the flowers' names.

Often, a number of propitious meanings may be combined in one picture, corresponding to phrases of well-wishing widespread in common parlance. For example, a combination of crabapple and peony suggests the meaning 'riches and honour to the whole family', because *haitang* (crabapple) is a pun on *mantang* (full main-hall), while the peony stands for wealth and aristocracy. The addition of the blossom *yulan* or Jade Orchid (*Magnolia denudata*) to this combination alludes to the phrase *yutang fugui*, which means 'wealth and rank in the Jade

Hall', a wish for a man to achieve a higher rank in an official career. 'Jade Hall' is an allusion to both a private noble house and the Hanlin Academy, whose members were the honoured scholars of the nation.

In Wu Changshuo's *A pure offering for the New Year* (cat. no. 48) the grouped flowers form a rebus for the blessing of happiness in the New Year. The image of persimmon, for instance, is a homophone for *shi* – business or other affairs – and suggests the complimentary phrase *shishi ruyi* or 'may all your wishes come true'. The image in art, therefore, is imbued with associations of success in business or other affairs. The pomegranates on the stem-cup represent vigorous fertility because of the fruit's numerous seeds – a pun for sons. Symbols of fertility also include the lotus and melon. A lotus pod contains many seeds, and additionally its name in Chinese (*lian*) forms a pun on the word for 'in succession' (*lian*). The image of melons connected one to another by vines suggests an image of generations of sons and grandsons stretching on without interruption. The pun comes from the word *dai* (belt) – the vine-linked melons – that provides a homophone on the word for 'generations' (*dai*).

Birds or other objects too can convey good wishes and greetings through the puns on their names which conjure up verbal associations with lucky ideas. *Xique* or magpie, for instance, is an auspicious bird whose caw heralds the approach of good fortune. Its name in Chinese forms a pun on the word *xie* for 'happiness' and 'joy'. The bulbul bird is known to the Chinese as the 'old man with white hair' (*baitouweng*) that suggests a pun on the notion of longevity or a long-lasting marriage (cat. no. 25).

High official rank is a traditionally desirable aim in life, allied to notions of wealth, honour and fame. The blossoming cockscomb is an auspicious theme because its Chinese name is pronounced in a similar way to the word meaning 'promotion'. Together with the cock the image comprises a rebus wishing a man success in his official career (cat. no. 36). The long-tailed birds which often appear in paintings are the so-called *shoudainiao* ('bird with long tail') which, in Chinese, suggests a pun on the word *shou* or longevity.

In some paintings, flowers of various kinds are depicted in vases (cat. nos 15, 16, 48). The vase (*ping*) is itself a pun on the word for 'peace' in Chinese. Ripe ears of rice appearing in conjunction with quail produce another symbol of peace. The allusion here

is from the word for rice-stalks that forms a pun or an alternative word meaning *he* or 'peace' and 'tranquillity'; while the term for the quail also supplies a pun on the word *an* meaning 'peace'. In addition, the homophonic association led apple (*pingguo*) to be a pun on 'peace' (*ping*).

In Shen Quan's painting (cat. no. 31), a cat is depicted because its name (*mao*) in Chinese is a pun on the term (*maodie*) denoting a person who has reached an old age. Along with grouping auspicious flowers, the artist thus created a painting suitable for the theme: 'a lofty old gentleman of great achievement'. The bat or *fu* appearing in Ju Chao's *Five bats* (cat. no. 43) is a homophone for happiness and good fortune. The title can therefore be read as the 'Five good fortunes'.

MULTIPLICITY IN FLOWER-AND-BIRD SYMBOLISM

In contrast to the usually clear-cut flower symbolism of Western culture, in Chinese tradition, the meaning of the flower-and-bird symbolism is multi-layered. The primary allusion is often accompanied by numerous lesser nuances, any of which could be called forth simultaneously for different purposes. For example, the *xuancao* (*Hemerocallis graminea*), a species of day-lily, has been known for ages as a drug or charm for dispelling grief, in a tradition that can be traced back to the Han dynasty. It was often paired with the *hehuan*, a flower capable of dispersing anger. In addition, the *xuancao* is supposed to favour the birth of sons when worn in women's girdles, and therefore also became emblematic of the mother of a family [Zhang Hua (231-300), *Bowuzhi* (*Account of Wide-ranging Matters*)].

There is no simpler way to show the unique phenomena of the multiplicity of Chinese floral symbolism than to trace the poetic overtones and social and political allusions of the peach (*Prunus persica*), both blossom and fruit. The peach blossom has had a keen appeal to the aesthetic sense of Chinese from a very early time. Throughout the ages its tender and delicate charm have been the focus of Chinese appreciation, even when later on many other associations accumulated.

Apart from allusions to youth, love and affection, from early on there is a tendency for the peach to be associated with the transcendental phenomenon.

During the time between the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (770–221 BCE), the peach became a talisman considered to possess magical powers. Its twigs or figures carved from its branches were hung up on doors to ward off evil spirits [Liu Xiang (c. 1st BCE) *Zhan'guo* (*Intrigues of the Warring States*)]. According to a writer of the Han dynasty, the custom originated from a legend about a pair of demon quellers called Shen Tuo and Yu Lei who lived on the Mount Dushu, under a huge peach tree [Ying Shao (fl. 189–194), *Fengsu tongyi* (*Records of Customs*)]. During the fervent quest for immortality in the Han dynasty many allusions to the peach accumulated. It was believed that the peach could be used as the elixir of longevity and immortality. The peach-tree that grew in the gardens of the palace of the Queen Mother of the West was said to blossom once in 3,000 years and to yield the fruit of eternal life, which ripened for another 3,000 years. The god of longevity is often pictured holding a peach.

In addition, the peach blossom became associated with a utopian world during the fourth century. In a famous allegory entitled *Peach Blossom Spring*, Tao Qian (365–427) tells the story of a fisherman who stumbles on a lost paradise beyond the turmoil of this chaotic world. The allegory says that during the Taiyuan reign of Jin dynasty (376–396), a native of Wuling (in present Hunan province) was fishing in a river. He rowed upstream until he suddenly came to a grove of blossoming peach trees lining each bank for hundreds of paces. 'No trees of any other kind stood among them, but there were fragrant flowers, delicate and lovely to the eye, and the air was filled with drifting peach bloom.' It made a great impression on the fisherman. He went on for a way and came to the foot of a mountain from whence the spring issued. There was a small opening in the mountain and it seemed as if light was coming through it. The fisherman went through the opening and found himself in an ideal world where houses were surrounded by fertile fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboo and other plants grew there. Roads were free of traffic and cocks and dogs could be heard calling to each other. All enjoyed working in the fields; old and young joyfully lived in full happiness. The ideal world Tao Qian describes contrasts sharply with that of his own era, which was scarred by political strife and the actions of aristocratic families

who seized land and forced small farmers into bondage. What Tao Qian described in *Peach Blossom Spring* was his dream of a past golden age, a time when all people lived in peace and happiness. In this allegory, the fisherman first saw, then smelled, the fragrance of blossoming peach trees. What attracts us is not only the natural beauty of peach blossom, but also the utopian world it embellished and heralded. *Peach Blossom Spring* thereafter became a symbol for generations of Chinese who sought refuge from the turmoil of this world.

The symbolism of birds are many and various, sometimes forcefully rendered and emotionally resonant. The magpie, for instance, is regarded as a bird of good omen. Its name in Chinese means literally 'bird of joy'. It is believed that if a magpie builds its nest near a house the people living nearby will all have good luck. The chattering of magpies before a house is said to be an indication of the arrival of a guest in the near future. The eagle stands for strength, dignity and power, and the representation of its name in Chinese characters depicts one bird swooping down upon another.

Swallows symbolise marital happiness in China because they often fly in pairs. Also, the Chinese words for 'swallow' and 'wild goose' are homophones (*yan*), although they are written differently, and the wild goose is a well-known symbol of marital fidelity because it takes only one mate.

In the Tang dynasty, a white-throated partridge called *zhegu* was abundant in the Yangzi basin and was even more common in southern China. The bird in literature and art represents a noble spirit anguished by the sorrows of parting. It is a token of human feelings: the displaced men who heard its sad voice felt that it spoke for them, and wept for their lost homes; generals and soldiers found in the bird a ready image for their own sense of an overly prolonged tour of military duty.

In conclusion, the flower and bird symbolism in China has been aesthetic, philosophical, religious, and even political. The motifs of plants and birds can be used to express an endless range of meanings and sentiments. The abundant associations of these subjects encouraged artists to go beyond their outward appearance and very nature and seek to evoke the unseen qualities.

花香鳥語之外

柳揚

在豐富多彩的中國美術中，花鳥畫是非常獨特的藝術現象，這不僅是因為它自唐代以來就獨立門戶，自成一科，而且還因為它所表現的對象，花鳥蔬果魚蟲，無不積淀著文學與美學的、哲學和宗教的，乃至於社會的，政治的深層意義。

中國花鳥文化的形成，得力於文人士大夫千百年來不遺餘力的推崇。愛花鳥且以具體的物象來寄托個人的情懷，是中國文學中常見的現象。形形色色的宗教勢力，由於其信仰與特定的花鳥千絲萬縷的關係，也給這種文化留下深深的烙印。在花鳥文化的發展過程中，皇室的偏好與介入，有時更是產生了決定性的作用。

中國花鳥豐富多彩的象征內蘊的衍生和演變，首先取決於具體的物體本身在自然中的特質。就花卉而言，它最直接的自然屬性莫過於美麗的外觀。這個特點很容易讓人把它們與人類社會中另外一些美好的東西相比較。自古以來，花與女性便是相映成趣的一對。歷代詩詞曲賦以花喻美人，比比皆是，繪畫作品也常襲用這個套路。文徵明筆下的木芙蓉既是鮮花，又是一個在水一方的佳人，悅目的圖畫，經由題詩的配合，散發出淡淡的離愁（圖5）。由於在現實生活中，女人的美貌與青春常常被形容為如鮮花般艷麗而短暫。“紅顏薄命”令人聯想起轉瞬即逝的花季。花與女性的命運相關聯，產生了詩畫中“惜花”的主題。

花卉襲人的芳香導致象征意義的衍生，蘭花是典型的例子。早在《易》中就有“同心之言，其嗅如蘭”之說。由此產生了“蘭友”“蘭契”之類的俗語。孔子於隱谷中見蘭花，感嘆不已，他一方面感慨蘭有如君子怀才不遇，又贊其高潔的情操：“蘭生於深林不以無人而不芳，君子修道立德，不以窮困而改節。”孔子進而把蘭花的幽香與君子以美德感染人的特點相聯係，說：“與善人處，如入芝蘭之室，久而不聞其香，則與之俱化。”（《孔子家語》）自從孔子賦予蘭花以道德喻義，歷代文人士大夫莫不以蘭自比，以愛蘭為己任。稍後，蘭花又與梅菊竹一道，被稱作“四君子”。這個組合與松梅竹“歲寒三友”一樣，道德含義的引申都是與植物的物理屬性相關。梅花迎霜斗

雪，菊花於百花開後發，松樹四季常青，竹子有“節”，折而不斷。所有這些特點，都與儒家理想中君子堅忍慎獨的情操相吻合，因此得以成為舉世認可的道德形象。

在花鳥文化形成和象征含義的積累過程中，政治的因素舉足輕重。歷史上有很多時候，統治階級引發推動和左右了某種時尚，宮廷的趣味變成了大眾的趣味。這方面最好的例子莫過於唐朝的牡丹。據唐人段成式的《酉陽雜俎》，在唐代以前，牡丹並沒有太大的名氣，隋代《種植法》七十卷甚至都未提及它的名字。長安重視牡丹是在開元天寶年間。牡丹突然之間變得灼手可熱，自有其複雜的原因，但其中重要的一環，卻直接關係著統治階級的趣味。據《楊妃外傳》說，開元中，禁中初重牡丹。當此紫妍紅之際，唐玄宗與楊貴妃親臨觀賞，正當梨園弟子欲歌一曲以助雅興，明皇說，“實名花，對妃子，焉能用舊曲？”馬上令人持金花箋，宣翰林學士李白進三章牡丹辭。其三云：“名花傾國兩相歡，長得君王帶笑看。解釋春風無限意，沉香亭北倚闌干。”在這三首詩中，名花與美人，牡丹與貴妃合二為一，難解難分。長安的牡丹熱也就此揭開了序幕。由於皇室的推崇，上到縉紳，下至百姓，無不以種牡丹為時尚。《國史補》說，“長安貴游牡丹三十余年。每春暮，車馬若狂，以不觀為恥。人種以求利，一本有值數萬者。”白居易詩云：“共道牡丹時，相隨買花去。一叢深色花，千萬中人賦。”（《秦中吟·買花》）

牡丹在眾香國中的花王地位從此奠定。當時有詩說“臨軒一賞後，輕薄萬千花。”由於其難以比擬的“國色天香”，更由於其與皇家的關係，牡丹成了詩人藝術家競相表現的對象，它的價值，也超越了觀賞的功能，一躍成為高貴富麗的代名詞。

中國花鳥象征內涵的另一個重要組成部分是其與宗教思想的聯係。許多植物與花卉被認為是神異之物，能預示吉凶徵兆，祓除不祥，乃至食後長生不死。

徵兆讖緯思想在中國源遠流長。它常常聯係到王朝更迭，新國君從民間誕生之類不同尋常之事。而花兆乃是讖緯學說中重要的一部分。《北夢瑣言》中說蜀王王建將死的那一年，峨嵋山婆羅花（無花果）全開白花。《後山叢話》說，芍藥中有紅瓣黃腰之一種，此花現則城中出宰相（見插圖）。類似的傳說與故事在歷史上舉不勝舉。許多植物在古人信仰里具有驅邪鎮惡的功效。早在先秦和漢代，桃梗被用來插於

門戶之上，防止邪惡之物入侵。漢俗於九月九日重陽節，人人縫囊盛茱萸系臂上，飲菊花酒，祓除不祥。東漢以來神仙思想流行，很多花卉植物因此被賦予神奇色彩，變成能使人長生不死的仙藥。《風俗通》說，南陽鄜縣山谷中有菊花，落英於澗水，村民飲之，得壽百二三十。《華山記》云，華山頂池中產千葉蓬，服之通仙。許多神仙被認為是食花之後成道的。例如《神仙傳》中說，康風子服甘菊花桐實後白日升天。

佛教東漸以來，傳統的花卉象征涵義吸收了外來的宗教思想，變得愈加豐富。最明確的例子莫過於荷花。對佛教來說，荷花是精神達至完美純粹狀態的象征。芙蓉出水，猶如佛陀投身凡胎，但是精神超越世俗之上。荷花盛開即結實，猶如佛陀所傳之真理結出的頓悟碩果。不過，荷花之所以在中國獲得如此崇高的地位和廣為喜愛，並不光是佛教的因素。荷花出淤泥而不染，還是潔身自好的君子的象征。

除了花卉，禽鳥也長期以來與宗教思想和超現實的學說難解難分。在中國早期神話中，禽鳥扮演了重要角色。它們或者是整個民族的祖先，或是某個神祇的使者。在漢代，一只青鳥是西王母忠實的隨從。當道教作為有組織的宗教於東漢末年出現，它吸收了傳統的鳥文化中形而上的部分。鳥常常是學仙成功者飛天的坐騎。漢代王子喬騎鶴白日升天是人們熟悉的故事。

花鳥名稱與表達吉祥意思的字眼是諧音詞，這也能引發豐富的聯想。

有一些特定的組合是傳統繪畫中常見的。海棠經常與牡丹相配合，表達“滿堂富貴”的意思。因為海棠與“滿堂”是諧音詞，而牡丹則是眾所周知的高貴富裕的象征。這兩種花再加上玉蘭，就成了“玉堂富貴”。玉堂既指富貴之家，同時又是翰林院的代名詞。在吳昌碩的《歲朝清供》中，柿子表達“事事如意”的弦外音；石榴多籽，是多子多福的象征（圖48）。在中國畫中暗示生殖能力的還有蓮蓬，除了多籽的特點，“蓮”與“連”同音，代表著代代相傳不絕。表示同樣意思的還有連接瓜兒的藤蔓：長長的“帶”是“代”之同音字。

禽鳥也一樣有很多由諧音而衍生意義的例子。比如喜鵲的“喜”同時是“喜悅”之喜。由此喜鵲的鳴叫被認為是好事到來的前兆。“白頭翁”常常被畫來作為新婚祝賀或祝壽。因為它的名字既有“白頭攜老”的喻意，又象征著長壽（圖25）。由於其名字而產生眉壽意味的還有綏帶鳥，因為“綏”是“壽”的同音

字。加官進祿也是傳統文化中常見的恭賀主題。表現於美術作品，最普遍的形象莫過於公雞和雞冠花，因為“雞冠”讓人聯想起“加官”（圖36）。沈銓的《耄耋洪基圖》是一幅祝壽的畫，除了牡丹、菊花和萱草等意味深長的花卉，一只貓的出現也絕非偶然，因為“貓”與“耄耋”之“髦”諧音，暗示著祝壽的主題（圖31）。居巢“五蝠圖”中的“蝠”乃是“福”的同音字（圖43）。

平安是不同時代的人們都嚮往的。表達“平安”祝願的形象很多，比如插在花瓶中的一束稻穗可以是一個雙重的隱喻，因為“瓶”指向“平”，而稻穗之“穗”暗示著“歲歲平安”。表示同樣意思的還有蘋果和鶴鴦，因為“蘋”與“鶴”，讓人聯想到“平”和“安”。

在中國，花卉禽鳥所含有的象征意義往往是多重的。具體的一種花一只鳥，可以表達很多額外之致，而領會其“畫外音”得視具體的語境而定。比如萱草，從漢代以來就被認為具有療愁忘憂的功能，可它同時又被稱作“宜男”，《風土記》中說，懷孕婦人佩其花則生男。

也許說明中國文化中具體花鳥的復意現象最佳的例子，莫過於桃花。從《詩經》開始，在春天盛開的桃花，它那嬌艷的形象，便是青春，歡樂的象征。“桃之夭夭，灼灼其華”，如火如荼的鮮花，視映出新婚燕爾的美好。從很早以來，桃樹還與神靈結下了不解之緣。先秦至漢代的人們相信桃樹具有消災攘禍、祓除不祥的力量。當時人習慣於新年飾桃梗，桃人於門，以鎮邪避惡。從這種信仰又生發出桃子，桃膠能補體延年，讓人長生不死的說法。西王母的仙桃以及蟠桃會，是非常流行的文學藝術題材。除外，桃花還讓人聯想起“桃花源”，一個理想中的樂園。這種說法始自晉代的陶淵明。他在《桃花源記》中講有一個漁夫捕魚時，“忽逢桃花林，夾岸數百步，中無雜樹，芳草鮮美，落英繽紛。”捕魚人繼而發現了一個世外桃源。那里男耕女織，人人平等，與外面的亂世形成了天壤之別。陶淵明的“桃花源”影響深遠，從此變成了烏托邦的代名詞。

綜上所述，中國花鳥文化源遠流長。具體形象所衍生的象征內涵複雜多變，與各種社會現象有千絲萬縷的關係。這對藝術家，以及欣賞藝術作品的觀者來說，都既是一筆財產，又是一種挑戰。因為一個人只有在瞭解這種文化的基礎上，才能欣賞到那奇妙無比的“花中之花”。