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Preface

The symbolic meaning of flowers and their colors is as complex and nuanced a subject as that of national cultures; both change subtly over time, a fact especially true in a culture as old and as dynamic as that of China. Yet the traditional meanings of symbolic colors have a dramatic ability to reappear, carrying the resonance of earlier times. It is easy (and often inaccurate) to dismiss old color symbolism as no longer relevant or influential today. In fact, flowers and their culture still carry the full symbolic meaning of thousands of years of history, religion, literature, and folk wisdom. It is fascinating to observe Chinese culture make and unmake symbolic meanings of flowers, colors, and fruits as national identity and national interests change.

This book grew from the priceless experience of growing up surrounded by flowers, both cultivated and wild, in the living spaces of and near my parents' home in *Wushe* 霧社 (a small village of the Atayal 泰雅 indigenous tribe) in the mountains of Taiwan, and later in *Wufeng guangfu xincun* 霧峰 光復新村 in the central part of the island.

Likewise, the people who inspired this book were first of all my extraordinary mother and father. My father taught me the *Sanzi jing* 三字經 (Three Character Classic) and various Tang poems from when I was six years old, and I have done the same with my two children. He was also expert in the cultivation of flowers, especially his beloved orchids. He had about one hundred of them and cared for them every day in person.

My mother graduated from college in the turbulent and war-torn China of the 1930s. To my father's focus on language and argumentation, she added her love of poetry and Daoism by sharing her lifelong commitment to the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), *Laozi* 老子, and *Zhuangzi* 莊子(Book of Master Zhuang). In addition, both with my parents and at school, I studied the work and life of Confucius (*Kongzi* 孔子). My rich education continued until I left home and went abroad to graduate school at age 29. My parents were literally my first and my best teachers.

My parents had extraordinary and unique abilities and created a rich intellectual and cultural life for us, always generous in their approach to the language and culture of our homeland. My father, Zhang Zhiliang 張智良 (1909-2008), was among the last to live in the large house on the edge of the Forbidden City in Beijing until civil war forced them to leave in the 1940s. Originally awarded to the fam-

ily by the emperor for fighting against the Mongols, they had continuously occupied the house for 700 years. Located on the edge of the Forbidden City, it indicated that my forebears worked for the imperial administration. It included a library of six rooms, filled with classic books and manuscripts. My father spent much of his early life in these six rooms, beginning his study of language, law, and diplomacy with private tutors at age four and eventually graduating from the top law program in China. He taught me to love the evolution of the written language, linguistics, as well as the construction of legal arguments and a deep passion for the truth, especially in the midst of political wrangling and obfuscation.

My mother, Zhang Shi Duomin 張史鐸民 (1922-1979) was a Beijing college graduate and high school teacher. In the evenings, she taught me Chinese poetry to represent the collective wisdom of the privileged and common sayings to illustrate the insights of ordinary people. She taught me that a complete education had to include both, the wisdom of the elite and the insights of the common people as embodied in sayings and proverbs. Without them, scholars would falsely simplify the flourishing of power and cultural tastes. My mother was a modern Chinese woman, who cultivated herself despite all sorts of political and social hardships: she lived through the Japanese occupation, the civil war, and the Taiwan insurrection in 1947. Besides her successful career as a celebrated high school teacher, she was also an inspiring and loving mother.

Due to the social complexities and political conflicts of the time, my maternal grandmother also lived with us for some time. An upper-class woman born under imperial rule, she came from a privileged background and accordingly had her feet bound as a child while not receiving any formal education. When I was young, I would carefully and sometimes secretly watch my mother and grandmother speak, trying to understand how an illiterate woman with bound feet could possibly have brought up a daughter as independent and educated as my mother, a college graduate and influential teacher. I looked from one to the other and tried to understand Chinese culture as gendered, complex, and ultimately mysterious.

Besides my parents, other inspirational sources of this book include the scholars, writers, and artists who were frequent visitors at my parents' home. I would hear calligraphers describe their work, scholars discuss literary and legal issues with my father, and writers talk about what it means to meet one's responsibilities both to the reader and to the integrity of the subject. I thank them all.

After I left China to pursue graduate studies in language and culture from an anthropological perspective, I benefited greatly from a number of important studies. Rey Chow's work, starting with *Writ-*

ing Diaspora (1993), helped me think repeatedly about how we all negotiate border identities and hope to do so democratically with a minimum of oppressive influences. The work of Brian Morris (1981; 1994), most notably his *Animals and Ancestors* (2000) and *Religion and Anthropology* (2005), led me to see ethnobotany, and especially flowers, as a way of perceiving and highlighting the mobilizing networks of folklore, poetry, and religion that dynamically structure the place of flower use and symbolism in Chinese culture.

The influence of these two scholars increased my desire to write a book on flowers and their symbolism, with the overall goal to demonstrate how different aspects of Chinese culture interconnect. I particularly wanted to focus on overcoming the artificial separation of Daoism into religion and philosophy as well as all sorts of other arbitrary opposites in the study of Chinese religion and culture, often established on the basis of western, imperialistic conceptual frameworks. My desire for wholeness led me to the voluminous work of Livia Kohn, and predicated the decision to submit my manuscript to Three Pines Press. Professor Kohn, in *Daoism and Chinese Culture*, reminds us that "19th-century missionaries, the first Westerners to come in contact with materials considered Daoist, . . . were fascinated by the texts and disgusted by the practices" (2001, 1). David Jasper illustrates the wider implications of this observation in his discussion of the "sinological studies" of James Legge and Herbert Giles:

> But Legge's principal concern is, as always in his translation work, to present the mind of Faxian to the reader—as he puts it, following a principle of Mencius, in his own Translator's Preface to the *Yijing*. "In the study of a Chinese classical book, there is not so much an interpretation of the characters employed by the writer as a participation of his thoughts; there is a seeing of mind to mind."
>
> Yet, and this is the creative paradox, in seeing into the mind of the Buddhist Faxian, the Christian mind of the missionary never quite left Professor Legge—his vision a Christian one with universal sympathies (2014, 194).

Throughout the book, the translations of Chinese texts are my own unless otherwise noted. I may face the challenges of translation like Legge, but unlike him, who translates into his first language, for me English is my third and I did not begin to study it until I was twelve. The real issue, however, especially in translating classical Chinese poetry, is, as Yip Wai-lim notes, that its content and structure represent substantially different conceptual systems of mind and attitudes toward nature. As he notes, "Both Daoist and Confucian

poetics demand the submission of the self to the cosmic measure rather than the Kantian attempt to resist and measure oneself against the apparent almightiness of nature, resulting in a much greater degree of noninterference in artistic presentation" (1997, 27). Chinese classical culture, with its absence of a Western-style focus on individuality, makes poetry challenging to translate, notably in places that speak of implied individual identity as, for example, in the work of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846). He often describes his personal reactions to natural settings, but not in order to distinguish himself as unique and special. Rather, he does so to demonstrate his noninterference in the processes going on around him.

My perception and understanding of flowers and their place in Chinese culture owes a great debt of gratitude to Anthony Cunningham's *Applied Ethnobotany: People, Wild Plant Use and Conservation* (2001). The book not only provided the broad framework of my evolving understanding of human-plant interactions, but also offered insights into effective partnerships and the prevailing myths of human abilities to "manage nature." In addition, the seven editors of *Ethnobiology and Biocultural Diversity* (Stepp et al. 2002), challenged my thinking about the cultural, ecological, and economic elements of the subject. One contributor to the book, S. Pei of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argues persuasively that biological diversity and cultural diversity are in the end one subject and one reality.

Huilin Li, professor of Botany at the University of Pennsylvania, produced three valuable books for my subject, especially *The Garden Flowers of China* (1959). His work combines the virtues of science and botany with the insights and literary expressions of culture, art, and folklore. Many references to his work document the influence he had on my writing and my respect for his judgment and interpretation. Li also exerted a substantial influence on Jack Goody's *The Culture of Flowers* (1993), a book on European plants with two important chapters on China, full of enthusiasm and critical insight.

In several chapters my analysis of a number of Chinese characters was affirmed by consulting the Han Dynasty dictionary: Shuowen jiezi 說文解字 (Explaining and Analyzing Characters). This is not the earliest Chinese dictionary, but it is the first that uses the organizing arrangement by radicals. I also want to mention a second source book, called Guang qunfangpu 廣群芳譜 (Enlarged Thesaurus of Botany,) written in the Qing dynasty, 1708. It records different names of flowers, and is an encyclopedia of cultivated and wild flowers and plants, including biological characteristics, matters of cultivation, appearance, and use. Although it has no illustrations, its script is highly readable.

Who else helped with this book? I am an independent scholar who has never sought an academic appointment. Thus, I do not have departmental or university colleagues in my specialty or cognate fields of study. Most help has come from the publisher, and I remain deeply grateful to the editors of Three Pines Press. It has been a delight and a learning experience to engage with their dynamic staff, whose love of Chinese culture and commitment to the best possible book by a given author has been a wonder to behold and experience.

Beyond that, I wish to thank Thomas E. Van Cantfort of Fayetteville State University and Viktoria L. Van Cantfort for their excellent photographs used in this book as well as their visual design. I thank them both heartily. Eileen Eddy helped with the long and tedious work of digital gathering of materials and was a great and inventive colleague in bibliographical searches and copyediting. I thank her heartily.

What is the underlying motivation of the book? Flowers are everywhere; they touch many aspects of our lives. They are beautiful reflections of and inspiration for folklore and poetry; they also play a key role opening us to the sacred in human perception and art. It is important that we realize and absorb their symbolism, experience them as a bridge to a life-affirming orientation toward nature. The way we nurture, contemplate, cultivate, appreciate, and honor flowers is exactly how we should interact with nature in the totality of our being.

Flowers are not only useful and inspiring in our bodily-spiritual existence; they are also a key barometer to the health of an environment and its human culture. The over one thousand cherry trees of the tidal basin in Washington, D.C. are blooming earlier each year. Maple sugar production in the United States is migrating further north into Canada as a result of global warming. What is a balanced, constructive, and appropriate response to these facts requiring human adjustment and thoughtful accommodation? We need coalitions of the best contemporary technological interventions in harmony with the wisdom of flower lore from China and all the world's cultures that cherish nature to create a universal culture that no longer sees nature merely as an inanimate resource. The Daoist attitude toward nature as the place of health, wholeness, and holiness is essential for planetary survival as we humans collectively try to re-inscribe our cultural productions with that which affirms life, not that which destroys life and pollutes the sources of our water and food.

How we treat and interact with flowers—whether we cherish, ignore, or commodify them—predicates our relationship with other people, with human art and creativity, and also with our sense and use of the ambient environment. This book honors the teaching of my

beloved parents who mentored me to see flowers and their human lore much along the lines as the brief blooming of the epiphyllum: miraculous, beautiful, and exquisitely brief.

—An Lan Zhang
Pullman, Washington, 28 June 2015

杏花

Apricot Blossom Color and Radiance

Apricots, with their red and yellow hues, are highly popular in China, a vibrant example of how ancient color symbolism can reappear in a revitalized mode today. Apricots have a lot going for them: the flower is beautiful and the fruit is delicious. However, beyond that, their colors carry their own power and importance. The 12th day of the 2nd moon is the Festival of a Hundred Flowers, celebrated especially in the south. People step outside and gather to admire the colors of blossoms. Called "flower month," the time is known particularly as "apricot month."

Apricot blossoms are vivid red, while the fruit is bright yellow. Ever since antiquity, red has been the color of good fortune, while yellow is that of nobility. Legend has it that there used to be a monster coming to eat people at the end of the year, causing people to hide in their homes. When the monster finally left, they went out; meeting their neighbors and friends, they congratulated each other on having

survived. The monster made a noise that sounded something like *nian* 年, so people called it by that name.

A year came when a local cowherd met the Nian monster on his way home. He used his whip, urging his buffalo to move faster. But then he noticed with surprise that the loud whipping noise scared the creature. The monster began to back away, growing even more scared when it saw the red flames of the cooking fires in the village. Ever since, around New Year's, because the Nian was afraid of loud noises and the color red, the Chinese have put red paper scrolls containing couplets of verse on both sides of their front doors, while using firecrackers to create loud noises, thereby to scare away any lurking monsters, evil spirits, and bad luck.

The color yellow symbolizes nobility. It forms part of the five phases, which together represent the four directions and the center, each with its distinct color. East belongs to wood and has the color green; west belongs to metal and has the color white; south belongs to fire and the color red; north belongs to water and the color black. The center, finally, belongs to earth and has the color yellow. Being the hub of all, it is most important—a feature that carries over onto the color yellow. The traditional phrase "yellow robe" means imperial garb, while "yellow flag, purple cover" indicates the spirit or presence of the emperor. Matching this, the sage ruler who first founded Chinese culture is called the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), again representing the central power among five primary rulers associated with the colors of the five phases.

Sometimes color definitions are not entirely precise in traditional culture. The ancient thinker Xunzi 荀子 records the saying: "Green comes from blue, but green is better than blue" (ch. 1), which means that one learns from a teacher or master but may well eventually surpass him. The saying goes back to the story of a student learning from a great teacher but over the years growing more knowledgeable. As a result, the original teacher asked his student to serve as his teacher in turn.

While blue and green stand for the natural world, other colors fundamentally indicate various symbolic meanings. Most generally, red is the color of joy; white stands for sadness, loss, and funerals; and black is the color of darkness, overall rather unpopular, except in operatic facial painting. Here it indicates that the character is simple and honest or blunt and tactless. Along the same lines, red in Chinese opera symbolizes loyalty and bravery, yellow stands for fierceness, blue shows vigor or wildness, green indicates wickedness, evil, or banditry, and white represents craftiness or cunning. Gold and silver are colors associated with gods and immortals.

Priding itself on its central position in Asia, between mountains and seas, the ancient Chinese called their land the Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo* 中國). Another way to refer to their homeland was with the expression Flower Country (*huaguo* 華國). The apricot, with its red blossoms and yellow fruit, therefore, carries strong imperial associations and subtle traditional nuances.

> Apricot yellow being the imperial color, it stands particularly for righteousness and social justice. If the emperor is corrupt, the people must rise up against him and restore order and stability. For example, at the end of Eastern Han (25-220 CE), the country was corrupt and depraved. Peasants rose in rebellion, wearing yellow turbans as their insignia, showing the new, and newly pure, emperor that was to arise. Toward the end of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), peasants similarly rose in revolt, wore red kerchiefs in honor of the next phase in dynastic unfolding.

The power of red to banish evil is also evident in Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 (1715-1763) novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber). A withered crab apple tree suddenly bursts into bloom late in the year. People thought it was a bad omen, so someone asked a maid to tie a piece of red cloth to the plant, hoping to keep away evil spirits (ch. 94).

Apricots also stand symbolic for gratitude. This goes back to a story of the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), recorded in the Song encyclopedia *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era), about the herbal physician Dong Feng 董奉, a great lover of apricots. Offering free care to his patients, he requested that they plant apricot trees after regaining their health: five trees for those with severe ailments, one for those who had overcome a less serious illness. Not surprisingly, over a few years, his village became a gigantic apricot orchard. Dong Feng then sold the fruit and from the proceeds bought more herbs to help the poor (ch. 12).

Deeply appreciating the doctor's help, people gave him a wooden plaque, saying: "Apricot orchard spring warmth" (*xinglin chunnuan* 杏林春暖). The custom of giving a "thank-you plaque" with these words continues to this day. Apricot gratitude even extends to the animal kingdom. Once, Dong Feng saved the life of a tiger. He in turn showed his gratitude by guarding the apricot orchard for the village (Ma 1988, 43).

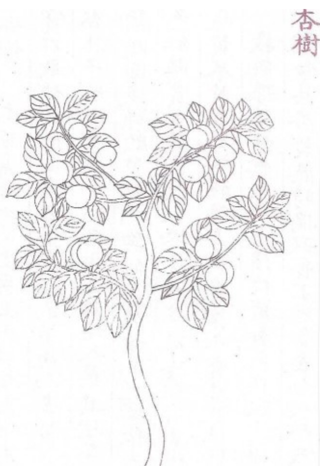
In the Tang dynasty (618-907) the poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), wrote a poem on Grave Sweeping Day (Qingming 清明).

Grave sweeping day: light rain falls.

The grave sweeper is sad.
He asks where he can find a good wine house.
The cowherd points to far-off Apricot Blossom Village.

This is a reflective scene, contrasting the radiance and colorful nature of the apricot with the grayness and sadness of the graves. The apricot and its colors, thus, radiates throughout the national culture, showing the strong sense that life is stronger than loss.

However, the pervasive influence of the apricot in Chinese culture is not just a feature of legends and poems. It is also reflected in well-known sayings and proverbs, common throughout the society. Confucius (551-479 BCE) was a failed politician and successful educator, who trained people particularly in the virtues of loyalty and filial piety. His teaching about how to govern and promote social order and harmony is still widely present today. According to the *Zhuangzi*, he used to teach near an apricot tree or shrine, so that his teaching came to be associated with the fruit, as in the phrase "apricot platform" (*xingtan* 杏壇) (ch. 31), which indicates the teaching profession in general.



Other common phrases using the apricot describe female characteristics. If a woman is beautiful with attractive thin eyebrows and large eyes, we say she has "willow eyebrows and apricot eyes." If she is angry, we say that she has "willow eyebrows raised, apricot eyes wide open."

Ye Shaoweng 葉紹翁, dates unknown, a poet of the Southern Song (1127-1279), in his poem "Visiting an Absent Friend's Garden," has two lines to describe the beauty of the apricot blossom:

The garden cannot contain spring's beauty:
A red apricot blossom climbs over the wall.

This last line today indicates a married woman engaging in an affair! Going beyond beauty, it shows a rather thorny situation.

The emperors are a thing of the past, but the significance of the colors red and yellow continues, especially around New Year's, the most important festival of the year. People still paste red paper with poetry couplets on both sides of their front doors, using golden writing

on brilliant, shiny red background. The tradition inspires good luck and persists everywhere as a common custom. In addition, people also place the character (*fu* 福) for "blessing," again in gold on red paper, in the middle of their front door, turning it upside down, since the word for "upside-down" (*dao* 倒) is a homophone for "to arrive" (*dao* 到). In other words, placing the word for "blessing" upside-down signifies the arrival of good fortune, preferably throughout the entire year.

Red is most powerful in combination with yellow. Yellow alone, on the other hand, is less potent in contemporary folklore. Still apricots are highly valued, providing a healthy addition to the diet. Both blossoms and fruit, and their colors, have changed over the years in their popular relevance, emphasizing more the quality and prosperity of individuals rather than an entire upper class. Still, despite growing individualism in style and appearance, the Chinese still work together for others and blossom in the group.