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# THE PLUM TREE IN CHINESE POETRY

BY HANS H. FRANKEL

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

One of the favorite topics of Chinese lyrical poetry is a tree called *mei*<sup>a\*</sup>, 'plum'<sup>1</sup>. Especially from the twelfth century on, practically every poet felt obliged to devote some poems to the blossoming plum, which was considered superior to other trees and spiritually akin to the man of letters. In the following pages I propose to enquire how the plum rose to this singular position, and to trace the emergence and growth of various motifs connected with the plum. As the number of poems dealing with the plum is enormous – amounting literally to several thousand – my illustrations will be limited to a few typical examples. Most of these, and a great many more which I shall not cite, may be found under the heading 'plum' in the Chinese encyclopedias.

## PRE-HAN PERIOD (ca. 11th–3rd century B. C.)

The oldest collection of Chinese poetry, the *Shih ching*, contains four poems in which a plum tree is mentioned incidentally<sup>2</sup>, and also an

\* Superscript letters refer to the table of Chinese characters at the end; this table does not include well-known, unambiguous words and phrases, nor personal names which may be found in Giles' *Biographical Dictionary*. An asterisk (\*) in front of a title means that the work is cited from the edition in *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an*. For the dynastic histories, the asterisk refers to the *Po-na pen erh-shih-ssu shih*<sup>b</sup>.

1. It is always difficult to identify plant names in literature, and such attempts often run counter to the purpose of poetry. In the present paper, the term 'plum' is used as an equivalent of the Chinese word *mei*<sup>a</sup>, without attempting to establish its exact botanical identity in each case, but assuming it to be fairly similar in most cases cited to the tree now commonly called *mei* in China and known to botanists as *prunus mume*. Another Chinese species which is also called 'plum' in English, the *li* (*prunus salicina* or *prunus domestica*) is not included in this study. As to the distribution of *prunus mume* in China, authorities disagree, but it seems fairly safe to state that it is indigenous to, and grows wild in, most parts of Central, South, and West China, but is rare in North China. Cf. a remark by Hung Mai in his \**Jung-chai hsü-pi* (author's preface dated 1192) 3.6a about two famous *Shih ching* commentators: "Mao and Cheng, being northerners, did not know the plum." For this and several other references I am indebted to Wolfram Eberhard.

2. Nos. 130, 141, 152, and 204. I quote from the *Mao shih* text as edited in the Harvard-

interesting piece (No.20) in which attention is focused on falling plums:

Falling are the plums,  
Seven of them are left.  
May the young men who seek me  
Seize the auspicious time!

Falling are the plums,  
Three of them are left.  
May the young men who seek me  
Seize the present moment!

Falling are the plums,  
In flat baskets we put them.  
May the young men who seek me  
Seize the chance to speak up!

The poem may be interpreted in various ways. According to the traditional Chinese explanation, handed down by the Han commentators, the plums in this poem are connected with a girl's eagerness or obligation to marry when she comes of age. One may suppose that the ripe plums represent the girl's maturity<sup>3</sup>. Or perhaps the falling of the plums stands for the passing of time and the girl's growing impatience. One may also think of the plums picked up by the girls as men, or chances of marriage. Still another explanation is offered by Arthur Waley. According to him, "this poem is akin to love-divination of the

Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (Suppl. 9, Peking, 1934), where the poems are numbered consecutively.

3. If this interpretation is correct, the poem may be compared with a fragment from a wedding song by Sappho, in which the chaste bride is likened to a ripe apple high up on the tree (ed. Lobel, *Epithalamia* 2a): οἷον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ερεύθεται ἀκρωι ἐπ' ὕσδωι, ἀκρον ἐπ' ακροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃες, οὐ μὲν ἐκλελάθοντ' ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεισθαι, translated by Hermann F. Fränkel (*Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, New York, 1951, p. 233) as follows:

So wie der edele Apfel sich rötet am oberen Zweige,  
oben am obersten Ast, ihn haben die Pflücker vergessen –  
nein, sie vergaßen ihn nicht, sie konnten nicht zu ihm gelangen –

type 'Loves me, loves me not' and 'This year, next year, some time, never'<sup>4</sup>''.

In the second oldest anthology of Chinese poetry, the *Ch'u tz'u*, which contains some pre-Han poems, there is no mention of the plum. This is surprising, because the book abounds with references to a considerable number of plants. The reason may be that the poets represented in the *Ch'u tz'u* seem to favor odoriferous plants. The plum blossom, while not without scent, emits only a faint, delicate fragrance.

In the few pre-Han prose texts which mention the plum, reference is also usually made to its fruit. Thus in an often quoted passage in the *Shu ching*, King Wu-ting of the Shang dynasty likens his good minister Yüeh to the salt and the plums which impart the essential flavors to a soup<sup>5</sup>. (The commentators explain that the plums are used here for their sour quality, like the vinegar of later times.) The plum blossom, which later came to be considered the most remarkable feature of this tree, is almost never mentioned in pre-Han literature<sup>6</sup>.

#### HAN DYNASTY (206 B. C. – A. D. 220)

From the Former Han dynasty, we have a curious story in which a plum plays a prominent role. It occurs in the *Shuo yüan*, by Liu Hsiang (77–6 B. C.), and begins as follows:

The ambassador of Yüeh, Chu Fa, brought a plum branch<sup>7</sup> to be presented to the King of Wei<sup>8</sup>. One of the King of Wei's minis-

4. *The Book of Songs*, Boston and New York, 1937, p. 30.

5. \**Shang shu* 5.11b (Section Yüeh ming, hsia<sup>c</sup>).

6. One minor exception is a passage in the *Hsia hsiao cheng*<sup>d</sup>, where the plum is listed among the fruit trees which blossom during the first moon (see \**Ta-Tai li-chi* 2.5a). But interest in the plum here is culinary rather than aesthetic, as may be seen from a later mention of the plum in the same work: "In the fifth moon ... cooked plums are used in the preparation of *tou-shih*e" (the meaning of this term varies; *ibid.*, fol. 8a).

7. Whether the phrase *i chih mei* here means 'a flowering plum branch,' as in later usage, or simply 'a plum branch,' without flowers, is hard to determine.

8. Literally 'King of Liang.' The name Liang was often applied to the state of Wei after



ters, by the name of Han Tzu, said to those around him: "How can one present a plum branch to the ruler of a state? For your benefit, gentlemen, I will put him [i. e., Chu Fa] to shame<sup>9</sup>." ...

The "putting to shame" refers to the custom of teasing and testing ambassadors on their arrival, and it is in this sense that the story continues, without mentioning the plum branch again. The anecdote may of course be pure fiction. If so, it shows at any rate a marked interest in the plum on the part of its author. If on the other hand it has a basis in fact, it may indicate that the plum played an important role in the state of Yüeh during the Warring States period, when the incident is supposed to have taken place.

In support of the latter assumption, the following legend may be cited:

A popular tradition of Yüeh states that the temple of Yü of Hsia on the Kuei-chi Mountain had a ridgepole of plum wood; one spring it suddenly sprouted branches and leaves<sup>10</sup>.

The temple of Yü the Great, the alleged founder of the Hsia dynasty, on the Kuei-chi Mountain (in modern Chekiang) was a sanctuary of its capital was moved to Ta-liang (near modern K'ai-feng in Honan) in 340 B. C. That the reference here is to Wei, and not to the state of Liang (in modern Shensi), is indicated, aside from other reasons, by a statement which Chu Fa makes later in the same story: "Yüeh is also a fief of the Son of Heaven. It did not receive the territory of Chi-chou and Yen-chou but is placed by the sea. ..." Here the ambassador of Yüeh evidently contrasts the situation of his own country with the more fortunate location of his host state. Now Chi-chou and Yen-chou (two of the nine divisions of ancient China, see the *Yü kung* section of the *Shu ching*) just about correspond to the territory held by Wei during the Warring States period, being in modern north Honan and southwest Shansi.

9. \**Shuo yüan* 12.11b-12b.

10. *Shu-i ch'ü*, attributed to Jen Fang (460-508) (ed. in *Sui-an Hsü-shih ts'ung-shu*), 1.15b. Other, more trustworthy works briefly refer to the same phenomenon, e. g., *Wu-Yüeh ch'un-ch'iu* by Chao Yeh (first c. after Chr.), a native of Kuei-chi: "In the temple of Yü of Hsia, the ridgepole was made of plum wood" (cited in \**T'ai-p'ing yü-lan* 187.7a); and *Feng-su t'ung-i* by Ying Shao (around A. D. 200): "The temple of Yü of Hsia had a ridgepole of plum wood; one spring it suddenly sprouted branches and leaves" (cited in \**T'ai-p'ing yü-lan* 970.2b). This passage is not contained in the extant text of the \**Feng-su t'ung-i*, which is in ten *chüan* (older versions, now lost, were in thirty *chüan*). Likewise, the sentence cited from the \**Wu-Yüeh ch'un-ch'iu* is not to be found in the present ten-*chüan* version of this work, which formerly consisted of twelve *chüan*.

paramount importance in Yüeh, since the ruling house worshipped this culture-hero as its ancestor; he was believed to have died and to have been buried on that very mountain, which was also the ancient residence of the rulers of Yüeh. The legend of the magic ridgepole is alluded to in a number of later poems<sup>11</sup>. Could it throw some light on the purpose behind the strange gift of a plum branch from Yüeh to Wei? Was the branch intended to convey magic powers? Was there perhaps a play on the word *liang*, which stands both for 'ridgepole' and for the state of Liang (Wei)?

From the Later Han dynasty, we have the *Nan-tu fu*, *Fu on the Southern Capital*, by Chang Heng (78–139). Here the plum is listed, without elaboration, among the fruit trees which grew in the imperial garden at Nan-yang, the southern capital (in modern Honan)<sup>12</sup>.

Another account of plum trees in the garden of a Han emperor is found in the *Hsi-ching tsa-chi*, which purports to relate events of the reign of Han Wu-ti (reigned 140–87 B. C.)<sup>13</sup>. It states that when Wu-ti had the Shang-lin yüan<sup>m</sup> (a huge park near Ch'ang-an, the western capital, in modern Shensi) renovated, the courtiers contributed unusual trees from faraway places; among them are listed seven (or six, according to a variant reading) varieties of plum, some of whose names indicate an aesthetic appreciation<sup>14</sup>. But since the *Hsi-ching tsa-chi* is a mixture of fact and fancy, we cannot deduce anything about the aesthetic taste of Han Wu-ti's court from this account; it merely shows what a writer many centuries later believed or imagined that taste to have

11. Sung Chih-wen (died A. D. 712), for example, in his poem entitled "Yeh Yü-miao<sup>h</sup>", "A Visit to the Temple of Yü", has the line:

The old structure (or system?) of the plum ridgepole is no more (\**Sung Chih-wen chi* 2.24b).

12. *Chang Ho-chien chi*<sup>i</sup> (ed. in *Han Wei lu-ch'ao po-san chia chi*), Chang Ching-chi t'ang<sup>k</sup> wood block ed., 1892) 2.3a.

13. The attribution of this book to Liu Hsin (ca. 48 B. C. – A. D. 23) is known to be false; it is believed to have been written during the Six Dynasties period. See *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* (ed. Shanghai: Ta-tung shu-chü, 1930) 140.1a–b, and *Ch'ung-k'ao ku-chin wei-shu k'ao*<sup>1</sup> (ed. Shanghai: Ta-tung shu-chü, 1928) 2.8–9.

14. \**Hsi-ching tsa-chi* 1.5a–b. The text of this passage varies considerably in different editions.

been. We may note, incidentally, that Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (ca. 179–ca. 118 B. C.), in his long *fu* on the newly renovated Shang-lin Park<sup>15</sup>, says nothing of such gifts of trees, nor does he mention the plum.

A reference to plums in the imperial garden is also contained in the poem *Po-liang shih*<sup>16</sup>, alleged to have been composed by Han Wu-ti and his courtiers. But its authenticity has been questioned<sup>17</sup>.

#### SIX DYNASTIES PERIOD (222–589)

Thus we have no sure evidence that the aesthetic aspects of the plum tree were appreciated in China before the period of the Six Dynasties. During this age of heightened individualism and aesthetic sophistication, poets began to be impressed with the peculiar charm of the flowering plum and developed a number of concepts about it. As is usual in Chinese literature, once these concepts are formulated, they are at the disposal of all later writers, and some are repeated so often that they become clichés.

One such motif is the plum blossom as a token of affection, sent to a distant friend or lover. This seems to go back to the following story, which was probably written in the fifth century of the Christian era:

Lu K'ai<sup>r</sup> was an intimate friend of Fan Yeh<sup>18</sup>. Once he sent a flowering plum branch from Chiang-nan<sup>19</sup> to Fan Yeh in Ch'ang-an, together with a poem which read:

15. *Shang-lin fu*, in *Ssu-ma Wen-yüan chi*<sup>n</sup> (ed. in *Han Wei lu-ch' ao po-san chia chi*), fol. 5a–12a.

16. Ed. in \**Ku-wen yüan* P 8.3a–4a.

17. See for instance Shen Te-ch'ien (1673–1769), *Ku-shih yüan* q (wood block ed. by Chang Chih-tung) 2.5b–6a.

18. Fan Yeh lived from 398 to 445. His biography may be read in \**Sung shu* 69.6b–23a and \**Nan shih* 33.4a–11a. He is best known for his authorship of the \**Hou-Han shu*. But I have no information on his friend Lu K'ai. Two men of this name whose biographies are included in the dynastic histories are out of the question for chronological reasons: one, a native of Wu, lived from 198 to 269 (see \**San-kuo chih* 61.3a–13a); the other, from Northern Wei, died in 504 or 505 (see \**Wei shu* 40.7a–8a).

19. The region south of the lower Yangtze.

Plucking these flowers, I met a departing messenger;  
 I send them to you up there in the northwest hills<sup>20</sup>.  
 As Chiang-nan has nothing to offer,  
 I merely give you a branch of spring<sup>21</sup>.

It is not surprising that this charming little poem has been imitated many times. Particularly ingenious is the conceit at the end, *i chih ch'un*, 'a branch of spring,' substituting 'spring' where one would expect 'plum.' This phrase, *i chih ch'un*, became a synonym for 'plum,' and also the title of a *tz'u* pattern, out of which developed a *ch'ü* pattern of the same name. One feature of this story which appears again in later versions is that the plum branch is sent from *south* of the lower Yangtze, where plums are plentiful, to a friend in *North* China, where they are rare. Take the opening lines of the *Hsi-chou ch'ü*, *Song of the Western Island*, an anonymous poem of unknown date<sup>22</sup>:

I remembered the plum trees and went down to the western island;  
 I plucked a branch and sent it to the land north of the river<sup>23</sup>. ...

Judging from the context, it seems here to be a woman, or possibly a man, who sends the plum branch to the absent spouse (or lover), and the river may well be the Yangtze. Arthur Waley has a different interpretation<sup>24</sup>.

We saw above that during the Han dynasty plum trees were planted in imperial gardens. Perhaps it was their rarity in North China which caused them to be reserved for the emperor. Gradually, however, the

20. *Lung-t'ou*<sup>s</sup> literally means something like 'flat hill-tops'; in particular, Lung often stands for the hilly region of Kansu and Shensi.

21. *Ching-chou chi*<sup>t</sup>, as quoted in \**T'ai-p'ing yü-lan* 970.3a. I have searched in vain for the original text; it is not to be found in the six fragmentary *Ching-chou chi* (all from the 4th and 5th c.) collected in the *Lu-shan ching-she ts'ung-shu*<sup>u</sup>.

22. Shen Te-ch'ien, in *Ku-shih yüan* 9 12.12a-b, placed it in the Southern Ch'i dynasty (479-502), noting that others had attributed it to the Chin dynasty (265-420).

23. \**Yüeh-fu shih-chi*<sup>v</sup> 72.5b.

24. See his version of the poem in *Translations from the Chinese*, New York, 1945, p. 95, "Ballad of the Western Island in the North Country."

concept developed that the plum tree belongs to the country gentleman, the scholar-poet, especially when he retires from the world to live as a *yin-shih* ('hiding scholar,' recluse). This association did not become a commonplace in literature until the Sung dynasty, as we shall see, but it goes back at least as far as T'ao Ch'ien (365?-427), who was admired and imitated by later generations of Chinese literati as the ideal *yin-shih*. One usually thinks of him rather as a fancier of willows and chrysanthemums, but alongside his willows he planted plum trees and enjoyed their flowering in late winter. Thus he says in his poem "Cha-jih",<sup>w</sup> "On the Day of the Winter Sacrifice":

Plums and willows were planted to flank my gate,  
One branch now bears fine blossoms<sup>25</sup>.

We note here, incidentally, the combination of plum and willow, which became common in later literature.

Another motif which crystallized around the plum during the Six Dynasties period is the poetic symbol of falling petals. Poets of many countries throughout the ages have seen in the fading or falling flower a symbol of the ephemeral nature of youth and beauty, and have frequently urged us to "pluck the flower" while there is time<sup>26</sup>. In China,

25. \* *T'ao Yüan-ming chi* 3.27 b. The poem was translated into German by A. Bernhardt and E. von Zach in *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen* (Berlin), XVIII (1915), 213, "Der Cha-Tag."

26. See for instance *Wisdom of Solomon* II.8: Στεψώμεθα ῥόδων κάλυξι πρὶν ἢ μαρανθῆναι, "Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they be withered" (*The Book of Wisdom*, ed. William J. Deane, Oxford, 1881; the book is believed to have been written by an Alexandrian Jew in the first c. B. C.). Most of the western versions of the theme derive from an anonymous Latin poem, attributed first to Vergil, then to Ausonius, but believed to date from the 4th c. after Chr.; it ends with the couplet:

Collige virgo rosas, dum flos novus et nova pubes,  
et memor esto aevum sic properare tuum.

(*Ausonii Opera*, Amsterdam, 1671, pp. 520-524, *Edyll.* xiv, "Rosae"). This is the source of Herrick's "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may"; for several 16th and 17th c. Spanish versions, see María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, "Perduración de la literatura antigua en Occidente," *Romance Philology*, V (1951/52), 106/107. The same concept is also expressed in Horace's famous phrase *Carpe diem* (*Carm.* I.xi.8), in which plants are not mentioned but strikingly suggested by means of the metaphorical 'pluck.'



too, this concept was often expressed in literature, and could be attached to any plant, or to plants in general<sup>27</sup>. But it came to be associated particularly, though not exclusively, with falling plum petals. There was a *yüeh-fu* tune and theme called *Mei-hua lo*, "Plum blossoms fall," said to have originated some time after the Han dynasty<sup>28</sup>. A foreign origin is vaguely suggested by some T'ang and Sung writers<sup>29</sup>, but I have not found any conclusive evidence for it. If the song was imported from abroad, 'plum blossoms' may have been substituted by the Chinese for some plant name less familiar to them. The tune was originally accompanied by the *ti*, a horizontal flute<sup>30</sup>. This may be the reason why in later poetry the plum tree is often associated with the *ti*.

The earliest extant *yüeh-fu* on the theme "Plum blossoms fall" is by Pao Chao (ca. 415-ca. 466)<sup>31</sup>. Another one, by Chiang Tsung<sup>ag</sup> (519-594), contains this illuminating couplet:

The young folk of Ch'ang-an are very frivolous<sup>32</sup>,  
In pairs they often sing "Plum blossoms fall"<sup>33</sup>.

This attests to the popularity of a song on the theme of the falling plum blossoms in the spirit of Horace's *Carpe diem*.

27. An early instance is a couplet in the *Li sao*, by Ch'ü Yüan (around 300 B. C.):  
Reflecting on the withering of herbs and trees,  
I mourn the decline of human beauty.

(\*Ch'u tz'u 1.7a). A classical example is the poem "Chin-lü 1x" (the last piece in the anthology *T'ang-shih san-po shou*), in which the poetess, Tu Ch'iu-niangy (early 9th c.), advises "seizing the time of youth" and "plucking the flowers" while they are in bloom, before they fall off. For a translation of this poem, see Witter Bynner and Kiang K'ang-hu, *The Jade Mountain*, New York, 1945, p. 146, "The Gold-Threaded Robe."

28. See Wu Ching (670-749), *Yüeh-fu ku-t'i yao-chieh*<sup>z</sup> (ed. in *Hsüeh-chin t'ao-yüan*<sup>aa</sup>, Ser. 20) 1.14b-15b; and Kuo Mao-ch'ien<sup>ab</sup> (12th c.), \**Yüeh-fu shih-chi*<sup>v</sup> 21.3b.

29. See Tuan An-chieh<sup>ac</sup> (9th c.), *Yüeh-fu tsa-lu*<sup>ad</sup> (ed. in *Hu-po hsien-cheng i-shu*<sup>ae</sup>), fol. 10a; and \**Yüeh-fu shih-chi*<sup>v</sup> 24.1a.

30. See *Yüeh-fu tsa-lu*<sup>ad</sup>, fol. 10a; \**Yüeh-fu shih-chi*<sup>v</sup> 24.1a; and Ch'eng Ta-ch'ang<sup>af</sup> (1123-95), *Yen fan-lu* (ed. in *Hsüeh-chin t'ao-yüan*<sup>aa</sup>, Ser. 12) 12.6a.

31. \**Pao-shih chi* 7.5b-6a.

32. Metropolitan youth had the same reputation in China as in other countries: the "frivolous young folk of Ch'ang-an" are proverbial in Chinese literature; for a much earlier example of this phrase, see \**Han shu* 90.20b. 33. \**Yüeh-fu shih-chi*<sup>v</sup> 24.2b.

It may or may not be a coincidence that the idea of fleeting time was already associated with the plum in one of the poems of the *Shih ching*<sup>34</sup>. But there it is fruit which falls from the plum tree, not blossoms.

Another motif which became a favorite among later poets, originated in the fifth or sixth century in the form of the following etiological anecdote, invented to explain the origin of the so-called "plum blossom make-up pattern" (*mei-hua chuang*<sup>ah</sup>):

The Princess of Shou-yang, daughter of Wu-ti [reigned 420–422], was lying under the eaves in the Han-chang [Palace] on the seventh day of the first moon, when a plum blossom fell on her forehead, forming a fivefold floral pattern. She was unable to shake it off. [Her mother] the Empress made her keep this pattern. Thus came into existence the plum blossom make-up pattern, which was widely imitated later<sup>35</sup>.

Of individual poets who wrote about the plum during the Six Dynasties period, two should be given special mention, Ho Sun<sup>ao</sup> and Hsiao Kang.

Ho Sun (died ca. 534) is celebrated in Chinese literature as the prototype of the plum-loving poet. He acquired this reputation by stages, which can be traced as follows. The starting point was a poem which he wrote to express his admiration for a flowering plum tree (or trees) at Yangchow (in modern Kiangsu)<sup>36</sup>. This poem, not particularly

34. No. 20. See above, pp. 88–90.

35. *Sung shu* (by Shen Yüeh, completed 488), as quoted in \**T'ai-p'ing yü-lan* 970.1 b. I have not found this story in the present \**Sung shu*, which is known to be incomplete (cf. *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* 45.9a–b). But regardless of whether the story was contained in the original *Sung shu*, it must have originated between the early 5th and the end of the 6th c. because (1) it mentions Sung Wu-ti, and (2) it was cited in the 8th c. encyclopedia *Ch'u-hsüeh chiai* which quotes only pre-Sui books (see *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* 135.3a); the story is not carried in the two eds. of the *Ch'u-hsüeh chi* available here (An Kuo'saj wood block ed. of 1531, and the ed. in *Ku-hsiang chai shih chung*<sup>ak</sup>, but it is quoted and credited to the *Ch'u-hsüeh chi* in *T'ang lei han*<sup>al</sup> (ed. by Yü An-ch'iam, preface by Shen Shih-hsing<sup>an</sup> dated 1604) 182.13 b. The story was retold many times, for instance in *Yen fan-lu* 3.15a–b, where Han-chang is identified as a palace in Lo-yang (in modern Honan).

36. "Yang-chou fa-ts'ao mei-hua sheng-k'ai"<sup>ap</sup>, "The Yangchow Judge's Plum Tree(s) in Full Bloom," in *Ho Chi-shih chia*<sup>aq</sup> (ed. in *Han Wei lu-ch'ao po-san chia chi*), fol. 33 b. For the title of this poem, see below, n. 40.



striking in itself, acquired prestige when the great T'ang poet Tu Fu (712-770) alluded to it<sup>37</sup>, thus calling attention to Ho Sun as a poet inspired by the plum. Tu Fu begins his poem, which matches a poem written by P'ei Ti<sup>at</sup>, by saying that P'ei Ti received poetic inspiration from a plum tree, "just like Ho Sun at Yangchow." To "explain" this verse by Tu Fu, a Sung writer, who usurped for his fanciful annotations to Tu Fu the great name of Su Shih (1036-1101)<sup>38</sup>, invented the following anecdote, which gained wide publicity and was incorporated – attributed to Su Shih – in a well-known annotated edition of Tu Fu's poems:

When Ho Sun of the Liang dynasty was judge (*fa-ts'ao*<sup>ay</sup>) at Yangchow, there was a plum tree at his official residence. When it was in full bloom, Sun composed poetry under it. Later, when he was living in Lo-yang, he missed the plum blossoms and asked to be sent back to Yangchow. His request was granted. When he arrived in Yangchow, the plum was just in full bloom, and he kept walking back and forth in front of it all day long<sup>39</sup>.

Actually, Ho Sun never was a judge at Yangchow, but he did serve on the staff of the Prefect (*tz'u-shih*<sup>ba</sup>) of Yangchow and wrote there the poem referred to above<sup>40</sup>.

37. "Ho P'ei Ti teng Shu-chou Tung-t'ing sung-k'o feng tsao-mei hsiang-i chien ch'iar," in *Tu-shih hsiang-chu*<sup>as</sup> (Shanghai: Sao-yeh-shan fang, 1915) 9.46a-47a.

38. For the "pseudo-Su" annotations to Tu Fu, see Wang Kuo-weiau, "Sung-k'an fen-lei chi-chu Tu Kung-pu shih pa<sup>av</sup>," in *Kuan-t'ang pieh-chi pu-iaw* (ed. in *Hai-ning Wang Chung-ch'üeh-kung i-shu*<sup>ax</sup>, 1927, Ser. 1), fol. 26b; and Hung Yeh, *Concordance to the Poems of Tu Fu* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Suppl. 14, Peking, 1940), Preface, pp. vi-vii.

39. \**Fen-men chi-chu Tu Kung-pu shih*<sup>az</sup> 24.2a, note.

40. See his biographies in \**Liang shu* 49.10b-11b and \**Nan shih* 33.25a-b. For the whole matter, see the note by Ch'ien Ch'ien-i<sup>bb</sup> (1582-1664) on Tu Fu's poem, in *Tu-shih hsiang-chu*<sup>as</sup> 9.47a. Ch'ien also points out that the present title of Ho Sun's poem (see above, n. 36) was invented on the basis of this anecdote. In fact, the poem bears the simple title "Yung tsao-mei shih"<sup>bc</sup>, "Poem about an Early Plum," in the T'ang encyclopedias which cite it: see *Ch'u-hsüeh ch'iai* (An Kuo's ed. of 1531) 28.14b; and *I-wen lei-chü*<sup>bd</sup> (wood block ed. of 1587, prepared by Wang Yüan-chen<sup>be</sup>) 86.12b.

Hsiao Kang (503–551), better known by his posthumous name Chien-wen-ti<sup>41</sup>, was a prolific writer<sup>42</sup>. His extant works contain two short poems on the plum<sup>43</sup>, which are not particularly remarkable. But a *fu* which he wrote on the flowering plum<sup>44</sup> is the first full elaboration of this subject in Chinese literature and may therefore be rendered *in toto*:

*Flowering Plum*

In the many-walled palace's  
 Sacred garden<sup>45</sup>,  
 Wondrous trees, a myriad kinds,  
 And countless plants in thousandfold profusion,  
 5 With light split and shadows mingled,  
 Twigs numerous and branches in all directions –  
 When the cold sundial marks a change of season  
 And wintry ashes move in the calendar tubes<sup>46</sup>,  
 They all wither and fade,  
 10 Their brightness gone before the shaking wind.

41. He ascended the throne of Liang in the summer of 549, to rule as a puppet of the tyrannical marshal Hou Ching<sup>bf</sup>, who deposed him in the autumn of 551 and had him assassinated shortly afterwards. See \**Liang shu*, *chüan* 4, and \**Nan shih* 8.1a–5a.

42. Liu Ju-lin<sup>bg</sup>, in his *Tung-Chin nan-po-ch'ao hsüeh-shu pien-nien*<sup>bh</sup> (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), pp. 433/434, gives a list of the writings credited to Hsiao Kang, totaling 754 *chüan*; most of them are no longer extant. His literary works, originally in 100 *chüan*, now make up 2 *chüan*, entitled *Liang Chien-wen-ti chi* (ed. in *Han Wei lu-ch'ao po-san chia chi*).

43. "Hsüeh-li mi mei-hua<sup>bi</sup>" and "Ch'un-jih k'an mei-hua<sup>bj</sup>," in *Liang Chien-wen-ti chi* 2.44b and 2.48a.

44. *Mei-hua fu*, in *Liang Chien-wen-ti chi* 1.13b–14a. I have found this to be the best available text of this *fu*, and have therefore based my translation on it. Other texts of the *fu*—containing a number of variants, all of minor import except in one place: see below, n. 48—are to be found in *Ch'u-hsüeh chi*<sup>ai</sup> (An Kuo's ed. of 1531) 28.14a–b; *I-wen lei-chü*<sup>bd</sup> (Wang Yüan-chen's ed. of 1587) 86.13a–b, an incomplete text; *Ch'üan Liang-wen*<sup>bk</sup> (in *Ch'üan shang-ku san-tai Ch'in Han san-kuo lu-ch'ao wen*<sup>bl</sup>, Canton, 1887) 8.8b–9a, based on the two last-named texts; and *Li-tai fu-hui*, *cheng-chi*<sup>bm</sup> (wood block ed. of 1706) 124.1a–b.

45. *Ling yüan*<sup>bn</sup> is a reminiscence of the 'sacred tower,' 'sacred park,' and 'sacred pool' of Wen Wang, father of Wu Wang who overthrew the Shang dynasty: see *Shih ching*, No. 242; and *Mencius* (ed. in Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Suppl. 17, Peking, 1941) 1A.2.

46. This refers to a calendrical device going back to Han times: the ashes of very thin reed

- The new year, the fresh season  
 Rouses the plants and stirs the dust.  
 The plum breaks into blossom earlier than others,  
 She alone has the gift of knowing spring<sup>47</sup>.
- 15 Receiving sunlight she brings forth golden splendor,  
 Mingling with snow she wears a silvery coat.  
 She exhales glamor to shine on the surrounding grove,  
 She extends splendor at the meeting of five roads.  
 Here are jades joined and pearls strewn,
- 20 There is ice hanging and hail spread out.  
 Tender leaves sprout, not yet formed;  
 The branches pull out fresh shoots and stick them onto old twigs.  
 Half of the tree top's petals have dropped and float in the air;  
 Sweet scent is borne by the wind to faraway places.
- 25 Slow-drifting gossamer is suspended,  
 Damp, driving morning mist is blended in.  
 The plum vies with the beauty powder falling from a window  
 And surpasses the silk on the loom in sheer whiteness.  
 Opening into flower, she leans on a hillside;
- 30 Holding out her form, she gazes into a pool.  
 Stretching toward jade steps, she forms brilliant ornaments;  
 Gently brushing a carved door, she lowers her branches<sup>48</sup>.

membranes, placed in tubes, were supposed to indicate by their movements changes of season. See \**Hou-Han shu*, *Chih* <sup>bo</sup> 1.23 b-24 a.

47. This idea recalls Ho Sun's<sup>sao</sup> line, "[Of all plants,] most sensitive to season is the plum<sup>bp</sup>" (in the poem referred to above, n. 36), but in the context of this *fu* it has an additional significance: the tree parallels the sundial and the calendar tubes in its sensitivity to the coming season.

48. After this line, some texts (*I-wen lei-chü*, *Ch'üan Liang-wen*, and *Li-tai fu-hui*) insert two additional verses which I consider a later interpolation, because they sound out of place stylistically and in content, because they contain literary allusions otherwise lacking in this *fu*, and because they refer to the tradition that the seven-character verse originated at Han Wu-ti's Po-liang-t'ai<sup>bq</sup> (cf. above, p. 93); such a reference is unlikely to have been made before the T'ang dynasty, when the seven-character line attained its prominent position in Chinese poetry.

And then,

In the innermost apartments an exquisite beauty,  
 Delicate in appearance and refined in spirit,  
 35 Appreciates the early flowering tree's sense of season  
 And marvels at glorious spring's expulsion of cold.  
 Wearing for the first time a thin lined gown  
 With newly light silk sleeves,  
 She plucks this fragrant flower,  
 40 Raising that dainty sleeve.  
 She may stick it in her hair and ask how it looks;  
 She may break off a twig and give it away.  
 She dislikes too much bareness in front of her hair-knot,  
 She is averse to the golden hairpin turning old.  
 45 She looks back at her shadow on the red steps  
 And posing, fondly eyes her graceful carriage.  
 Wide she opens the spring windows,  
 On all sides she rolls up the silk curtains.  
 "The spring wind blows plum petals – I fear they all will fall.  
 50 For this I, humble woman, knit my brows.  
 If flowers and beauties are alike,  
 We ever worry for fear of missing our time."

This *fu* would deserve a fuller discussion, but we shall be content with a few short remarks.

(1) The plum tree is given an honored position in the imperial palace grounds, where it is inaccessible to the general public. With this setting, Hsiao Kang – himself a prince and later an emperor – apparently continues an old tradition\* and ignores the more modern concept, represented by T'ao Chien, of associating the plum with the scholar-poet\*\*.

(2) Like some of his contemporaries\*\*\* and many of his successors, Hsiao Kang presents the plum as standing out among all trees in that it

\* S. above, pp. 92–93. \*\* S. above, p. 95. \*\*\* Cf. n. 47.

blossoms in winter, when other plants are still dormant, its solitary beauty being enhanced by white snow.

(3) The plum tree is semi-personified all through the first part of the poem, and endowed with distinctly feminine features in the description of its delicate shape, its graceful movements, and its elegant adornments. In the latter part (starting with v. 33), the center of attention suddenly shifts from the plum tree to a lady – evidently a palace lady, because there is no indication that we have left the imperial enclosure. This shift does not impair the unity of the poem. The lady is presented in close association with the plum: she admires the blossoms, plucks them, and adorns herself with them. The poet describes the woman and the tree as being equally graceful, delicate, and refined. The lady herself is conscious of this resemblance. At the end of the poem, she voices her fear that her youth and beauty will pass away like the plum blossoms – the theme of the falling plum petals\*. This near-identity of plum tree and woman foreshadows a striking development of the T'ang and Sung dynasties.

(4) The *fu* does not describe an individual tree, or one distinct type of plum tree. Rather, it deals with the ideal plum tree, almost in the Platonic sense. Therefore no reference is made to features which distinguish various types of plum trees from each other, with one apparent exception. Chinese plum blossoms may be white, red, pink, yellow, or pale green. In verse 28, Hsiao Kang mentions whiteness, choosing a word (*su*) which also means 'plain,' 'unadorned,' and which is often associated with fairies<sup>49</sup>. His purpose here is not, I believe, to single out the white-blossoming variety of plum, but rather to bring out a particular type of feminine beauty which for him, and for later poets, is represented by the plum, namely, plain elegance, as distinct from loud colors and too much make-up\*\*.

\* Cf. above, pp. 95–96.

49. Edward H. Schafer notes 'fairy-lady white' among the special connotations of this word, see his "Notes on a Chinese Word for Jasmine," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXVIII (1948), 64.

\*\* Cf. below, p. 113.



## T'ANG DYNASTY (618-907)

In the numerous poems written about the plum during the T'ang dynasty, we find little that is radically new. Rather, the concepts and images developed during the preceding period are further elaborated and more widely adopted.

One such concept is the comradeship of the plum tree and the poet. Like T'ao Ch'ien, the famous T'ang poet Po Chü-i (772-846) planted plum trees in his garden. One of his poems opens with the line:

By the pond I have newly planted seven plum trees<sup>50</sup>.

The sentimental attachment of a poet to an individual plum tree is exemplified in a well-known poem by Wang Wei (probable dates: 701-761):

You have come from my home,  
So you must know about things at home.  
On the day you left – in front of my open-work window,  
Had the winter plum opened into blossom yet?<sup>51</sup>

In a delicate poem by Chang Chi (*chin-shih* of 799), the sight of plum blossoms in his garden, on the trees as well as on the ground, imparts a quiet, sheer joy:

I love the beauty of the newly flowering plum,  
I go and seek it along the slanting path.  
I do not have the stones swept  
For fear of spoiling the falling petals<sup>52</sup>.

50. "Hsin-tsai mei<sup>br</sup>," in *Po Hsiang-shan shih hou-chi*<sup>bs</sup> (ed. in *Ssu-pu pei-yao*) 7.7a.

51. "Tsa shih," in \* *Wang Yu-ch'eng chi* 6.14a. A rather free English version may be found in *The Jade Mountain*, p. 190, under the title "Lines." In a poem strikingly similar to Wang Wei's, the poet asks a traveler coming from his home how many *chrysanthemums* have grown under his south window. This poem, entitled "Wen lai-shih<sup>bt</sup>," has been included from the 10th c. on among the works of T'ao Ch'ien, the chrysanthemum-lover (cf. above, p. 95), but it is believed to be of more recent origin, dating perhaps from late T'ang. (See the poem and commentary in \* *T'ao Yüan-ming chi* 2.6b-7a; and Kuo Shao-yübu, "T'ao-chi k'ao-pien," *Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies*, XX [1936], 28.) Thus it is more likely to be an imitation than a model of Wang Wei's poem.

52. "Mei ch'i<sup>bv</sup>," in \* *Chang Ssu-yeh shih-chi*<sup>bw</sup> 5.1a.

A seemingly similar but actually different concept is found in a poem by Li Ch'ün-yü (mid-ninth century):

She grows on a remote mountain slope, alone and untended ;  
The creeping plants of the brook and the birds of the creek  
  are her companions ;  
The travelers on the road reserve no affection for her ;  
Deep in the mountains, sad fragrance drops unheeded in the rain<sup>53</sup>.

A singular motif which gained prominence in late T'ang times is the femininity of the plum tree. If we were dealing with classical Greek or Roman mythology, it would be a matter of course that the spirit of a tree is a woman, just as the names of all trees are feminine in Greek and Latin grammar. But Chinese belief is almost as impartial in this respect as Chinese grammar: some trees are endowed with masculine traits (for instance the pine tree and the bamboo), and others are thought to be feminine.

We have seen suggestions of the association of plum tree and woman in some of the earlier poetry: in a *Shih ching* poem, it was a girl who contemplated and gathered the falling plums; in the *Hsi-chou ch'ü*, it was perhaps a woman who plucked and sent the flowering plum branch; in the story of the Princess of Shou-yang, the plum blossom was linked

53. "Shan-i mei-hua by," in \**Li Ch'ün-yü shih hou-chi* 4.5a.



to an individual lady and to feminine make-up; and in Hsiao Kang's *Mei-hua fu*, we found a striking parallelism of plum tree and palace lady.

From the ninth century, we have the *Mei-fei chuan*, *Biography of the Plum Lady*, by Ts'ao Yeh<sup>bz</sup> (fl. mid-ninth century)<sup>54</sup>. This story of an alleged concubine of Emperor Hsüan-tsung (reigned 712-756) may have little or no historical foundation, but for our present survey it is significant in that it portrays a woman as the spirit and embodiment of the plum tree. This is apparent throughout the *Biography*, in the names given her, the manner in which she is described, and various links established between her and the plum trees of the palace grounds. This is how she came to be named Mei-fei, 'Plum Lady,' in the words of the *Biography*:

She was fond of plum trees and had some planted all along the balustrade outside her apartments. The Emperor named the place Mei-t'ing, 'Plum Pavilion.' When the plums blossomed, she would write poetry and enjoy the blossoms until the middle of the night, lingering under the flowering trees, unable to leave. Because of her fondness for the plum, the Emperor playfully named her Mei-fei\*.

Besides calling her Mei-fei, the Emperor also dubbed her Mei-ching<sup>cb</sup>, 'Plum Witch'. In describing her appearance, the *Biography* uses precisely the same terms which are commonly applied to the personified plum, as shown elsewhere in this paper\*\*:

... she used make-up sparingly and dressed in a refined manner, and her bearing was elegant ...

Finally, the *Biography* relates that when the Emperor came back from Szechwan after the An Lu-shan rebellion, he found her dead body buried under a plum tree.

54. Ed. in *Lung-wei pi-shu*<sup>ca</sup>, Ser. 4. Tr. by E. D. Edwards, *Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period*, London, 1937/38, II, 114-120.

\* Fol. 1a-b. \*\* S. above, p. 102, and below, pp. 106/7 and 112/3.

## SUNG DYNASTY (960-1279)

It was during the Sung dynasty that poetry inspired by the plum reached the height of its development. It became fashionable for poets to grow plum trees at their country homes, or to take up residence near a plum grove. Consequently, the plum appears in many of their literary names.

The comradeship of plum tree and recluse, which we saw suggested by T'ao Ch'ien and again in T'ang times, became a generally accepted concept during the Sung dynasty. Sung writers were fond of noting similarities between the personified plum tree and the recluse. The plum – so they rationalized – blossoming in winter, is removed (in time) from other flowering plants just as the recluse removes himself (in space) from the turmoil of court and city life. Both are pure and refined, and stand above the vulgarity of the ordinary world. Yang Wan-li (1124-1206) expressed this idea in the form of a direct comparison:

The flowering plum in the grove is like a recluse,  
Full of the spirit of open space, free from the spirit of worldly dust<sup>55</sup>.

A typical plum-loving recluse was Lin Pu (967-1028). He wrote delicate poems<sup>56</sup> about the plum trees which grew in his island retreat at Ku-shan (near Hangchow)<sup>57</sup>, where he lived in complete solitude, a lifelong bachelor. It was said of him that he had plum trees for wives, and cranes for children<sup>58</sup>. The association of plum tree and crane will

55. "Chün-chih yen-t'ang t'ing chung mei-hua" cc, in \**Ch'eng-chai chi* cd 12.7a. (The last character of the second verse happens to be lacking in this ed., it should be *ch'ice*.)

56. See his collected poems, \**Lin Ho-ching hsien-sheng shih-chi*.

57. It is interesting to note that the plum trees of Ku-shan had already been praised by Po Chü-i (see his poem "I Hang-chou mei-hua yin shu chiu-yu chi Hsiao Hsieh-lü cf," in *Po Hsiang-shan shih hou-chi* bs [ed. in *Ssu-pu pei-yao*] 6.8a), but they acquired fame only through Lin Pu, and in later literature they are associated with him rather than with Po Chü-i.

58. *Shih-hua tsung-kuei* cg (compiled by Juan Yüeh ch in 1123), as quoted, for instance, in *P'ei-wen yün-fu* (ed. in Wan-yu wen-k'u series, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937) 8.345a. I have not been able to find this epigram in the extant version of the \**Shih-hua tsung-kuei*.

be met again. But what makes this epigram noteworthy in our present context is the combination of two motifs: the plum tree as a companion of the recluse, and the plum tree as a woman.

This latter motif is given full and final elaboration in the story of Chao Shih-hsiung at the Lo-fu Mountain (in modern Kwangtung), which had an age-old reputation of being haunted by all sorts of spirits<sup>59</sup>. In the oldest available version, the story reads as follows:

During the K'ai-huang period (581–601) of the Sui dynasty, Chao Shih-hsiung was sent to a post at Lo-fu. Once, on a cold day, at the time of sunset, when he happened to be in a grove of plum trees, he saw a beautiful woman, made up sparingly and dressed simply but elegantly, coming toward him from a building next to a wine shop. It was already getting dark; the last remnants of snow were yet to melt, and the moon shone forth a pale light. As Shih-hsiung spoke with her, her speech was most refined and beautiful, and her fragrance was enticing. Therefore he went to the wine shop with her, knocked at the door, and they drank together. After a while, a lad dressed in green merrily sang and danced for them. Shih-hsiung fell asleep, intoxicated. He only felt that the wind was cold, and that the power of attraction was great. After a long time, when the east was already lighting up, he arose, and looking around, found himself under a large blossoming plum tree. Above there was a kingfisher, wailing and gazing at him. The moon was setting, and Orion was on the horizon. Nothing was left but a feeling of disappointment<sup>60</sup>.

The book in which this story occurs, the *Lung-ch'eng lu*<sup>cl</sup>, was published as being the work of the famous T'ang writer Liu Tsung-yüan (773–

59. See *Lo-fu chih*<sup>ci</sup>, by Ch'en Lien<sup>cj</sup> (completed in or shortly after 1410; ed. in *Ling-nan i-shuck*, Ser. 3), *chüan* 4 and 5.

60. *Lung-ch'eng lu*<sup>cl</sup>, as quoted in \**Chi-chu fen-lei Tung-p'o hsien-sheng shih*<sup>cm</sup> 14.19b, note. I prefer this 12th c. version to the slightly different text found in current eds. of the *Lung-ch'eng lu* (e.g., 2.4a–b in the *Pai-hai*<sup>cm</sup> ed.).

819), but it was not until the twelfth century that it was appended to Liu's works, nor has any mention of it been found prior to that period<sup>61</sup>. In that same century, two men of letters, Ho Yüan<sup>cr</sup> and Chu Hsi (1130–1200), declared it to be a forgery, and both expressed the belief that its real author was Wang Chih<sup>cs</sup> (fl. first half of twelfth century)<sup>62</sup>. Today, the identity of the author is still uncertain<sup>63</sup>, but I believe the question of the approximate date can be settled on the basis of the story just quoted. For as early as the twelfth century, Chu Hsi pointed out that the stories in the *Lung-ch'eng lu* were invented for the purpose of "illustrating" or "explaining" certain literary passages<sup>64</sup>. The editors of the *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu* catalogue cite two specific instances from the *Lung-ch'eng lu*<sup>65</sup>. One is a story which coincides with a poem by Han Yü (768–824), and the other, the story of Chao Shih-hsiung translated above, which they believe to be designed to explain Su Shih's (1036–1101) line, "In the moonlight, dressed in white, I come to knock at the door"<sup>66</sup>. But they seem to have overlooked the next poem in Su Shih's collected poetical works<sup>67</sup>, which is much more strikingly related to the plum fairy story. This poem, written in January 1095<sup>68</sup>, may be

61. See *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* 144.1a. With his ed. of Liu's works, which included the *Lung-ch'eng lu* for the first time, the editor, Ko Ch'iao<sup>co</sup>, intended to match an elaborate ed. of Han Yü's works prepared by Fang Sung-ch'ing<sup>cp</sup> (see *Chih-chai shu-lu chieh-t'i* [ed. Chiang-su shu-chü, 1883] 16.15a). Since Fang's preface (as quoted in *Pi-Sung lou ts'ang-shu chih<sup>cq</sup>* [wood block ed. of 1883] 69.8a–b) bears the date 1189, Ko's ed. of Liu's works must be posterior to that date. But the *Lung-ch'eng lu* must have been in circulation for a number of years before it was thus printed by Ko (see below, p. 110).

62. See Ho Yüan's *Ch'un-chu chi-wen*<sup>ct</sup> (completed after 1141; ed. in *Hsüeh-chin t'ao-yüan*<sup>aa</sup>, Ser. 15) 5.3a; and *Chu-tzu yü-lei*<sup>cu</sup> (Ying-yüan shu-yüan<sup>cv</sup> ed.) 138.2a.

63. Cf. E. D. Edwards, *Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period*, I, 144/145.

64. See above, n. 62. — Compare the fabrication, at about the same time, of stories designed to "explain" Tu Fu's poems, see above, p. 98.

65. *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* 144.1a.

66. From the poem "Shih-i yüeh erh-shih-lu jih Sung-feng-t'ing hsiamei-huasheng-k'ai<sup>cw</sup>," "On the Plum Trees beneath the Pine-Wind Pavilion in Full Bloom, on the Twenty-sixth Day of the Eleventh Moon," in \**Chi-chu fen-lei Tung-p'o hsien-sheng shih*<sup>cm</sup> 14.19a.

67. Entitled "Tsai yung ch'ien yün<sup>cx</sup>," "Using the same rhyme again," op. cit., 14.19a to 20a.

68. See op. cit., "Tung-p'o chi-nien lu," fol. 29b.

quoted here, since it serves to determine both the genesis of the story and the date of the *Lung-ch'eng lu*:

In the Plum Blossom Village at the foot of the Lo-fu Mountain,  
The bones of the flowering plums are of jade and snow, and their  
souls are of ice<sup>69</sup>.

In their multitude the blossoms seem moonlight hanging from the  
trees,

In their brightness they blend only with Orion on the horizon.

By myself I live, among rivers and waters<sup>70</sup>,

Melancholy like a sick crane perching in a deserted garden.

In their heavenly fragrance and world-renowned beauty, the blossoming plums are a comforting sight,

They understand I am heavy with wine and ready to bring forth  
pure, fresh verses.

Like the Flower-Bird Emissary<sup>71</sup> in the Fairyland Palace,

A cockatoo, dressed in green, hangs on the Sunrise Tree<sup>72</sup>.

Looking at me from among the branches, he sees me lying in  
drunkenness :

He therefore bids the woodpecker knock at the door.

The fairy Ma-ku<sup>cz</sup> is coming to see me, quickly I must sweep  
and clean.

The birds know how to sing and dance, the flowers know how to speak.

As I recover from my drunkenness, every one is gone, lonely  
is the mountain.

Nothing is left but falling blossoms sticking to the empty wine cup.

69. White jade, snow, and ice here represent the whiteness and purity of the blossoming plum, as well as the cold season in which it blooms.

70. That is to say, in solitude, away from people.

71. An official of the T'ang emperor Hsüan-tsung (reigned 712-756), who was charged with searching the country for beautiful women to be placed in the imperial harem.

72. *Fu-sang*<sup>cy</sup>, a fabulous tree from which the sun was believed to rise.



There is undoubtedly a genetic relationship between the poem and the story. That Su Shih should have been the imitator is out of the question, for in that case he would certainly have alluded to Chao Shih-hsiung and his encounter with the plum fairy in the customary way. The only possible conclusion is that the story was written to "explain" the poem. Indeed, it was promptly used for the purpose for which it had been invented: it was inserted in the commentary to Su Shih's poem in the edition from which I quoted it. This edition, prepared by Wang Shih-p'eng<sup>da</sup> (1112-71), provides not only an early version of the story but also one of the oldest references to the *Lung-ch'eng lu*. In conclusion, far from being the work of Liu Tsung-yüan, the *Lung-ch'eng lu* must have been written between 1095 (the date of Su Shih's poem) and 1171 (the year of Wang Shih-p'eng's death)<sup>73</sup>.

The elements from which the plum fairy story was fashioned are thus plainly visible in Su Shih's poem. Around these elements, the author of the story built an erotic plot, radically changing the wistfully poetic spirit of the original. He carried to an extreme the personification which were only vaguely suggested by Su Shih. Giving a literal turn to certain metaphorical expressions in the poem, such as "a cockatoo dressed in green" and "the birds know how to sing and dance, the flowers know how to speak," he transformed the plum tree into a fairy, and the green bird into a boy. Viewed from a historical perspective, the transformation of the plum tree into a bewitching fairy is the final stage in a development which, as we have seen, extended over several centuries.

73. Another early reference to the *Lung-ch'eng lu* (in addition to the two mentioned above, n. 62) is to be found in *Chi-le pien*<sup>db</sup> (ed. in *Lin-lang pi-shih ts'ung-shu*<sup>dc</sup>) 2.12a, by Chuang Chi-yü<sup>dd</sup>, who believed it to be the work of Liu Tsung-yüan. The *Chi-le pien* must have been completed in or after 1187, because it refers to Sung Kao-tsung, who died in that year, by his temple name (1.38b and 2.16a); it cannot be much later than 1187 because the author refers (3.44b) to something which he saw during the Shao-sheng period (1094-98). The compilers of the *Ssu-k'ü ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* (141.6a-b) noted that while the author's preface is dated 1133, the book itself refers to events of the year 1139; they failed to notice the references to Kao-tsung, which postpone the earliest possible date of the completion of the book by 48 years.

Admiration of the plum became a veritable cult during the Sung dynasty. Poets were not only inspired by plum blossoms but virtually intoxicated by their sight, their odor, and even their taste. Several of them speak of chewing plum blossoms<sup>74</sup>. Liu Han<sup>df</sup> (twelfth century) uses this motif to describe and symbolize poetic creation:

As with relish I chew plum buds by the little window,  
Fresh verses issue from my mouth, fragrant in every word<sup>75</sup>.

This remarkable couplet expresses a strange fusion of physical contact and artistic inspiration; flowers turn into verse, and fragrance becomes melliflence. We have come a full circle. First, the plum tree was prized for its fruit, then the fruit was forgotten and replaced by the blossom<sup>76</sup>, and now the blossom is chewed as though it were a fruit.

The poetic output devoted to the plum during the Sung and later dynasties is enormous, and includes many fine poems by some of the best-known writers of these periods. But the concepts are always the old familiar ones. The tendency to follow established patterns, both in imagery and in form, often goes to extremes. Either through lack of inspiration, or to display their skill and learning, or to show respect for the work of others, poets would often write counterparts to older

74. For an early antecedent, cf. a verse in Ch'ü Yüan's *Li sao*, whose probable meaning is: "In the evening, I eat the blossoms falling from the autumnal chrysanthemums<sup>de</sup> (\*Ch'u tz'u 1.12 b).

75. From the poem "Hsiao yen<sup>dg</sup>," in *Hsiao-shan chi*<sup>dh</sup> (ed. in *Nan-Sung lu-shih chia chi*<sup>di</sup>, Ku-shu liu-t'ung ch'u<sup>dj</sup> photolith reprint of Chi-ku ko<sup>dk</sup> wood block ed.), fol. 1 b. From the second line of this couplet, the Yüan poet Kuo Yü-heng<sup>dl</sup> took the title of his collection of centos on the plum, *Mei-hua tzu-tzu hsiang*<sup>dm</sup> (author's preface dated 1312; ed. in *Lin-lang pi-shih ts'ung-shu*<sup>dc</sup>), not, as suggested by the editors of the *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu* (167.3 b-4 a), from the verse *Ch'ang te hung-mei tzu-tzu hsiang*<sup>dn</sup> by Yen Chi-tao<sup>do</sup> (11th c.). (See Yen Chi-tao's *tz'u* which contains this verse in *Hsiao-shan tz'u* [ed. in *Sung lu-shih ming-chia tz'u*<sup>dp</sup>, Kuo-hsüeh chi-pen ts'ung-shu series, Shanghai: Commercial Press], p. 20.) The *Ssu-k'u* editors seem to have overlooked the fact that Liu Han's verse is included in the first poem of the *hou-chi* of Kuo's collection. They further erred in attributing Yen Chi-tao's verse to his father Yen Shu.

76. It should be borne in mind, however, that many of the plum trees of which the Chinese poets sing belong to varieties which do not bear fruit – this may be considered a result as well as a cause of the development shown in these pages.



poems, identical in subjectmatter, poetic form, and rhymes – an old practice called *ho*, ‘matching’<sup>77</sup>; or they would string together whole lines from older poems in *chi-chü*<sup>ds</sup>, centos<sup>78</sup>.

It is no wonder that at a time when the plum theme was gaining in popularity but losing in spontaneity, the topic was approached for the first time in a spirit of critical analysis. Thus we have from the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries a number of monographs and other works specially devoted to the plum. The first of these is the *Hua-kuang mei-p’u*, by the Buddhist monk Chung-jen<sup>du79</sup>, reputedly the originator of black monochrome plum paintings. In this work, a discussion of the technique of painting the plum is combined with abstruse speculations on metaphysical equivalents of various parts and aspects of the plum\*.

The *Mei-p’u* by Fan Ch’eng-ta (1126–93)<sup>80</sup> reveals the methodical and at the same time highly sensitive genius of its age in the systematic enumeration and description of various kinds of plum trees, done in a spirit of delicate appreciation.

Particularly interesting to the student of literature is the *Mei p’in* by Chang Tzu<sup>dx81</sup>, another plum fancier of the twelfth century. It lists the “fitting matches” and “dislikes,” and the “glories” and “disgraces” of the flowering plum, who is personified, appearing to be now a lady, now the ideal poet, now the author himself. The “fitting

77. As an example may be cited the 800 poems on the plum by Ch’en Ts’ung-chi<sup>dr</sup>, matching 800 earlier poems on the same subject; see the preface which Ch’en’s friend Yang Wan-li (1124–1206) wrote for this work, in \**Ch’eng-chai chid* 79. 7a–8 b. This preface, incidentally, in a few sentences brilliantly sums up the history of poetry about the plum.

78. See, for instance, Li Kung’s<sup>sdt</sup> collection of 4-line centos on the plum, entitled *Mei-hua na* (author’s postface dated 1242; ed. in *Nan-Sung lu-shih chia chidi*). An example of 8-line centos on the plum is Kuo Yü-heng’s *Mei-hua tzu-tzu hsiang* (see above, n. 75).

79. Ed. in *Mei-shu ts’ung-shudv*, Ser. 2, Pt. 5. I have not been able to ascertain the exact dates of the author, but according to the preface to this work, he was a friend of the famous poet Huang T’ing-chien (1045–1105).

\* Cf. n. 84, below.

80. Ed. in *Po-ch’uan hsüeh-haidw*.

81. Written after 1185, a date mentioned in the author’s preface. Ed. in *I-men kuang-tu<sup>dy</sup>*.

matches'' form an illuminating list of phenomena and motifs associated with the plum, and read as follows:

Delicate shade, early morning sun, slightly cold weather, drizzling rain, light mist, a fine moon, evening sun, light snow<sup>82</sup>, a rosy sunset, a rare bird, a solitary crane<sup>83</sup>, a clear brook, a small bridge, a place next to bamboo, a place under a pine<sup>84</sup>, a bright window, a widely spaced bamboo fence, a verdant cliff, green moss, a bronze vessel, a paper screen, the playing of a flute in a grove<sup>85</sup>, a *ch'in*<sup>86</sup> resting on a knee, the playing of chess on a stone slab, sweeping the snow and making tea, being worn in the hair of a beautiful woman simply dressed and made up\*.

For each item in this list, a number of illustrations from among poems dealing with the plum could easily be cited. We note the emphasis on adjectives such as 'delicate,' 'slight,' 'light,' 'small.' In harmony with this trend, the ladies associated with the plum here (see the last item of the list) and elsewhere† are always dressed and made up in a plain but refined way. The adjectives which are used again and again to describe their dress and make-up are *su*\*\* and *tan*<sup>ec</sup>, which means 'mild,' 'plain,' 'pale,' 'restrained,' 'refined.'

82. These 3 elements are present in the story of Chao Shih-hsiung (see above, pp. 107/8).

83. We may remember that cranes, together with plum trees, were said to be the only companions of Lin Pu (see above, p. 106).

84. The association of pine, bamboo, and plum (later called *sui-han san-yüdz*, 'the 3 friends of the cold season') became commonplace in post-Sung literature. Perhaps the first to place the plum side by side with pine and bamboo was Chu Ch'ing-yü<sup>ea</sup> (*chin-shih* of 826) with his couplet:

[The plum] is worthy of adjoining the pine and the bamboo,  
It is good to plant them together.

(from the poem "Tsao meieb," in \**Chu Ch'ing-yü shih chi*, fol. 30a). Also, Chung-jen<sup>du</sup> said in his *Hua-kuang mei-p'u* (see above), that the plum is "as clear as the bamboo and as truthful as the pine" (fol. 4b).

85. The association of plum and flute was noted above, p. 96.

86. A kind of zither with 7 strings.

\* Fol. 8a-b. † See above, pp. 102, 104/5 and 106/7. \*\* See above, p. 102.

One of the most remarkable of the Sung dynasty books devoted to the plum is the *Mei-hua hsi-shen p'u*<sup>ed</sup> by Sung Po-jen<sup>ee</sup> (first published in 1238)<sup>87</sup>. In pictures and in verse, it shows a hundred stages in the development of the flower, from the first budding until the last petal has fallen, with a name for each stage<sup>88</sup>. Sung Po-jen's woodcuts are delightfully fresh and varied, but his poems are for the most part labored and trite. We see here the rise of a new genre, and the decline of an old one.

The plum has continued to be a favorite theme of Chinese lyrical poetry down to our own time, but no new development was possible, except in other media, such as painting. As Chiang K'uei (1163-1203) said in one of his *tz'u* about the plum:

When you want to find again its subtle fragrance,  
It has passed into the painter's scroll by the little window<sup>89</sup>.

87. Ed. in *Hsü ku-i ts'ung-shuef*, No. 46.

88. Some of these names seem to have been created by the author for the purpose, others were already in use.

89. "Su yingeh", "Scattered Shadows", in *Po-shih tz'uei* (ed. in *Sung lu-shih ming-chia tz'u* [see n. 75, above]), p. 2.

a	梅
b	百衲本二
c	十說命下
d	夏小正
e	豆實記
f	述異庵徐氏
g	隨叢書廟集
h	謁禹河
i	張

j	漢魏六朝
k	百三大家集
l	章經濟堂
m	重考古今
n	偽書林苑
o	上馬文園
p	司集詩
q	柏梁苑源
	古文詩
	古詩

r	陸凱
s	隴頭記
t	荊州精舍
u	麓山書集
v	叢書詩集
w	樂府日衣娘題
x	蜡金縷
y	杜秋府古
z	樂府要解

aa	學津討原
ab	郭茂倩
ac	段安節
ad	樂府雜錄
ae	湖北先正
af	遺書昌
ag	程大總
ah	江梅花粧
ai	初學記
aj	安國

ak	古香齋十	bi	雪裏覓梅	cg	詩話總龜	di	南家宋六十
al	種唐類函	bj	春日看梅	ch	阮羅浮志	dj	家集書流通
am	俞安時行	bk	花全梁文	ci	陳榷南遺	dk	古處汲閣
an	申遜州法	bl	全上太古	cj	嶺城錄	dl	郭豫字
ao	何揚梅盛	bm	全代國歷	ck	龍集東坡	dm	梅香得紅
ap	何揚梅盛	bn	正靈志	cl	集東詩海	dn	唱字幾道
aq	和蜀送梅	bo	驚梅時最	cm	嶠崧宋志	do	宋家詞
ar	寄杜裴王	bp	柏新白後	cn	何王春朱	dp	從句華仁
as	宋集部觀	bq	張集李山	co	應十六亭	dq	術川鑑門
at	補海慈法	br	曹龍梅郡	cp	王扶麻王	dr	寒慶梅
au	分杜跋別	bs	群驛鄭威	cq	雞琳叢莊	ds	喜伯古
av	王遺集部	bt	精治中齊	cr	夕之劉小	dt	變影石
aw	益梅類貞	bu	杭因寄	cs	集	du	詞
ax	霖南街	bv	年	cu		dv	
ay		bw		cv		dw	
az		bx		cw		dx	
ba		by		cx		dy	
bb		bz		cy		dz	
bc		ca		cz		ea	
bd		cb		da		eb	
be		cc		db		ec	
bf		cd		dc		ed	
bg		ce		dd		ee	
bh		cf		de		ef	
				df		eg	
				dg		eh	
				dh		ei	