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# LI TE-YÜ AND THE AZALEA

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The T'ang period was a great age of innovation in floriculture. Private gentlemen of taste, sometimes led by members of the imperial family, were active in introducing new plants of handsome habit and vivid coloration to their gardens. This development, it seems, accompanied a gradual change from the appreciation of nature, compressed into the space of a garden, as a universal symbol, to the feeling for plants and birds as individual and unique esthetic objects.

The most famous of the T'ang introductions is the tree-peony, first planted in the palace grounds, in pink, violet and white varieties, early in the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> A deep carmine variety soon appeared within the precincts of the great Tz'u-en Buddhist temple in Ch'ang-an.<sup>2</sup> Another T'ang novelty, this one an exotic, was the white lotus, brought from Chekiang to Loyang in the ninth century by Po Chü-i.<sup>3</sup> There is still much we do not know. The wisteria was a favorite in Ch'ang-an courtyards of the T'ang age.<sup>4</sup> Was it first domesticated in this period? Magnolias were grown in parks both north and south.<sup>5</sup> Possibly they were first brought from the wilds to the cities in T'ang times. Further study will tell. The palace required provincial governors to submit native flowering

1. Hung Ch'u, *Hsiang p'u*, 6, 21 (*Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng* ed.), quoting Li Po, *Hou chi hsü*. See *Yu yang tsa tsu*, hsü 9, 247 (*Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng*), for more on the peony vogue.

2. K'ang P'ien (fl. 877), *Chü t'an lu*, b, 4a (*Chin tai pi shu*, ser. 9, vol. 9).

3. E. H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), p. 129. Before this time, only the pink lotus was well known. Li Te-yü boasted that he was the first to write a *fu* in praise of the white lotus. All this is well attested. But how explain a compound 'white lotus' which appeared, apparently spontaneously, in the palace (*Ta ming kung*) of Hsüan Tsung a century earlier? An imperial oddity, otherwise unknown, or actually a white water lily? See *K'ai yüan T'ien pao i shih*, 3, 64b (*T'ang tai ts'ung shu*).

4. Ch'en Ts'ang-ch'i, quoted in *Pen ts'ao kang mu*, 18b, 51b (*Hung pao chai* ed.).

5. Ch'en Ts'ang-ch'i and *Shu pen ts'ao*, quoted in *Cheng lei pen ts'ao*, 12, 38a (*Szu pu ts'ung k'an* ed.).

plants as annual 'tribute' – chrysanthemums, herbaceous peonies, forsythias, hibiscus, orchids, and a great many others – probably many species and varieties were new to the private gardens of T'ang. Such inventions were the work of a few enthusiastic amateurs; the ones we know well are the ninth century magnates Po Chü-i, Niu Seng-ju, and Li Te-yü. The country garden of Li Te-yü enjoys the most fame.

Li Te-yü, a man of solitary temperament, was devoted to writing<sup>6</sup> and to his gardens. At the height of his career, as chief minister to Wen Tsung and Wu Tsung, he had a tasteful garden at his residence in the An-i Quarter in Ch'ang-an, just south of the rich and aristocratic Eastern Market. It was noted for its 'fantastic stones and ancient pines,' and for its pavilion in which were displayed his collection of old calligraphy and painting.<sup>7</sup> But his greatest efforts were expended on a garden villa at P'ing ch'üan in the hills south of Loyang. He called this retreat a 'mountain dwelling' (*shan chü*). This expression was regularly used of residences designed to offer solitude in the midst of natural surroundings. In the previous century, Tu Fu had written of the pleasures of isolation from the crowd in

A house in the wilds – flowing with cold water,  
A fence in the hills – girded with thin clouds.<sup>8</sup>

Wang Chien watched the wild deer and fed the pheasants at a 'mountain dwelling', which was

A house placed west of a spraying spring,  
With a rivulet beneath its thatched eaves.<sup>9</sup>

6. Biographies in *T'ang shu*, 180, 9a–9b, and *Chiu T'ang shu*, 174, 11b–12a (*Szu pu pei yao* ed.).

7. *Chü t'an lu*, b, 3a–4b. He took his precious collection, or part of it, into exile in Lingnan, but lost it in a shipwreck. Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, p. 46.

8. Tu Fu, 'T'i Po Ta hsiung ti shan chü wu pi, erh shou,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 4, ts'e 4, 16, 9b.

9. Wang Chien, 'Shan chü,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 5, ts'e 5, 3, 1b.

A special feature of Li Te-yü's 'mountain dwelling' was its richly developed arboretum, which the minister justified on literary grounds. He aspired to poetic excellence. Accordingly, in his own description of the plantings at his estate, he explained that workers in linguistic imagery notoriously require precise knowledge of the nomenclature and habits of plants.<sup>10</sup>

This famous villa occupied a space ten *li* in circumference, filled with stones, water-courses, birds, and a bewildering variety of plants. It was embellished by every kind of artifice, including terraces and summer-houses, and even a grand model of the gorges of the Yangtze. Admirers and enthusiasts in the most distant places sent specimens to add to this astonishing collection, including, we are told, parrots from the Lung Mountains in the west, and flowers from Annam. There was even the rib cage of a 'giant fish', twenty-five feet long, contributed by the magistrate of a coastal county. A contemporary writer compared the whole effect to a *hsien fu* – a residence of the godlike Taoist transcendents.<sup>11</sup>

Li Te-yü's well-known essay on his P'ing ch'üan garden and the ten odes which accompany it make up a partial catalogue of the plants he admired most there. He had introduced them from every part of the T'ang realm. Among them were few which we would regard as proper suburban 'garden plants' – herbaceous annuals and the smaller showy perennials. The great majority were large trees, accompanied by a variety of flowering shrubs with some water herbs and streamside plants.

10. Li Te-yü, 'P'ing ch'üan shan chü ts'ao mu chi,' in *Hui ch'ang i p'in chi* (*Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng* ed.); other editions are available in *T'ang tai ts'ung shu* and in *Wu ch'ao hsiao shuo*. There is a synopsis of this essay in English in E. D. Edwards, *Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period: A. D. 618-906*, I (London, 1937), pp. 150-151, and a rather unreliable translation into French in Bruno Belpaire, 'Essai sur les plantes (de jardin) d'un chalet (sur le mont) p'ing ts'iuen; par Li Tê-yu des T'ang,' *T'ang kien we tse: Florilege de littérature des T'ang* (Première série, Paris, 1957), pp. 90-95.

11. *Chü t'an lu*, b, 4a; *Chiu T'ang shu*, 174, 11b-12a. See also Li Te-yü's recollection of this garden in two poems called 'Hsia wan yu huai P'ing ch'üan lin chü,' *Hui ch'ang i p'in chi*, pieh chi, 9, 239.

Many had been brought from Chekiang, the rising garden center of the country, a province in which Li had held office. Among these were the rare and beautiful Golden Larch (*Pseudolarix amabilis*)<sup>12</sup> and the crimson-berried Nandin (*Nandina domestica*),<sup>13</sup> both from Mount T'ien-t'ai. He also planted varieties of magnolia, osmanthus, tamarix, cassia, box myrtle, juniper, arbor-vitae, necklace-tree (*Ormosia*), peach, wild cherry, lotus, camellia, lilac, hibiscus, oleander (apparently),<sup>14</sup> and a multitude of others whose identity is uncertain, or even impossible to ascertain.

The great emphasis placed on rare plants from distant places distinguishes this garden from such 'natural' gardens as that of Wang Wei at his Wang ch'uan villa. Exoticism is not expected in a 'mountain dwelling'. Li Te-yü's confection reminds us rather of a miniature imperial park of the ancient sort, which contained specimens representing every part of the empire.<sup>15</sup> However, there were few true exotics in it – Li does not mention a peepul, which had already been introduced to Chekiang, or a saul tree, already growing in Ch'ang-an,<sup>16</sup> or, with the exception of the questionable oleander, any other foreign tree. He rejoiced rather in new *Chinese* plants, such as the camellias of Canton, whose appearance was sensational only in Loyang.

This great garden was destroyed during the Huang Ch'ao rebellion, and its contents dispersed. In the tenth century, only junipers and water plants survived on the original site.<sup>17</sup> In the twelfth century, '...the grounds can hardly be distinguished, and if you search for the herbs and trees described by Te-yü, you will find all converted to millet and other cereals'.<sup>18</sup> The famous stones were eagerly sought by connoisseurs. Many ulti-

12. *Chin sung*. See also his 'Chin sung fu,' *Hui ch'ang i p'in chi*, pieh chi, 5, 232. See also Ch'en Jung, *Chung-kuo shu-mu fen-lei-hsüeh* (Shanghai, 1947).

13. *Ch'i shu*. Li Te-yü writes with relish about his debt to the flora of the Wu area in his essay.

14. Brought from Kuei-ling, but ultimately of Indian origin.

15. Belpaire compares it rather to a botanical garden. See his *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88.

16. Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, pp. 122–123.

17. Yeh Meng-te, colophon to 'P'ing ch'üan shan chü ts'ao mu chi,' quoting Chang Chi, *Chia shih t'an lu*.

18. Shao Po, *Wen chien hou lu*, 27, 175–176 (*Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng ed.*).

mately found their way into aristocratic Sung gardens, as did those from the rival collection of Niu Seng-ju.<sup>19</sup>

A source of information about Li Te-yü as a gardener which has not, it seems, been noticed heretofore, is Tuan Ch'eng-shih's *Yu yang tsa tsu*.<sup>20</sup> Tuan had been employed in Li's suite in Chekiang when both were young men,<sup>21</sup> and the future minister must have been an important botanical informant for Tuan during this period. Indeed, the association was life long: we know of a letter which the minister wrote to Tuan from exile in Yai-chou on Hainan island, reporting that he was in good health – but, in fact, he died within the year.<sup>22</sup> Tuan's notes tell us only a little about rare plants (such as a yellow magnolia) in the P'ing ch'üan garden, but he transmits all sorts of lore acquired from Li Te-yü, who appears in these pages in the guise of an authority on horticulture: he tells Tuan how to stunt the growth of pines; that there is a dark blue 'pink' (*Dianthus*) in Szechwan; that the elecampane (*Inula*) is injurious to the eyes; that the 'three bristle pine' and the 'peacock pine' (*Cryptomeria?*) are not the same. There is much else.

Li Te-yü's taste for unusual and handsome botanical specimens, unknown in traditional northern gardens, conjoined with his expert knowledge, must surely have led to the introduction of a number of new plants to the domestic condition. As an example, consider the case of azalea.

19. See Yeh Meng-te and Shao Po, *opera cit.*, and E. H. Schafer, *The Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest: A Commentary and Synopsis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961), pp. 51 and 57. This was the age of rough, fantastic rocks as an important element in 'natural' gardens. Niu Seng-ju, for instance, brought baroque stones from Huai-nan to embellish his garden in Loyang in 837. Here he often read poetry in company with Po Chü-i. See Schafer, *Stone Catalogue*, p. 7. Both Po Chü-i and Li Te-yü favored and promoted this taste.

20. Hsü 9, 245–248 (*Ts'ung shi chi ch'eng* ed.).

21. E. H. Schafer, 'Notes on Tuan Ch'eng-shih and his Writing,' *Asiatische Studien*, 16 (1963), 18.

22. Sun Kuang-hsien, *Pei meng so yen*, 8, 67 (*Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng*). Li was banished to Ch'ao-chou (in Kwangtung) in 847. Next year he was banished further to Yai-chou, and arrived there in the first (Chinese) month of 849. He died there at the age of 63 years (Chinese) in the twelfth month of the same year (ca. January, 850). See his biographies in *T'ang shu* and *Chiu T'ang shu*.

There are about four hundred species of the genus *Rhododendron* (which includes the azaleas). A few of these are American, but more than half grow in China, most of them in remote mountainous regions, in Yunnan in particular. The rest live in the highlands of Tibet and the Himalayan countries, many in hardly accessible alpine regions.<sup>23</sup> They occur in many hues, but chiefly violets, pinks, magentas, and white. Among the more available of the Chinese species is *Rhododendron pulchrum*, whose flowers are rosy purple (or rose-red or carmine in some varieties), spotted with dark purple. This species, which also grows in Japan, is unknown in the wild, and may be a hybrid.<sup>24</sup> The Snow Azalea (*Rhododendron mucronatum*), with fragrant white or greenish white blossoms (rarely rosy pink ones), is also found both in China and Japan.<sup>25</sup> A sweet-scented species, *Rhododendron auriculatum*, whose large flowers, white or rose-pink, are splashed with pale green inside, blooms in late summer in Hupeh at altitudes above 5000 feet.<sup>26</sup> These and even rarer kinds have only lately come to the attention of Western gardeners. Indeed, the azaleas and rhododendrons are one of the last of the important groups of Far Eastern flowering plants to appear in our gardens (other late comers are the magnolias and camellias) – the oriental exotics favored in advanced gardens of eighteenth century Europe were, rather, oranges and weeping willows.<sup>27</sup> But nowadays new species of *Rhododendron* from the snowy fastnesses of Sikkim or Bhutan continue to appear, and countless domestic hybrids inflate the pages of our garden catalogues.

But the men of T'ang seem only to have noticed two lowland species – a yellow and a red. The first is the 'Chinese Azalea' (*Rhododendron molle* = *Rh. sinense*) which grows widely on open hillsides and in thin pine forests

23. C. G. Bowers, *Rhododendrons and Azaleas; Their Origins, Cultivation and Development* (New York, 1960), p. 159.

24. Bowers, *Rhododendrons*, p. 266.

25. Bowers, *Rhododendrons*, p. 263.

26. Bowers, *Rhododendrons*, p. 239.

27. For an elegant account of these changes in taste, see Sacheverell Sitwell, *Cupid and the Jacaranda* (London, 1952), esp. pp. 234–238.

of eastern China. Its yellow blossoms are stained with green blotches.<sup>28</sup> This common shrub had been known to the Chinese for centuries under the inelegant name of 'Goat Staggers' (*yang chih-chu*), because of the unhappy effect of its poisonous foliage on goats which chanced to eat it.<sup>29</sup> No one, it seems, thought of this as a flower of esthetic merit until T'ang times, but pharmacologists of earlier ages had found much of interest in it. Although Li Te-yü did not list it among the selected attractions of the P'ing ch'üan manor, he refers to it in one of his poems as growing splendidly by his house in Yüan-chou.<sup>30</sup> It is a popular cultivated plant in the twentieth century. Perhaps he is responsible.

The other common Chinese azalea is *Rhododendron Simsii* (= *Rhododendron indicum* var. *ignescens*), an evergreen with rose-red to dark red flowers, which paints the hillsides of the Yangtze valley and other temperate parts of China.<sup>31</sup> Li Te-yü brought it from Chin-ling (in modern Kiangsu) and planted it at P'ing ch'üan. He refers to it in his essay under the name of *tu-chüan*, already better known as the name of a bird, the Hawk-cuckoo (*Hierococcyx sparveroides*).<sup>32</sup> A poem, sometimes attributed to Li Po, but more believably ascribed to Tu Mu a century later, associated the seasonal singing of the bird with the blooming of the flower in Szechwan.<sup>33</sup> Li Te-yü also catalogues a 'Four season *tu-chüan*' at P'ing ch'üan. This may have been a variety of *Rhododendron simsii*, or perhaps some rare evergreen species – a number grow at higher elevations, such as *Rh. strigillosum* of Szechwan and Yunnan, *Rh. setchuenensis* of Hupei and Szechwan, and *Rh. fortunei* of Kiangsi and Chekiang.

28. Bowers, *Rhododendrons*, p. 251.

29. *Pen ts'ao kang mu*, 77b, 36b, quoting T'ao Hung-ching, Ch'en Ts'ang-ch'i, et al.

30. Li Te-yü, 'Erh fang ts'ung fu,' *Hui ch'ang i p'in chi*, pieh chi, 2, 186.

31. Bowers, *Rhododendrons*, p. 269.

32. See Lin Min Chiun, 'The Hawk-cuckoo (*hierococcyx sparveroides*) in Chinese Tradition and Belief,' *Journal of the West China Border Research Society*, 8 (1936), 145-152 (translated by D. C. Graham).

33. Li Po, 'Hsüan ch'eng chien tu-chüan hua,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 3, ts'e 6, 24, 5a; Tu Mu, same title, *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 8, ts'e 7, 6, 6a. No other eighth century poet notices the flower, so that I am inclined to doubt the attribution to Li Po.

In a poem, Li Te-yü refers to the red azalea under another name, *shan shih liu*, 'mountain pomegranate.'<sup>34</sup> Po Chü-i tells us plainly that the 'mountain pomegranate' is also the 'mountain staggers' and the 'tu-chüan flower.'<sup>35</sup> Another ninth century name was 'red staggers' (*hung chih-chu*). Po Chü-i used it,<sup>36</sup> and Chang Chi wrote of the *chih-chu* ('stagger') flower reddening the head of a mountain stream.<sup>37</sup> The 'purple *chih-chu*' of Yüan Chen's poem refers presumably to a variety of the same plant.<sup>38</sup>

Apparently Po Chü-i was the first great azalea fancier. The poet was a garden enthusiast like his contemporary Li Te-yü. He wrote many poems in praise of the red azalea. In one of them he writes of a *shan liu* cultivated 'close to flagstones',<sup>39</sup> so that it is clear that the shrub was already kept in gardens in the first half of the ninth century. It seems obvious that we owe this novelty to Po Chü-i or to Li Te-yü. Possibly Po Chü-i's praise of the wild azalea in his poems led Li Te-yü to introduce it to the grounds of his villa. But perhaps some sensitive Buddhist monk transferred a pink azalea to his monastery garden before either of these nobles made the flower famous.

In literature the red Chinese azalea is associated with blood, woman, and fire. The ninth century poet Yung T'ao, on hearing the song of the

34. The pomegranate is native to West Asia, and was apparently introduced to China at about the end of the Han dynasty. Laufer mistakenly thought that the 'mountain (i. e. wild) pomegranate' of China was a true pomegranate '... reverted to the wild state.' *Sino-Iranica* (Chicago, 1919), pp. 281-282. The Sanskrit name of the pomegranate, *dālīma*, appears in Six Dynasties literature in the form *t'u-lin* (\**d'uo-liəm*), instead of the more usual [*an*] *shih liu*. See Shinoda Osamu, 'Tō-shi shokubutsu shaku,' in Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, ed., *Chūgoku chūsei kagaku gijutsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1963), p. 362.

35. Po Chü-i, 'Shan shih liu chi Yüan chiu,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 7, ts'e 3, 12, 7a. He also associates it with the Hawk-cuckoo in the late spring. Ch'en Jung, *op. cit.*, notes the modern application of the name *shan shih liu*, other than to the azalea, to *Berberis thunbergii*, *Rosa laevigata*, and *Melastoma candidum*.

36. Po Chü-i 'Yü ch'üan szu nan san li ... t'i shih i shih yu che,' *Po Hsiang-shan chi*, 10, 14 (*Kuo-hsüeh chi-pen ts'ung-shu* ed., v. 2).

37. Chang Chi, 'Chi Li Po,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 6, ts'e 6, 5, 12 b.

38. Yüan Chen, 'Tzu chih-chu,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 6, ts'e 10, 26, 1a.

39. Po Chü-i, 'Hsi wen shan shih liu,' *Po Hsiang-shan chi*, v. 1, 3, 117.

hawk-cuckoo, wrote about its blood staining the boughs of the azalea,<sup>40</sup> and the tenth century poet Ch'eng Yen-hsiung borrowed the image:

Doubtless it is the blood from within its mouth  
Dripping to form the flowers on the branch.<sup>41</sup>

Tu Mu wrote of azaleas, 'like fire,' 'radiant on the small mountain',<sup>42</sup> and also, in a rather precious conceit, pictured them 'burning' in the 'halcyon cloud' chignon of a beautiful woman. Po Chü-i represents an azalea of a mountain temple as the 'transformed body of a daughter of Māra',<sup>43</sup> and wrote of the azaleas of another temple that 'they seem not to be flower thickets – they seem to be fire dunes!'<sup>44</sup> Another poet of the late eighth and early ninth century, Meng Chiao, extended the fiery image in this fashion:

'Red stars fell from the blue sky.'<sup>45</sup>

So, by the beginning of the ninth century, the red azalea had been elevated from a little known relative of a poisonous weed, to a fire-flower, a blood-flower, a flower evoking the red cheeks and ruddy jewels of exciting women, and a favorite of the more adventurous poets.<sup>46</sup>

40. Yung T'ao, 'Wen tu-chüan,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 8, ts'e 6, 12 b.

41. Ch'eng Yen-hsiung, 'Tu-chüan hua,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 11, ts'e 6, 1a. Han Wo, also in the tenth century, uses a blood image, but not referring specifically to the hawk-cuckoo. See his 'Ching hsing szu tu-chüan i chih fan yen wu pi,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 10, ts'e 7, 1, 8a.

42. Whence presumably a Sung name for the azalea, *ying shan hung* 'radiant mountain red.' See Hung Mai, *Jung chai sui pi*, 10, 3 b (*Szu pu ts'ung k'an* ed.). Hung Mai, on the basis of a *kung tz'u* poem by Wang Chien, thinks that the red azalea may already have been known in the imperial palace in the eighth century, but as a great rarity.

43. Po Chü-i, 'T'i Ku-shan szu shan shih liu hua shih chu seng chung,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 7, ts'e 4, 12, 9a.

44. Po Chü-i, 'Yü ch'üan ...,' see note 36 above.

45. Meng Chiao, 'Ch'ou Cheng P'i chih-chu yung,' *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, han 6, ts'e 5, 9, 2 b.

46. For a good general survey of the garden plants of China, with some historical information, see H. L. Li, *The Garden Flowers of China* (New York, 1959).

## CHINESE CHARACTERES

*Books*

Chia shih t'an lu	賈氏談錄
Chü t'an lu	康談錄
Hsiang p'u	香譜
Pei meng so yen	北夢瑣言
Yu yang tsa tsu	酉陽雜俎

*Persons*

Chang Chi	張洎
Ch'eng Yen-hsiung	成彥雄
Hung Ch'u	洪留
K'ang P'ien	康駸
Li Te-yü	李德裕
Meng Chiao	孟郊
Niu Seng-ju	牛僧孺
Shao Po	邵博

Sun Kuang-hsien	孫光憲
Yung T'ao	雍陶

*Places*

P'ing ch'üan	平泉
Yüan-chou	袁州

*Words*

ch'i shu	王其樹
chin sung	金松
hsien fu	仙府
shan chü	山居
shan shih liu	山石榴
tu-chüan	杜鵑
t'u-lin	塗林
yang chih-chu	羊躑躅