

No. 154 In Quest of Flowers at the Priory of the Twin Trees

The Priory of the Twin Trees lies to the west of the Bridge of Eternal Spring, and east of the Twenty-four Bridges. I had returned with Ruan Yuan from the One-and-a-Half-Foot Tower, and we rowed our boat to the east. In the distance we saw a bay with peach blossom along the bank, fragrant grass fresh and soft, and a dazzling carpet of fallen petals. It had all the qualities of the ancient Peach Blossom Retreat.¹ South of the blossom stood a pavilion, on the wall of which was mounted a stone inscribed with the words 'Garden of Enchantment'.

My distinguished host commented:

"This is the misty rain of the four bridges."

To the north of the stream there was the rustling and whistling of trees and plants in the wind. There too were the irregular fences and hedges surrounding dwellings. Once again the Grand Old Man commented:

"This is the agriculture and sericulture of Yangzhou."

Going along the stream and following the flowers, we came directly to the gate of Peach Blossom Priory. We entered and saw the Hall of Enlightenment. I recollected that when I had been here last, it was in the sixth month of the cyclic year *bingshen* (1836). The lotus flowers had been in their full bloom and glory. Now it was the third month, and so the peach flowers were in full splendour. Then our conversation turned to the *qiong* or jasper flower.² My Grand Master said:

"The flower was once in the Fanli Temple within the city, but now it is unknown. The old records say that it was twice transplanted in the Song dynasty, and then once lifted up and transported in the Jin dynasty. It withered in the Yuan dynasty. Nowadays people consider the flower of the Eight Immortals (the hortensia) or the Jade Bud (hydrangea) to be the *qiong* flower, and so the controversy goes on.

¹Editor's Note: The description here closely resembles Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 'Peach Blossom Retreat' 桃花源記.

²According to R.H. Mathews (Chinese-English Dictionary) it is 'a kind of hortensia which is said to confer immortality when eaten.' (JM)

“Lord Han Wei of the Song dynasty³ once wrote a poem on the *qiong* flower, as follows:

The flower of one tree in Weiyang⁴
 Has no peer in the world.
 Each year it blooms in the Earth Temple,
 Precious as the most precious jade.
 Within, it contains the fragrance of hail and ice,
 Without, it attracts the fluttering butterflies.
 The *tumi*⁵ has not its delicate scent,
 The peony⁶ is put to shame.
 It spreads its green around,
 Scatters its orient pearls . . .

“According to this poem, it seems to have been an unusual sort of flower. It is regrettable that no one has ever painted a representation of it. Recently there have been two magnolia trees in the Priory of the Twin Trees, and they are towering beauties in full bloom. Why do we not go and see the sight?”

So we directed our boat southward to the Bridge of Eternal Spring, and then disembarked and walked about two *li* until we saw a long wall winding its way around an enclosure, the lower part constructed of stone patterned like a tiger's stripes. When we entered the gate we saw myriad bamboos towering into the sky, casting a deep pool of green shade. Going further north-west along the fence, our sedan-chairs carried us into the Priory proper.⁷ As soon as we entered we saw two trees of a circumference so large that it would have required two persons joining hands to reach around one of them. The old trunks spread their branches out in all directions, reaching up to the empyrean and striving to reach the Milky

³Han Qi 韓琦, an important statesman of the northern Song dynasty.

⁴Yangzhou.

⁵The translator acknowledges his ignorance of the English name of this flower 茶蔎.

⁶The *shaoyao* 芍藥 is generally called the peony, but though seemingly alike, they are in fact different flowers.

⁷*Shanmen* 山門—the common or conventional nomenclature for the gate of a monastery, Buddhist or Taoist.

Way. Turning right along the covered way, we could smell the drifting fragrance of the precious *qiong* flowers.

The monk Shengliang boiled water for tea and entertained us in front of the trees. He also brought out the portfolio of all the presented poems and paintings collected by his Master the Reverend Qing, to entertain us and for our comments. I wrote a complimentary colophon:

“In the cyclic year *gengzi* of the reign of Daoguang (1840), on the first *si* day in the third month, and coincidentally on the festival of Cold Food, the Grand Scholar from Yizheng invited me to accompany him to go boating in his specially made boat called Green Wilderness, and to observe the traditional rites of Spring Purification at Red Bridge; and then to take a little rest in the hills. Master Shengliang showed us this portfolio and asked for some comment. Scrutinising and enjoying the collection I have found all the poets and painters represented here to be renowned scholars and artists, which fact provides eloquent testimony to Master Qing’s noble attainments. I avail myself of this opportunity to append these few words to commemorate the providential cause of the meeting.”⁸

After I had written this colophon, we left the monastery, embarked on the boat and returned.

⁸The monk Shengliang 勝量 was doing what he had been trained to do every time a V.I.P. came to the priory. But unwittingly he caused these two magnates to have a very unpleasant experience, if not an ordeal. Ruan Yuan was a champion of Confucianism, and in public he had to maintain a distance from Buddhists. Moreover, he was a close relative of the titled representative of Confucius’ descendants. Linqing was in a dilemma. He did not want to displease anybody, and he was himself close to the Buddhists. Though he wrote in a stiff style that showed his embarrassment, he did succeed in solving this dilemma.