

No. 153 Sailing in the Boat 'Green Wilderness'

'Green Wilderness' is the name given by Mr Ruan Yuntai¹ to a little boat of his. After having served as Grand Secretary, he begged for leave to retire and returned to his native city of Yangzhou. His scholarly accomplishments and statesmanship were looked up to throughout the Empire. I respectfully called on him to pay my homage, with the due reverence of a disciple of the second generation. It was the cyclic year *gengzi* (1840), the third day of the third month, *guisi*, which is the first *si* day, the holiday known as the Day of Cold Food,² and the old man invited me to go for an outing in his boat to Pingshan Hall.

Soon after daybreak of that day I went to the outskirts of the city, to the riverside, and found him already waiting for me in his boat at the appointed place. We rowed westward, and saw the various gardens and villas along the bank, the water and trees fresh and radiant in the morning sun. Our first turn brought us to Red Bridge and the Poetry Club of Vernal Enchantment, the next turn brought us to the spot known as Bright Clouds at the White Pagoda. There Mr Ruan had provided sedan-chairs for us—he invited me to be seated in the chair that had been presented to him by His Majesty.³ We ascended Little Golden Hill, visited the Lotus Nature Temple, and took a little rest in front of the White Pagoda. Then we returned to our boat and rowed with gusto across Baozhang Lake, where the sparkling ripples were dyed green and the willows exuded a green haze. There was a gentle breeze on the water which dispersed every dusty mundane care. As our boat advanced, a

¹Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849). (JM)

²Nobody has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory explanation of the origin and purpose of the Day of Cold Food 寒食. But people never minded about that. So long as there was a day in the folkways to celebrate, people were happy and duly celebrated it. The day is 105 or occasionally 106 days after the Winter Solstice 冬至 and two days before the Solar Term known as Pure Brightness 清明. *Shangsi* 上巳, the 'first *si* day', has been an important Holy Day since the Spring and Autumn era.

³Before his retirement he had been honoured with the special privilege of sitting in a sedan-chair in the Forbidden City, to wait upon His Majesty or to attend other Court duties and functions. (LQ)

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veritable 'green wilderness' unfolded before our eyes—compared with Pei Du's garden, that he named the Green Wilderness, ours was truly superior.⁴

Then, proceeding further northward, we passed Lotus Bridge, above which stood five pavilions, while below it there were four wings. Each wing had three arches beneath it, and these twelve arches together with the three main arches beneath the bridge formed altogether fifteen arches. Legend has it that on the night of the full moon, each of these fifteen arches has one full moon in it. I regret that I never witnessed this.

Still further north, we passed the Pond of Nine Turns, where the crowds of reeds become a sort of forest, and the undergrowth of plants in the water obstructed our oars.

Looking at the Hillock of Shu in the distance, I saw thousands of pines piling layer upon layer of greenness, their scales⁵ spreading and twigs and manes bristling. They formed a deep, dusky shade. When we reached the Hillock of Shu, we travelled up the steps in our sedan-chairs and entered the Monastery of the Purity of the Dharma, and then went up to Pingshan Hall. There the whole misty panorama of the Twenty-four Bridges, and the clear waves of the Thirty-six Lakes were laid before us to behold and enjoy. There are no hills or mountains in Yangzhou, but here the hills on the south side of the Great River all seem to come to the front of this Hall. Therefore we can most appropriately call this the Hall of Green Wilderness too.

Then I was invited to go the One-and-a-Half-Foot Tower.⁶ The Grand Old Man commented:

"The gardens in Pingshan were well kept and at their best in the days of the Emperor Qianlong. In the Jiaqing days they became gradually

⁴Pei Du 裴度, Lord Jin, was one of the meritorious Grand Ministers of the Tang dynasty. Disappointed with the unsagacious and selfish deeds of the younger politicians, Pei retired early and built a garden in Luoyang, naming the main hall Green Wilderness. Ruan Yuan used the name for his rowing boat to commemorate Pei Du.

⁵The rough bark of the pine.

⁶A queer name that nobody or book seems to have explained. It is perhaps not worthy of explanation. In the Tang dynasty there was a popular saying to the effect that the Wei and Du families were so wealthy and powerful, it seemed that they were only a foot and a half beneath the Heavens. Here it perhaps means that the tower seemed so high, as if it were only a foot and a half below the sky.

neglected. Now, forty years after Jiaqing, those gardens that have been in the care of monks have still preserved their former splendour. But those gardens belonging to people of the commercial class have merely been entrusted to employed gardeners, and most of them have become deserted and ruinous. This is the only one that has survived, with every one of its fountains, its springs, trees and plants still intact.”

I replied:

“Prosperity and decline turn like a wheel. Such is the law of past and present. Since the springs and trees—the beauties of Nature—are still there, when the times become more prosperous, the former splendour will certainly be restored. It is only to be regretted that nobody has made a record of their glory in days of former prosperity. Visitors of a later age can only ask the wild hazels and creepers and tendrils for information.”

The Grand Master said:

“Your regret is a correct and timely one. My fellow native of this place, the *xiucai* Li Aitang,⁷ did indeed compile a *Record of the Painted Pleasure Boats*⁸ in eighteen volumes, which I should send you as a gift soon.”

Smilingly he intoned the line:

“Two men sailed a boat named Green Wilderness . . . ”

To which I responded:

“To observe the Spring Purification at Red Bridge.”

⁷Named Dou 斗. (LQ)

⁸Editor's Note: See Li Dou 李斗, 'The Painted Barges of Yangzhou', translated by Lucie Borota, *Renditions* No. 46 (Autumn 1996), pp. 58–68.

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