Vignettes from the Late Ming

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Known as a child prodigy, Ch’en Chi-ju made a name for himself equal to that of his close friend Tung Ch’i-ch’ang (1555–1636) while both of them were students at the prefectural school. However, they took different roads in the jungle of the world in their later careers. Tung went up the social ladder until he was appointed a cabinet minister and became the most famous and important calligrapher and painter of the age. Ch’en gave up his political career at the age of twenty-eight, with the memorable expressionist act of burning all his scholar’s caps and gowns, and went to lead a commoner’s life in the beautiful lakes and hills of Sung-chiang Prefecture, Southern Metropolitan Region, his native land. Nevertheless, his fame as a versatile and erudite scholar, poet, and painter spread far and wide. Cabinet ministers and governors took pride in inviting Mei-kung (Ch’en’s cognomen, lit., “Master Brow”) to be their houseguest or in visiting him. Tung Ch’i-ch’ang even had a storied building constructed at his own villa specifically named for Ch’en’s occasional visits.

Besides his artistic and literary pursuits in many different fields, Ch’en was acknowledged as an arbiter of fashion in all kinds of epicurean pleasures, from floriculture and landscape architecture to gastronomy. His enjoyment of close contacts with his prestigious and powerful friends won him the reputation of being the “Grand Councillor in the Mountains,” in spite of his alleged reclusion. This perhaps accounts for the posthumous accusation of hypocrisy and dilettantism represented by a satirical poem written by the renowned Ch’ing poet and playwright Chiang Shih-ch’üan (1725–85) with the lines “Lightly the crane in the cloud flies / In and out of the houses of prime ministers.” Ch’en did decline, on the excuse of ill health, numerous official appointments resulting from recommendations to the throne from his friends in court, probably out of his determination to stay away from the political intrigues and partisanship of the Wan-li reign. However, he was honored in various literary circles. Although he was himself a protégé of Wang Shih-chen’s, Ch’en
also befriended the Yüan brothers and Chung Hsing, thus providing a liaison between the old and the new camps. He enjoyed a long and rich life, and at his death left a meticulously detailed will for his family.

Quite a few passages from Ch’en’s books of random notes are available in English in Lin Yutang’s superb translation, contained in his anthology The Importance of Understanding, but our selection does not overlap those. Ch’en’s vignettes shine with wit and humor and flow with carefree ease.

Trips to See Peach in Bloom

There is a lot of sunshine at the southern city wall. Beneath it there lies a host of peach trees, the flowers of which flourish with the sunlight and the water. Local residents have planted slender elms and gentle willows, which form hedges and fences. Vegetable plots and flower gardens are interwoven into one another like embroidery.

One day after the Birthday of the Flowers, I summoned the mountain recluse Ch’en and his son and asked them to warm up some wine and bring it along with a small carrying case of food. In the company of Hu An-fu, Sung Pin-chih, and Meng Chih-fu, we crossed the bridge and walked to the east of the city wall, where some peach trees were bursting into bloom.

We pushed open the gate and stormed in [to a garden]. An old man was feasting his guests. We rushed to the table to beg for wine and asked him to have the table moved under the flowering branches. The old man looked at us in astonishment, but he followed our instructions respectfully. Without telling him our names, we played gluttons in wining and dining at his table. Then we climbed up the branch of a peach tree, sat among flowers, and played the game of fist-hiding. Winners and losers got up and down in turn. The five or six of us made a living windlass in the red rain. Or we could be likened to lonely apes or crazy birds poking among leaves and looking for fruit. Our only worry was that the branch might be too brittle to carry our weight! We didn’t disband until dusk. On that day, the old man was having a birthday party concurrently with the celebration of the Birthday of the Flowers. After a couple of drinks I composed a song and presented it to the old man, in which I proposed that he provide food and wine to hold another birthday celebration the next day.
On the fourteenth, Hsi-chou, Chih-fu, Shu-yi, and I set out carrying wine and food cases. As soon as we came to the road that led out of the city gate, we ran into Po-ling and Tzu-yu and dragged them along. Then we also met Administrator Yüan, who was entering the city wearing a cape made of crane feathers. Hearing that we were making a trip to look at the flowers, the administrator turned back and went to Peach Blossom Brook with us.

When we arrived, Mr. T'ien was weeding with a hoe. Seeing us, he went inside to change clothes and then came out to invite us in. The guests scattered around and squatted on rocks. An-fu, Pin-chih, Ch'i-chung, and his son all brought food cases and wine for the occasion. Catching a glimpse of us from atop the city wall, the three gentlemen—Tung, Hsü, and Ho—got excited and staggered down, bringing with them wine, fresh bamboo shoots, and clams for the company. At that time there were eighteen of us who assembled without previous arrangement. Counting Mr. T'ien's son Kuei-p’ien, there were nineteen. Altogether there were eleven food cases and seven or eight jugs of wine. The wine was finished, but we had just reached the height of our enthusiasm. The flowers might have got drunk, yet we remained unintoxicated. We were just about to start feeling frustrated with the empty bottles and jugs, when a jar of wine was hauled down to us by means of a long rope from above the city wall. The newcomers were the brothers Wen-ch’ing and Chih-ch’ing. We were overjoyed and acclaimed them as men of refined taste.

Now people formed into groups, and each group played its own game. The administrator and Po-ling were fighting a battle of wits at the table, and all those guys present were suffering from their empty fists. The host, short-haired and with long ears, talked and laughed in dotage. Seeing that there was still a little wine left, we stopped whoever happened to pass by outside the flowered hedges and, without considering whether it was an acquaintance or a stranger, whether he was good-looking or unattractive, we just poured a cup of wine down his throat and stuck a twig of peach flower in his hair by the temple; everyone left in great delight, believing this to be auspicious. When the sun had set and the birds had become weary, we also went back. We leaned on one another for support beneath the moon. Our gauze hoods and silk sleeves were mostly covered with wine stains and flower petals.

In the past, T'ao, the Gentleman Summoned to Office, wrote his own mind in telling us how the residents of the Peach Blossom Spring had fled from the upheavals during the Ch’in. He used the place as a fable; actually there was no such place as Peach Blossom Spring. Now the peach flowers
here are so close to the city wall, but no one wrote about the flowers and made them known to those who might be interested. But, after I “inquired about the ferry,” within a few days a footpath has taken shape beneath the flowers. Except for men like us, how many would really appreciate and protect those flowers? On the other hand, several people have crushed the flowers like a furious wind or a torrential rain, turning the rosy cloud into a miserable mess. Then, with such a criminal case of damaging the peach flowers, this humble fellow here is half-commendable and half-guilty.6

Inscription on Wang Chung-tsün’s
A History of Flowers

My farmhouse is located among crisscrossing waters. Besides a few kinds of flowers, I keep only some earthen pots, a bamboo couch, and books of the Three Schools.1 All these are useless things except to people who have perceived the Tao. I do have a mania for flowers, though. Around the two equinoxes, every day I direct my low-capped and long-bearded servants2 to move or plant my flowers, exposing myself to wind and dew and forgetting to comb my hair or take a bath. A visitor quipped, “Our Brow Taoist has the peach flower in his destiny.”3 I retorted, “It is a flower along with the Post-Horse Star.”4

Having little to do in seclusion, I once thought about working on a history of flowers to be handed down to my children and grandchildren, and did not expect that my friend Wang Chung-tsün would get ahead of me. A History of Flowers, a work by him in twenty-four sections, consists of interesting anecdotes about people of old times. It should have a place in the future along with books about farming and horticulture. Those who have read this book, if they manage to age among flowers, may live a long life in this world; if they learn the rules and principles to break through brambles and sweep away gravel, to irrigate and to cultivate, they may make use of those to govern in the world; if they decline the positions of minister and chamberlain and engage themselves in “watering the garden,”5 then they may create for themselves a refuge away from the world, or live in defiance of the world. But those who fly and eat meat6 may not be able to appreciate it.
A Colophon to *A History of Flowers*

Those who have access to rural pleasures but do not know how to enjoy them are woodcutters and herdsmen. Those who have access to fruit and melons but have no time to savor them are greengrocers and peddlers. Those who have access to flowers and trees but are unable to appreciate them are men of rank and wealth.

Among the worthies of the old times, Yüan-ming was the only one who frequently found his pleasure among mulberry, flax, pines, and chrysanthemums, and between the fields or by the hedges. T’ung-p’o was fond of planting and was able to tend flowers and trees all by himself. It is something inherent in one’s nature, not to be imposed. If we try to force it on someone, even if we present to him *A History of Flowers*, he would angrily throw it away and take his leave. If it is really something close to your nature, and you are really fond of it, then please pick up the book, lie down in the sun by the woods, and watch carefully how the flowers bloom and fall. In that case, how is it in any way different from tracing the rise and decline of dynasties over tens of thousands of years? We may even claim that all of the twenty-one histories are contained in this one unofficial history.¹

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*A Colophon to A Profile of Yao P’ing-chung*

Without an understanding of the Tao, how could one ever get through the Passes of the Four Words—Life, Age, Illness, and Death? There is nothing more pathetic than the aging and illness of beautiful women and celebrated generals, as in the cases of Lady Li and General Ma.¹ When rosy cheeks are replaced by white hairs, when a tigerlike, gallant young warrior turns into an old man with wrinkled skin, what pleasure is there any more? Hsi-tzu went to the Five Lakes.² Yao P’ing-chung entered the Blue Castle Mountains. It was unlikely that they would escape death in a number of years, but at least the ugly last stage of their life was not to be seen by others. Hence the saying, “A divine dragon shows its head to people, but not its tail.”³
Selections from *Privacies in the Mountains*

1

During the five beats of the night watch, the birds in the mountains startle and make noises five times. It is known as the “night beat alarm” and in fact becomes a substitute for the clepsydra and sandglass in the mountains. I remember that once, when I lived at the foot of the Smaller Mount K’un-shan, it had just cleared up after the plum rain and my guests were draining their wine bowls. Then I happened to hear the frogs croaking in the courtyard and alerted my guests to listen to the sound and regulate their drinking. I composed an antithetical couplet:

Flowering branches wave the guests farewell;  
Frogs beat time on their drums.  
Rustling bamboos resound in the forest;  
Birds keep up the night watch.

First-hand observations of life in the mountains, indeed!

2

In an empty valley, you’re just awake, and you hear the footsteps of friends coming. You contemplate joining them for an exploration of the pine and cassia through cloud and mist, when some gentlemen who take pride in their own talents always insist on picking a title and assigning the rhyme-scheme words, and then lavish enormous pains on composing and chanting. For a quiet man, to cope with that situation is really like a clear stream struggling to free itself of fallen leaves, or a deep forest sizzling with the raucous sound of droning cicadas. That is why it has been said that in the absence of a poet, a company may spare itself the trouble of accumulating several scores of poems composed as responses to one another, which is no small matter, really!

3

Flowers to be kept in vases and placed on the table each have their own proper place. The fragrant early plum (*Prunus mume*), which stands proudly in the snow, always stays around a versifying soul. The apricot,
which charms in spring, is most lovely by a dressing mirror. Pear blossoms, which weep in the rain, will break a maiden’s heart in her boudoir. The lotus, which braves the wind, will invite a grin on rosy cheeks. The crab apple, the peach, and the plum \(Prunus salicina\) vie with one another in glamour at a sumptuous banquet. The peony makes the best ornament for the fan of a singing girl. A twig of fragrant cassia will suffice to start a pleasant conversation. A bouquet of quiet orchids will make a proper keepsake for the dear departed. By the same token, you set each kind in its proper ambience, and there will usually be agreement between scene and mood.

4

Most of the ancient hermits devoted themselves to tilling in the fields; but I am frail and feeble, so that’s the first thing I’m unable to do. Most of them took up hunting and fishing; but I refrain from killing, so that’s the second thing I’m unable to do. Most of them owned some thirty acres of land and about eight hundred mulberry trees;\(^1\) but I am poor and indigent, so that’s the third thing I’m unable to do. Most of them were able to subsist on water and meals of thin gruel; but I cannot stand hardship and hunger, so that’s the fourth thing I’m unable to do. The only thing I am able to do is to live quietly on plain fare and engage myself in writing. To be a writer, however, make sure never to criticize sages of the past. You may enumerate what one is right about, but do not make it a business to prove what others are wrong in.

5

When seafood is not salty, when preserved fruit is not sweet, when a man of letters who has retired from the world is not arrogant, and when an eminent Buddhist monk does not prattle about Zen, they demonstrate the ultimate virtue.

6

A celebrated courtesan leafing through scriptures, an old Buddhist monk brewing wine, a military general indulging himself in the garden of literary imagination, a scholar charging onto a battlefield—they may have lost their respective original characters, but these are very tasteful things to do.
In the third month the bamboo shoots have just grown juicy, and the drowsy plum wind\(^1\) has not yet begun. In the ninth month the water-shield and the perch are most sensational,\(^2\) and the sorghum wine smells really good. This is the best time to sit by a sunny window with some nice friends, take out some ancient calligraphy masterworks or famous paintings, and appreciate and discuss them while some incense is burning in the room.

To live in the mountains, you need a small boat with crimson balustrades, blue roofing, bright windows, and a short sail. In the boat you place a miscellany of books, maps, and bronze vessels, as well as various kinds of wine, tea, preserved fruit, and dried meat. For a short trip, you may stop at the Peaks by Lake Mao.\(^1\) For a long trip, you go no farther than Ching-k’ou in the north or Ch’ien-t’ang in the south.\(^2\) When the wind is favorable and everything goes smoothly on the way, you may travel over to visit some old friends. If invited, you might as well stay for a chat overnight or for a drinking party for ten days. If you find some mountains and waters with a great view, or come upon the lodging of an eminent monk or a recluse, where luxuriant bamboos and trees are set off by grass and flowers, you may tie up your hair in a piece of silk, carry your walking cane, put on your sandals, and face them with composure. Sometimes, when the view is unspectacular but still refreshing, you play a note on your steel flute in the clear void of water and moonshine, and the white gulls seem about to start dancing. It is just another way to escape from the hubbub of the world and to avoid visitors.