A Botanical Exchange: "The Emperor likes flowers"

E. B. 庫爾提斯 (Emily Byrne Curtis)

Background

One of the most famous maps of China was drawn by Michael Boym, SJ (卜彌格 Bu Mige, 1612-1659). The map is also the first one produced (c. 1652) by the Jesuit missionaries who sought to acquaint Europeans with their knowledge of the country's territorial divisions and some of its minerals and plants. Hence, one finds on Boym's map depictions of rhubarb (大黃 *ta huang*) and ginger (姜 *jiang*).[1] Martino Martini, SJ (魏匡國 Wei Kuangguo, 1614-1661) included a description of the ginseng plant (人參 *renshen*) in his *Novus Atlas Sinsis*, and the *Plinus Indicus* (c.1618-30) contains a detailed record of the herbs and plants Johann Schreck (Terrenz), SJ (鄧玉函 Deng Yuhan, 1576-1630), had observed, with illustrations of them rendered in their natural colors, and their identifying names in Chinese characters (Figure 1).[2] To this may be added the seventeen colored illustrations of plants in Boym's botanical geography of China, the *Flora Sinensis* (1656), the remarks on Chinese plants recorded by Louis Le Comte, SJ (李明 Li Ming, 1655-1728) and those found in the *Lettres édifiantes*.[3]

Thus, while the missionaries were disseminating knowledge about Chinese herbs and plants in Europe, the Chinese were observing the exotic specimens the Portuguese had imported to their colony at Macau.

Some Chinese Observations

The *Aomen jilue* (澳門記略, *A History of Macau*) was written by two Chinese officials who successively served at Macau. It was started by Yin Guangren (印光任, ?), who became the Vice-Prefect (統治 Tongzhi) in 1744 and was completed by his successor, Zhang Rulin (張汝霖, 1709-1769).[4] Believed to have been published c 1753, the book is divided into two chapters, the second of which is devoted to all matters pertaining to the Portuguese settlers. For instance, they had a plant which was known as *chang pu* (菖蒲) or calamus. This plant formed part of the 'tribute' the Portuguese submitted to the Beijing court in 1722. These ten pieces of calamus from the 'Great Western Ocean,' were presented together with examples of piper longum (蓽茇 *bibo*), aloe vulgaris (盧薈 *luhui*), grapes (葡萄 *genus Vitis, putao*), cardamom (白豆蔻 *baidoukou*), nutmeg (肉豆蔻 *rudoukou*), and a variety of white or yellow roses referred to under the generic heading of *tufei* (荼癡?).[5]

The different characteristics of some of the floral specimens came to the attention of members of the Chinese literati class, who began to compose poems extolling their virtues. Chen Gongyin (陳恭尹 1631-1700) versified about a flower which in China was identified as being a chrysanthemum from the west (西洋掬 *xiyang ju*, Figure 2). This flower was actually a lily, which as it bloomed, to Chinese eyes, transformed and mutated itself into a chrysanthemum.[6] An entry for a hanging scroll entitled "Chrysanthemums from the West" ((洋菊 *yangrju*) may be found in the *Shiqu baoji* (石渠寶笈), a well-known catalogue of paintings and specimens of calligraphy that were preserved in the various halls of the Forbidden City.

Roses seem to have found particular favor. In his poem about them, Qu Dajun (屈大均, 1630-1696, literary name, Shi Jinzhong 釋今種) compares their red color to that of cabochon rubies. He goes on to incorporate in his verse additional pieces of information as to how the Portuguese settlers

in Macau used rose petals.[7] This interest in the flower itself and the different ways its petals could be utilized extended also to the imperial court in Beijing. Kangxi (r. 1662- 1722) had shown a particular affinity for roses, and to satisfy this penchant allowed the French Jesuits to establish a laboratory in one of his palaces where they made rose water, oil, and *l'esprit ardent* (perfume?).[8]

In 1693 Joachim Bouvet, SJ (白晉 Bo Jin, 1656-1730) received an imperial rescript ordering him to go to France as Kangxi's imperial envoy to the court of Louis XIV (1638-1715). During the course of his audience with Louis XIV, the monarch not only expressed a great interest in an exchange between the two nations, but even arranged for Bouvet to obtain some two to three hundred seeds own garden at Versailles. When Bouvet returned to Beijing, Kangxi allowed him to plant the seeds in a tract of land adjacent to the French Jesuits' residence. However, since this was done in late fall, the seeds failed to flourish in Beijing's harsh climate, and several decades would pass before a more successful botanical transfer was achieved.[9]

Exchanges with France

Nicholas Fréret (1688-1749) corresponded for many years with the missionaries in China and seems to have been indefatigable in his efforts to obtain seeds for Louis XIV's garden. His interest may have been piqued initially by a letter Dominique Parrenin, SJ (巴多明 Ba Duoming, 1665-1741) had sent to l'Académie française in May 1723, in which he listed some of the plants found in China, and described the properties of different Chinese roots such as rhubarb (Figure 3), which was not well known in Europe at the time.[10]

In 1735, Fréret sent a lengthy letter to Parrenin, stating that he wanted the seeds from three different species of rhubarb, tea and ginseng, gourds, melons, pumpkins, and especially those obtained from the famous *Hami* melons (哈密瓜 *hamigua*) found in Tartary (Manchuria). Seeds from all types of flowers merited attention too, and Fréret went on to point out that they already had two species of flowers from China, a small pink carnation, and a large purple or yellow aster, which he claimed had made a great fortune within a few years.[11] Accordingly, Fréret suggested to Parrenin that he might attain similar results by gathering seeds and bulbs from various lilies, narcissi, tuberoses, mountain lilies (*martagons*), hyacinths, tulips, and the like.

Jean-Alexis Gollet, S. J. (郭中傅 Guo Zongfu, 1666-1741), corresponded with Fréret from at least 1731 to 1735. Gollet was stationed in Macau where presumably he had greater access to the flora and fauna of China's southern regions. Seeking to take advantage of this, Fréret sent him a list of desired specimens, such as seeds from the lichee fruit, and observed that by filling *le jardin du Roy* with rare and unknown plants, Gollet's efforts would also be of benefit to Europe. As for flowers, examples of all the types found in China should be gathered from the gardens in Macau, with special attention paid to bulbs. And, as he did with Parrenin, Fréret cautioned Gollet to pack everything in moisture proof containers.[12]

François Xavier d'Entrecolles, SJ (殷弘緒 Yin Hongxu, 1662-1741) had observed a variety of the kaki tree (*diospyros khaki*) at Beijing, and in 1736 sent seeds of it to Paris. His accompanying letter contained an accurate account of the tree and its edible fruit, and comments on several other famed Chinese plants.[13] With all due respect to the efforts expended by these worthy Fathers, it may be pointed out that they were not trained botanists, a condition which would not be met until the arrival of Pierre d'Incarville , SJ (湯執中 Tang Zhizhong, 1706-1757).[14] **A Glassmaking/Botanist**

Pierre d'Incarville's aptitude for botany was discernible in his early years and expanded through his personal contacts with Bernard de Jussieu (1699-1777?), who was the director of the gardens at the Trianon, Versailles. As to d'Incarville's glassmaking skills, these had been acquired from the royal glassworks on rue du Pré, in Saint-Sever parish, Rouen. It is possible that some of these were

intended to be utilized for botanical purposes; Jean-Baptiste du Halde, SJ (1674-1743) certainly referred to his ability to make plate glass in the letter he sent to Beijing informing the French mission of d'Incarville's arrival.[15]

D'Incarville enjoyed Jussieu's patronage, and after reaching Guangzhou wrote to him about the many flowers and seeds he had found in Macau As to Jussieu's request for the Chinese characters for various specimens, d'Incarville replied that he was not yet able to provide a satisfactory answer. However, he was sending paintings of all the flowers he had seen thus far, including some herbs from Nanjing. This was followed a few days later by a short missive with a detailed description of the tea plant he had been able to observe in Guangzhou. His stay there was abruptly cut short with the arrival of instructions from Beijing, that he depart for the capital as soon as possible.[16]

Palace records show that in 1740, d'Incarville received an appointment, not as a botanist to the emperor's gardens, but as an artisan at the imperial glass workshop. It is apparent from a series of letters he sent to his sister, Maire-Madelene Rondeaux, that d'Incarville experienced great difficulties in his attempts to make aventurine glass. Therefore, he asked his sister if she could find out from the glassworks at Rouen how to make this variety and glass d'Incarville described as having the color of a yellow broom flower. In another one of his letters, d'Incarville mentioned that the study of the Chinese language and the glassworks, left him hardly any time to think, but that he could visit the French Jesuits' cemetery outside of Beijing, and gather examples of the plants he found there.[17]

In November 1742, d'Incarville addressed a long letter to Bernard de Jussieu, requesting that if possible, he send some bulbs and seeds for presentation to Qianlong. For, in addition to liking flowers ("*L'Empereur aime les fleurs"*), he had an apartment made expressly next to a small hillock totally covered with "matricaria" (*matricaires*) in "an astonishing quantity of marvelous different colors." All of these flowers attained the "same effect as our Ranunculus and anemones in Europe," and had the additional advantage of lasting longer and blooming after all the other flowers had faded. D'Incarville then listed the varieties he thought would be most esteemed.[18]

Correspondence with England and Russia

The learned academicians of London's Royal Society and the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg were very interested in scientific and botanical discoveries the missionaries were making in China. To this end both societies established relations with d'Incarville. On one occasion he sent to the Royal society a box with plant roots and seeds for two types of tea, and D'Incarville's relations with the St. Petersburg academy were equally cordial. In the spring of 1746, a Russian caravan arrived in Beijing from Moscow and presented d'Incarville with different species of seeds. He wrote that "they were very well received."[51] This may have led him to entrust the caravan with a small dictionary he had complied which was published under the title; *Catalogue alphabétique des plantes et autres objets d'historie naturelle en usage en Chine* (1812) .[19]

Interesting enough, it is under the heading for "Sensitive" in this catalogue, that we find a brief explanation as to how d'Incarville finally managed to attain an appointment to Qianlong's (r. 1736-95) gardens. According to the explanation, Bernard de Jussieu had sent d'Incarville some seeds for a mimosa plant (*mimosa humilis spinosa*), which he cultivated and presented to Qianlong. Flowers of this variety retract when touched. The Emperor was so delighted with this feature, that "he laughed with all his heart," ordered d'Incarville to 'visit it often,' and asked as to whether he had other flowers or plants from Europe.[20] The sovereign then commanded Giuseppe Castiglione, SJ (郎世寧 Lang Shining, 1688-1766) to make a painting of the mimosa (Figure 4). and added to the scroll a poem he had composed with his impressions of the plant.

To everyone's dismay, the mimosa plant which "the Emperor loved greatly," appeared to be quite sickly and on the verge of dying. This actually happened in the autumn of 1754, and when it occurred a second time, d'Incarville became quite discouraged. On the other hand, the seeds he had obtained from Europe for anemones and ranunculus were admired and thriving in Beijing up to the frontier, as were the specimens d'Incarville continued to receive from the Russian caravans. His imported botanical specimens were probably included also among the rare and unusual plants tended in the landscaping of the Yuanming Yuan's (圓明園) European section, and the nursery, in the Forbidden City's South Garden.[21]

The millefleurs pattern

One of the most charming and influential feature of this activity was the inclusion of some of these flowers in the millefleurs (萬花堆 *wan hua dui*) pattern. A superbly enameled porcelain vase (Figure 5) is decorated with an especially sumptuous version of the millefleurs motif. The vessel has been painted with a veritable cornucopia of different plants, against a chocolate ground, with the flowers are skillfully blended together, so as not to seem crowded, projecting an almost three dimensional image. The colorful variety of blossoms depicted, include irises, peonies, chrysanthemum, dahlias, prunus blossoms, lotus, daisies, and lilies. In many respects these wares with their flowers and glass enamel colors, epitomize the profound influence exerted upon Qing decorative wares with the introduction of European glass making technology, and plant life.

We may bear in mind that the raw materials for the enameling process took the form of glass 'cakes' which the imperial glassworks produced in a wide variety of colors. Artisans were at their most inventive in deploying them to adorn their wares, and d'Incarville admired particularly their way of obtaining a lovely red color. As he described it, "The red of China is more beautiful than ours; perhaps this happens because the Chinese put a bed (*couche*) of yellow on first, before applying the red. One knows that in painting yellow brings out the red."[22]

A Slight Dilemma

After d'Incarville's death, the upkeep of the European flowers he had introduced to Qianlong's gardens fell to the care of the eunuchs he had trained. The task proved troublesome for them. Accordingly, the emperor sent an order to the French missionaries to appear at the palace with one or two Europeans who knew something about cultivating seeds and plants. Since Pierre-Martial Cibot, SJ (韓國英 Han Guoying, 1717-1780) was the author of several treatises on plants and the pleasure gardens of China, he was deemed as being the most suitable candidate. Cibot arrived with a box of seeds and a book which had been sent by an official in Guangdong. Intrigued, Qianlong asked that the labels on the seeds and a summary of the books contents, be translated into Chinese. This presented the missionaries with a bit of a dilemma. All of the printed matter was in English, and there was not one European in Beijing who knew the language. Rallying, each of the French missionaries "put his hand in the work," and managed to give a respectable account of the book's text, including its sixty plates. Qianlong was quite pleased with the results and in recognition ot their efforts bestowed a piece of silk of the first grade upon Cibot and the others who had assisted him in this project.[23]

A floral tribute

The mission which set out for London to China in 1792 included several "botanical gardeners." It brought home from this journey a rare collection of plants gathered and recorded by these gardeners in Hebei province. One of the entries on their list reads "Incurvillea." [24] This is likely to be in reference to *Incarvillea*, the *I. Sinsnsis*, a beautiful bignonaceous plant, the seeds of which d'Incarville had sent to Jussieu, who named it in his honor (Figure 6).

Notes

1. *The Library of Philip Robinson Part II The Chinese Collection*, London, Sotheby's, November 22, 1988, pp. 84-5, lot 91.
2. Claudia von Collani, *Joachim Bouvet, S. J., Journal des voyages*, Taiwan, Taipei Ricci Institute, Variétés Sinologiques New Series 95, 2005, pp. 78, 109. Also, Henri Bernard Maitre, SJ, *Le Pére Le Chéron d'Incarville, Missionanaire français de Pékin*, reprint Paris, J. Peyronnet, 1949 (?), pp. 4-5, 26-9.
3. Boleslaw Szczesniak, *The Writings of Michael Boym*, Tokyo, reprint from Monumenta Serica, Jo urnal of Oriental Studies, Vol. XIV, 1949-55, pp. 492-3; E. Bretschneider, MD., "Early European Researches into the Flora of China," in *Journal of the North-China Branch of* the Royal Asiatic Society, China, Shanghai, New Series, No. XV, 1880, pp. 26-8; *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* III, Paris, 1843.
4. 印光任 Yin Guangren and 張汝霖 Zhang Rulin, 澳門記略 Aomen jilue in 嶺海 異聞 錄/ 祁坤作僎*Ling hai yi wen lu / Qi Kun zhuan* [Guangzhou]: Zui jing tang [1890?].
5. *Ibid*., juan 2, 24a, 24b.
6. For biographical details see Arthur W. Hummel,ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1912)*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1943, pp. 88-9.
7. Hummel, pp. 201-3; Luís G. Gomes, translator, *Monografia de Macau por Tcheong-ü-Lâm e Ian-Kuong-Iâm*, Macau, Imprensa Nacional, 1950, pp. 189-92.
8. von Collani, pp. 65-6.
9. Archivio Storico de Propagande Fide: Scritture riferite nie Congressi, Indie Orientali-Cina, Miscellanee, Vol. 2, f417.
10. Bretschneider, p. 30.
11. Virgile Pinot, *Documents inédits relatifs à la connaissancce de la Chine en France de 1685 à 1740*, Paris, P. Geuthner, 1932, pp. 94-7.
12. Renée Simon, "Nicholas Fréret, Académician" in *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, Geneva, Institut et musée Voltaire, ed. Theodore Bestman, 1956-2000, pp. 66-7.
13. Bretschneider, p. 29.
14. Bernard-Maître, pp. 3-7.
15. Bibliothèque Nationale, N. A. F., 6656 f26v, October 13 1739.
16. Bernard-Maître, pp. 8-13.
17. Yang Boda, "An Account of Qing Dynasty Glassmaking," *in Scientific Research in Early Chinese Glass*, ed. Robert H. Brill and John H. Martin, Corning, The Corning Museum of Glass, 1991, p. 140; P. Le Verdier, "Documents Historiques: Quelques lettres du P. d'Incarville, missionaire en Chine," in *Bulletins de la Société de l'Histoire de Normandie*, Paris, 1904, Vol. 9, pp. 73-4.
18. Bernard-Maître, pp. 19-21.
19. Bernard-Maître, pp. 29-31; "Catalogue alphabétique des plantes et autres objets d'histoire naturelle en usage en Chine," in *Mémoires de la Société Imperiale des Naturalistes de Moscou*, Moscow, 1812, Vol. 4.
20. "Catalogue alphabétique," Vol. 4, p.79.
21. Bernard-Maître, pp. 48-52.
22. "Catalogue alphabétique," Vol. 4, pp. 39-40.
23. Henri Cordier, "Les Correspondants de Bertin," in *T'oung Pao*, Leide, E. J. Brill, ed., 1917, Vol. XVIII, pp. 326-27.
24. Sir George Leonard Stauton, *An authentic account of an embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, Philadelphia, Printed for R. Campbell by J. Bioren, 1799, Vol. 2, pp. 43-4.

Captions for Illustrations

Figure 1. A page from a Chinese herbal attributed to Johann Schreck (Terrenz), SJ, c. 1618-30. Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, Ms 5018.

Figure 2. "Chrysanthemums of the West," painting by Giuseppe Castiglione, SJ. *Lang Shining chou*, Beijing: Gugong bowu yuan, 1931, Vol. 4, p.11.

Figure 3. Chinese rhubarb as depicted by Michael Boym, SJ. *Flora Sinensis*, 1655.

Figure 4. "A Western plant said to tell time," painting by Giuseppe Castiglione, SJ. *Lang Shining chou*, Beijing: Gugong bowu yuan, 1931, Vol. 4, p.17.

Figure 5. A porcelain bottle shape vase decorated with the millefleurs pattern on a chocolate ground; Qianlong (r. 1736-95) seal mark on base. Christie's, London, 16 November 1998, #241.

Figure 6. *Incarvillae emodi*, from *Flore des serres et jardins de l,Europe*, by Charles Lemaire et alia, 1856, Vol. 11, plate 1109.