

Evolution and Analysis of Hand-held Flowers in Ancient China

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese flower arrangement, as a part of China's intangible cultural heritage, features unique Chinese cultural characteristics and styles of forms. A small number of studies on hand-held flower were scattered in the history of flower arrangement. This paper aims to briefly chronologize the development of hand-held flowers in ancient China, make comparison with its Western counterpart, analyze the influence of primitive religions and Buddhism on the development of Chinese hand-held flowers in the early days of ancient China, and discuss the situation when hand-held flowers progressed at a slow pace after the Song Dynasty because bottled flowers took up a proportion of the share of hand-held ones, leaving less chance and limited raw materials for the application of hand-held flowers. The West-East differences largely took place in the 17th-19th centuries, when the Western world entered the Renaissance and the industrial-social revolution, there were a tremendously large number of plants to choose from for hand-held flowers to be used on more occasions. These reasons, together with the advent of floriography (the language of flowers) accelerated the development of hand-held flowers. For China, the traditional hand-held flowers have been glittering with their unparalleled cultural charm for over 1000 years, and the special choice of woody plants in the design, the cultural traits of flowers' symbolic meanings, and the distinctive attributes of bouquets used on Chinese folk festivals are believed to be the reasons. Therefore, contemporary-style bouquets can be arranged based on the convergence of Eastern and Western characteristics.

Keywords: *China, traditional flower arrangement, hand-held flower, eastern flower arrangement, bouquet, ancient times*

1. INTRODUCTION

As China's intangible cultural heritage, Chinese traditional flower arrangement has unique Chinese cultural characteristics and form characteristics. The research of traditional Chinese flower arrangement has been mainly focused on flower arrangement in containers, especially bottled flowers. Hand-held flowers, however, are described as the original form of flower arrangement which is scattering in history and has been rarely studied. This paper attempts to demonstrate the historical evolution of hand-held flowers in ancient times, and their uniqueness compared with their Western counterparts, analyze the development process and reasons in ancient China, in order to supplement the missing part of hand-held flowers in the traditional Chinese flower arrangement. The analysis of their characteristics can also combine

the development of Chinese hand-held flowers with the current Western bouquets to form contemporary bouquets with both Eastern and Western characteristics.

2. HISTORY OF HAND-HELD FLOWERS IN ANCIENT CHINA

2.1 Before the *Qin* Dynasty – Hand-held Flowers for Primitive Religions

The earliest record of hand-held flowers is in the Books of Songs, "men and women hold orchids" and "young men and ladies, frolicking and laughing, give each other peonies as gifts"^[1]. In ancient China, people went to the Qin stream and You stream on the third day of the third month in the Lunar Calendar, to perform a ritual to purge bad luck, which was called Fu Xi. The hand-held orchids and peonies as gifts had both

medicinal function and the power to exorcise evil spirits in the purification ceremony. Referring to Xiang Liu's (the Han Dynasty) Shuo Yuan^[2], it seems that the envoy of Yue (a state in ancient China) chose plum blossom as the gift for the king of Liang (a state in ancient China) purely because of its ornamental function. But according to the full text, the gift was criticized by the courtiers of the king of Liang, indicating that the plum blossom was not a common ritual at that time. In Chu Ci^[3], "pick the hemp flowers and give them to those who are going to leave home as a token of missing" indicates that the act of giving flowers as a farewell gift already existed during the Warring States period.

2.2 The Han Dynasty to the Northern and Southern Dynasties - Hand-held Flowers as Offerings in Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty and offering a lotus to the Buddha was the most important application of hand-held flowers of that period. The lotus flower was given a symbolic meaning of life and three lives (the past, the present, and the future) in Buddhism and flower offerings could accumulate merit, so images of followers holding lotus flowers, buds, and leaves to the Buddha were appeared after the Eastern Han Dynasty. At Kongwang Mountain, Lianyungang City, Jiangsu Province, there is a statue of a Hu Ren (a person from the Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China) holding a lotus and standing beside the Eastern Han Dynasty Buddha statue, which is an early example. And the most famous one is Empress Wenzhao Worshipping the Buddha in Central Binyang Cave built in the late Northern Wei Dynasty in the Longmen Grottoes, in which the Empress held a flower, a bud, and a seedpod of lotus, which is thought to resemble a bouquet.^[4]

The custom of giving flowers to the opposite sex or as a farewell gift in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period was continued. For example, in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Yan Xiao wrote "pick plum blossom for the beauty and expect warm spring". In the Han Dynasty, picking a willow branch became a local folk custom around Chang'an, the capital, while in other farewell poems, plants including Meihua (plum blossom), Yaohua (Chinese Snowball Viburnum), orchids, and Naihua (jasmine) were also cited. In addition to farewell, hand-held flowers could also be used as gifts for people in faraway places. For example, Kai Lu wrote in A Poem for Ye Fan, "When I picked flowers, I met the messenger and asked him to give the flowers to you who was far away in the border area." In addition, the form was simple, mainly single-stemmed flowers and scented flowers, such as plum, wintersweet, osmanthus, orchid, rose, and jasmine. The size and color were not paid much attention to. Different from the period before the Qin

and Han Dynasties when fragrant herbs, mainly herbaceous plants were most common, in this period, woody plants were the mainstream except for a few herbaceous plants such as orchid and mugwort.

2.3 The Sui, the Tang, and the Five Dynasties – Hand-held Flowers in the Royal Court

Offering to the Buddha was still one of the most important applications of hand-held flowers, but the scope of flowers was expanded, as written in the doctrines of Buddhist scriptures in the Tang Dynasty that "there is a variety of flowers to choose from"^[5]. In addition, more indigenous flowers were adopted, such as peony, another common material on top of lotus. For example, in Cave 468 built in the middle Tang Dynasty, a noblewoman holds a peony^[6], and in Cave 409 built in the Five Dynasties, each of the two Huihu Princesses holds a big flower that looks like peony and hollyhock^[7]. Meanwhile, this period also saw the development of the bouquet-like form, such as the bilaterally symmetrical bouquet of lotus flowers and calamus leaves held by nymphs in the Taoist painting The Scroll of Eighty-Seven Immortals.

In daily life, hand-held flowers were also used for farewell, and as gifts for people afar and the opposite sex, with more materials used, mainly woody plants, such as cherry blossom, peach blossom, plum blossom, sophora flower, tung blossom, etc. Hand-held flowers were applied in the everyday life in the royal court. Record of Sui^[8] recorded that some people offered exotic flowers to Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty and "the emperor ordered Bao'er Yuan to hold the flowers and called her the officer in charge of the flower", indicating that in the Sui Dynasty, exotic flowers were offered to the emperor in the hand-held form. In the tomb paintings of the Tang Dynasty, a number of maids can be found holding flowers, such as a maid holding a long-stemmed peony in the tomb of the Princess Royal (The emperor's sister) Xicheng in Liquan, Shaanxi Province^[9]; a maid in male attire holding a daylily on a mural painting of the tomb of the Aunt-princess of Fuping, Shaanxi Province; a maid in male attire holding a lotus flower with drooping buds in the tomb of Concubine Yan in Liquan, Shaanxi Province, and two maids holding flowering branches in the tomb of Li Feng in Fuping, Shaanxi Province, one with an upright branch with leaves (like a Chinese rose), and the other with a branch in her right hand, the left side higher than the right, with a staggering height, featuring the beauty of picked flowers^[10]. The tomb murals depict the lifetime of the owners, in which holding flowers is the object, appearing with other carriages and horses, so it can be presumed that the maids holding flowers had become part of the extravagant life of the imperial concubines and princesses in the palace.

From the late Tang Dynasty to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, the use of hand-held flowers was extended from the royal court to men of letters, when hand-held flowers were not used as a gift for farewell and other occasions, and not for offering to the Buddha, but the main purpose was self-appreciation with a strong presence of personal aesthetic. “When picking a branch of the pine tree, we can feel its spirit, no withering even in the coldest wintertime.” in Chengzan Weng’s poem Pine^[11], “I pick a chrysanthemum while humming verses. The raindrops damp my clothes and I echo the spirit of the flower by sniffing it” in Mu Du’s poem Pick a Chrysanthemum^[12], and “in the atrium, after the rain, the spring is coming to an end. Flying petals, bare branches, I lean on the rails and talk to myself.” in Yansi Feng’s poem Pick a Mulberry^[13] are all examples, showing that hand-held flowers are used as carriers of personal thoughts, expressing more delicate and reserved personal aesthetics and ideas. Therefore, hand-held flowers had distinct aesthetic characteristics of literati: evergreen pine branches, chrysanthemums, bare branches, etc.

2.4 The Song to the Qing Dynasties - Bouquet

From the Song to the Qing Dynasties, the application of hand-held flowers did not differ greatly from that of the previous dynasties. Due to the prevalence of bottled flowers, hand-held ones were less used on some occasions, for example, in the offerings to Buddhism and the royal court, flower branches held by attendants in the Sui and the Tang Dynasties were replaced by bottled flowers, indicating that the expanding of bottled flowers outperformed hand-held ones. There was a special custom of people holding lotus buds and children holding lotus leaves in Hangzhou on the seventh day of the seventh month in the Chinese Lunar Calendar, which evolved from Buddhism and meant “to have many children in a row”.

The Northern Song Dynasty witnessed a clear form of bouquet that had changed from the bilateral symmetrical style to an asymmetrical bouquet style of varying lengths. In that period, the “bunch of lotus style” in the Yaozhou Ceramics Kiln was a pattern of a bouquet of lotus flowers, seedpods, and leaves tied with ribbons, and in *The Tied Lotus* painted on the tomb walls of the Jin Dynasty, an asymmetrical bouquet tied tightly with a rope was depicted^[14] (Fig.1). In Zongyuan Wu’s painting (the Northern Song Dynasty), *Procession of Immortals Paying Homage to the Primordial*, there is a short branch of lotus, collocated with two branches of plum blossoms on both left and right, with different lengths, demonstrating the asymmetrical form. According to Zimu Wu’s (the Song Dynasty) *Dreaming Record of Memorial of the past*, vendors tied the followers for vases into a bouquet which was more convenient for the buyers to carry^[15].



Fig. 1 a painting of lotus bouquet tied with a rope on a tomb wall of Jin dynasty

In the Yuan Dynasty, the development of hand-held flowers almost stagnated. Bouquets for the Dragon Boat Festival were popular in the Ming Dynasty. This festival was supposedly initiated by King Jing, the ruler of the state of Qi in the Spring and Autumn Period. Until the Han Dynasty, the tradition was hanging silk of five colors on the window, and that of the Northern and Southern Dynasties was wrapping Zongzi (a kind of rice dumpling, traditional food for the festival) and arms with silk of five colors, wearing talismans, holding boat race, and picking mugwort leaves and hanging them at others’ doors, as well as arranging calamus leaves. With the adoption of sunflowers in the Southern Song Dynasty, it was recorded in Mi Zhou’s *Stories of the Qianchun Years* that “big flowerpots are placed at every household’s doorsteps, with an assortment of flowers including mugwort, calamus, and sunflowers”^[16]. In the Ming Dynasty, similarly, bouquets for the Dragon Boat Festival mainly covered mugwort leaves, calamus leaves, pomegranate, and sunflowers, etc. Bouquets were portrayed in paintings, and the form of tying was shown in a number of works, such as Shengmo Xiang’s *Dragon Boat Festival*, Guang Liu’s *Scenes on the Dragon Boat Day*, and Kehong Sun’s *Scenes on the Dragon Boat Day*^[17] (Fig. 2) and Yin Tang’s *Lotus*. All these can be cited as examples, meaning that flower materials and texture of bouquets had been elevated to a richer level.

Succeeding the previous dynasties, the development of hand-held flowers in the Qing Dynasty may be illustrated by Liangbiao Xu’s painting *Immortals*^[18] (Fig.3), which shows a complex structure of hand-held flowers. The immortal holds a circular frame woven of bamboo, like a modern structured bouquet, with bamboo leaves as the base and peonies laid on the frame to form the bottom layer; a bamboo branch is picked out from the middle and two peonies are tied underneath to form the upper layer. As it expresses the theme of immortals, the hand-held flowers may be imaginary or made of fake flowers. The court paintings in the Qing Dynasty, however, were strongly influenced by European horticulture, which can be proved by elements such as layered regular-shaped potted plants and Western-style geometric-shaped flower walls. And the bouquet in the painting has the obvious characteristics of Western

horticulture, embodying the convergence of Eastern and Western floral art.

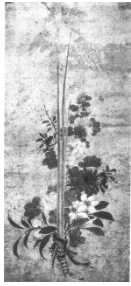


Fig. 2 ⁽¹⁾

Fig. 3 ⁽²⁾

(1) Scenes on the Dragon Boat Day by Kehong Sun;

(2) Immortals painting by Liangbiao Xu.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE HAND-HELD FLOWERS

3.1 Mainly woody flowers with stiffer lines

Unlike Western bouquets which are largely soft herbaceous flowers, Chinese hand-held flowers focus more on woody flowers with stiffer lines, especially willow, plum blossom, peach blossom, green pine, peony, hollyhock, bamboo, Chinese rose, wintersweet, osmanthus, etc., and a small number of herbaceous flowers, such as lotus, calamus, mugwort, chrysanthemum, daylily, etc. The application of woody plants was greatly related to the political and cultural centers in northwest, north, and central China in ancient times. Plants such as willows, peonies, Chinese roses, peach blossoms are all typical plants in the north. And in the West, flower arrangements originated from ancient Egypt and the Mediterranean region, with tropical water lilies, cyperus, Mediterranean cornflowers, etc., as the mainstream, while plants such as violets, hyacinths, roses, olive leaves prevailed in the Greco-Roman period, in the later period of which, many fragrant herbs were used to dispel diseases.

3.2 A small number of flowers and featured mainly asymmetrical long strips form

Chinese hand-held flowers had a small number of materials and featured mainly asymmetrical long strips, and Western classical round-shaped bouquets did not appear in ancient China. And the dominance of woody plants resulted in the formal characteristics: the flower material is often multiple branched, forming a three-dimensional space, similar to the Chinese traditional painting technique of portraying only one branch of several branches of plants, normally gnarled branches. As plum blossoms, a typical representative, the hand-held flowers can be formed by only one or two branches, mainly long ones, and supplemented by some flowers or leaves. In the Sui and the Tang Dynasties, the left-right

geometrically symmetrical small bouquets were similar to the Western one, but not the main development direction, while in the Song Dynasty, asymmetrical long strips prevailed. In the West, a technique of stacking plants such as water lilies and cyperus to form a round bouquet was developed during the Ancient Egyptian period, based on which, small bouquets expressed in dense forms continued to develop in the ancient Greek and Roman periods, After the Middle Ages, the main orientation fell on the Biedermeier-style conical and round bouquets, with a small number of long bouquets, such as the one in the painting *Madame Pierre Seriziat and Her Son* by the renowned French painter Jacques-Louis David in 1795.

3.3 Simple tying techniques

Compared to the West, in addition to the small number of materials, Chinese hand-held flowers did not require complicated tying techniques, mainly tied with cloth, rope, colored velvet, , while the use of ribbons and gold thread was common in the West because herbaceous flowers with large quantities were the mainstream. For example, in Peter Paul Rubens' work *Portrait of Anne of Austria* painted in the period of 1621-1625, the queen holds a ribbon-tied bouquet. In Hiepes Tomás'work *Garden View with a Dog* in the 1660s, a bouquet of small flowers bound with wire are placed in baskets. And Paret y Alcázar Luis' *Bouquet of Flowers* painted in the 18th century shows a ribbon bowknot decoration. In the 19th century, bouquet sticks, wrapping paper, lace, etc. emerged. For example, in the Victorian court, the early 19th century, the bouquet sticks made of metal and jewelry became the accessories to fix small bouquets that could be pinned to the waist, chest or held in the hands, and the popularity of bouquets decorated with wrapping paper and lace in Europe can be found in Edouard Manet's work *Olympia* painted in 1865 and Henry Nelson O'Neil's *The Landing of HRH The Princess Alexandra at Gravesend* in 1863.

3.4 symbolized and non-social function

In the West, the language of flowers is used to express the emotions of the givers to the recipients, which is external communication where the social function is underscored. Comparatively, Chinese hand-held flowers symbolize the quality of the flower bearer through special symbolic meanings, rather than external communication, which is focused on self-cultivation. For example, plum blossoms symbolize strength and purity, bamboo represents a sharp sense of integrity, orchids embody gentleman, nobility, and beauty, and chrysanthemums stand for hermits who are indifferent to fame and fortune. Chinese flowers for special festivals, such as pomegranate, calamus, mugwort for

the Dragon Boat Festival, have a special symbolic meaning of warding off evil spirits.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE HAND-HELD FLOWERS

The earliest developments in China and the ancient Egyptian of hand-held flowers have some similarities, largely for primitive religions, Chinese medicinal herbs representing warding off evil spirits, and ancient Egyptian water lilies and papyrus representing rebirth and resurrection. At that period, Chinese hand-held flowers were simple in form, while the Egyptian ones witnessed more complicated and diverse forms probably due to the tropical climate and the softness of flowers. The hand-held flowers as offerings to the Buddha in China were similar to those used for Christianity in the Western Middle Ages, with flowers that strictly corresponded to religions, lotus flowers and indigenous peonies in China, lilies and carnations dominating the West. The form was also similar, with a single-stemmed lotus flower, lily, or carnation. It is shown that the use of plants by human beings in the early days was mostly related to primitive religions and beliefs.

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Sui and the Tang, and Five Dynasties periods, large quantities of hand-held flowers were used in Buddhist offerings. From the Song to the Qing Dynasties, the variety of flowers and materials increased, and the combination of bouquet materials showed richness, but the application occasions shrank. The reason is that flower hairpins were popular at the Song court, the flower branches held by court attendants were replaced by vase flowers placed on tables, the men of letters expressed themselves more often with bottled flowers, and some of the hand-held flowers for Buddhist worshippers were replaced by vase flowers. In the scenarios of farewell or missing people afar where hand-held flowers were frequently used, as depicted in poems like “picking branches” or “picking flowers”, flowers were picked rather than bought, which means that no substantial value of trade was created. In addition, flowers as gifts to the opposite sex became a rare case because of the ancient idea of “men and women should keep a distance”. Therefore, after the Song Dynasty, most of the scenarios of hand-held flowers were for the public to hold flowers during the blooming season and for special festivals, such as the period from the Birthday of All Flowers to the Tomb-sweeping Day when people held flowers, the eve of Qixi Festival when the Song people held lotus, and the Dragon Boat Festival when the Ming people held bouquets. Meanwhile, influenced by the gradual fixed symbolic meanings of Chinese flowers, the choice of flower materials was confined to a limited range. Moreover, hand-held flowers lacked application occasions, so the development waned.

As for the West, small bouquets of herbs were widely used to ward off diseases in the Middle Ages and later, when people were plagued by poor sanitation and epidemics. For example, in France in the 16th and 17th centuries, the first botanical garden was established in 1576, and the Royal Botanical Garden for medicinal purposes in 1626, made flowers, especially bulbous plants, abundant. In the 17th century, there were gardens in the courts and aristocratic families, and bouquets tied with ribbons were part of their luxury consumption, used to show off their status and maintain their original class. Western women played a greater role in the development of bouquets, and it was common decorative practice for women to hold bouquets or pin them in their hair or dresses. Bouquet sticks were invented to make bouquets easier to hold or insert in the hair or the dress. In the Victorian era in the 19th century, small bouquets were used by wooers as a way of expressing themselves in the early stages of a relationship. And bouquets became a language of communication in the wake of the Dictionary of the Floral Language. Bouquets were regarded as gifts for a variety of purposes such as for lovers, welcome ceremonies, and successful shows. In contrast to the lack of scenarios for hand-held flowers in China at the time, the increased number of applications in the West gave birth to the flower trade, while the convergence of plants from around the world in the 19th century offered new options and possibilities.

The difference between Chinese and Western hand-held flowers mainly emerged in the 17th-19th centuries. In the 17th century, flower consumption boomed in European courts and aristocratic life, and the West entered the industrial age in the 18th century when society grew rapidly and flower language culture gave bouquets new developmental opportunities. While the convergence of various plants in the world led to the great development of horticulture, China was still in the era of seclusion in the Qing Dynasty.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the initial development and religious development periods of hand-held flowers in China and the West were similar, and radical changes took place after the entry of the Renaissance and industrial social revolution in the West when plant materials were abundant with an increasing number of occasions for use, coupled with the creation of the culture of flower language. While in China, the options of plant materials and bouquet forms were continuously increased, the overall hand-held flowers development, though progressed, was relatively slow due to the limitations of the times. From another perspective, however, the traditional hand-held flowers have been glittering with their unparalleled cultural charm for over 1000 years, and the unique characters of Chinese hand-held flowers

such as the special choice of woody plants in the design, the asymmetrical composition, the cultural traits of flowers' symbolic meanings, and the distinctive attributes of bouquets used on Chinese folk festivals, such as the Birthday of All Flowers and the Dragon Boat Festival, are believed to be the reasons. Therefore, contemporary-style bouquets can be arranged based on the convergence of Eastern and Western characteristics.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Lin Shi: Conceptualization, Original Draft;

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