ARTICLES

Writing and Displaying Herbs in China

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Abstract:

Herbs, as *xiangcao* (香草) and *caoyao* (草药) in Chinese, have played a crucial role in constituting Chinese culture and history. A material object doubling as a sociocultural sign, herbs become the very site of interplay between everyday life and literary expressions from traditional to contemporary China. By examining herbs in various types of genres and texts and engaging with the scholarship of literary criticism and cultural studies, this study attempts to unravel the relationship between the visualization of herbs, the reimagination of traditional culture, and the symbolic power of China in the transnational context. In the figure of herbs not only do we find the representation for the modalities of literary and cultural life in China but also the reflection of deep desires for the beautiful and the subliminal across histories and through time.

Keywords: herbs in literature, affective symbolism, nostalgic trope, cultural performance

Herbs, written as 香草 (*xiangcao*) and 草药 (*caoyao)* in the Chinese script, have played a crucial role in Chinese cultural history. A material object doubling as a sociocultural sign, herbs are the very site of interplay between everyday life and literary expressions since traditional to contemporary times in China. In

such a context, this paper traces the representation and visualization of herbs in Chinese literature and culture from the pre-Qin era (221 BCE) to the 21st century. By examining herbs in various types of genres and texts, we intend to address the following questions: How do herbs become a frequently-used imagery and motif in classical poetry? How does the writing of herbs change with the emergence of literary reform and the dawn of Modernism during the long twentieth century? What role do herbs play in forging and exhibiting the urban space in contemporary China? Engaging with scholarship of literary criticism and cultural studies, we aim to explore not only the diachronic genealogy of writing herbs in Chinese literature, but also to decode the sociopolitical connotations of writing and visualizing herbs at different venues.

Specifically, this section will begin with an examination of herbs used in classical Chinese poetry. This analysis will highlight the function of the imagery of "herbs and beauty" (*xiangcao meiren*) as a rhetorical device in traditional poetics. In this way, we try to understand how the symbolic and metaphoric writing of herbs consolidate the Chinese poetic tradition of "poetry expresses intents" (*shi yan zhi*), as well as redefine the convention of male writing. Then, our study will move forward to the early 20th century, when the New Literature Movement was in the process of transforming the ways in which literature was written and read. On the one hand, the writing and recording of herbs became a mark of modern scientific knowledge in contrast to what they had been in the Chinese tradition. On the other hand, herbs in the new literature serve as a means to invigorate the memory of modern writers who have suffered from social turbulences.

Subsequently, we will take the 2019 Beijing Garden Expo as an example to examine the exhibition of herbs in the contemporary urban space of China. We will show that the visual display of herbs is structured by the identity, ideology, and culture of the exhibition's organizers, which has been similarly observed by other scholars.[1] However, our study will further unravel the relationship between the visualization of herbs, the restoration of traditional culture, and the symbolic power of China in a transnational context. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the argument that herbs have become a potent signifier that indexes the modalities of literary and cultural life in China through their written and visual representations to reflect the depth of human desires and the uncertainty over radical social changes.

1 For example, Meng Yue examined the relationship of the displays and organization of herbs and the level of civility in her book chapter "Reflecting upon semi-civilization: the transition and bifurcation of Chinese botanical knowledge" (Fanguan banwenming: Zhongguo zhiwu zhishi de zhuangui yu fenliu).

Herbs in Classical Poetry: Affect and Symbolism

Writing herbs in pre-modern Chinese literature could be dated back to as early as 7th century BCE, when the earliest anthology of Chinese verse, *The Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), was composed (Cai 13). In *The Classic of Poetry*, the evocation of herbs is a well-established rhetorical tool which commonly draws a symbolic connection to the ideal of virtue conceptualized by the poet. Despite the variety of subjects and themes in the anthology, scholars have identified three basic modes of presentations: "*fu* (exposition)," "*bi* (comparison)," and "*xing* (affective image)" (Cai 28). The reference to and depiction of herbs are intimately associated with these modes of presentations. In other words, the traditional rhetorical devices of exposition, comparison, and affective image are often practiced through writing about herbs and plants in *The Classic of Poetry*. For example, in the poem "Cai Fan," the first two stanzas provide a vivid image of a woman gathering *fan*, the aromatic herb known as artemisia or southernwood. "She gathers the white southernwood; / By the ponds, on the islets. / She employs it; / In the business of our prince." In ancient China, southernwood was commonly used for decoration, medicine, and sacrificial services. According to Cai Zongqi's reading, this poem is "the plaint of a palace woman who is preparing a sacrifice for her ruler's ancestors" (26). The gathering of southernwood at different places is a celebration of the woman's labor. These opening lines could be considered an example of *fu*, employed to illustrate people's daily life and particularly that of women at work. The tonality of the language suggests the labor of gathering herbs is repetitive and arduous activity, which carries a slight complaint, as reflected in the ending stanza, "With head-dress reverently rising aloft; / Early, while yet it is night, she is in the prince's temple; / In her dead-dress, slowly retiring; / She returns to her own place."

In addition to using as *fu*, the writing of herbs is more frequently seen in the last two modes of presentation: *xing* and *bi*. In another poem, "Cai Wei," herbs are used as the affective image to evoke certain sentiments. Each stanza begins with the same first line, "Let us gather the thorn-ferns, / let us gather the thorn-ferns." Then, the second line of each stanza describes three phases in the growth of thorn-ferns, from "the thorn-ferns are now springing up" to "the thorn-ferns are now tender," then followed by "the thorn-ferns are now hard." Here, the figure of people gathering thorn-ferns not only depicts daily labor, but also implies the flowing of time through the herbs' growth process from sprouts to twigs. Lamenting the passage of time further evokes people's longing for home, since the following lines repeat the same question, "When shall we return?" Being kept away from home in

order to serve the king, people's homesickness accelerates and their sorrow turns into distress. In this way, the herbs affectively channel the sentiments expressed in the poem, and foreshadow people's grief in the last two lines of each stanza: "Our sorrowing hearts are in great distress; / But we shall not return from our expedition." Yet it is worth noting that there is not always a definite distinction between the use of *xing* and *bi* in any one poem, such as in the case of the poem "Zhong Gu" in which herbs are presented by means of and for the effect of both *xing* and *bi*.

Each stanza of the poem starts with stating that herbs are growing in the village: "In the valleys grows the mother-wort." The writing of mother-wort, an herbal medicine, once again exemplifies the use of *xing*. In three stanzas, the poet depicts the gradual withering of the mother-wort: "But scorched is it in the drier places." Following this, each stanza ends with a woman's sigh and suffering as she is "forced to leave her husband." The sentiment of sorrow is precisely triggered by the herbs' process from blooming to scorching, which resonates with the experience of an abandoned wife. Here, herbs function as an affective image to evoke feelings of sympathy and melancholia. But more importantly, the poem draws a comparison between the life cycle of mother-wort and the experience of the abandoned wife. The woman and her marriage life start with the analogy of burgeoning mother-wort, which is lively and vigorous. However, when the woman is forced to leave her husband, her melancholia makes her wither as an herb does at the end of its life. In this poem, the life cycle of herbs functions as a metaphor of a woman's life and emotion which reflect the affect of the state of a woman's abandonment.

The diverse and recurring herb imagery in *The Classic of Poetry* established a precedent that will become a tradition for poets of later generations. Scholars of different times have also given plenty of attention to the language of herb imagery and its importance in poetics. Apart from its function to trigger certain emotions and ethos discussed above, the large cluster of herbs usually reveals the discontent that people suffer in the chaos of the time. Of course, the natural beauty of some herbs could allude to the passion of love or the harmony of interpersonal relationships (Chen 129). Another salient aspect of herb imagery is its evocation of women and femininity, such as women's feelings, experiences, and women's labor. In this regard, it is not surprising that many examples of herbs in *The Classic of Poetry* are related to the portrayal of feminine beauty. The poem "Shuo Ren," for instance, employs numerous herbs to depict the gorgeous look of a young woman. It compares the woman's fingers to a type of fragrant wild herb: "Her fingers were like the blades of the young white-grass," which is to say her fingers are slender and

soft. As such, certain characteristics of feminine beauty in traditional China were established.

After *The Classic of Poetry,* the semiotic relationship between herbs and ideas is continuously explored and expanded in other classical poetic genres, of which herbs as a signifier of women and beauty remain constant and paramount. *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci*), for instance, is a celebrated example of the frequent and sophisticated use of herbs to represent beauty and splendor. Dating back to the Warring States period (403–227 BCE), *Lyrics of Chu* is an anthology of poems written and compiled by scholars in the Chu region. Among them, Qu Yuan is the most prominent poet who contributed "Encountering Sorrow" (*Lisao*) and "Nine Songs" (*Jiuge*), which are the heart of the *Chuci* canon. Notably, Qu Yuan's poems are recognized as "a rich and exotic botanical image bank" (Mair 254) and praised for their representation of "metaphorical journeys" (Mair 254) in his use of herb imagery and his reference to a remarkable shamanistic style. Since herbs and flowers are the "important components of a shamanistic ritual"(Cai 39), they are associated with divinity in the religious practices of the time, which connote the qualities of "sincerity, beauty, and solemnity"(Cai 12). Moreover, Qu Yuan started the aesthetic tradition of endowing herbs with humanity, making them suggest not only divinity but also human virtuousness and righteousness as well. In Qu Yuan's poetics, interestingly, beauty (*meili*) is not merely a signified to herbs. Rather, beautiful women (*meiren*) itself becomes a symbol of loyalty and patriotism, which is then superimposed onto herbs as a metaphor of purity, fragility, and other notions. With herbs and beauty being the most common rhetorical devices in *Lyrics of Chu*, its representation is also inseparable from the feminine voice that the poet often and deliberately employs. For instance, the reference to various kinds of herbal plants marks the voice of a woman in "The Lord of the Xiang River" ("Xiang Jun").

In the poem, the poet mentions many different kinds of flowers and fragrant herbs, such as cassias, fig leaves, melilots, irises, and orchids. Most of these plants are decorations for the shamanistic performances portrayed in the poem. The poem adopts the voice of "a lovely lady with delicate beauty," and depicts a ceremonial ritual performed by "a female shaman" (Cai 39) addressing the quest for a male river god, Lord Xiang. Here herbs are not only elements of a solemn religious performance but also the embodiment of sincerity and honesty. The motif of "Xiang Jun" is the female shaman's quest for love, which is manifested by lines such as "Wafting my magic, I still have not reached him; / My women are upset and heave deep sighs. / My tears run down like small streams; / The thought of you makes me grieve" and "Our hearts are different: / all matchmaking is in vain; / Our love is not

deep: / it is easy to break."

The female voice propelled by the botanical imagery accretes into Qu Yuan's unique poetic style, which enables his poems such as "Xiang Jun" and "Nine Songs" to be read not only as the representation of a spiritual journey of self-discovery but also the performance of "ritual healing" (Connery 226). In this sense, the poetic and cultural connotations of herbs in *Lyrics of Chu* transcend the religious realm to allow the poet's "spiritual world" to connect with the "realistic world" (Xiao 39). These poetic elements contribute to the reception of Qu Yuan's persona as a "model scholar-official" who is "cultivated, pure, accomplished, steadfast, and loyal, but vulnerable to the slanders and attacks of venal contemporaries at court"(Connery 228). More specifically, the stylistic resources including shamanism, botanical imagery, and philosophical ideas have become a powerful tool of "self-expression" (Connery 228) for Qu Yuan. Apart from drawing on the symbolism of herbs, the tactful employment of a female voice is an implicit way to express the poet's own virtue and his loyalty to the ruler. Therefore, when Qu Yuan stumbled in his political life, he found an outlet in the poetic imagery of herbs and beauty, which manifested his dissatisfaction with reality and his persistent pursuit of righteousness and justice at the same time. The rescue of his masculine pride through the employment of a female voice is the triumph of the poetics of *xing* and *bi* invested in the herb imagery.

The mode of male poets writing in the female voice, which started in *The Classic of Poetry* and was lifted to a new height by Quan Yuan, needs further comment, since it has been such a prominent and elaborate art form in pre-modern Chinese poetry. On the surface, it expresses the motif of women's complaint and promotes a sort of "realistic" reading of poetry as a mirror of social reality. For instance, in "Cai Wei" discussed earlier, we read the woman speaker who pines for her missing husband and feel empathy for her. However, there is always a possibility to read poetry figuratively and metaphorically, i.e., the theory of literature as a "lamp,"[2] which has been a major feature of aesthetics in classical Chinese poetry. It is then plausible to suggest that the woman figure in "Cai Wei" is a representation of a male soldier in a state of grief and sorrow while away from home. Modern scholars are more likely to argue for the latter reading than the former, as Wang Li

2 M.H. Abrams proposed that the Romantics, as contrast to neoclassical poets, thought of literature as a lamp. While neoclassicists regard literature as a reflection of life, romantics believe that the literary creation illuminates the world through the light ignited by the writers' inner feelings. See *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

points out that women were unlikely to write poetry considering their social status and level of education in pre-Qin China, and these poems in *The Classic of Poetry* were almost certainly composed by male authors albeit adopting the voice of a melancholy woman. To this popular convention of evoking the symbolism of herbs in association with the figure of the female voice, Kang-i Sun Chang poignantly refers as "gender mask" (Yin and Wan 52). By putting on the "gender mask," Yin and Wan argue that the literati in traditional China are able to inscribe their gender identity in poetry writing while keeping a distance from possible political repercussions. In other words, herbs in classical poetry is not only an expressive device, but a medium that enables Chinese literati to displace their gender, transfer their intentions, and perform their social and political roles more safely and effectively. Speaking through the symbol of herbs reflects the predominant principle of "poetry expresses intent," which dictates that "poems are always spontaneous, true reflections of the writer's inner being" (Cai 211). In sum, a practice born out of the aesthetic value of metaphoric language in Chinese classical poetry, the herb imagery in *The Classic of Poetry* and *Lyrics of Chu* has set an example for poets in the later generations, from being the figure of love in the "music bureau" poetry (*yuefu*) during the Han Dynasty, to becoming a trope for lofty character favored by the poets of the Six Dynasties, and to the even more flourish of natural sublimity of Tang and Song poetry.

Herbs in Fiction: Knowledge, Science, and Chinese Modernity

While the herb imagery in classical literature was commonly seen in the writings of scholars and literati who were considered as cultural elites in society, the functions and connotations of such imagery altered in response to the advent of the new literary genre—vernacular fiction, or novel. Since the 17th century, vernacular fiction established itself as a significant genre along with the social and cultural transformations during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Although writing in the classical Chinese language remained official and mainstream in the literary scene, the publication and circulation of vernacular fictions had seen substantial growth during this time. As manifested in many Ming Dynasty fictions including *Journey to the West* and *Plum in the Golden Vase*, the knowledge of herbs, especially herbal medicine, is the "popular knowledge" (Schonebaum 8) practiced and experienced in quotidian life. The continuity of using herbs as a symbol demonstrates that the rhetoric adapts to the new development of genre; however, the innovation in literary practice confronts the ideology of the cultural elite. During this time, fiction as a

new genre possesses an "encyclopedic nature" (Schonebaum 5) that incorporates practical knowledge produced by everyday life experience. The writing and use of herbs, in responding to and accommodating such transition, significantly contribute to the portrayal of everyday life. Herbs, in particular herbal medicine, are usually presented and represented in vernacular literature as common or popular knowledge, in distinction to elite or official knowledge (Schonebaum 7-8).

Writing herbs in fiction and the turn away from elite knowledge has a far-reaching impact on late-imperial literature and literary history. This legacy has carried through to the modern times. In the early 20th century, China experienced numerous social and political transformations, including the end of imperialism. Reacting to the drastic transformations brought by social and national revolutions, modern intellectuals called for reforms in the cultural and literary scene. During the early Republican era (1917-1937), writing of herbs was interwoven with the national enlightenment project with an urgency to reform literature in modern China. At the heart of the national literary reform was the promotion and popularization of vernacular writings. Among the modern writers who introduced new ideologies and styles into the literary scene at the beginning of the 20th century, Zhou Zuoren was one who consistently and deliberately incorporated the writing of herbs to the pursuit of his literary ideal. Specifically, he reinvented the tradition of recording various plants in an epistemological manner while highlighting the scientific nature of botany with an aim to capture the new structure of feeling.

Introducing the concept of "essay" into China, Zhou Zuoren was an ardent practitioner of this new genre. In his writing, Zhou consistently utilized this new literary form to illustrate his idea of "proletarian literature" and "literature of humanity" (1). In his earlier writings, Zhou aligned with other iconoclasts and promoted a new form of literature that aimed to emancipate people from the tethers of antiquated mentalities associated with the "old" literature. Zhou's attempt is particularly manifest in his promulgation of "proletarian literature," which sets guidelines for his writing of herbs. "Proletarian literature" is defined as a genre that tells common people's tales in a common form; but in his eponymous article, Zhou cautions us not to equate "proletarian literature" to "popular literature." To Zhou, caring for the underprivileged is not tantamount to writing for the common people. Rather, common people are treated as objects for intellectuals to observe and study. The elitist and utilitarian approach permeates Zhou's writing of herbs in the way that human subjectivity is crucial in appreciating herbs as an organic component in a modern subject's artistic life.

In the 1920s, his essays, represented by "Drinking Tea" ("Hecha") and "Wild

Edible Herbs in My Hometown" ("Guxiang de yecai"), indicate the twofold function of introducing herbs into modern literature. First, "He Cha" epitomizes Zhou's literary ideal that fuses artistic taste with humanism in the way in which he meticulously discusses how green tea is the prime choice for tea-drinking and how tea along with other exquisite utensils reflects the art of living. Such position situates Zhou in the romantic vein of modern literary tradition; whereas the writing of herbs embarks on a dialogue with Western romantic literature. Moreover, by locating and naming the specifics of various kinds of wild edible herbs like "huang hua mai guo," Zhou aims to illustrate how the knowledge of plants helps to disenchant Chinese people from unreasonable belief systems and wishful thinking about herbs as a gift from nature.

The second layer of meaning in herb writing for Zhou could be traced back to his childhood reading experience. When recounting his admiration for Chen Zi's *Mi Chuan Hua Jing*, an encyclopedic monograph on cultivation of plants published in 1688, Zhou noted in the essay "Flowery Mirror" ("Hua Jing") that he saw the book as one of his old friends and always cherished it. Zhou stated that he has learned much about herbs that were easy to find in the countryside but not in historiography, since they were not "graceful" enough (86). Thus, Zhou intentionally makes an effort to incorporate the herbal knowledge into his writing projects and directs our attention to horticulture as a rigorously defined discipline of science. His agenda resonates with the prevalence of biological evolutionism during the time and indicates how scientific knowledge succeeds in warding off the unscientific penchant in traditional writing about plants.

For Zhou, one of the merits of *Mi Chuan Hua Jing* is that the author is anything but the traditional literati who sit in their study sifting through books and citing unfamiliar sources. On the contrary, Zhou particularly mentioned that Chen Zi had taken pains in categorizing these herbs to investigate their colors and predilections, which Zhou considered as a systematic and scientific way of studying plants. In premodern China, there was a general lack of interest in studying nature. "Although there were descriptions of vegetation, insects and aquatic life in famous works, local chronicles, medical and agricultural books of all dynasties, they had not become independent studies after all" (Han 141). This phenomenon, granted, has to do with the system of civil exams and the privileging of textual studies over fieldwork. Yet, it is the scientific characteristic of *Mi Chuan Hua Jing* that parallels Zhou's own theoretical approach.

In the following decades, Zhou grew increasingly obsessed with presenting different kinds of sources when describing herbs. In "The Stalk of Amaranth"

("Xiancai geng"), Zhou listed a host of textual evidence to account for "xiancai," a common type of edible herbs in rural China. Such preference culminates in his 1939 essay "The Popular Names of Wild Herbs" ("Yecao de suming"), in which Zhou introduced popular names assigned for eight kinds of wild herbs of his hometown, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. In this essay, Zhou's intention is not to encourage people to study herbs so as to be professional herbalists. The knowledge of herbs, from Zhou's standpoint, is to instill some common sense into people's minds. In his essay "On The Women's Movement and Commonsense" ("Funü yundong yu changshi"), Zhou straightforwardly lamented that "Today's Chinese people, men and women alike, lack common sense. It applies not only to most people without education, but also to the so-called intellectual class who have received higher education in their own countries or abroad. They may have specialized knowledge that emphasizes one domain, but they have not integrated all the common knowledge. Therefore, their comments are somewhat puzzling and eventually become the 'stale and muddy wine in the new bottle'"(qtd. In Li 206). Here, Zhou's oeuvre could be considered as "a systematic and coherent construction of his alternative approach to enlightenment" (Li 208). In other words, Zhou envisions to use herbs as the alternative to reinforce the importance of acquiring common sense when dominant discourse of enlightenment becomes dogmatic and authoritative to the point that it has ceased to be productive and dialectical. This also bespeaks the reason why Zhou grew apart from his previous comrades when he realized that it was imperative to not mystify and canonize the May Fourth spirit. In this sense, the common knowledge represented by the herbs in Zhou's writing becomes an effective weapon with which to reflect upon enlightenment.

Herbs as Tropes of Nostalgia and Desire

Throughout the Republican period, herbs became a common motif for writers who migrated from rural areas to urban cities that allowed them to express their nostalgia toward a disappearing countryside and to construct a site of memory. In the meantime, herbs also stitch together various discourses that revolve around Chinese modernity when modern intellectuals were facing a time of large-scale social transition and geographical dislocation. As the national crises escalated during the Second Sino-Japanese War, herbs served as a far-reached utopia for writers to express their lyrical bent. Xiao Hong, for instance, wrote about her grandfather's garden in a restorative and therapeutic way. Her idyllic portrayal invokes a sense of a nostalgia that is forever at loss, and a yearning that is endlessly

unfulfilled. Herbs thus assume a role of healing in the times of turmoil and bespeak how writers respond to trauma in its most intense moment. The solace provided by herbs soothes the traumatic aftermath of massive changes and their enduring repercussions. Inspired by the social and spiritual functions of herbs, Xiao Hong, originally from the northeast part of China, constructs a mirage-like garden in her writing which is saturated with herb imagery. Notably, herbs constitute an essential component in Xiao Hong's nostalgia for childhood and hometown while simultaneously serving as a foil for the remoteness of China's rural northeastern region.

In Xiao Hong's novels and short stories, there is the recurring imagery of the "back garden" where herbs grow to their full capacity. The vitality and the wide variety of herbs glorify a long-lost past, which makes the desolate town into a vibrant presence in Xiao Hong's memory. The binary nature of herbs in Xiao Hong's writing unfolds her own conflicted attitude towards her Japanese-occupied hometown during a time when she was sojourning in and outside of China. In alignment with the symbolic meaning of herbs as a virtual and vicarious home-coming, Xiao Hong took pains in describing the color, variety, growth and most importantly, the resilience and tenacity of herbs. In "Back Garden" ("Hou huayuan"), Xiao Hong wrote, "Flowers grow on cucumbers despite the fact that the silky tendril of the annoying melon is wrapping around them, much more, pulling them down. Even though the flowers fall to the ground, they are still blooming. The shovelers always pluck them when they meet the flowers, but the more they pluck them, the faster they grow. The flower seeds fall to the ground and soon they give birth to new ones"(4). The way those unattended flowers manage to survive and thrive parallels the loneliness and resilience of Xiao Hong's life of constant migration at the most turbulent time in modern China.

Similarly, in her well-received autobiographical novel *Tales of Hulan River* (*Hulanhe zhuan*), Xiao Hong devoted much space in reminiscing the "big garden" of her childhood home from a child's perspective. The garden is like a wonderland in the sense that every creature is doing things of its own without any tethers.

> Flowers bloom, just like flowers wake up. Birds fly away as if they are disappearing into the sky. Insects bark as if they are talking. Everything is alive. Every little thing has unlimited ability to do whatever it wants. All are free. Pumpkins climb onto the shelves if they want to, and climb onto the house if they want to. If a cucumber is willing to bear a yellow flower, it will bear a yellow flower; if it is willing to bear a cucumber, it will bear a

> cucumber. If a cucumber does not want to bear anything, then it will bear nothing and nobody would bother it. Corns grow as tall as they like, and nobody cares if they want to go to heaven (1).

These freewheeling plants in the garden constitute an idyllic utopia in which Xiao Hong conserves her most precious recollections with her grandfather. This highly idealized garden is Xiao Hong's old playground and is forever fixated onto her memory. The feeling of familiarity and safety is unreachable to the wandering Xiao Hong and the days of being a happy-go-lucky child like those carefree plants are gone; yet she nevertheless reconstructs a mnemonic palace to restore the past by writing. Through revisiting and reliving the childhood memory, the garden in her novel summons Xiao Hong into affectionate reminiscence with her grandfather, which finally grants her an opportunity to come home from her diasporic journey.

Ironically yet unsurprisingly, the freedom and the mobility of the plants in the gardens that Xiao Hong meticulously conjured up are constantly illustrated in conjunction with the dead-end future and the daily grind of local residents. In "Back Garden," the protagonist who works as a miller suffers from long-time repression of desire and immediately loses his wife and his newborn after his belated union with an equally unfortunate widow. In the story, Xiao Hong does not comment on the character's fate directly or explicitly; instead she goes on to outline how the plants in the garden still grow healthily.

> In the summer of the following year, the flowers and plants in the back garden were so lively that cucumbers climbed up the tree mischievously. Sunflowers bloomed, causing swarms of bees to stir up trouble. Big potts, parthenocissus tricuspidata, 'Horse Snake Cabbage' and 'Yan Powder Bean' all blossomed. They were dazzling, and scattered fragrance as well. The cucumber that climbed up the window lattice of the mill year after year has climbed up again this year. Those who bear fruit year after year bear fruit again this year. After several times of prosperity and withering in the back garden, the big purple flower seems to be going on for generations. After winter and spring, it keeps blooming in the garden year after year (89).

The cyclical nature of plants vis-à-vis the ephemeral and fragile human beings bears witness to Xiao Hong's rumination about her ill-fated hometown folks. Considering the backdrop of Xiao Hong's times, even in her most lyrical and private expressions, the reality sinks in and a heavy dose of sympathy is expressed subtly

via the seemingly nonchalant recounting of the herbs. Perhaps it is not far-fetched to argue that the lusciousness of herbs permeates Xiao Hong's writing and points to a utopian time-space as Xiao Hong is facing a cascade of crises in her endless days of roaming. The trope of plants reveals Xiao Hong's personal nostalgia for a lost hometown; whereas it also functions as a reminder for the hopeless peasants who are torn by the Japanese invasion and their poverty-stricken daily lives.

Apart from echoing with the changing literary trend and enriching her experience of everyday life, Xiao Hong's nostalgic writing of herbs mirrors another trope in Chinese literature—lyricism, or the expression of emotion (*shuqing*). Lyricism of Chinese literature has been a long-standing tradition, which had been observed by generations of scholars. If the notion that "poetry expresses intent" dominates classical Chinese literature as we discussed earlier, it stands to be modified into "poetry follows from emotion" (*shi yuan qing*), which seeks to redefine literature in its purpose and presentation. [3] By such a literary paradigm, herbs once again play a crucial role in connecting the depiction of nature and the authors' perception of their internal world. The way that herbs are represented in modern literature not only carries on this function, but further develops and rewrites the lyrical tradition of classical Chinese literature.[4] However, lyricism in literature was disrupted during the socialist era (1950s–late 1970s). With the flourishing of socialist and revolutionary literature, lyricism is allowed only for the cause of extolling socialist causes. Meanwhile, excessive revolutionary zeal and political messages have overshadowed the expression of individual and personal feelings. During this time, herbs together with other imagery are overdetermined to carry out the symbolic meanings of communist revolution. Two important literary schools emerged during the socialist period, "the School of Lotus Pond" (Hehuadian pai) and "the School of Potatoes" (Shanyaodan pai), both devoted to depicting the transformation brought by the sweeping revolutionary projects in local villages. Although the writers of these two groups mainly set their stories in the countryside, the natural scenery of the rural areas was downplayed while the ongoing conflicts between disparate classes were put under the spotlight (Wei 147). When natural scenery, including the description of herbs, occurs in the writings of socialist

3 "Poetry follows from emotion" (*shi yuan qing*) was proposed by the poet, Lu Ji (261-303), from the Western Jin Dynasty. For more discussion, see Wang David Der-wei. *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 8-9.

4 The concept of "lyrical tradition" was proposed by Chen Shih-Hsiang in the 1970s, which helped to conceptualize the temporality and sensibility of lyricism in modern Chinese literature. For more discussion, see Wang David Der-wei, 37-38.

realism, it nevertheless functions to underline the stereotypical images of socialist subjects.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, significant changes occurred in the writing of herbs echoing with the ebbing of revolutionary projects and the accentuating trend of global neoliberalism. Herbs have ceased to convey the revolutionary message, and no longer contrast the negative image of enemies against the positive image of proletariat comrades (Ke 117). As a gesture of farewell to the period of high socialism,[5] writers like Wang Zengqi (1920-1997) reestablished the connection between herbs and the personal expression of lust and desire. After a nearly three-decade pause in his writing, Wang Zengqi published his novella "Buddhist Initiation" ("Shoujie") in 1980, which instantly earned him a reputation as "China's last scholar-official" (Chen 72). A protégé of Shen Congwen (1902-1988), Wang inherited Shen's "lyrical archaeology" in the way that he synthesized trivial subjects with larger socioeconomic context and "reflected China's 'old life' with the new philosophy of his era" (Yan 101). This feature is particularly manifest in Wang's use of herbs in "Shoujie," expressing a common sentiment of reflecting upon the remote native soil, which further adumbrated "root-seeking literature" in the late 1980s.

"Shoujie" represents a young boy's journey of being ordained as a monk while capturing the secular manner of living in a Buddhist temple, named "Water Chestnut." "There is no rule in the temple and nobody even mentions the word 'rule'" (Wang 66). The monks who live in the temple lead an unrestricted life and take joy in marrying, eating meat and other activities that are usually forbidden to monks, yet common for lay people. Such portrayal of an iconoclastic temple alludes more to the social atmosphere of the 1980s than that of Republican China. As the political control of literature lessened after China entered the "new phase" of openness and reform in the late 1970s, articulating personal emotions and desires became a new trend in order to dispel the myth of political dogma. Nevertheless, "Shoujie" is still criticized for taking on such a lighthearted tone in depicting the deviant monks. Such depiction, as one scholar points out, indicates that the discourse of enlightenment has been surpassed by the longing for hedonism (B. Wang 22). Despite its poignant tone, the criticism indeed reveals that the natural desire of monks embodies the open-mindedness of the cultural scene of the 1980s. Hence,

5 "High socialism" is the historical periodization referring to the timeline through the 1950s to 70s in China, characterized by the politicization of everyday life, the fluid class label system, and the grassroots' massive engagement in state political campaigns. For more discussion, see *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism,* ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

what once had been repressed again resurfaces onto the historical horizon; and the exploration of human desire returned to writers' agenda.

In "Shoujie," the burgeoning romanticism between the teenage monk Minghai and his childhood sweetheart Yingzi is indicated by the symbolic meanings of the pomegranate flowers and cape jasmine. These two kinds of plants recur three times in the story. Each time, their presence guides us towards the development of the budding love between the two protagonists. Both flowers as literary imageries have the same sort of characteristic of being a token for romantic love (Hua 45). The flowers first appear when Wang describes the surroundings of Yingzi's family house, gesturing towards a potential romantic relationship in the following passage. After Minghai and Yingzi get to know each other, Yingzi asks Minghai to draw a picture of the pomegranate flowers and cape jasmine. Such an action indicates how proactive Yingzi is in this relationship and reinforces the linkage between flowers and romance. Towards the end of the story, Yingzi wears these two kinds of flowers as hair accessories and proposes to Minghai. From drawings to Yingzi's headdress, the flowers become a witness of Yingzi's love, implying how Yingzi audaciously and straightforwardly expresses her feelings to Minghai through action.

The story ends with a detailed depiction of reed marshes, where, as the author implicitly hints, Minghai and Yingzi have sexual intercourse. Interestingly, Wang Zengqi adapted the Shanghai opera *Tinders from the Reed Marshes* (*Shajiabang),* which also took reed marshes as an important stage scene. The reed marshes in *Shajiabang* were the hiding place for the New Fourth Army from which they launched their attacks against the Japanese occupying forces. Therefore, in this play, reed marshes are a symbol for the great cause of revolution (Hua 52). As a contrast to the symbolic meaning of reed marshes in the revolutionary period, "Shoujie" employs herbs as a literal and figurative bed for the young couple in love. Such innovative use of plants unveils Wang's attempt to subvert the previously constructed connection between plants and revolutionary tenets. Herbs no longer serve as a token of revolution; rather, they function as a medium to give voice to people's free will and pure love. Through disassociating herbs from the revolutionary narrative, Wang's writing practice bears witness to the reestablishment of using herbs to express personal desire and pleasure. As a practice of restorative nostalgia,[6] Wang's writing retraces the Chinese lyrical tradition and recalls a literary convention that was temporarily repressed. As a result, the metaphoric

6 "Restorative nostalgia" was proposed by Svetlana Boym, referring to the reconstruction of the national past, and a return to national symbols. See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

herbs resume a crucial role in initiating the transformation from the literature dominated by politics to the literature of humanism and individual fulfillment. In a significant way, Wang Zengqi's depoliticization of herb imagery has opened a new path for Chinese writers to redefine the relationship between human and nature in the context of rapid social and cultural changes in contemporary China.

Visualizing Herbs and the Performance of Culture

Indeed, herbal imagery is crucial in enriching the literary practice and in reflecting transformations in literary history. Writing herbs is also intrinsically related to how human activities and culture are structured. The reference to over 30 species of plants and herbs in Chi Zijian's award-winning novel *Last Quarter of the Moon,* for instance, makes the fiction a work of ethnobotany that not only informs the "indigenous knowledge" (Zhang 157) of the Evenks, but also portrays the ecological and social changes in the Evenki society over 50 years. Furthermore, the knowledge of herbs and plants represented in the novel challenges the conventional perception which regards Evenki society as primitive and backward. Their "indigenous knowledge" based on their expertise in using herbs precisely reflects how the Evenks are familiar with ecological conditions and their changes, and how they use such knowledge to fulfill their needs. Their botanical and ecological knowledge, therefore, is much more comprehensive and possibly more advanced than those belonging to people from a modern society (Zhang 173). In contemporary ecological writings, the descriptions of plants and herbs provide traces of human activities and native culture. Such an indexical relationship, on the one hand, reminds us of the modern literary trend in the early 20th century that treated botany as common and scientific knowledge. On the other hand, herbal knowledge has become a marked catalogue of human civilization at both literary and cultural venues in the 21st century. In fact, the ways herbs are categorized, planted, recorded, and used are substantially affected by the paradigm of knowledge, the level of civilization, and the relationship between power and culture. As Meng Yue aptly suggests, the intersection between botanical knowledge and civilization potentially represents the development of human consciousness and the prospect of future (Meng 410-411).

The association of knowledge of plants with level of civilization, according to Meng Yue, could be dated back to the 19th-century travel journal written by Robert Fortune (1812-1880) (Meng 408). At that time, tea, of all Chinese plants and herbs, became the measurement of Chinese civilization in regard to "civilized

nations" such as those of Western Europe. Although the industrial, political and legal situation rendered the 19th-century China "semi-civilized" in the eyes of Westerners, the knowledge and production of tea made Chinese civilization irreplaceable compared to other cultures(Meng 424). In her examination of herbal knowledge and the notion of "semi-civilized," Meng sees these levels of civilization as a mode of discourse rather than merely as a concept of colonialism or imperialism. She argues that civilization as a discourse helps us probe into the "production of modern botanical knowledge" and trace the origins and conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures (Meng 416). Meng's approach foregrounds the relationships between civilizations and the botanical knowledge developed in the modern context. Such relationships, we contend, continue to play a crucial role in contemporary Chinese society. Precisely, we will use the concept of indigenous botanical knowledge as an entryway to examine the 2019 Beijing Garden Expo and to uncover the expo's ideology that supports and advocates for the splendor of Chinese civilization.

The Garden Expo is a state-sponsored recurring "garden landscape fair" and has been held in 10 different cities in China since 1997. The Beijing 2019 Expo was hosted by the Chinese government and the Beijing Municipal People's Government. On its official website, the aims and goals of the event are described as such:

> It aims at boosting communication and cooperation between China and other countries in landscaping industries and displaying latest achievements in landscaping construction and management, as well as spreading landscape culture and ecological concepts. Besides, it also leads the trend of technological innovation; at the same time, it devotes to promoting the construction of energy-conserved and environmental friendly society so as to advance the coordinated development of social economy, population, natural resources and environment (Lyu, *The Beijing 2019 Expo*).

It seems that the statement proclaims three major goals for the Expo: promoting technology, spreading Chinese culture, and drawing international attention. It is through the visualization of herbs and botanical knowledge that these goals will be realized. The entire Expo is composed of four pavilions, of which the Chinese pavilion is the largest. The Chinese pavilion consists of 34 individual theme gardens that feature the plants, environment, and landscape of each province in China. These gardens are supposed to be not only a site of leisure and beauty but also an embodiment of traditional Chinese culture. For instance, the Jiangsu Garden has

replicated the famous Suzhou-style architectures, and planted various herbs and flowers throughout the landscapes of the garden. When describing the design of the garden, the introduction on the official website draws the visitors' attention to the culture-related elements, such as couplets, Suzhou-style embroidery, tea and floral art. Above all, the garden is named a "poetic and picturesque province," which highlights the connection between the display of plants and landscape and classical literature and paintings.

The cultural history of herbs displayed in the Chinese pavilion goes back to 1600 BCE. For example, in the main exhibition hall, there are sculptures of ancient Chinese characters found on the oracle bones that are related to herbs, plants, and gardening. These sculptures are surrounded by pictorial introduction of the herbs mentioned in *The Classic of Poetry*. By the side of each live herb specimen, the prose text of introduction for each type of herbs (origin, medical use, and social function) is enhanced by original quotes of poetic lines from *The Classic of Poetry*. In addition, the exhibition in the Chinese Pavilion gives prominence to the traditional paintings that feature mountains, rivers, and plants. The art work that catches visitors' eyes is the replica of the Song Dynasty painting, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (*Qianli jiangshan tu*). According to the official website, the replica exemplifies the combination of modern technology and traditional art, since the artwork uses preserved fresh moss as its main material to recreate the original painting. The organizers would not let this minor detail escape the visitors' attention because it is a good example of the tradition of herbs being kept alive by modern technology. Other than the artistic values of herbs, their cultural and social functions are a major theme emphasized in the Expo. To this end, the Expo specifically designs an outdoor theme garden, "The Hundred Herbs Garden" which grows a variety of medicinal herbs, such as carum carvi, basil, and radix isatidis. It is explained that the herb garden is designed to educate the visitors with traditional Chinese herbal knowledge as well as to promote Chinese medicine to the world. While visiting the garden, visitors shall have the immersive experience to see how herbal medicine is grown, processed, and utilized. In this process, visitors are no longer the passive receivers of information; rather, they become subjects of culture as they participate in the procedure of cultural (re)production themselves.

Apart from displaying Chinese culture to its own citizens, the Expo aims to present China as an eco-friendly, techno-advanced, and culturally powerful nation vis-à-vis other countries in the world. In order to attract international attention, the Expo establishes an international pavilion, the second largest in size, and welcomes foreign designers, suppliers and exhibitors. Interestingly, the official website draws

a comparison between China and the U.S., attempting to reveal the "harmony in diversity between the Oriental and Western gardening spaces." By constructing an exhibition garden that grows plants from both China and the U.S., the organizer argues that, despite the "differences" between the two countries, the fact that native plants of China have thrived in the U.S indicates how "Chinese native plants influence public space design" in western countries. Expanding the herb imagery into the intercultural space, plants and herbs are now regarded as a tool for exploring the interaction between Chinese civilization and Western cultures.

The narrative of herbs and plants orchestrated by the official organizer and its state sponsor begins with their history that juxtaposes the written text with the live example, continues with their privileged status to celebrate China's traditional culture and its modern achievements, and then ends with their reference to China's reach and influence to the world. Herbs are things of natural beauty and also a token of civility within and without one's own culture. In term of displaying China to its own people and to the outside world, it could be argued that visualizing herbs in the 2019 Beijing Expo has become a process of interpellation,[7] in which herbs are vital to the performance of culture inscribed in the discourse of national pride in present-day China. In this process, herbs as an artistic and cultural sign mitigate the hint of hegemony inherently embedded in the narrative of claiming them as emblems of national pride. In one way or another, and much like the use of other cultural signs from Chinese tradition, herbs help reproduce the nationalist ideology by obscuring the relationship between a dominated state subject and a subjugated civilian object. Within the environment of immersion and affect created by the Expo, visitors/individuals recognize themselves as subjects located in the nationalist ideology and are incorporated into the power and social structure based on this very ideology.

Conclusion

From premodern to contemporary China, herbs undergo a long journey from articulating human emotions to reflecting on human activities. It is through this journey that herbs realize both a practical function as a material object and a symbolic function as a cultural sign. In this chapter, we traced the representation of herbs in Chinese literature and culture from the 7th century BCE to the 21st

7 Interpellation process was introduced by Louis Althusser in his 1972 essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser believes that the interpellation process enables individuals to recognize themselves as subjects while being "complicit" with state ideologies that dominate them.

century. By analyzing herbs in written text and visual exhibition, we explored herbs' metaphoric and symbolic connotations, and how they persist or evolve in the face of or in response to social and political changes in Chinese society.

In classical poetry, herbs are used as a symbol for humanity's beauty and virtue. While writing poetry, poets tend to articulate their innermost emotions and ambitions through the mirror image of natural objects such as herbs. Therefore, the poetic writing of herbs consolidates the literary convention of "poetry expresses intent," which enables the poet to speak in metaphoric language tactfully and circuitously. Herbs thus are coded and reformulated into a set of symbols in order to transmit the poets' interior thoughts in moments when their sensibilities are held back by social or political restrictions.

Entering the modern era, the sentiments of anti-tradition spurred reform-minded intellectuals to creatively reassess the pre-existing modes of lyrical writing. Responding to literary innovation, herbs have been employed as a specific kind of modern knowledge that represents rational and scientific thinking. Being upheld as an agent for Chinese modernity, herbs in literature at the same time invoke a sense of nostalgia in the face of massive social turbulence. It is the tension between onward- and backward-looking that instills meanings to herbs in modern Chinese literature and, to a certain extent, has made herbs an overdetermined signifier.

Yet, as the revolutionary enthusiasm faded away in the 1980s, Chinese writers began to reemphasize the association between herbs and lyricism with an aim to deconstruct the grand historical narrative of enlightenment or high socialism. By restoring the connection between herbs and human desire, herbs resume the key role in writing individual-centered literature. At the same time, in the face of a heightened environmental awareness, herbs appear more frequently in contemporary ecological writings. In this context, herbs are not only a symbol of human feelings but also a testimony of human activities. Through visualizing herbs in contemporary urban space, herbs have been assigned with two roles: as the miracle cure constituting an essential part of Chinese medical culture, and as the exquisite flora which bears the aesthetic values at the heart of traditional painting and architecture. Either way, herbs became a standard bearer for native and national cultural heritage and have been prominently used in contemporary China's nationalist discourse.

Above all, our discussion foregrounds the interrelation and interaction between humans and herbs in various forms of literature and at different sociocultural venues. Yet, herbs show a greater prospect in future research as we shift away from a human-centered point of view. The contemporary Hong Kong-based artist

Zheng Bo (1974-), for instance, probes into the potentiality of plants and envisages a larger worldview by extensively engaging with herbs in his artworks as a proactive response to the ever-escalating ecological crisis. For Zheng, accentuating the agency and self-containability of organisms like herbs is a good way for us to rectify the tendency of subjugating flora and fauna to human beings. In his own words, "ecological art practices as a whole is not an art school or an art movement, but a paradigm shift. The key is to extend the scale from humans/society to everything/ the Earth" (Zheng 5). Needless to say, Zheng's innovative approach to herbs undermines the hierarchical structure among living beings. His attempt to construct a symbiotic relationship not only among plants per se but also between plants and the human race calls for a new imagination in regard to the meaning and the significance of herbs to the human world.

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