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I certify that the exegesis entitled

FLOWERS AS SYMBOLS AND
METAPHORS IN CHINESE CULTURE

submitted for the degree of MASTER OF FINE ART (RESEARCH)

is the result of my own research, except where otherwise
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FLOWERS AS SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN CHINESE CULTURE

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the award of

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ABSTRACT

Chinese floral culture reveals a process of transferring flowers into cultural symbols and artistic metaphors. This transference takes place through juxtaposing verbal art with that of visual expression. Investigating the process of transference and juxtaposition will test three arguments. They include: the possibility of communication; a quest for the idealisation of the Chinese people; and the implementation of social, political and literacy power as a means for fulfilling the ideal. Juxtaposition implies contrast and a new relationship and metaphor suggests new insight and dialogue. By investigating these processes I am seeking to reveal a new paradigm for cultural understanding.

Ceramic flowers will be constructed as models and prototypes which will be formed into a visual thesis under the title of 'Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom.' The visual presentation does not directly fit within the Chinese or any particular cultural context, but attempts to propose a common language for cultural acquaintance as well as to promote a sense of awareness of cultural differences.

The installation consists of three groups of flower prototypes linked by the concept of the bridge. The bridge is often perceived as a medium for connection, extension and relating, but paradoxically and metaphorically it is also a channel for invasion, conquering and change. Different cultures are interconnected, overlapping and competing, therefore one needs to be aware of these ambiguous cultural relationships and the paradoxical effect of bridging.

The interplay between the ambiguous and the paradoxical is much more complex than we can imagine in reality. I will examine these dual processes through Chinese floral symbols and metaphors and their positive and negative outcomes. The temperament that underlines this examination will be one of empathy, an understanding of the complementary and interdependent nature of opposites which is fundamental to Chinese thought and philosophy.

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Figure 1

Tay Siew Cheng. A Rose. 2004.

Porcelain.

This is a distorted image of a ceramic flower which reveals a contradictory relationship between culture and nature.



Figure 2
Tay Siew Cheng. *Chrysanthemums*. 2004.
Porcelain.

INTRODUCTION



To cultivate trees you need ten years

To cultivate people you need a hundred years

- Chinese Proverb -

This research attempts to investigate a process of transforming flowers as cultural symbols into artistic metaphors, which takes place by juxtaposing verbal art forms with those of visual interpretations. The investigation will test three arguments: the possibility of communication; a quest for the idealization of the Chinese people; and the use of social, political and literacy power as a means of fulfilling personal or collective ideals. Through this project I hope to locate a reference point for communication through a common language, as the historical usage of floral symbolism has become, to a certain degree, an international language of interaction.

Different cultures are interconnected, overlapping yet often competing with each other. These interconnected and overlapping relationships contain elements for developing a common language for mutual reference. Art, for example, is one of the potential common languages for cultural exchange. Competition is very often perceived as a barrier for communication but I prefer to conceive it as a fertilizer for mutual growth between different cultures. This takes effect if we are sincere in knowing and learning from each other and are keen to draw on others' strengths to offset our own weaknesses. The main factor contributing to cultural discrimination and misunderstanding is not so much the difference itself but the attitudes of ignorance and arrogance in perceiving others. In my opinion, open dialogue is an effective tool for removing barriers for cultural understanding. Indeed, taking the initiative in communicating with another culture is a process of creating a new metaphor.

This investigation takes into account the formation and development of Chinese floral culture within a historical context and recaptures, as much as possible, the aesthetic and moral principles that underline its creation. I seek to understand how these principles and antiquities were perceived,

interpreted, transformed and integrated into the literati's floral culture. At the same time, I want to evaluate the process of how these ideas were and are attached to the various political and ideological formations and how they affect the larger society.

Based on the research, three groups of ceramic flowers have been constructed and elaborated into a visual thesis under the title of *Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom* (Figure 3). It is a process and activity of presenting a new metaphor by which I hope to propose a personal insight into cultural communication, the paradoxical ambiguous relationship between the ideal and reality, as well as between control and freedom.



Figure 3

Tay Siew Cheng. *Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom*. 2004.
Porcelain and Stoneware.

Ceramic art has been chosen as a medium for expression because clay is out of the earth; it originates from nature then is transformed into an artistic object by the process of shaping and firing. As a transformable material, clay can be shaped into an object by the artist's free will and

sympathetic understanding. The process of creation conveys a sense of control when I, as an artist, implement my knowledge and skill (power) in making and creating. Conversely, the artist also subjected to the physical factors such as the characteristics of clays and the vagaries of the kiln during firing.

Flowers come from nature and possess qualities of fragility and toughness in terms of their appearance and ability to grow in harsh environments. These qualities are conveyed in ceramic flowers through forms of abstraction. During the process of making and firing ceramic flowers I found a channel for communication with materials, as well as with other artists. Therefore I believe that art can be a common language for cultural dialogue and understanding.

The visual presentation does not intend to fit within the Chinese or any particular cultural context, but represents an attempt to propose a new paradigm for cultural understanding. I believe that cultural communication takes place if we sometimes shift away from our own culture in order to give room for knowing others, without bias or perceived stereotype.

The installation consists of three groups of ceramic objects that will be connected by the concept of a bridge. It is a metaphorical interpretation as the term bridge has both positive and negative references. The bridge is a medium for connection, extension and relating, however it is also a channel for invasion, conquering and change. The installation attempts to induce a new and profound insight into cultural acquaintance. It is a suggestion for seeking alternatives in perception, as well as thinking beyond the metaphorical framework if necessary.

Symbols and metaphors indicate human manipulation of verbal and visual interpretation. The aim is to communicate, inculcate and cultivate social or personal ideas and values, by which the concrete conveys the abstract. The communication was hierarchical in the Chinese context, as the message was transmitted from the literati, who developed the symbols and assigned meanings to them, for every level of the society. The literati were a group of well-educated people who managed to influence and in some cases manipulate society, by implementing their learned knowledge and well-developed writing skills. The value system that underlines Chinese flower symbolism is not exclusively from the ideas of the literati but is an integration of the elitist culture with folk art. However, it was the intellectual elites who controlled and developed the system of writing, recording, interpreting and defining that created a literati flower culture, which subsequently, reinforced their thinking and practices. Therefore, to understand the literati value system is a gateway to understanding Chinese culture.

Chinese culture is basically a process of constructing, developing and handling relationships. There are relationships between humankind and nature, between individuals and their society, also between the outer and the inner self. The fundamental force motivating Chinese society is the seeking of 'order' transformed into subtle rules of what constitutes harmony. This is the fundamental principle governing all realms of Chinese relationships. No relationship in Chinese philosophy is perceived as a dichotomy but is seen as an integrated and complementary association. Confucianism and Taoism, two influential Chinese philosophies, both propose that the complementary nature of opposites is the fundamental force that envelopes the totality of existence within the human world. The understanding of the complementary and

interdependent nature of opposites, the interplay between positive and negative, is fundamental to Chinese thinking. It is a dynamic approach for dealing with conflict and contradiction, although sometimes it remains merely an ideal because it is difficult to look at negative issues positively.

I was born in Singapore, a multi-racial society in which people from various cultures are immersed in a process of integration. I have experienced and understood the essential nature of cultural dialogue and understanding. As an Overseas Chinese woman I appreciate Chinese ancient wisdom concerning the complementary nature of opposites that implies an equal relationship between women and men. Unfortunately, this idea only remains as an ideal in nearly every culture. As a student of art, I am inclined to agree with the Chinese philosophical teaching that *life is art and art is life*. Although various philosophers and artists throughout the long course of Chinese history have proclaimed the intimate relationship between art and life, there is still room for contemplation. Based on my personal belief, I suggest that art, in certain conditions, is a common language for interaction. Art in this aspect is defined as both a process and a product of thought and it should not be confined to in any particular forms or format. Secondly, the ideal and reality should be in constant negotiation and they have to be examined with a sense of sincerity. Thirdly, we need freedom to act but this should be acquired on the basis of assuming self-responsibility and self-discipline.

As a person who is outside the mainstream of Chinese culture I have the advantage of having a distance for observing this culture as objectively as possible. However, I was embraced by a sense of ignorance regarding

Chinese floral symbols and metaphors when I commenced my research, until I read *The Chinese Flower Culture* (Goody, 1993).

In his research on Chinese flower culture, Jack Goody argues that this culture reveals a process of using power as a means to control. The power is derived from the mastery of skills and the accumulation of knowledge in horticulture and literacy. It is manifested by a process of growing out-of-season flowers and by the domination of linguistic and visual systems of developing symbols and attaching symbolic meanings. These processes were mainly in the hands of the Chinese literati 'for whom the maintenance of symbolic value was also the maintenance of political and economic influence.' (Goody, 1993: 369) The literati were a highly respected social group who were able to influence or, in some cases, control society by exercising their literary knowledge and writing skills. Writing as a tool of power is indicated by the literati's possession of skill in written and verbal expression which enabled them to convince the people to believe in their ideas.

I agree with Goody that the use of power in control has created a negative consequence or distortion, but I believe that both positive and negative effects should be examined with the understanding of the Chinese philosophy of complementarity of the two oppositions in mind.

I do not deny that the use of symbols and metaphors in human civilization has created a system and order for maintaining harmonious human relationships, or that we do need some sort of control and or discipline in reality, both personal and social. Indeed, the claim of absolute freedom does not sound convincing to me, because free will without self-control and responsibility is more harmful than we can imagine. Absolute

freedom implies inequality, if every individual acts without considering others. However, the key is to find a balance in life when people who have power and control distort reality.

Goody also argues that the symbolic meanings of flowers 'were uniformly positive, harbingers of good, concerned with the three basic wishes of mankind for longevity, happiness and fertility.' (Goody, 1993: 370) The three wishes are not particularly Chinese; they are universal. However, the uniformly positive symbolic meanings are uniquely Chinese. In my opinion, this represents a quest for idealization that includes an idealized world which perfect men and women inhabit. Goody suggests that there is a process of 'idealization of nature' conveyed in flower arrangement, garden art and paintings. However, I propose that the process of idealisation should be examined on a holistic scale, the idealisation of life itself.

The Chinese believed and some still do, that life is meaningless without the ideal. The importance of having an ideal in life was continuously emphasized throughout my education in my school textbooks and writing projects. The title 'My Ideal of Life' appeared again and again in various written projects, from primary to high school. My teacher took every opportunity to remind me about that idea even after I joined their profession. I do believe that the ideal gives motivation and direction for life, but the problem is that reality often does not synchronize with the ideal. As a consequence, it can throw us into confusion. Therefore, there is a need to locate a point of balance between ideal and reality.

My exegesis will be presented in the following way: Chapter One, *Research Hypothesis and Definitions*, aims to clarify the terms used in my

research. Chapter Two, *Flowers as Symbols and Metaphors in Chinese Culture*, demonstrates the underlying value systems, through investigation of the context of the development of the floral symbolism. As well, it examines the process of transference and juxtaposition of verbal expressions with visual ones in which floral symbols and metaphors evolve. Chapter Three, *Life is Art – Art is Life*, presents some influential artists for reference and discusses the fundamental concepts underlying my visual project. Chapter Four, *Studio Project – Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom*, is a visual interpretation of self-discovery. The conclusion presents a summary of my findings.



Figure 4
Li Di. Red and White Hibiscus. c.a. 1197.
Pair of Album Leaves. Ink and Colours on Silk.
-Miyagawa, 1983-

CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND DEFINITIONS



Lament for the White-haired Man

The blossoms of the plum and peach east of Lyoyang town
Are flying hither and thither, where will they come down?
The lovely maids of Luoyang whisper many a sigh,
As pensively they sit and watch the falling flowers fly.
This year the flowers have fallen, their colours have faded too;
Next year when they bloom again, who will admire the view?
We've seen men chop for firewood the pine and cypress trees;
We've heard of fields of mulberry transmuted into seas.
Men of old have left Luoyang to return here never more;
Men today still see the peach as in the day of yore.
Day by day, year by year, the same flower bloom and blow;
But year by year, day by day, all men must come and go.

Liu Yuxi from the Tang Dynasty

Li, 1988: 171□

In this exegesis, I propose that the Chinese flower culture reveals a process of transferring flowers into cultural symbols and artistic metaphors, which takes place by juxtaposing verbal art with visual form. Three claims will be examined in the investigation of this transference process. Firstly, this process suggests a possibility for communication. Next, the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of flowers in the Chinese culture are generally positive, which indicates that there is a quest for an idealized world that includes perfect men and women. Lastly, the cultural practices of using flowers as cultural symbols and artistic metaphors that reflect a concept of idealization have evolved into a process of control. This process is made possible only by the use of social, political and literary power, which sometimes results in distorting nature.

Floral symbols and metaphors contain both natural and cultural elements, thus communication between nature and culture can be developed. Nature in this research refers to 'everything in the world that is neither caused nor controlled by human beings, including all animals, plants and natural phenomena.' (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1987: 958) The current relationship between culture and nature (including human nature and nature as a force) is basically that of human beings as the conquerors and nature as the conquered. The relationship can be improved if we, as cultural beings, take the initiative in promoting a sense of awareness and empathy towards nature. Nature also refers to human characteristics, such as feelings of love toward the beloved and hate towards enemy. Therefore a dialogue between the inner self and the outer reality is required for improving the quality of life.

The Chinese quest for idealization has led to two outcomes: positively, it gives rise to order and harmonious relationships; and negatively, it is a

possibility for distorting perception and can affect human attitudes and behaviour. Whether the outcome is positive or negative the consequence is the same. Conquering and changing nature to fulfill human desires and the manipulation of individuals in order to maintain social control is central to the notion of control through power.

It is the literati who possessed literary power, who recorded Chinese history, and who elaborated their thoughts, ideology and value systems. Therefore Chinese culture or more specifically its floral symbols and metaphors is basically culture of the literati, with the addition of some elements from folk culture. The term 'Chinese' in this research project refers to the 'Han Chinese' named after the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220).

The literati were a promising social group who took advantage of the state-run examination system to gain political and social power by serving as government officials. They performed as a bridge between the Emperor who headed the political system and the society as a whole. By implementing their learned knowledge and writing skills, they were empowered to influence and, in some cases, to manipulate society.

In this project, symbol refers to the use of objects or signs to represent human beliefs, emotions and experiences. Therefore the world becomes meaningful and human action becomes purposeful. The use of symbols to indicate cultural ideology or values is universal but the choice of objects and their assigned meanings varies from culture to culture. The meanings of symbols are usually understood by a shared culture or studied within a given cultural context. The Chrysanthemum, for example, is the emblem of joviality and of reclusion in the East, but it is often related to the

deceased in the West. Jasmine represents moonlight in the grove in Indian culture, while it is an emblem of beauty in China. Jasmine is also a symbol of heavenly felicity in the Christian religion, yet symbolizes despair and illusion in Arabian culture. This variation of meaning demonstrates the significance of knowing and understanding a foreign culture as a building block for establishing a tolerant world.

Metaphor is a kind of linguistic approach that belongs to rhetoric or a trope. Etymologically, metaphor derives from the Greek word *metafora*; which means to 'carry over'. In contemporary terms it can be interpreted as a method to 'transfer' or 'convey' meaning from one area to another by figurative expression. Aristotle defined metaphor as the transference of a name to some other object that denotes a process. It is a creative process of insight into two sets of objects, developing new concepts, which draw similarity out of differences by deriving mutual references from the related objects. It is a process of simplification and integration. The major functions of metaphors are creation and communication, drawing from differences to create new concepts and to convert the abstract into concrete for comprehension. Therefore metaphor implies change.

Feinstein (1998: 63) gives Langer's (1957) definition of metaphor as both a process and a product of thought. As a process of thought, 'metaphor reorganizes, condenses, and vivifies, allowing new insights to emerge and different or deeper levels of meaning to be tapped.' As a product of thought, 'Art is a metaphor for what the artist know about the life of feeling.' (Feinstein, 1998: 63) Based on this definition, I propose that the Chinese metaphors examined in this research will not be studied from a linguistic approach but as the process and product of thought, revealing the Chinese value system and its aesthetic concepts.

Symbols and metaphors contain the ideas used for comparing and contrasting the relationship between ideals and reality in life. The process of juxtaposing verbal and visual art for inculcating, cultivating and maintaining social order, as well as constructing socially accepted human behaviours and relations is basically a metaphorical process. This is based on the definition given by Paul Ricoeur who was mentioned by Kao in his paper, *Comparative Literature and the Ideology of Metaphor, East and West*. Ricoeur suggests that the metaphorical process is a process of cognition, imagination and feeling. (<http://clwebjournal.likb.purdue.edu> 2003) Both life and art are part of a metaphorical process in which they mirror and supplement each other. By actively and enthusiastically engaging in the mutually enhancing process of life and art our scope of understanding will be widened, by practising lateral thinking and artistic imagination. This process might result in self-discovery, and if the interpretation is referentially adequate, the producer and the receiver each enrich the other.

I have mentioned in my proposal that flowers with their attached meanings are elevated to the status of cultural symbols and artistic metaphors by a process of juxtaposing verbal and visual art. In this research, Chinese language and poetry are the verbal art forms selected for investigation. Visual art mainly refers to Chinese paintings, but in some cases, ceramics, garden art and the use of flowers in special events will be examined as well. Juxtaposition highlights contrasts or reveals new relationships. The process of juxtaposing two art forms is a continuous process of interaction, consequently new perceptions and thinking will evolve if it is insightful enough.

The status of flowers as natural objects and as cultural representations is rather ambiguous. Insight into floral symbolism is an opportunity to rethink our cultural and personal relationships, as well as to investigate the close link between art and life.

How life and art function to enrich and enhance each other is an essential theme for exploration that will be further discussed in chapter three, *Life is art, Art is life*. In the next chapter I will proceed to investigate the process of transforming and juxtaposing and its evolution.



Figure 5

Bride, Bridegroom, Pageboy and Flower Girl. 1920-30.

A Wedding Photograph of Mr. And Mrs. Chia Teck Chye of Singapore.

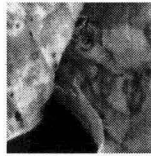
Straits Chinese.

□Ho, 1983: 42□

*This photograph comprises all the elements of my research:
flowers, symbols, metaphors, life and art.*

CHAPTER TWO

FLOWERS AS SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN CHINESE CULTURE



The Land of Exile

Methinks there's a genius
Roams in the mountains,
Girdled with ivy
And robed in wisteria,
Lips ever smiling,
Of noble demeanour
Driving the yellow pard,
Tiger attended,
Couched in a chariot
With banners of cassia,
Cloaked with the orchid,
And crowned with azaleas;
Culling the perfume
Of sweet flowers, he leaves
In the heart of a dream-blossom,
Memory haunting.

By Qu Yuan 4th Century BC

The use of floral symbols for articulating human desires has a long and continuous history in Chinese culture. Floral motifs have appeared extensively in Chinese decorative art, paintings, poetry, architecture and gardens since antiquity. The long-established system of horticulture and domestication of plants offered the Chinese diverse varieties of flowers for various art forms. According to Li, the author of the book *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, Peach Blossom, Chrysanthemum, Lotus Flower, Peony, Plum Blossom, Cymbidium (Orchid) and Tiger Lily have been domesticated as garden flowers since 1000 BC.

This highly developed horticulture 'was promoted, intellectually and practically, by the literati using painting, the written word and the cultivation of miniature and specialist varieties.' (Goody, 1993: 347) The involvement of scholars in horticulture and related activities marks a special direction in the establishment of Chinese floral culture. It constructed a bridge between botany and art as well as giving rise to the integration of literati culture with those of the common people. This is an important aspect for clarification before further discussion of Chinese floral symbolism, because this link reveals a fundamental aspect of the Chinese cultural approach of integration.

Before discussing the process of transforming and juxtaposition I will examine the context of the evolution of Chinese floral symbolism and its underlying value systems.

In Chinese folklore, flowers are often personified as men and women; they are believed to function under the management of *Huashen* (花神), the goddess of all flowers. Historically, the 12th day of the second moon (Lunar calendar) was the birthday of the flowers in China.

This was widely celebrated in the past but has been forgotten. Princess Der Ling of the Qing dynasty (AD 1664 – 1911) mentioned in her book, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, a royal ceremony in the palace celebrating the birthday of flowers. On that day, she wrote, all the Court ladies would accompany the Dowager Empress Cixi to tie red silk ribbons on every single tree and plant, ‘it made a very pretty picture, with the bright costumes of the Court ladies, green trees and beautiful flowers.’ (1924: 349) The celebration was followed by a theatrical performance of the story of the tree and flower fairies celebrating their birthday. The festival was also celebrated in the Song dynasty (AD 960 – 1279). On a designated day, people went to the gardens to admire flowers and trees then carried out a ritual ceremony.



Figure 6

Anonymous. Princess Der Ling and the Dowager Empress Cixi
Descending Peony Hall at the Summer Palace.

□Valder, 1999: 40□

It is difficult to confirm the precise date when Chinese engaged flowers in cultural activities, but that it began in antiquity is clear. The ancient festival of Purgation which was practised around or even earlier than the Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220) was a festival which combined activities of revelry, courtship, sex and care for the dead. (Bodde, 1975: 274) This is mentioned in one of the Chinese classics, the Book of Poetry (11th – 7th century BC). Flower was given to the beloved as the overture of love.

When the *Chen* and *Wei* are in full flood,
(*Chen* and *Wei* are two rivers in north central *Henan* in China)
Then boys and girls pluck *chien* flowers.
The girl says, "Have you been to look?"
The boy says, "I have indeed."
"And shall we then go again to look?"
Beyond the *Wei* it is very open and pleasant."
That boy and that girl, together they besport themselves.
The one gives the other a peony.
(Bodde, 1975: 274)

Floral motifs are also closely associated with Chinese written language. The Chinese character *li* (禮) literary means rite, which is the focus in Confucius' teaching of etiquette. This consists of a radical on the left (示) that indicates an 'altar' suggesting a religious meaning of sacrifice; and an image on the right that shows a bunch of flowers (曲) on a vase (豆) that represents "a vase full of flowers to be offered as a sacrifice to the gods." (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) I do not know when the word was constructed but this example proves that the Chinese have associated language with floral or plant motifs from time immemorial. The association also appeared on other art forms like pottery. According to a Chinese historian of art history, Li Zehou, some vein-like patterns on

pottery from the Neolithic Age ‘were modeled on the veins of leaves.’ (Li, 1988: 33) Although Chinese floral symbolism were fully developed during the Song and Ming dynasties around the tenth to seventeenth centuries, the involvement of flowers in decoration and cultural functions definitely began from antiquity.

There is a wealth of Chinese words associated with flowers in metaphorical expressions. For example, the Chinese name of China, *Zhonghua* (中华), is a disyllabic word that when combining *Zhong* (中) (means central) and *hua* (华) (originally means flower) gives a suggestion that China is the ‘Centre of Flowers.’ Another disyllabic word *Lanzhi* (兰芝) associates *lan* (Orchid) and *zhi* (iris) to indicate an ideal relationship between a wise man (orchid) and a beautiful woman (iris). It is because the orchid symbolizes perfect scholars and iris represents delicate women. The word *Baihua-zhengyan* (百花争艳) literally means flowers bloom in a riot of colour but metaphorically is interpreted as a group of beautiful women competing to outshine each other. *Baihua* (百花) means ‘hundred flowers’ that symbolize a group of beautiful women. *Zhengyan* (争艳) means competes to outshine others.



Figure 7
Tang Yin □1470-1523□ Concubines of Last Emperor of Chu.
Ink and Colour.
<http://www.chinapage.com> 2004□

Confucius was an active educator in the sixth century BC. He described the pleasure of meeting good friends as entering a room full of *lan* flowers (the Chinese fragrant orchids). Metaphorically, the room full of *lan* flowers indicates a morally fine environment. The Chinese orchid as a symbol of a man of high reputation is imaginatively transferred into a metaphor that elaborates an idealized morally fine environment; one that is occupied by a group of morally refined gentlemen.

Women and flowers share the same verbal language. The flower is called *hua* (花) in the Chinese language and there are many words constructed

with the characters *hua* to form disyllabic or polysyllabic words carrying metaphorical meanings in Chinese language. Figure 8 shows a portrait of an Empress of the Song dynasty and two ladies-in-waiting. The flowers on her robe and the caps of the two attendants are brilliant in colours and delicate in design. It suggests a close relationship between flowers and women.



Figure 8
Anonymous. The Empress, Consort of Song Ren Zong. 11th Century.
Hanging Scroll. Ink and Colour on Silk.
-Fong and Watt, 1996: 145-

The association with flowers is not the privilege of women; many flowers are symbolically and metaphorically related to men as well. Poet Qu Yuan (340-278 BC) decorated himself with fragrant herbs and flowers to ‘symbolize his virtues of righteousness and justice.’ (Chan 1980:101) He also cultivated Orchids as an act to convey his effort to attain a perfect

personality. The hermit poet Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian) (AD 378-427) in the Jin dynasty (AD 265-420) often expressed his intimate love of Chrysanthemum in his poetry. Both poets describe in their poetry the eating of Chrysanthemum petals as a symbolic expression of their noble and reclusive personality. In this aspect, the two poets had promoted the Chrysanthemum and Orchid as the symbols of the recluse, and of the perfect man with firm moral principles.



Figure 9

Chen Hongshou. *The Poet Tao Qian with a Chrysanthemum*. 17th Century.

Detail from the Scroll Homecoming

□Keswick, 2003: 94□

The union of a perfect man and a perfect woman is an idealized relationship. The Orchid, as a flower of a perfect and noble scholar, has been grouped with Iris that symbolizes feminine beauty and forms a

disyllabic word *lan-zhi* in Chinese language to represent wise men and beautiful women. A perfect man is a person who is the sum total of a scholar, poet, painter and statesman. That means he is capable and artistic in dealing with all aspects of life.

The symbolic meanings of flowers speak of the cultural expectations of Chinese women and men. Plum blossom, the very love of the Chinese people, is a symbol of perfect human beings, such as purity, courage to endure hardship and female chastity. Chrysanthemum and Orchid are often related to men of literacy and perfection. Peach Blossom, the Chinese Narcissus, Day Lily, Hibiscus and Jasmine are common symbols of feminine beauty, chastity, charm and purity. Beauty and fertility of women appear to be the common meanings carried by floral symbols translating a message of the position of women in the Chinese society. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be successful in their careers, therefore Apricot Blossom symbolizes a successful candidate in examination while the Osmanthus flower represents good luck in official promotion. Of course, in all of this both women and men are required to be morally upright.

In his essay, *Peach Blossom Spring*, the hermit scholar Tao Yuanming told a story of a fisherman who accidentally entered an unknown village where groves of Peach Blossoms were in full bloom. The residents in that village were the descendants of a group of people who escaped from war in ancient time. They lived in great harmony but had lost contact with the present world. It is a lost horizon or a utopia in the Chinese context. The story suggests that the past is better than the present and it provides both hope and disappointment for those who quest for this land of peace, because utopia is both a good place and a non-place by the definition

given by Sir James Mean (<http://www.euro.net>). It is, perhaps, the Taoist concept of simple life. In the Book of Ethics, *Daodejing*, which it is believed was written by Laozi (Lao Tsu), more than two thousand years ago, there is an idealized country where 'people take death seriously and do not travel far.' They are happy to live a simple life and 'though they live within sight of their neighbours' still 'leave each other in peace while they grow old and die.' (Feng and English, 1972: Chapter 80)

The poet Wang Wei in the Tang dynasty wrote a poem with a similar title telling a similar story of the discovery of a utopia. His poetry narrates a fisherman who traveled along the river where 'on both banks peach blossoms enclose the ancient ford' and he found a group of people who settled here in order to 'escape from disaster'; in isolation, 'they became immortal and so did not return.' (Yu, 1980: 60) *Taohuayuan*, the Peach Blossom Spring hence became synonymous with utopia in Chinese culture. That has given inspiration to various poets and artists for further interpretation (Figure 11).

A Chinese garden, or more specifically a literati garden (Figure 9), is a human-made utopia, an idealized world (Figure 10). Architecturally, the garden is often attached to the house and yet enclosed by its own wall and can only be entered by a separate door. It is a place for retreat and solitude, which is a 'taohuayuan' or a 'Peach Blossom Spring' at home. It is a complementary relationship between Confucianism and Taoism in practice. Pine, Bamboo, Chrysanthemum and Plum Blossom are the common plants that grew in the literati garden because they are the 'four gentlemen' in floral symbolism, indicating nobility and uprightness in human character. Peony, as a symbol of wealth and feminine beauty mostly appears in the women's garden.



Figure 10

Qiu Ying 阇. 1510-51 *The Historian Sima Guang in his Home-made Pavilion.*

Ink and Colour.

阇Keswick, 2002: 177阇

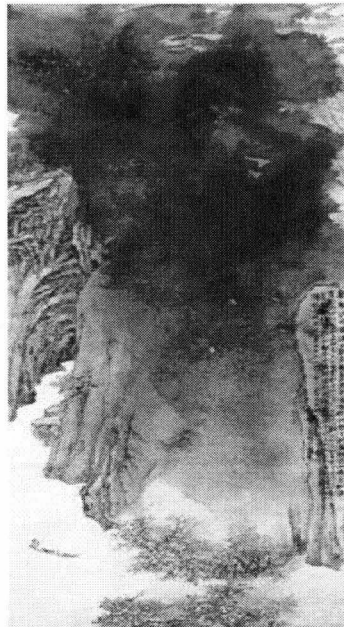


Figure 11

Zhang Daqian. *Peach Blossom Spring*. 1983.

Hanging Scroll. Ink and Colour on Paper.

阇<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu> 2004阇

The fundamental ideas underlying the Chinese floral symbols and metaphors are Confucianism as a dominant influential element, together with Taoism and the incoming religion, Buddhism. In my opinion, Chinese society is basically moulded under the teaching of Confucianism although Taoism and Buddhism are appealing to Chinese scholars, but are basically conceived as a guideline in relations, especially with nature in terms of inner self and physical environment. The symbolic meanings of floral symbols justify the profound influence of Confucianism on Chinese people in every aspect of their lives.

Confucius believed in building a world where people lived in harmony. It is an ideal society where people morally relate to each other by maintaining appropriate relationships. There are five pairs of relationships in Confucian teaching which include ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and that between friends. It is a hierarchical relationship in which genders, social status and age are the decisive elements. For example, son obeys the father and a wife is submissive to her husband. However, a person who is superior in the paired relationship, such as ruler and father, is expected to perform his assigned duty in return. Everybody knows his or her position and duties and perform their roles with sincerity in this system. In order to give a perfect performance in life every individual is required to undergo a process of self-cultivation; it is a life-long process of striving to be a 'superior man' or a 'gentleman' who 'cultivate themselves morally, who participate in the correct performance of the rites, who show filial piety and loyalty where these are due and who have cultivated humaneness.' (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) Each individual possesses the potential of becoming a superior man through education but not by birth.

Tao (道) in Taoism means the 'way' or the order in which things happen which indicates a philosophy of life as well as approaches to deal with life issues. Taoists look on humankind as an inseparable part of the great Universe in which it exists. The essence of life is to let things run their natural course. Life events are perceived as the outcome of constant negotiation between the two opposites, the negative and the positive, therefore, dichotomy is not convincing to them.

Buddhism as the incoming religion has a profound effect on Chinese floral culture: For example, the use of floral motifs in architecture, paintings, ceramic art, flower arrangement and garden art. The principles of Buddhist morality are harmlessness and moderation, which can be reached through practising moral discipline, meditation and pursuing wisdom. It has a close link with Taoism but differs from Confucianism, especially in the teaching of withdrawing from secular life. For instance, those who became monks or nuns have to leave their family and stay in temples.

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are often viewed exclusively in secular and religious polarity yet I believe there is a common ground for them to evolve into a cohesive Chinese culture. It is the seeking of order that is crucial. The processes of developing and maintaining order are demonstrated in the five relationships in Confucianism, the observance and following the natural law in Taoism, as well as the practice of meditation and self-discipline in Buddhism. The idea of seeking order is also manifested in a process of mastering the techniques of horticulture, flower art, writing and painting of flowers. Therefore, the Chinese realize that art and life are not two separate components; they complement each

other to construct a holistic whole. This line of thinking has been summed up in one statement, 'Art is life and life is art.'

The process of communication through floral symbolism is a continual one although the references change within time and place. The propaganda poster below designed and published by Communist China (Figure 12) shows three charming children posed together and partly framed by the blooming flowers. It demonstrates the Communist intention of cultivating international friendships that are expected to be like flowers in full bloom. There is definitely an air of sincerity in promoting friendships by the presence of children and flowers. The Chinese writing at the top of the right hand corner, *youyi hua kai bian tianxia* (友谊花开遍天下), literary means the friendships are flowering all over the world. Words and images here are mutually intensifying to influence the viewers. It is persuasive, powerful and convincing.

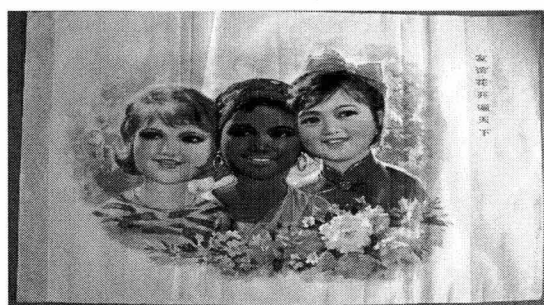


Figure 12

Youyi hua kai pian tianxia □International Friendship is in Full Bloom.

1978.

Cultural Revolution Propaganda Poster.

□<http://www.zitantiqie.com/c2179.html> 2004□



Figure 13

Mao Zedong and the Vermillion Plum Blossoms. 1968.

Cultural Revolution Poster Block Print.

<http://www.zitantique.com/c2266.html> 2004□



Figure 14

Mei Sheng. Shanghai YuXin Cigarette Advertising Girl. 1930.

Advertising Poster.

<http://www.zitantique.com/poster95.html> 2004□

Vermillion Plum Blossoms are often used as a substitute for Plum Blossoms as a symbol of perfect human beings. Mao Zedong commented metaphorically in his poem that these flowers are beautiful and yet modest in character. His reason is that they bloom in the cold winter without any intention of competing with other flowers. Various scholars have interpreted the praise as an implication of his determination to be humble even though he is politically powerful. Figure 13 is a poster showing Mao standing in front of the Vermillion Plum Blossoms. His statue-like position appears powerful and controlling but is softened by the beautiful flowers behind him and his warm smile. The poem together with the designed warm image of Mao and the floral symbol of the excellent quality of human character, are intermingled to construct an imposing idealized reality. The process of juxtaposing verbal and visual art forms is effective in creating a desired result of cultivating social and political ideals and ideology.

Inevitably, the poster (Figure 14), depicting a cigarette advertisement showing a beautiful girl sitting in front of a Plum Blossom has a strong similarity with the poster of Mao standing in front of the Vermillion Plum Blossoms. It is as difficult to relate the beautiful woman with the cigarette, as it is to associate Mao with the flower. However, the impression of the beauty of woman and flower Plum Blossoms are likely to affect our perception by cancelling the negative effect of smoking. In these two cases the reality is constructed by juxtaposing the beautified image and the persuasive language. Both words and images are effective tools for fulfilling social or personal desires in the hands of people who are equipped with the power of manipulating them.

Vermilion Plum Blossom has been extensively used as the symbol of perfect Communists. It is one of the well-known and powerful symbols in Communist propaganda. On the *Cultural Revolution Red Book Mao's Poems* (Figure 15), there is a portrait of Mao in a symbolized image of a 'rising sun' accompanied by a Vermilion Plum Blossom at the bottom. It presents visually an idealized Communist leader who is as powerful as a rising sun, and, at the same time, is physically and mentally strong in enduring hardship like Plum Blossoms that bloom beautifully in the severe cold winter. The shining sun, the flower and the book cover are all in red colour that is traditionally believed to be a symbol of strength and power. The three-in-one design conveys the idealized China under the power of an idealized leader.

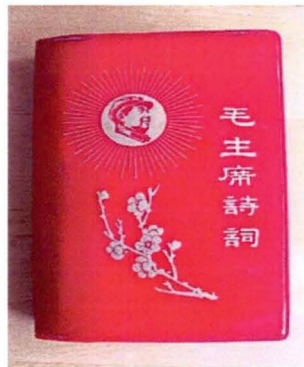


Figure 15

Chairman Mao's Poems. 1968.

Book Cover.

<http://www.zitantiq.com/c2187.html> 2004-

The flower as an object is elevated as a symbol by a process of juxtaposing verbal and visual art. It is a continuing process in which new ideas and new insights are developed and incorporated. The effect is powerful and persuasive because it definitely stimulates human sensory enjoyment. It is the joy of seeing, feeling and experiencing beauty. Since beauty is in the eye of the beholder it is, to a certain extent, indefinable.

The aesthetic idea of the Chinese is basically related to the sense of beauty. Beauty is like music that gives joy. The Chinese character for the word music is *Yue* (乐) that is sometimes defined as happiness. According to the classic, *Note on Music*, 'Music is born in the heart. When a person's emotions are aroused they turn into sound, and sound that has been refined is called music.' (Li, 1988: 72) Therefore, music comes from human feelings and it is beautiful. The definition relates not only to music but also to every aspect of Chinese life and art. *Wen Fu*, the scholar of Jin dynasty (265-420 AD) echoes the classical aesthetic concept when he defines poetry that 'originates from emotions and is beautiful...' (Li, 1988: 131) Since the concept of beauty is derived from music I suggest that Chinese aesthetics also includes elements of rhythm and movement. Therefore, art provides joy (feeling) through seeing and enjoying beauty that includes rhythm and movement. It is also spiritually appealing since art originated from ritual within the Chinese context.

Symbols and metaphors as tools of philosophy and aesthetic ideas speak a full picture of a Chinese idealized world. It is a continuous process that has formed the cultural root of Chinese people. If we agree that 'plants are both prisoners and shapers of their environment' (Low, Rodd and Beresford, 1994: 66) then human beings, I suggest, are the prisoners and creators of their own culture. If humankind is narrow in perception or

stereotyped toward other cultural groups, then they become the prisoners. Change only takes place if ideas from other cultures are welcomed.

The painting of figure 16 shows a style of painting that 'depart from tradition by being modeled in light and shade and placed in three-dimensional space.' However, the symbolic ideal of the Chinese Narcissus is still clearly shown by a skillfully designed composition in which 'scene is set with a classic firmness and idealization, showing perfect blooms and leaves, artfully rounded rocks...' (Cohen, 1987: 136)



Figure 16
Zhao Xiuhuan. *Spring*. 1983.
Ink and Colour on Paper.
[Cohen, 1987: 136]

While the traditional aesthetic concept of beauty and positiveness still dominate, the perception of Chinese people to the notion of beauty continues to be modified. Figure 17 is a painting done by a contemporary artist called Guan Wei, who uses classical Chinese flower painting techniques to argue the problem of trafficking in genetic plants. Figure 18 under the title *Twelve Flowers Month* by depicting flowers from different seasons on calendars is traditionally used for New Year celebration. Artist Chen Lingyang borrows the traditional theme, boldly questioning the position of women in the Chinese society. She has created a shocking effect by incorporating the Chinese narcissus with the image of menstruation demonstrating the interplay between reality and ideals. However, whatever ideas these contemporary artists are communicating, art is still a mirror of life.

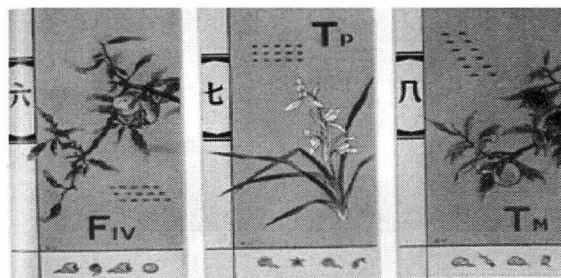


Figure 17

Guan Wei. *Exotic Flowers and Rare Grasses*. 2001.

Acrylic on Canvas.

Artlink, 2003: 49

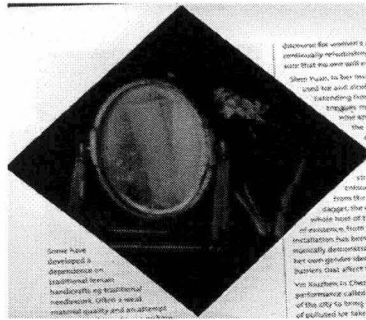


Figure 18
 Chen Lingyang. *Twelve Flowers Month*. 2001.
 C-print.
 Artlink, 2003: 64

Chinese culture is like a piece of colourful embroidery on which the diversity of thinking and practices are the threads. Diversity gives variety to life but at the same time has the potential to cause conflict. The process of integration of diversity was and hopefully will remain a cultural practice in Chinese culture. Investigating the process of integration and finding out how it worked in the past and how it can be continued in the present and future is beneficial, especially in the present era of chaotic interrelations and violence provoked by cultural conflicts

The processes of communication, idealization and the use of power in control need to be examined retrospectively. There is often a dichotomy between positive and negative aspects of life and the effect is paradoxical and somewhat ambiguous. These relationships will be further examined and discussed in chapter four, *Studio project – Let a hundred flowers bloom*. The next chapter, *Life is Art – Art is Life*, introduces some artists

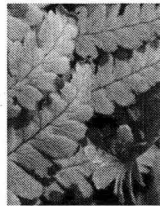
who have explored the same theme of floral symbolism and the basic aesthetic ideas of my artwork.



Figure 19
Tay Siew Cheng. A Flower in Transition. 2004.
Water Colour on Paper.

CHAPTER THREE

LIFE IS ART - ART IS LIFE



Tonight I walked into the sunset - Georgia O'Keeffe

□ Cowart and Hamilton, 1987: 2 □

Life and art are metaphorical in relation because both are processes and products of human creation. As a process, art helps us in dealing with life's events imaginatively and creatively and life is the unlimited source for artistic activities. As a product, both life events and art notify us of the effectiveness of our actions. They are in mutual reference in the way that they mirror and manifest each other.

In this chapter I would like to discuss artists who have influenced me philosophically and aesthetically. Through them I see the intimacy between art and life and the outcome of the interplay this brings.

Vincent Van Gogh was an artist who hardly ever sold a single artwork when he was alive. My question is, how did he go on when life was that depressive? Art, I believe, is the mechanism for performing his life. He has sentimentally said that his aim of making art was to touch people and make them feel deeply and tenderly through this medium. Does his work justify his expectation? The answer is positive. In 1990 I had a privileged opportunity to attend his exhibition, the Van Gogh Centenary 1990, in the Netherlands. The impact was inspiring. 'Awe' is the word I could use to sum up my feelings when I stood face-to-face with his original paintings and drawings. I was wondering what magic he had to touch people's heart? I believe that the effect comes from his precise translation of the language of nature which has been presented sincerely and intimately in his art. He had created a channel for viewers to participate in a dialogue with nature through his style. Charles Blanc advised him that, 'Style is reality writ large, simplified, stripped of all irrelevant detail, reduced to its original essence, its distinctive appearance.' (Arte 1990: 17) Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers and Irises (Figure 20 and 21) illustrate Blanc's advice where it is practised with full energy.

To my understanding, truthful to his feelings is the magic given by Van Gogh to touch people's hearts. It is expressed in a significant form through a process of simplifying complications and thereby unveiling the truth. It is this quality that has given my studio project of purpose – simple in form and conversant with the truth.

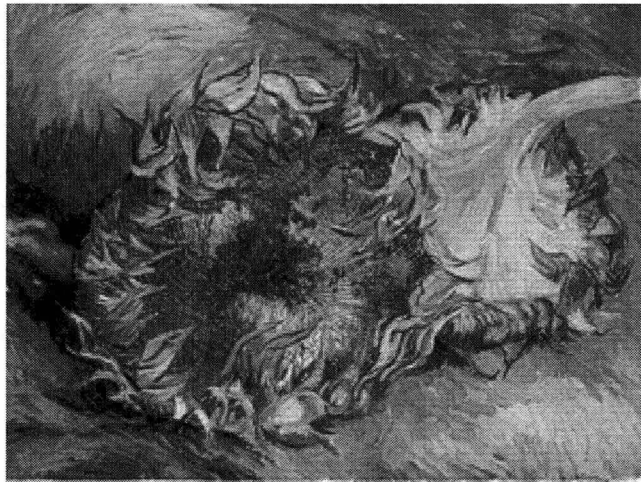


Figure 20

Vincent van Gogh. *Still-Life with two Sunflowers*. 1887.

Oil on Canvas.

□Gogh, 1990: 67□

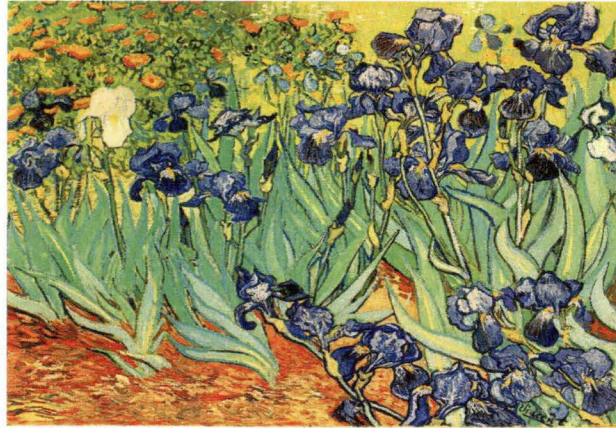


Figure 21
 Vincent van Gogh. *Irises*. 1889.
 Oil on Canvas.
 (<http://www.ibiblio.org>, 2004)

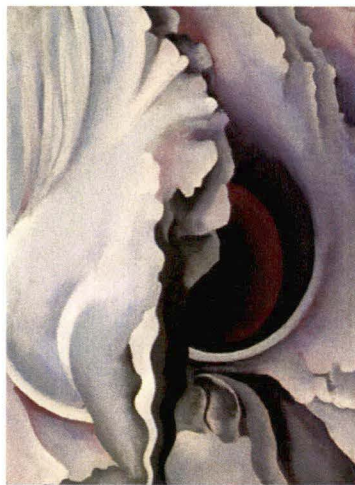


Figure 22
 Georgia O'Keeffe. *The Dark Iris No. 11*. 1926.
 Oil on Canvas.
 -Coward and Hamilton, 1987: 48-

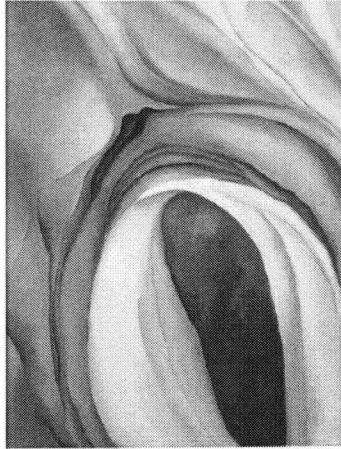


Figure 23
 Georgia O'Keeffe. *Music, Pink and Blue II*. 1919
 Oil on Canvas
 [Coward and Hamilton, 1987: 35]

Whenever I am looking at flowers in any art form Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of flowers in gigantic appearance (Figure 22 and 23) would come into my mind immediately. The reason for painting such huge sized flowers, according to Georgia O'Keeffe, is because they are too small to attract human attention. She made them large so others would see what she saw. O'Keeffe commented that there is no difference between looking at flowers and developing friendships because they both need time. Life can be visualized in art. A comment on her paintings put me in contemplation, 'With all fragility, a permanent image without season, wilt, or decay.' (Coward and Hamilton, 1987: 2) A sense of eternity is echoing.

Although I am moved by the art of Van Gogh and O'Keeffe I want to produce art that fetches my own personality. I hope others might see what

I see through my work, however, instead of making flowers large I make them small and delicate in appearance. I believe that there must be some other qualities possessed by flowers which makes us fall in love with them. Secondly, art should convey a sense of eternity.

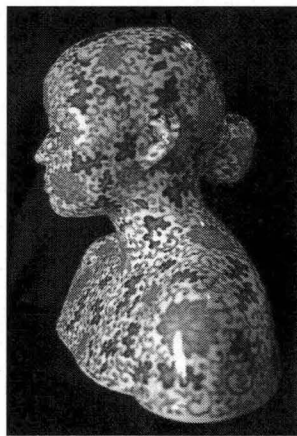


Figure 24

Ah Xian. *China China-Bust 51*. 1999.

Porcelain with Underglaze Blue and Overglaze Iron Red.

□Now & Now, *World Contemporary Ceramics*, 2003: 133□

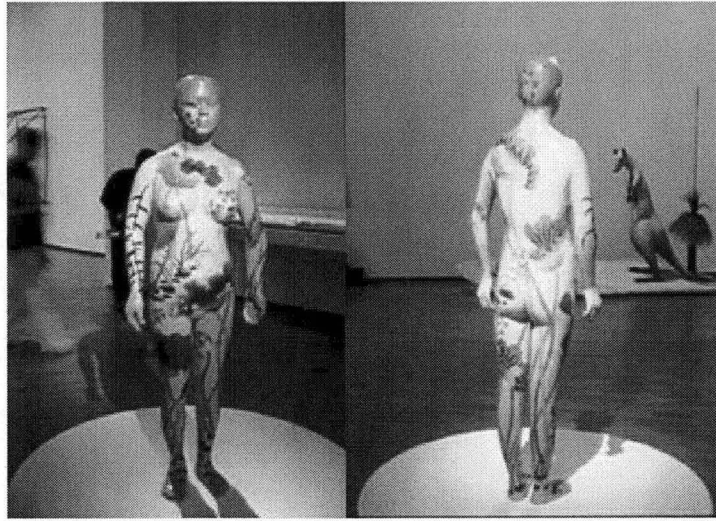


Figure 25

Ah Xian. *Human Human-Lotus*.

Porcelain.

□<http://www.asiasociety.net/arts/ahxian.html> 2004□

The ceramicist, Ah Xian, who creates clay busts and then inscribes Chinese traditional symbols on life-sized figures (Figure 24 and 25), has projected an interesting idea by placing the heritage on to human form. It is a gesture of embracing the past for contemplation of the present and proceeding into the future. It is definitely one of the many ways of initiating cultural communication by presenting one's culture to others; that is the aim of my research too. However, I differ from him by taking a position of not referring my work to any particular culture. This is important to me in terms of the taking initiative in cultural communication, that means moving away from our culture in order to leave room for knowing others.

I believe that human beings are common in nature, however are differentiated from each other by culture. We have a shared sense of the love of nature; nevertheless the choice of flowers and the way of expressing our affection for them differs from culture to culture. Therefore a common language can be developed on the basis of human nature.

Simplicity is the origin of complexity. It is the basic idea pervasive in my visual presentation. Beauty is the aesthetic concept embedded in this installation. I believe that the Chinese way of thinking positively is a strength for dealing with chaotic life, especially in the present world where it is full of war and violence.

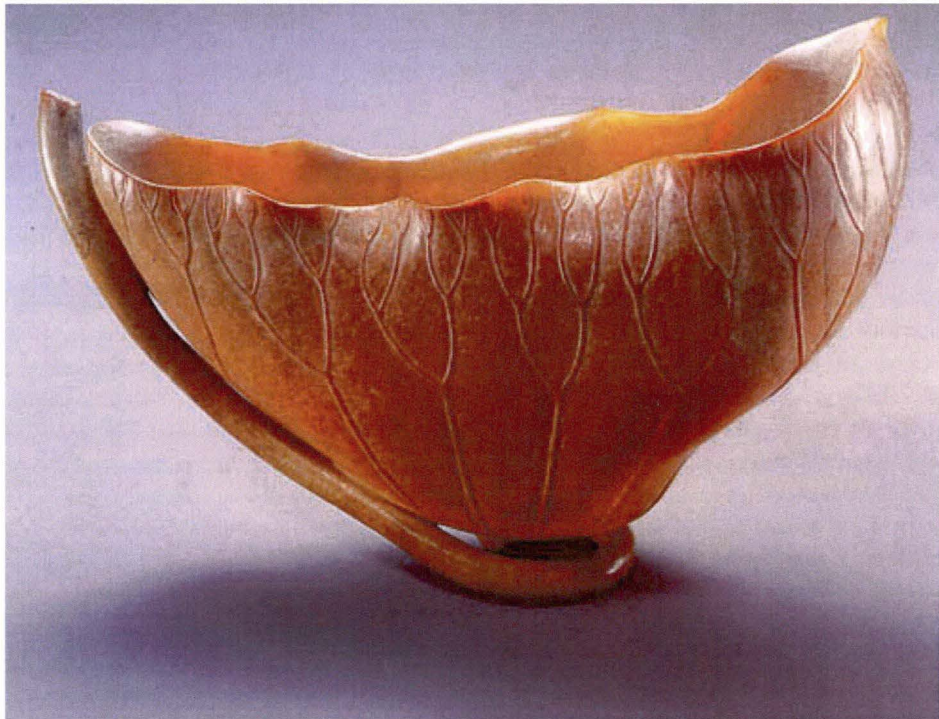


Figure 26
Cup in the Shape of a Lotus Leaf.
Jade.
Southern Song to Early Ming Dynasty. 12th – 15th Century.
–Fong and Watt, 1996: 58–

CHAPTER FOUR

STUDIO PROJECT LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM



Question and Answer on the Mountain

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountains;
I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care,
As the peach-blossom flows downstream and is gone
into the unknown,
I have a world apart that is not among men.

By Li Bai □AD 701-762□

□Pang, 2002: 52□

My intention in adopting the idiom, let a hundred flowers bloom, as a title is an attempt to put in perspective the ambiguity of life, as well as provoking insightful discussion regarding the outcome of the interplay between the ambiguous and the paradoxical. This is in relation to three issues: contradiction between the ideal and reality, the conflict between control and freedom; and the use of a common language and the recognition of diversity in cultural communication. We need to find a reference point for balancing ourselves in dealing with these conflicting outcomes in life. The questions surrounding this are threefold: how to let a hundred flowers bloom in reality; what critical factors contribute to the blooming of a variety of flowers; and how do flowers bloom in a disadvantageous environment? These questions also apply to the human world.

The studio project consists of three groups of ceramic flowers in abstraction subtitled as *North South East West – East South West North*. This group aims to examine the function of floral symbols and metaphors for communication. Secondly, *The Peach Blossom Spring*, presents a relationship between the ideal and reality. And the last group, *Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom*, examines the use of power as a means of control. Through this visual interpretation I wish to explore a new metaphor on the foundation of traditional metaphors. This will work with a sense of awareness of looking beyond a metaphorical framework. Metaphor is a kind of linguistic device for expression and interpretation. Sometimes it is local due to factors of cultural indication that can only be shared by people from the same cultural background. Secondly, there has been a huge accumulation of death metaphors that might constrain our perceptions and thinking.

The concepts and process underlying the assembling of ceramic flowers are arranging, re-arranging and repeating. (Figure 27) In contemplation, neither flowers nor human beings are able to escape from the life cycle of birth and death. A flower grew and withered but will appear again in the next season. It is a process of repetition and pattern although the present flowers are not the previous ones on the same plant but they are identical. By this approach I aim to convey the implied concepts of change and alternative in symbols and metaphors, and to argue that complexity in reality originates from a simple thought or idea. For instance, the complex system of floral symbols and metaphors is the consequence of a simple feeling of loving and possessing nature. Eventually, art will be speaking for life.

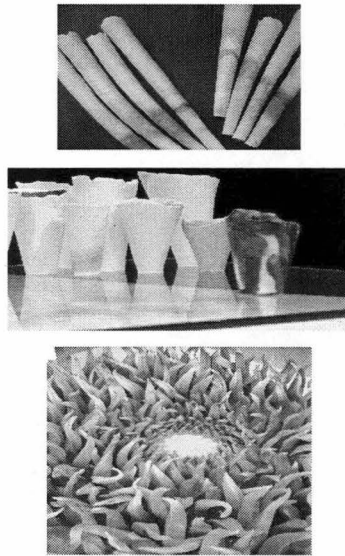


Figure 27

Tay Siew Cheng. Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom. 2004.

Installation.

Porcelain and Stoneware.

Bridging is the basic concept for linking the three groups of studio projects in the installation. The bridge is often perceived as a medium for connection, extension and relating, but ambiguously and paradoxically it is also a channel for invasion, conquering and change in terms of metaphorical interpretation. Therefore, the bridge also facilitates the ideas of integration, diversity, change and alternative.

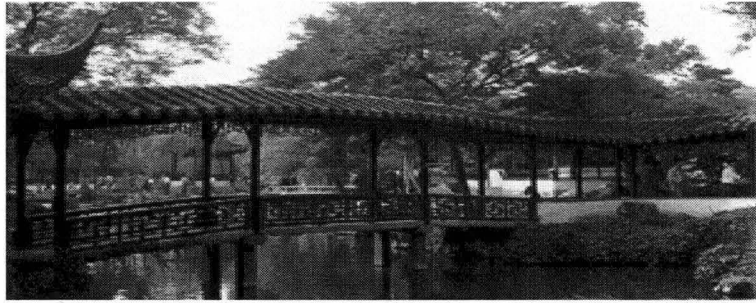


Figure 28

Flying Rainbow Bridge. Zhuo Zheng Yuan □ Garden □ Suzhou.

□ Keswick, 2003: 122 □

Using only porcelain in making the artwork presents a way of challenging oneself and facilitating self-discovery. It is a journey comprising various technical processes, problem-solving and decision-making, and aesthetic determinations. Porcelain is fine and elegant in appearance and produces a sense of fragility and beauty inherited in the feel and sight of flowers. However, it is strong as it is a high temperature firing clay which has been fired to 1280 degree Celsius.

PROJECT ONE

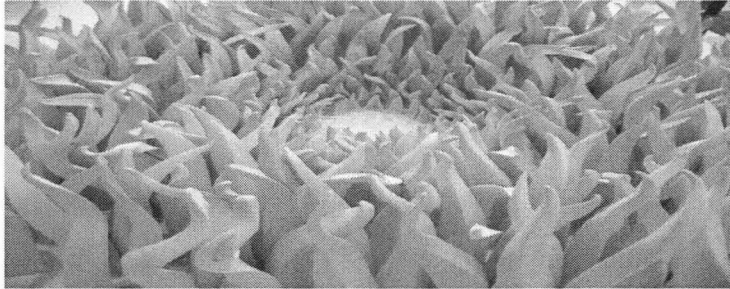


Figure 29

Tay Siew Cheng. North South East West □ East South West North. 2004.

Stoneware Porcelain. Dimension: 1 meter.

One firing and unglazed.

The ceramic flower depicted in the picture (Figure 29) is moulded in the idea of a Chrysanthemum but without the intention of shaping a realistic form. As a metaphorical interpretation the ceramic flower and Chrysanthemum are identical but not the same. My intention is to reveal that human perception gives rise to differences even if we are looking at the same object or issue. In fact, viewers have given different responses to this ceramic work, some told me it was a flower, some said they were a group of dancers, some even claimed that they were penguins.

The Chrysanthemum is commonly called 'mum' or 'tansies' which 'has been known since before 5000 BC in a small yellow form.'

(<http://www.flowers.org.uk>) It is nicknamed as the 'gold flower' in Greek but 'yellow flower' in Chinese. Chrysanthemums can be found world-wide in a great variety with a wide range of shapes, sizes and colours. This flower has been involved in multitudes of human cultural activities,

such as myths, poetry, paintings, festivities, ceremonies and even the food industry. It is an international symbol which is depicted as auspicious in one culture but inauspicious by another. Chrysanthemum is chosen as a visualized metaphor because of its universal, diverse and dynamic appeal. It is dynamic because Chrysanthemums facilitate both positive and negative interpretations. When the two opposites are complementary in action they will transcend change. Therefore, it is a symbol of common language and at the same time a reference for differences.

The chosen title, North South East West – East South West North, is a comparison and contrast between Chinese culture and the West. Four directions on earth are addressed in the sequence of North, South, East and West in the Western culture. They are divided into two sets to indicate an opposing relationship, North towards South and East towards West. The Western way of thinking and perception contributes to this interesting aspect. It manifests itself within a perception of international relationships with a hierarchical implication. The Northern (developed countries) are perceived as superior to the Southern (under-developed countries) and the Eastern (non-European countries) are often set against the Western (the European). On the other hand, the Chinese way of reading, East, South, West and North reveals a circular sequence. This begins from the East because sun rises in that direction and is perceived as a point for beginning. It is a continuing path where the beginning is the ending and the ending is the beginning, full of vitality. In summary, this is a quest for harmonious relationships in Chinese culture. I assert that neither dialectical (the West) nor analogy (the Chinese) is perfect by itself. However, if both forms are directed in complementary ways then the whole of civilization will benefit.

The flower project one comprises various contrasting independent parts that resemble both petals and the individual human being. Each petal is characterized by a non-repeating pattern that indicates different personalities. These petals project individual forms, are simple in shape but express a sense of complexity and dynamism by their arrangement. The proposition that is human actions are basically motivated by a rather simple idea or motive but complicated by a wide divergence of human desires, feelings, emotions and cultural value systems. For instance, with the simple love of nature and beautiful things, flowers express meaning through symbol and metaphor by a process of juxtaposing verbal and visual art forms.

Figure 30 is the final presentation of project one in which the core of the ceramic flower is removed from its position indicating a symbol that involves specific characters for reference. When an object is elevated as a symbol that can imply a sense of control or even the unreal. Plum Blossom is not a woman or Orchid is not a perfect man. Therefore, the process of assembling these petals is a gesture of control when the artist implements aesthetic concepts in a formal arrangement.

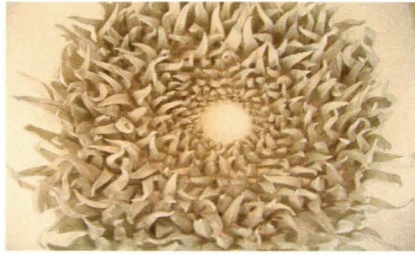


Figure 30
Flower and its Core.

PROJECT TWO



Figure 31
Tay Siew Cheng. Peach Blossom Spring -Utopia-. 2004.
Porcelain. Various Dimensions.

The title, Peach Blossom Spring, originates from an essay written by the hermit poet Tao Yuanming. (Please refer to Chapter two), which has become a Chinese idiom denoting utopia. Searching for utopia is a universal human desire or hope of perfection in life. The evolving human civilization is an incorporation of a magnitude of processes in the search for constructing the ideal model of life - utopia. Indeed, the ideal often communicates with reality through these processes of constructing utopia or another way of saying, imagination interacts with experience. We need the notion of the ideal for motivating action, as well as enriching and enchanting thought. However, the ideal can also imply authority and control as a way of providing a perfect model.

The long cone-shaped ceramic objects with the subtle patterns on top are designed as suggestions of flowers. The images depicted on the long cones are designed to represent human ideas because language and thinking are patterned. These images indicate a perception of utopia; it is something not found in reality. It is a dreamland, an aspiration, and a social desire. Each cone speaks of a personal dream and when grouped, this becomes a social, or community dream.

PROJECT THREE

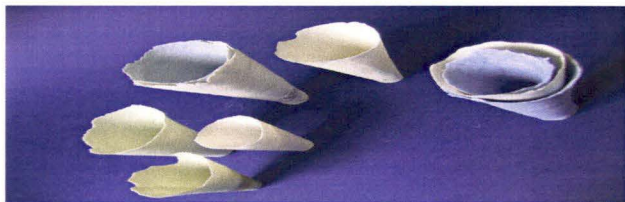


Figure 32
Tay Siew Cheng. Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom. 2004.
Porcelain. Various Dimensions.

The small cones (Figure 32) can be presented individually or in a stack of two or three cones. They are presented on glass that represents the reflective quality of water or mirror. The arrangement invites viewers to gain a new perspective in mediating the relationship between individuals and community, suggesting the significance of open dialogue. The proposition here is that without appropriate conditions flowers will not bloom.

The idea of making a small cone-shaped flower originated from a photograph published in one of the Australian newspapers. The headline, *Dance with delicacy and harmony of fine brushwork* strikes me because it is an intricate example of demonstrating the sense of art in Chinese tradition. Art, classically, comprises three forms that were dance, music and poetry. The dancer on the left is depicting a brush stroke that resembles a flower, a dancing flower in my eyes. That gives me an inspiration of making a flower that resembles a moment of dancing or like a stroke in calligraphy.

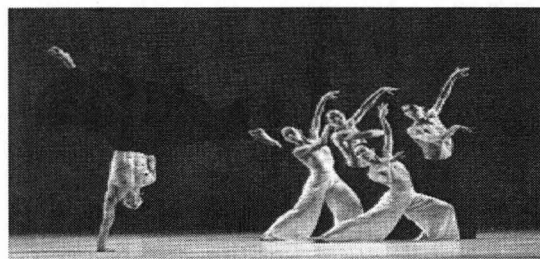


Figure 33

Cursive II. 2004.

Dance Performed by the Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan.

□Australian Newspaper 2004□

Installation

Iris – a bridge between heaven and earth (Figure 34) is my graduation presentation of the Bachelor of Contemporary Arts program. It is a visual and metaphorical interpretation of a floral mythology in which the Iris is a goddess who is ushering souls of dead women to the underworld and she is also a messenger traveling between Heaven and Earth. This work gives me the concept for flowers as bridge for connection and communication. The link can be found in nature if we are sincere enough in constructing.

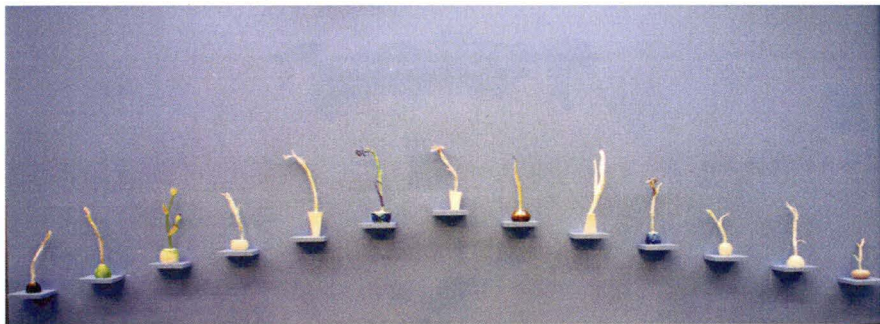


Figure 34

Tay Siew Cheng. Iris – A Bridge between Heaven and Earth.

Installations 2002 for Graduation.

Bachelor of Contemporary Arts -University of Tasmania-

Porcelain Flowers and Vases.

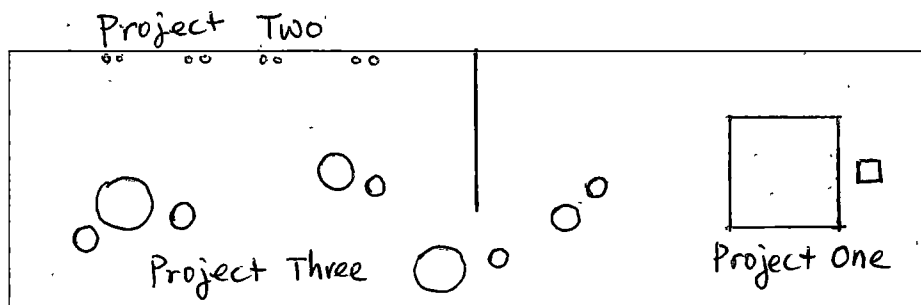


Figure 35
 Tay Siew Cheng. *Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom.*
 Floor Plan of the Installations 2005.

Figure 35 is the floor plan of the studio project in which project three is displayed as a bridge to connect project one and two. It reveals the schematic idea of the bridge acting as a link between the ideal (project two) and reality (project one).

The reasons of using flowers as a bridge are manifold. Firstly, it is a visual communication between artist and viewer on the basis of mutual reference (the love of nature), and secondly, it is a suggestion that the ideal and reality should be in constant negotiation. Thirdly, communication begins if people are keen in taking the initiative to reach the other end. And finally, cultural acquaintance is a process of the integration of diversity that only comes into effect by seeking and implementing a common language and respecting differences with a sense of empathy. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that interaction is not exclusively positive in terms of the dual effects of the bridge and the partial message given by the symbol. However, with the sense of awareness and imagination in integrating the positive and the negative, as well as relating them to the experience of our own creativity, discovery is

not impossible. Discovery means gaining new knowledge and ability in handling our life purposefully.

Fertile soil, sufficient sunshine and water, a sense of caring and understanding, are the essences for a hundred flowers to bloom. Therefore, on one hand we need to promote relevant conditions for different varieties of flowers to bloom. On the other hand, we should let a hundred flowers bloom in different seasons according to their natures. It sounds paradoxical and ambiguous but that is what life is, never so simple. Conversely, it can be rather simple if we understand that life is the accumulation of events, minor to major ones, which gives rise to intricate patterns of complexity. If we examine the complexity carefully enough we will be able to locate 'repeating motifs in your life with continual slight variations.' (Walter, 1969: 88) The question is whether we are insightful enough to unveil the repeating pattern and take action to interfere or intercept it before proceeding.



Figure 36

Chinese Flowers Bloom for the Aussie Parents. 30 September 2004.

The Australian 2004: 2

CONCLUSION



Know the strength of man,

But keep a woman's care!

Be the stream of the universe!

Being the stream of the universe,

Ever true and unswerving,

Become as a little child once more.

□Lao T'su, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter twenty-eight□

□Feng and English, 1972, trans.□

There has been significant discussion and argument regarding the symbols and metaphors in relation to thinking, communication and actions. I suggest that we need to further explore the current ideas of using metaphors put forward by scholars as an approach to conceptualising, problem solving and decision-making. Keen insight is needed in terms of relating a metaphorical approach to experience as a creative process. We need to search for new metaphors in order to progress, however this search should incorporate a sense of awareness, and a willingness to look beyond traditional metaphorical frameworks.

Kathleen Forsyth proclaims in her award-winning essay, *Cathedrals in the Mind*, that 'Metaphor can create new meaning, create similarities and so define a new insight and new perception of reality.' She argues that metaphor is 'architecture of thought in which analogical thinking serves as architecture, analytical thinking serves as engineering...'.

(<http://www.uia.be>) New insights as well as the complementary roles of rationality and imagination are the keynote in the above-mentioned argument. I suggest that in the development of new metaphors one should be aware that a metaphor is a device for expression and communication. Metaphor is pervasive in human thought and actions, however, we should understand that there are limitations and weaknesses in metaphors. In order to prevent ourselves from becoming the victims of our own metaphor we have to think and look beyond the prescribed meaning of metaphor in some cases. For example, the metaphorical interpretation of the bound feet of Chinese women, so-called 'Three inch lotus flowers' was a nightmare in the life of those women. Girls were forced to bind their feet as young as three or four. 'Their feet (were) bound tightly with bandages, folding all the toes except the big one under the sole to make the foot slender and pointed.' (<http://www.towson.edu>) The damage was

physical as well as psychological. The irony is those women who have gone through this cruel process and are still alive and have demonstrated an air of proudness when they were interviewed by journalists about their condition. Perception changes along our time-path, and beauty blurs with ugliness that becomes indefinable.

The ideal often contradicts with reality when people who possess power to control tend to move into the direction of distortion in order to fulfill their desires.

Communication is a two-way process that involves sender and receiver. Interaction only takes place if the two parties are interested in knowing and willing to be known. It is a process of giving information and expressing ideas or feelings to other people. The purpose of communication is to know and be known. The process of constructing symbols and metaphors justifies this fundamental approach which is basically to give information to members of the same cultural group. People who share the same cultural environment will be able to decode the symbolic and metaphorical meanings. Thereby communication is possible for people who have acquired some knowledge of the culture from which the symbols and metaphors originate. By investigating Chinese floral symbolism and presenting the finding in both verbal and visual forms, I attempt to demonstrate my culture as a gesture for opening a channel for dialogue. This bridge is only constructed on the basis of empathetic understanding.

Ignorance and arrogance are the major contributors of cultural discrimination and conflict, especially when they are entangled with a sense of fear of the unknown. On the other hand, when ignorance is

integrated with feelings of love, people tend to romanticize or to mystify the reality. Whether it is because of fear or love, the consequence is the same, untrue or stereotypical perceptions will be a hindrance to fair appraisal. I believe that taking the initiative of knowing and understanding other cultures will improve the situation.

Life and art are reciprocal if there is enough mutual reference. Constant improvement in knowledge and skills is helpful in handling them; that requires a sense of imagination and truthfulness of feelings. Order is required in life, both social and personal, if we do not want to be trapped in the death metaphors. That means control is unavoidable because it gives life order for functioning purposes. However, one must be aware of distortion of reality by those who have power to do so. Idealisation is a cultural process that provides hope and positive thinking; it is motivating. Nevertheless, the ideals and reality need to be in constant negotiation; it is a sincere interaction between individuals with their society and the inner self.

Love, I believe, is the essential motivator in developing relationships. However, the motive of love is often intermingled with various human feelings and emotions that can be resulted in the formation of a complex web. It is within the space of this complexity that ideals and reality often do not reach compromise. Although many people know that constant negotiation is essential in dealing with relationships, putting theory into practice is difficult. Once we fall into the complex web we are often unable to escape from it. Life becomes ambiguous, paradoxical and often chaotic. However, simplicity is the origin of complexity therefore when life becomes too complicated we should turn to the origin to search for why and what the problem is. It is never an easy process. It needs wisdom

but there is still hope because wisdom may or can come from formal or informal learning, not by birth.

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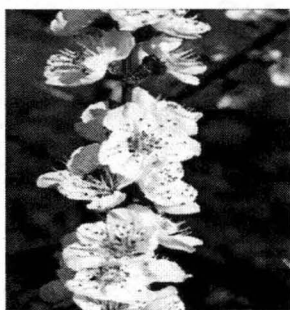
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APPENDIX ONE

Flower as Cultural symbols

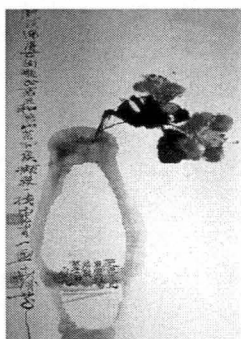
The selected examples are only the major floral symbols in Chinese culture according to the frequency of their appearance in Chinese poetry and paintings.



Apricot Blossom

杏花

Apricot Blossom is well known in ancient Chinese culture, which has been mentioned in the earliest Chinese literature. Because of their blossoming at the 2nd month (Chinese Lunar Calendars), the month of the imperial examinations, they became the symbol of successful candidates.



Camellia

山茶花

The Chinese name for the camellia is *Cha hua* that means 'Tea Flower'. Some Chinese people call it *Shancha*, 'Mountain tea'. It is a symbol of good fortune and wealth.



Chrysanthemum

菊花

Chrysanthemum is able to withstand the cold weather therefore is chosen as a symbol of Confucian scholars who have the ability to stand firm to their principles. In general, it symbolizes joviality, a life of ease, gentility, fellowship, nobility and longevity. Due to the special love of this flower by the hermit poet Tao Yuanming (372 – 427), Chrysanthemum has become a symbol of reclusion too.



Hibiscus

芙蓉

Hibiscus appears frequently in Chinese poetry and paintings, it is a symbol of feminine beauty.



Lotus flower

荷花 莲花

Lotus is a popular floral symbol in different cultures that is frequently mentioned in mythologies, religions and legends. Lotus flowers rise from the muddy soil yet appears in stainless purity. It is therefore a symbol of creative power, purity, nobility, feminine genius and a perfect man.



Narcissus

水仙花

Narcissus is nick-named Chinese Sacred Lily. It symbolizes a wish of good fortune and prosperity. Therefore is a favorite flower for Chinese New Year celebrations. It is also a symbol of purity and cleanliness due to their nature of growing in clean water.



Orchids

兰花

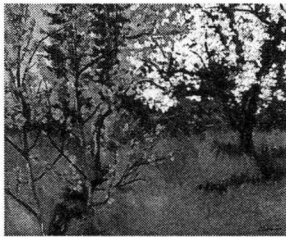
The Chinese Orchids are generally smaller in size when compared with their counterparts in the West. They are the 'scent of the king' in China; is a symbol of noble and perfect men as well as beautiful women.



Peach Blossom

桃花

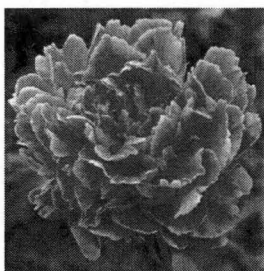
Peach Blossom is a symbol of a charming young lady because of its lovely pink petals. It sometimes symbolizes a beautiful lady with a fleeting life just like its fragile petals which cannot withstand wind or rain.



Plum Blossom (Japanese Apricot)

梅花

Plum Blossom is the soul symbol of the Chinese literati and has a high frequency of appearance in both verbal and visual art. As a result, Plum Blossom has been projected as a symbol of perfect human being. It is the emblem of perseverance, renewal, felicity, female chastity, as well as the symbol of long life, purity and courage to endure hardship. 'The five petals represent the five blessings of old age, wealth, health, love of virtue and a natural death.' (Valder 1999: 106)



Tree Peony

牡丹花

Peony is 'king of all flowers' in Chinese culture because of its large and showy appearance. It is a symbol of riches, honor, aristocracy, love, affection and feminine beauty.

APPENDIX TWO

CHRONOLOGY OF DYNASTIC CHINA

DYNASTY	YEARS
XIA	ca. 2200-1700BC
SHANG	ca. 1700-1100BC
ZHOU	ca. 1100-221BC
Western Zhou	ca. 1100-771BC
Eastern Zhou	770-221BC
Spring and Autumn period	770-476 BC
Warring States period	475-221 BC
QIN	221-207 BC
HAN	206BC-AD220
Western Han	206 BC-AD9
Xin Dynasty	AD9-23
Eastern Han	AD25-220
THREE KINGDOMS	AD220-280
Wei	AD220-265
Shu	AD221-263
Wu	AD229-280
JIN	AD280-420
Western Jin	AD265-317
Eastern Jin	AD317-420
SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN DYNASTIES	AD420-581
SUI	AD581-618

TANG	AD618-907
FIVE DYNASTIES AND TEN KINGDOMS	AD907-960
SONG	AD960-1179
Northern Song	AD 960-1127
Southern Song	AD 1127-1279
YUAN	AD1279-1368
MING	AD1368-1644
QING	AD1644-1911
REPUBLIC OF CHINA	AD1911-1949
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA	AD1949-present

APPENDIX THREE

EXHIBITIONS

COSMOS

Solo Exhibition

Powerhouse Galley

19 □ 29 November 2004



FLOWERS DO NOT TALK

Joint Exhibition

Handmark Gallery

30 September □ 31 October 2004



I was born in Singapore therefore I am a city person. Nature, especially the wilderness, is remote yet attractive and seductive for me. Coming to Tasmania is a journey back to nature and at the same time fulfilling a dream of pursuing art.

As a trained Chinese language teacher, I think language and art can be integrated in an effective teaching programme. Both language and art is channel for thinking, expression and communication, as well as for cultivation of compassion and patience. A Chinese saying tells that, an artisan (I suggest artist too) needs to sharpen his tools before he engages in producing quality work. The course of Master of Fine Art (Research) offered by the University of Tasmania (Launceston) provides me with the opportunity for tool sharpening; both in research and artistic techniques. It is a long tough journey of self-discovery; yet it is fulfilling and rewarding.

My research, *Flower: Nature and Culture, Flower As Cultural Symbol And Artistic Metaphor In Chinese Culture*, aims to search for a bridge for communication between the past and the present within the Chinese culture, as well as between the Chinese and the West. Communication is significant in terms of cultural understanding because the symbolic meanings of flowers often mirror particular cultural values and system.

The exhibition, *Flowers Do Not Talk*, gives me an opportunity to seek different opinions about the flower culture, the East and the West.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Handmark Gallery's Founder and Director, Pat Cleveland for providing me this opportunity for communication.

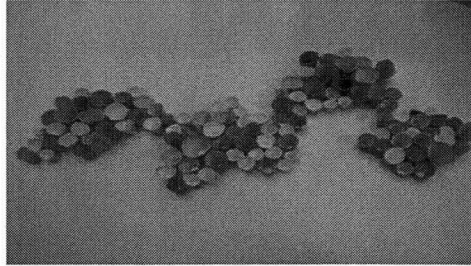
(By Tay Siew Cheng, 2004)

FLOWERS DO NOT TALK

Solo Exhibition

Academy Gallery

11 □ 25 June 2004



The title *Flowers do not talk* comes from Zen teaching. It sounds interesting to me not so much because of the Zen teaching but because this statement leaves room for imagination. What would a flower tell if it did talk? Will human beings listen to flowers when they talk?

Flowers have long been deprived from expressing their own views in the process of encountering human beings. With human love flowers are grown in gardens, at home or in parks. They are sold as products or given away as gifts. Some people talk to flowers when they feel happy or sad. We assign meanings to flowers and elevate them to symbols for the purpose of maintaining social order. We give our opinions, ideas or feelings about flowers in metaphorical expression. Indeed, as human beings we do what we like to flowers in their silence.

If flowers realize that they have a right to act and to give opinion, what will they do or what would they tell? Will they question human beings, "What right do you have to tell me where to grow and how to grow"? "What right do you have to change my colours and appearance?" Would flowers inform us? Perhaps they might say, "Please do not associate us with women or men or anything else, we just want to be ourselves."

Do flowers talk and what will we do if they did?

A well-known Chinese poem of the Song dynasty, Ouyangxiu (1007-1072) narrates a story about a woman and flowers. The poem told that the woman was upset about her meaningless life and with a tear she asked the flowers for an opinion but they just responded in silence. With disappointment she saw the flowers fly away in the wind. Do you think the flowers have answered her question? I think they did. They answered in action indeed. A verbal language is

not the only means of communication there are other language too, for example, visual language. Visual language is an artistic way of expressing and interpreting ideas and feeling, which involves visual thinking and imagination. In this sense, my ceramic flowers are talking. We need sense of sincerity and keen attitude in understanding to communicate with them. (By Tay Siew Cheng 2004)

Red Dirt and August Fog

Group Exhibition

Academy Galley

31 March – 17 April 2003



Title: Tasmanian Native Flowers

Tay Siew Cheng's series of Tasmanian Native Flowers reflects her powerful personal belief that all cultures must live in harmony and peace. Tay Siew Cheng is fascinated by the close resemblance of Tasmania to the distant village greens of England, as identified by Thorne, an impression reinforced by the architecture, town design and the gardens of City Park, Launceston. For Tay Siew Cheng there is a strong sense in Launceston of what she terms an English foreign look that epitomizes the generalized Australian view of Tasmania. (By the Curator, Mr. Malcom Bywaters, 2003.)