

*Guide to* Capturing a Plum Blossom

By SUNG PO-JEN

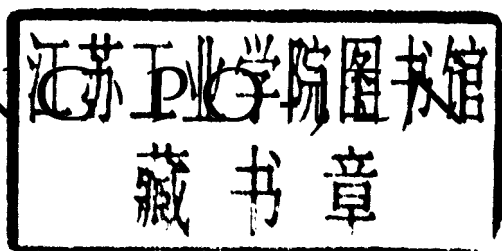
*Translated by* RED PINE

*Introduction by* LO CH'ING



# CAPTURING BLOSSOM

by SUNG



The Chinese Classic Translated  
with Commentaries by Red Pine

Introduction by Lo Ch'ing

English translation © 1995 by Red Pine

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Printed on recycled, acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

Designed by Thomas Christensen

— *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data* —

Sung, Po-jen.

[Mei-hua hsi-shen-p'u. English]

Guide to capturing a plum blossom / by Sung Po-jen ; translated  
by Red Pine ; with an introduction by Lo Ch'ing.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-56279-077-3

1. Sung, Po-jen. 2. Flowering plums in art. 3. Flowering  
plum—Poetry. I. Pine, Red. II. Title.

ND1049.S795A4 1995

759.951—dc20

95-18816  
CIP

FIRST EDITION

5 4 3 2 1

## Translator's Preface

Plum pictures and plum poems have been on my mind ever since I found Sung Po-jen's *Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom* in China's old cultural capital of Hangchou, west of Shanghai. That was six years ago, a few days before the tanks rolled through Tienanmen in June of 1989. I was browsing through the only bookstore in Hangchou that sold old books, and I found a hand-bound copy of the 1928 edition of Sung Po-jen's *Guide* on a shelf with other dusty survivors of the Cultural Revolution. I'd never heard of Sung Po-jen or his *Guide*, but I was captivated by the pictures. I bought the book and took it back to my hotel room and tried to read the poems. I soon realized that the poetry of a thirteenth-century scholar-official was beyond my reach, which was limited to the more accessible works of Chinese Buddhists. I put the book down and a few weeks later, back in Taiwan, I gave it to my friend Lo Ch'ing. It was a fortuitous decision.

Lo Ch'ing had studied art with the last emperor's cousin, and he had heard of Sung Po-jen's *Guide*, but he had never seen a complete copy. Surprised by our good fortune, we agreed to enjoy the book together. Every Wednesday for the next four months, we sat down on his straw mats, surrounded ourselves with piles of dictionaries, dynastic histories, anthologies, and compendia of all sorts, and spent the whole morning working our way through five or six poems and as many pots of tea.

As the result of our efforts, I was able to make rough translations into English. But before I had time to polish them sufficiently for publication, I put them aside to finish work on a book about Chinese hermits, then to embark on a series of journeys in China that involved the production of more than a thousand radio programs, and finally to move back to America. It's taken me five years to pick them up again.

I regret the long delay as well as the mistakes I may have made where I have ignored Lo Ch'ing's advice and followed my own perverse interpretations. The notes, too, hardly do justice to our weekly discussions or the background Sung Po-jen expected of his readers. But the Thunder-cloud plum I planted last year in my garden has begun to let go of its

first blossoms, and I can no longer hold onto these. In passing them on to the reader, I hope that something of their original fragrance has remained and that the pictures, reproduced from the edition of 1261, will make up for any loss of spirit.

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Red Pine, Spring 1995  
Port Townsend, Washington

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*Acknowledgments*

The translator is indebted to Lo Ch'ing, Deborah Rudolph, and Paul Hansen for help with the Chinese; to Christina McLennan and Michael O'Connor for help with the English; to the Port Townsend Bakery, the Salal Cafe, Mercury House, Interwest Savings Bank, Jane and Kim Stallings, Shannon Gentry and Jack Estes, Carol and Richard Porter, Paul Hansen and Jennifer Clarke, Martin Merz and Bruce Grill, for wages, royalties, loans, and outright gifts.

*for Paul Hansen*

# Introduction

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Sung Po-jen's *Mei-hua hsi-shen-p'u*, or *Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom*, was printed from woodblocks in 1238 and thus became the world's earliest-known printed book of art. Two decades later, a copy of the book passed into the hands of the Chinhua Shuangkueitang Publishing House, and the publisher added this short note to his 1261 edition of the book:

Those who sing the praises of the plum flower might capture its form but not its essence. Recently, I came across this book, which not only succeeds in capturing the flower's spirit but also explores its inexhaustible forms. Reading it is like chewing sugar cane: the longer you chew, the better it tastes. Surely this is the crown of plum flower poetry.

Despite such praise, Sung's book would have been lost if a single copy of the 1261 edition had not come down to us in the following manner:

When the Mongols completed their conquest of China in 1277, the mixture of Chinese nationalism and aesthetics displayed in Sung Po-jen's *Guide* became treasonous, and his book disappeared from public notice. Although artists consulted the book in private, no one was willing to affix their name to our surviving copy until it appeared 300 years later in the collection of the sixteenth-century painter Wen Cheng-ming.

After Wen died, his copy passed through other unknown hands for another 200 years, until it surfaced in Peking's antique market, as described by the famous collector and book connoisseur Huang P'i-lieh in the colophon that he added to the book:

At the beginning of 1801, I decided to travel north with my friends Ku Nan-ya and Hsia Fang-mi. The day we left, my friend Ch'u Mu-fu presented me with an album of plum flower paintings. I put them in my luggage thinking to ask friends along the way to add their poems on the facing pages. Shortly afterwards, my friend Ch'en Chung-yu joined us, and we sailed off together.

When we arrived at Maple Bridge, my relative Yuan T'ing-t'ao

saw us off with wine and presented us with a branch of plum flowers from his courtyard to wish us good luck in the civil service examination. We took a line from the T'ang poem that goes "I have nothing to give but a branch of spring," and we all wrote poems with this as our inspiration.

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After leaving, we continued on to Yangchou, where Nan-ya painted four plum flower paintings in a snowstorm, one of which depicted Shou-chieh presenting his gift, and all of which we added to Mu-fu's album. Enjoying ourselves, we titled the album *Plum Flower Words Are Perfumed Words*.

In the middle of the second month, we finally arrived in Peking and went looking for books in the Liulichang antique market. At the Wentsui Bookstore I found a Sung dynasty copy of *Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom*. I was amazed that such a rare treasure would fall into my hands, and at the same time I was reminded of the paintings of Ch'u Mu-fu and Ku Nan-ya. It was such a coincidence, I summoned my old friends, and we met again to write poems about my new treasure.

Later, when I returned home, I failed to find Sung's book listed in the reader's guide to Ch'ien Tseng's famous collection of books. Fortunately I had also acquired a later, more complete version of Ch'ien's reader's guide, and here I found Sung's book listed. And finally I realized what a rare possession my copy of the 1261 edition was.

Recognizing the book's importance, Huang asked his relative Yuan T'ing-t'ao to trace two copies in outline form, one of which he presented to the famous scholar Juan Yuan. Juan added his own colophon to this copy and passed it on to the Ch'ing court, where it was reprinted in the collection of books known as the *Yuan-wei pieh-tsang*. Yuan T'ing-t'ao's second outline copy was also reprinted, though not until after his death, by the Kuniyuan Publishing House. In addition to spreading the book's fame through these two outline copies, Huang also had the 1261 edition reprinted in its original form in 1823 among the later collections of the Chihputsu Library. I recently came across a copy of this edition, collected earlier by Chou Tso-jen, the brother of Lu Hsun, and added it to my own collection.



In 1851 Huang's own copy of the book passed into the hands of Yu Ch'ang-sui, and Yu loaned the book to the painter Chiang Chung-li, who refused to return it. Only through trickery was Yu able to get the book back, and he added this note to its growing list of colophons: "I will never show this book to anyone who hasn't been my friend for at least ten years." Yu called it among the most precious objects in the world.

From Yu Ch'ang-sui, the book passed to P'an Tsu-yin and then to P'an Ching-shu, who inherited it in 1921 on her thirtieth birthday. P'an Ching-shu was the wife of the famous painter and collector Wu Hu-fan. The couple loved this book so much, they covered its pages with nearly fifty seals designed especially for the purpose. From P'an and Wu, the book then passed into the collection of the Shanghai Museum, which reprinted it in 1981 and thus made the world's oldest-known printed book of art available for our use.

About the book's author, we know next to nothing. According to the brief biography included in Huang P'i-lieh's colophon, Sung Po-chen was a native of the Huchou area of Chekiang province. His personal name was Ch'i-chih, and his pen name was Hsueh-yen, both of which had patriotic echoes in Chinese. After passing the poetry section of the civil service examination, he was appointed to supervise the salt trade in Huaiyang along the Grand Canal. This is all we know of the man, except for the few personal notes he slipped into another collection of ninety-odd poems that survive in the *Ssu-k'u ch'uan-shu*.

Although we have no dates for his birth or death, we know Sung lived in southern China in the first half of the thirteenth century, when the northern part of China was in the hands of the nomadic Jurchens, who were, themselves, about to lose the north to the Mongols. Sung wanted to do something to encourage his countrymen to recover the north, and he expressed his frustration and patriotic feelings in his verse, which he likened to withered leaves teasing the wind and dried-up lotus leaves battered by the rain. And so he published his book, with its image of the flower that blooms in the middle of winter and with its poems that recall the glories of China's past. In this Sung was not alone. During this period Chinese intellectuals turned to their culture's ancient roots for inspiration and solace in the face of disunion and exile. In painting and poetry, they chose the flowering plum as their symbol.

In his own preface, Sung Po-jen had this to say:

I am so addicted to plum blossoms that I laid out my garden around them and built a pavilion to view them and published a collection of poems called *The Pure and Fragile* in praise of them. And still I failed to exhaust their subtlety, much like my ancestor Sung Ching, who turned to writing about clouds when plum blossoms proved too elusive.

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When their flowers are in bloom, my heart is filled with the purest snow and my body is buried beneath clouded moonlight. I never tire of lingering beside a bamboo fence or a thatched hut to smell their stamens, to breathe on their petals and inhale their fragrance, and to taste their pollen. I enjoy the sight of plum blossoms whether they are facing up or down or are open or folded.

Detached, refined, and rare, beyond the world of red dust, so different from the Two Gentlemen of Kuchu, the Four Worthies of Shangshan, the Six Eccentrics of Chuhsi, the Eight Immortals of Wine, the Nine Elders of Loyang, or the Eighteen Erudites of Yingchou, they float beyond the confines of form and the mundane world of man, and beyond the rhapsodies written on such flowers as the peach blossom or peony.

Thus, I painted the flower from the unfolding of its buds to the falling of its petals. I painted more than 200 portraits, and after eliminating those that were too staid or too frail, I was left with 100 distinct views. And to each I added an old-style poem and titled the result *Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom*. Actually, though, it's about capturing the spirit of the plum blossom. And while there are also guides that describe peonies, chrysanthemums, and bamboo, this is not the same kind of guide. I have published it in the hope of sharing it with other lovers of plum flowers.

In devoting my time to such an insignificant task, how, someone might ask, can this be of any use to the world? Might not these pages end up as lids on someone's jars and jugs? Despite such a possibility, surely there are like-minded people who would enjoy turning a few pages when the flowers aren't yet in bloom, people who would prefer to fill their imaginations with the beauty of a single branch on a deserted hillside or the desolation of

Yangchou before spring, people who can't let a day pass without seeing plum flowers, people who could spend their lives thinking about plum flowers. I have not painted plum flowers for the sake of painting plum flowers. In this, the artistry of Abbot Chung-jen and Yang Wu-chiu are quite beyond my ability.

Someone also joked, "When this flower's whiteness and perfume are gone, it can stop the thirst of armies with its red and yellow fruit and blend the perfect soup in the tripod of the state. This book of yours should likewise move loyal and patriotic readers to act the part of generals in the field or ministers at court in straightening their sashes and jade scepters and in bringing peace to the kingdom. But by focusing instead on the aesthetic beauty of a half-hidden tree in a garden after a snowfall or a branch reaching beyond a bamboo fence reflected in the water, you have concerned yourself with frozen verse and forgotten the root while chasing among twigs."

I rose and thanked him, "And that's why I have a poem about tripods and soup at the end of my *Guide*." My friend clapped his hands and smiled, "In that case, your *Guide* is not in vain. It cannot be called insignificant or of no use to the world, and it should be spread as widely as possible so that it might be passed on to future generations."

Fortunately for Sung, his book appeared just as the technology of printing that began with Buddhist sutras in the ninth century was extended to works of literature and art in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This technological revolution also brought with it a new attitude toward knowledge. Until the Sung dynasty, books were the private possessions of those able to afford laboriously produced handwritten copies. The use of woodblocks and movable type suddenly made knowledge reproducible and available in the marketplace. Ideas that were once the preserve of a small elite were now exchanged as easily as other merchandise.

This marked the second of the three stages through which Chinese culture has passed—the first being the invention of writing, the second being the development of printing, and the third being the introduction of personal computers. With the advent of printing, books were pro-

duced in great numbers, and private collectors emerged. Intellectuals now had easy access to a wide range of materials on Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that was beyond any one person's capacity to memorize, and the publishing centers that developed provided a fertile ground for a new synthesis of ideas that resulted in what Western scholars have called Neo-Confucianism.

Turning their backs on the traditional approach to the derivation of knowledge from discursive thought, Neo-Confucians held that the secrets of Nature could be discovered only through the investigation of things. Painters, too, followed this early scientific approach. And they developed a complicated grammar of painting, as they tried to represent natural forms and landscapes in a seemingly realistic manner.

Realism, though, was not what the Sung painters were after. They were after the essence of things. The great poet and calligrapher Su Tung-p'o warned his colleagues, however, against a one-sided search for this essence. He held up the works of Wang Wei, whose paintings, he said, contained poems and whose poems contained paintings, as examples of a more balanced approach. Su maintained that the ultimate goal of both painting and poetry was to express one's feelings and ideas. The creation of a likeness or a verbal cliché was not the goal of art. The goal was to express meaning beyond words and feeling beyond representations, and thus to encourage painters to paint like poets and poets to write like painters.

From the late Northern Sung (960-1127) to the Southern Sung (1127-1276) dynasties, we begin to see scattered examples of this effort to combine poetry and painting, in which a poem is not merely an annotation to a painting and a painting is not simply an illustration of a poem. Though they might overlap, poetry and painting were seen as each maintaining its own integrity. In this respect, Sung Po-jen's book was the first—and the last—attempt to put Su Tung-p'o's theory into practice on a large scale. It was not only the world's first book of art, but also the first book that combined painting and poetry.

Sung's book is also significant because it attempts to fathom the essence of a material object through detailed, empirical examination and uses the results of that examination to form the basis for that object's deconstruction and reconstruction on a different plane. Once the reader has the flower's 100 stages memorized, he has the key to the plum flower

and the key to Nature as well. With this key he can create his own plum flower universe without having to observe Nature at all. Later painters who wanted to paint plum flowers were encouraged to follow the book rather than Nature. How, they asked, could anyone hope to observe the plum flower as meticulously as Sung Po-jen? This, then, was also the first example of postmodernism in the history of Chinese painting. In Sung's book, form becomes a catalyst for meaning, and conversely, meaning conjures up form.

The sudden appearance of this book was unprecedented and represented a climax that has yet to be surpassed. Sung Po-jen's *Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom* is a most remarkable book indeed, and its flowers are as fresh today as they were over 750 years ago. Breathe in their fragrance, and see for yourself.

Lo Ch'ing, April 1995  
Taipei, Taiwan

# I     *Wheat Eyes*

a southern branch erupts with buds  
unmarked means a year of plenty  
Han Kuang-wu comes to mind  
restoring the throne with a meal

A southern branch feels the warmth of spring before other branches. The Chinese still look to the plum tree for the first sign of spring, and they examine its buds to predict the coming season of growth. It was from such buds that the career of Emperor Kuang-wu began. The year he was born, nine ears appeared on a single stalk of corn in his district, and his mother named him Hsiu, meaning "grain flower." Later, when he was put in charge of a granary, he sold wheat and millet at discounted prices and gained a large following among the oppressed. In A.D. 25 he toppled the usurper Wang Mang, restored the Han dynasty, and ascended the throne as Emperor Kuang-wu.

Throughout his book, Sung Po-jen uses variant forms of characters, as if he were testing his readers' erudition as well as their patience. In the second line, for example, he uses the name of Mount Kungtung in place of two similar characters that mean "blank" or "unmarked." Puns are also fair game: "meal" is a homophone for "revolution."

## 2 Willow Eyes

silently watching the Sui Dike procession  
the glories the endless failures  
willows don't bend to look pretty  
what they see isn't commonplace

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In A.D. 605 Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty toured the newly completed Grand Canal in a procession of boats that stretched for 100 kilometers. To provide a shaded promenade and to guard against erosion, the emperor had willows planted along the dikes. Later, the dynasty's name was applied to new sections of this important trade route that linked the Yangtze with the Yellow River. The willow's hanging catkins remind the Chinese of a woman bending at the waist, and "willow lane" is their euphemism for a brothel-lined street. Here, though, willow eyes, like the eyes of a buddha, see through illusory form and superficial beauty. A poem by the ninth-century poet Yuan Chen includes the line: "Where does spring appear first / spring appears in the willow eyes."

### 3 *Pepper Eyes*

lavishing poems on the first spring dawn  
prayers for a thousand years  
conquering winter defying old age  
outlasting the ice and snow

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Black pepper arrived in China in ancient times as a trade good from Southeast Asia. In addition to its use as an incense in calling down ancestral spirits, pepper was infused in alcohol to warm the extremities and offered to family elders on the first day of the new year along with poems wishing them long life. The Chinese add another year to their age on New Year's Day, rather than on their birthday.



## 4 Crab Eyes

scuttling across sands of rivers and seas  
at home in the foulest wind and waves  
preferring the Lord of the East  
public death to the cauldron

---

Chinese tea aficionados refer to the appearance of bubbles in their kettles as the eleventh-century poet Su Tung-p'o did in a poem about brewing tea: "After the crab eyes, the fish eyes appear." "Rivers and seas" is a metaphor for the world, and "wind and waves" refers to the vicissitudes of life. The Lord of the East is the spirit of the sun and of spring. In China, crab catchers traditionally operate at night using torches. The last lines suggest the crab would rather die on a sunny beach before the eyes of its fellow creatures than by human hands.