

Lotus rejoice

This wondrous flower is renowned for its ability to bring beauty to the harshest of environments

For thousands of years, the delicate lotus flower has been revered in Chinese culture. Ancient poems and tales glorify the beautiful flower, and praise its ability to raise itself from the contaminated dirt, away from the pollution of its origins, and bloom into petals of white, red, pink, purple and blue – representing all things pure and chaste.

The lotus has been symbolic in several cultures across Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The Egyptians, Phoenicians and Greeks all admired the power of the mystical bloom that would disappear suddenly in times of drought and then magically reappear with the first rains.

The importance of the lotus in Chinese culture becomes wholly apparent when we look at the various ways the flower has been depicted in works of art – both modern and ancient. Chinese artists often use the lotus within their paintings to signify something which is valuable and worthwhile.

One artist who is dedicated to photographing and painting the beautiful flower is Ma Yuen-ho. Mr Ma has travelled across China in his quest to produce beautiful images of the revered lotus. His travels have taken him to most of the nation's provinces, and many of his resulting works are unique as he has combined painting and photography into one image.

According to Mr Ma, taking pictures of the lotus flower brings back memories of ancient stories from China's past. He explains that poets would use the stalks of the flower to drink through as they wrote their poems.

For Mr Ma, the lotus becomes even more beautiful when the nature around it plays with its petals. When the breeze passes by, he says, a beautiful fragrance is lifted into the air. And when it rains the raindrops compose a symphony as they hit the petals and the pond.

"The lotus is the most beautiful flower in China," Mr Ma explains. "Its shape and features are unique, and the leaves and petals of the flower are amongst the most beautiful of all flowers in the orient."

According to Mr Ma, there are over 300 different types of lotus, the best of which can be seen at research laboratories in Guanxhi and Wuhan.

His friends call him a lotus-addict due to his love affair with the flower. "I treat the lotus almost like a lover," he says. "Its short life of four days in which it will open and bloom twice before dying is also what makes it so beautiful."

Mr Ma explains that he no doubt has more love for the lotus flower than most people, but he "hopes at least that when people see my artwork it will make them happy".



Lotus in the Bai Kuo Mountain area, Tsingtao, China. By Ma Yuen-ho
青島中華睡蓮世界。攝：馬元浩

Some of Mr Ma's work is displayed at the Wan Fung Art Gallery in Hong Kong, whose president Kwok Ho-min also shares a passion for the flower.

"Chinese people believe that if you sow a good seed, it bears a good harvest. It is representative of the harvest of life," Mr Kwok said.

And it is life that also brings further meaning to the lotus in Chinese culture. The flower is known for its hardiness and ability to survive the harshest of weather, and also the ability of the lotus seeds to sprout almost anywhere – even in the most desolate terrain.

As such, the flower is often called to mind when referring to poor young people who have managed to come from difficult surroundings and backgrounds and work their way up in society to become inspirations to us all.

In the same way, the lotus seeds can sprout from anywhere and still become a beautiful blossom.

Aside from its beauty, different parts of the lotus, such as the seeds and the root, are commonly used in a variety of Chinese recipes.

Dried lotus seeds are commonly found in Asian markets. They are usually available in two different forms, brown peel and white. The brown peel are harvested when the lotus is nearly ripe, whereas the white are harvested earlier when the lotus is still green.

The seeds are used in many types of desserts and are also ground into a paste to be used in sweets such as moon cakes, a traditional Chinese food enjoyed during the mid-Autumn festival.

The lotus root is remarkable as it consists of a series of hollow chambers which are linked to the stem of the flower and siphon air from above the water to help it grow underwater in their oxygen-starved environment.

It is commonly used in a variety of soups, traditionally also containing chicken, red dates and ginger. The root is commonly eaten in other parts of the world, such as India, Pakistan and Japan.

But ultimately, it is the beauty of the flower that gives it its universal appeal. The lotus is seen as representing a higher level, something that people can reach for and try to attain.

荷花吐艷醉遊人

中國文化數千年來對高雅的蓮花篤愛有加，詩詞歌賦均對蓮花的瑰麗讚嘆不已，尤其「蓮生淤泥中，不與泥同調」的高潔氣度表露無遺；紅、藍、粉紅、紫、白等色彩繽紛的花瓣，代表完美及純潔。蓮花於歐亞以至中東文化有著不同的象徵意義，埃及、腓尼基及希臘人對蓮花能於旱時收起花冠，初雨時即開花的神秘，深表喜愛。

要領悟蓮花於中國深邃的文化淵藪，最佳的方法莫過於研究自古至今不同的藝術表達形式，中國畫家尤其喜愛於畫中以蓮花代表寶貴的事物。馬元浩先生就是其中一位專門拍攝及繪畫蓮花的中國藝術家。馬先生走遍中國大江南北，利用照片與畫作合而為一的獨特技巧，捕捉蓮花的各種美態。

過去兩年的夏天，馬先生到訪國內十個城市「捕蓮」，拍攝他深愛的蓮花，讓他記起中國古代有關蓮花的故事，其中詩人喜愛在創作時以蓮莖啜飲。此外，蓮花與週遭的自然環境配合，又起著另一種賞蓮的角度：微風一過，飄起蓮花的香氣；雨點落在蓮池及花瓣上，灑灑的聲音猶如一曲交響樂。

馬先生表示，蓮花是中國最美的花，它的形態獨特，花葉堪稱東方各種花卉中最絢麗多姿的。馬先生稱蓮花共有三百多種，最佳的品種可於廣西及武漢的研究所中找到。

對於慕蓮的沉溺，馬先生稱他待蓮花如愛人。蓮花終其一生只開兩次花，每次開花不超過四天，這都令他對蓮花更加愛惜。他希望作品能讓觀賞者在賞蓮時有更大的喜悅。

馬先生的部份作品於雲峰畫苑展出。雲峰畫苑董事長郭浩滿先生對蓮花同樣熱愛，他相信生

命從播種開始的理念，源自中國人一分耕耘一分收穫的道理。蓮子於任何地方均可發芽，同時，蓮花能於最艱難的環境中茁壯成長，於中國文化中最能表達生命的不屈不撓。故此，蓮花經常用來比喻貧困的年輕人，藉以描述於艱苦的環境中出人頭地的振奮故事。

除了觀賞之外，蓮花的不同部份亦有不同的食療價值。在亞洲國家的市場通常可以買到曬乾的蓮子，帶有褐色的蓮子是蓮花於差不多全熟時採摘，而白色的則是蓮花仍是嫩綠時便採摘。蓮子可用於不同的中式甜品，或磨成蓮蓉來製作各式甜品，如中秋月餅等。

蓮花的根莖稱為蓮藕，內有氣孔並連接蓮花的莖部，藉此從花莖吸取氧氣供於水底下生長的蓮花之用。

蓮藕通常用來搭配其他食材煲湯，例如：雞、紅棗及薑等。印度、日本及巴基斯坦等地亦有吃蓮藕的習慣。

不過，蓮花還是以其觀賞價值而深獲世人喜愛，並象徵著人們不畏艱辛、發憤向上的高尚情操。



Lotus in Yiqian Town, Guangchang, Jiangxi province, By Ma Yuanhao
江西廣昌驛前鎮之蓮花。
攝：馬元浩



Passers-by admire the lotuses in Ritan Park, Beijing.
途人正在北京日壇公園裏觀賞蓮花。



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