Luca STIRPE*
Valeria VARRIANO*
luca.stirpe@unich.it
vvarriano@unior.it
Università degli Studi
"G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara
Università di Napoli l'Orientale

PEARLS OF OIL AMIDST VERSES AND IMAGES: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE CULTURAL MEANINGS OF *GANLAN* 橄欖 IN CHINA

Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the symbolic value attributed to the olive tree in both ancient and modern Chinese culture. Beginning with an examination that reveals a far more complex lexical situation than commonly assumed, the article concludes that the term *ganlan* can refer, depending on context, to at least three different plants: *Canarium album*, *Olea europaea*, and *Phyllanthus emblica*. The analysis of various literary documents has enabled a broad reconstruction of the phases of *ganlan*'s presence or introduction in China and its growing importance in the imperial economic and agricultural system. Poems from the Song era (by authors such as Wang Zhiwang 王之望, Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, Liu Kezhuang 劉克莊, Zhao Fan 趙蕃, and Wang Yucheng 王禹偁) have illuminated the development of a complex symbolic and metaphorical system in ancient times. Furthermore, the spread of the tree in China in the twentieth century is discussed, highlighting the Chinese Communist Party's decision to integrate the plant into the Chinese agricultural system. The journalistic and cinematic narratives of the arrival of plants from Albania in 1964 laid the groundwork for both new and ancient symbolisms. In this article, these symbolisms are explored through analysis of the song "The Olive Tree" by San Mao, as well as a review of the new customs and habits of contemporary China.

Keywords: Olive in China, *ganlan* 橄欖, Song poetry, Zhou Enlai, symbolism, Albania

As Europeans, when we speak of, hear of, or imagine the olive, we associate it with a single plant: *Olea europaea*. This conviction is reinforced when we search for the Chinese equivalent of the term in bilingual dictionaries, where the term *ganlan* 橄欖 (橄榄) is systematically reported. However, if we reverse the process, starting from the Chinese term, we discover a composite reality that undermines our initial assumptions. Indeed, *ganlan* primarily corresponds to a typical Chinese fruit that has nothing to do with *Olea europaea*, and only secondarily does a vague reference to the Mediterranean olive appear, if at all. On the other hand,

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ORCID 0000-0002-2422-1794
0000-0003-0203-3781
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as early as 1919, anthropologist Berthold Laufer, in a study examining the diffusion of various plant species between the Middle East and China, issued a warning, stating:

> The so-called Chinese olive, kan-lan 橄欖, has no affinity with the true [sic!] olive of the West-Asiatic and Mediterranean zone, although its appearance comes very near to this fruit (Laufer 1919: 417).

The same occurred in an article appearing in the *People's Daily* (人民日报) on February 3, 1958, where, speaking of a fruit called *qingguo* 青果 (see *infra*), it states:

> In countries along the Mediterranean coast, such as Italy and Greece, there exists a type of olive tree that is also called *ganlanshu*,[1] although in reality it is absolutely not the same as the Chinese *ganlan*. The olive and the *ganlan* belong to two different botanical families[2] (Deng 1958).

Beginning with this terminological question, this contribution aims to clarify what is actually meant by *ganlan*, as determined by historical and literary sources. In particular, we will first examine the appearance and diffusion in China of the plant thus designated and the construction of the cultural and symbolic imaginary developed around it, with emphasis on poetic texts from the Song era (960–1279). As we approach modern times, we will then examine the media case of the donation by Albania of Mediterranean olive trees to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1964. The images presented in the media of that era will be considered to understand the symbolic value attributed to the plant in those years, a value whose evolution will then be followed to the present day.

The Words of the Olive: Names and Properties

The term *ganlan* 橄欖 denotes distinctly different plants. One is the aforementioned *Olea europaea*, more correctly denominated *youganlan* 油橄欖 (oleiferous olive), also known as "common olive", belonging to the Oleaceae family, originating in Asia Minor (and probably Syria), later spreading throughout the Mediterranean area, becoming one of its most representative products, and only in relatively recent times cultivated in various other regions of the planet, including China. Another is *Canarium album*, known as *qingguo* 青果 (green fruit), also known as "Chinese olive" or "white olive", belonging to the Burseraceae family, with edible fruits very similar to olives, from which cooking oil is extracted. Originating in Southeast Asia, this tree has a height between 10 and 25 meters, evergreen leaves, light gray smooth bark, fragrant flowers, oval-shaped drupes about 3 cm long,

1 As a reference for the transcription of Chinese terms in *pinyin*, ABC 2010 was used.

2 欧洲地中海沿岸国家，如意大利、希腊等国有一种阿列布树，也被称为橄榄树，实际和我国橄榄树并不相同。在植物学上，阿列布树同橄榄树是分两科的。

Canarium album

initially yellowish-green, then grayish-yellow, and is used as an ornamental plant or for street plantings. The fruits are consumed both fresh and processed into sweet preserves or brined preparations and are used, like the seeds, in traditional medicinal preparations (as, in more recent times, the fruits of *Olea europaea* are).

Phyllanthus emblica

Depending on the cultivation zones, flowering occurs between May and July while fruiting occurs between August and October. In China, it is distributed in the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, and Yunnan, as well as in Taiwan. Finally, ganlan can also denote a plant with morphology and characteristics very different from the first two, namely Phyllanthus emblica, known by various other names, including amla, Indian gooseberry, or Indian currants, belonging to the Phyllanthaceae family. A shrub or small tree between 1 and 8 meters in height, with deciduous leaves, typical of tropical Asia and southern China. The wood is used for craftsmanship and carpentry, while oil extracted from the seeds is employed in soap manufacture. The fruits are edible and very rich in vitamin C, with a taste that is initially tart, then sweeter (DRP 2005: yougan).

An examination of some of the numerous synonyms of these plants reveals interesting aspects. Regarding the Mediterranean olive, we find: *qidunguo* 齊墩果 (fruit of *qidun*);[3] phonetic transcriptions of the term "olive", from Latin *oleum* and Greek *ελαίων*, such as *aliebu* 阿列布 (Laufer 1919: 417) and *aliwa* 阿利襪 (Masini 1989: 291); finally, *yangganlan* 洋橄欖 (foreign olive). In three of the four cases, phonetic transcription, partial in *qidunguo* and complete in *aliebu* and *aliewa*, betrays the exotic provenance of the plant, while in the last case, the adjective *yang* ("ocean, sea", denoting "foreign", particularly "Western") clarifies that this is not an indigenous product. As for the Chinese olive, the synonyms are even more numerous: *ganlanzi* 橄欖子 specifies that these are "olive fruits"; some signal its most relevant characteristics, from Colour – such as *qingganlan* 青橄欖 (green olive), *bailan* 白欖 (white olive), and *huanglan* 黃欖 (yellow olive) – to taste, as in *ganlan* 甘欖 (sweet olive); others, however, provide a cultural connotation, which we will encounter again later in various ancient poetic texts, such as *zhongguo* 忠果 (fruit of loyalty) or *jianguo* 諫果 (fruit of good counsel). For amla, finally, the most common synonyms are *yougan* 油柑 (oleiferous tangerine), *yugan* 餘甘 (sweetness that endures), and the transcriptions *anmole* 庵摩勒 and *anluoguo* 庵羅果.

Regarding curative properties, all three plants find use in traditional Chinese medicine preparations. The Mediterranean olive proves useful for lowering blood pressure, reducing blood fats, rehydrating the intestines, relieving constipation, neutralizing toxins, and promoting wound healing, as well as in the treatment of burns, scalds, and coronary diseases. The Chinese olive acts on the meridians of spleen, stomach, and lungs, and is used as an element that helps dissipate excessive heat; among other things, it decongests the throat, dissolves phlegm, treats coughs, soothes irritations, facilitates the production of fluids in cases of dryness, neutralizes toxins (it is, for example, administered in cases of poisoning from fish or crab meat), and proves an effective remedy against drunkenness. Furthermore, according to the herbal manuals *Materia Medica of Master Rihua* (日華子本草) and *Compendium of Materia Medica* (本草綱目), appearing respectively during the Five Dynasties period (907-960) and the sixteenth century (Ming era, 1368–1644), Chinese olives stimulate appetite, alleviate excess gas, stop diarrhea, and relieve thirst (Rihuazi 2005: 437; Li 2017: 473–474). Finally, the leaves, seeds, roots, and bark of amla are used in combination with various other elements for their capacity to stimulate liquid production, counteract toxins, eliminate excess heat, and cool the blood. This plant thus proves useful in treating more or less serious diseases and inflammations such as diphtheria, jaundice, dysentery, haemorrhoid, cough, enteritis, eczema, colds, and is prescribed to alleviate the effects

3 For a detailed discussion of the term *qidun*, see Laufer (1919: 415–417). The character *dun* is also found in the variants *dun* 敦 or *tun* 暾.

of bites from certain poisonous insects and snakes (ETCM 2011: *anmole*, *yougangen*, *yougan mupi*, *youganye*).

Regarding the introduction of *Canarium album* into China, we have a reference in *The Region of Three Capitals* (三輔黃圖), a geographical work of unknown authorship and uncertain dating (from the third to the sixth century), in which the areas of Xianyang, capital of the Qin dynasty (221–206 B. C.), Chang'an, and Luoyang, capitals of the Western (206 B. C. – 9 A. D.) and Eastern (25–220 A. D.) Han dynasties respectively, are described in detail, with particular emphasis on Chang'an. In the third of six chapters, the Litchi Palace is mentioned, located in the park of the Palace of Sweet Springs, a secondary imperial residence of the Qin and Han emperors. It was a kind of greenhouse where plants from the south were planted and cultivated. The text reads:

> In the sixth year of the Yuanding era of Emperor Wu of the Han, after the campaign against Nanyue, the Litchi Palace was erected in which extraordinary trees and plants brought from the South were planted [...] as well as over a hundred specimens among longans, lychees, arecanuts, olives, thousand-year plants, and citrus fruits[4] (He 2005: 208–211).

The Chinese olive is mentioned only in the text entitled *The Capital of Wu* (吳都賦), composed by Zuo Si 左思 (250–305) during the Western Jin dynasty (266–316) and later collected in the celebrated *Literary Selection* (文選) of Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531). In the *Commentaries on the Literary Selection* (文選注), compiled by Li Shan 李善 (630–689) in the Tang era (618–907), we are given some interesting information:

> The olive grows in mountainous zones; its fruits are similar to hen eggs, of brilliant green Colour, with sweet and pleasant taste; once it reaches maturity its consumption is beneficial to health. It is found throughout the region south of Shixing and is used for offerings to the South Sea[5] (Xiao 2002: 164).

From the data reported, there is little doubt that this concerns the Chinese olive, widely attested and known in the medieval period. During the Tang dynasty, the Chinese olive was also numbered among the products used as payment for local tribute taxes from Changle, in the southern province of Fujian, as attested in a passage contained in book 31, *Treatise on Geography* of the dynastic history compiled by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), titled *New History of the Tang* (新唐書, Ouyang 2019: 1064). Thus, *ganlan* was not only known but widely cultivated, at least in Fujian.

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4 漢武帝元鼎六年, 破南越起扶荔宮宮以荔枝得名, 以植所得奇草異木: […] 龍眼、荔枝、檳榔、橄欖、千歲子、甘橘皆百餘本。

5 橄欖, 生山中, 實如雞子, 正青, 甘美, 味成時食之益善。始興以南皆有之, 南海常獻之。The text *The Capital of Wu* is found on pp. 149–181, while the commentary is in note 80. Shixing is located in present-day Guangdong Province.

One of the most important encyclopedic works on agriculture in ancient China also mentions olives. This is *Substantive Techniques for the Benefit of the People* (齊民要術), in 10 books and 92 sections, compiled by Jia Sixie 賈思勰 during the period between the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535) and the Eastern Wei dynasty (534–550), completed around the year 544, and which systematically collects information in various fields of plant cultivation, agronomy, animal husbandry, gastronomy, etc., accumulated over roughly a millennium and a half. In the final book, it cites various sources that mention the olive, including the *Description of Plants and Trees of the Southern Regions* (南方草木狀):

> Olives are as large as dates; the tree flowers in the second month and begins to fruit immediately after. Maturation occurs between the eighth and ninth months. If eaten fresh, olives have a tart taste, but if preserved in honey they become sweet[6] (Jia 2015: 1268).

The first documentation of the Mediterranean olive in China dates to the ninth century A. D., in the late Tang era, and comes from a work in 20 chapters (plus ten others added later) that touches on various subjects, including natural phenomena, botany, insects, fish, medicine, and Buddhist traditional stories. This is the *Miscellany of Youyang* (酉陽雜俎), compiled by the erudite poet and official Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803–863). In the eighteenth chapter, third section *Animals and Plants*, we find the following passage:

> The tree grows in Persia and also in Syria.[7] In Persia it is called *qixu*.[8] It is between six and nine meters tall, the bark is light, the flowers resemble those of the pomelo and are very fragrant, the fruits resemble those of the carambola and mature in the fifth month. Westerners pound it to extract oil with which they cook pastries and fruits, exactly as sesame seeds are used in China[9] (Duan 2015: 1344–1345).

Apart from some incongruities, such as the fragrance of the flowers, the size of the fruits, and so on, likely due to the compiler's lack of direct knowledge of the plant – but also to the difficulty of identifying with complete certainty many plants when mentioned in ancient texts – from all other information it can be stated that we are indeed speaking of the Mediterranean olive, which constitutes not only the first mention of *Olea europaea* in Chinese texts but also the only confirmed one until modern times.

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6 橄欖子, 大如棗, 二月華色, 仍連著實。八月、九月熟, 生食味酢, 蜜藏仍甜。

7 The term Fulin (and its various graphic variants) referred during the Sui and Tang periods both to the Eastern Roman Empire and, more specifically, to its extension along the Mediterranean coasts of Syria (CY 1991: 779).

8 For a discussion of the term *qixu* and its variants, see Duan (2015: 1345, note 2).

9 齊暾樹, 出波斯國。亦出拂林國, 拂林呼為齊虛。樹長二三丈, 皮青白, 花似柚, 極芳香。子似楊桃, 五月熟。西域人壓為油以煮餅果, 如中國之用巨勝也。

The Ganlan in Song Dynasty Poetic Texts

The frequent mentions of *ganlan* in non-literary texts of the Song era testify that, from the tenth century onward, the cultivation of the Chinese olive was spreading extensively throughout the empire and was becoming an important component of agricultural production, such that the cultivars in certain specific zones were considered of greater value than others, exactly as happens with the Mediterranean olive in our regions. Consider, for example, the following passage from the ninth of the 10 chapters of *Annotations and Anecdotes of an Itinerant Official* (游宦紀聞), a miscellaneous work composed in the thirteenth century by Zhang Shinan 張世南:

> The olive grows in both Min and Shu; the Dingxiang variety from Min is the best, is much smaller and preserves for a long time its extraordinary flavor, far superior to that produced in Shu[10] (Zhang 1981: 82).

The diffusion in various areas of the empire can explain some of the colourful names attributed regionally to certain varieties, as in the description contained in the *Gazette of Three Mountains* (三山志),[11] chapter XLI, *Local Products*, compiled by the literatus Liang Kejia 梁克家 (1128–1187):

> The olive is a tree with a straight and tall stem; its fruits, autumnal, are first bitter and then sweet; those that crackle and have a savory taste are called "jade green"[12] (Liang 2000: 649).

Similarly, it is from the Song era onward that *ganlan* begins to be mentioned more frequently in literary sources, particularly poetic ones. Various internal elements of the texts suggest that reference is being made to the Chinese olive, or, in some cases, to the amla, but not to the Mediterranean olive.

Undoubtedly, the characteristic that most strikes one about the Chinese olive is its taste that from bitter gradually becomes sweet. A combination of different flavors that is often compared to the experience of tea tasting and opens the way to philosophical reflections on life that have surely contributed to configuring some aspects of the symbolic imaginary of *ganlan*. The literatus Wang Zhiwang 王之望 (1104–1171),

10 橄欖, 閩蜀俱有之, 閩中丁香一品, 極小, 儁永, 其味勝於蜀產。

11 Also known as the *Gazetteer of the Three Mountains of the Chunxi Era* (淳熙三山志). Chunxi is the third and final reign period of Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1163–1189) of the Song dynasty and lasted from 1174 to 1189. Local gazetteers (*difangzhi* 地方志) are works that record the geography, history, customs, and products of a given area – province, prefecture, district, or city – and were periodically compiled by local officials. "Three Mountains" is an alternative name for Fuzhou, in Fujian. It should be noted that this is the prefectural capital in which Changle was located, mentioned by Ouyang Xiu in the *New History of the Tang* (see *supra*), attesting to the long-standing tradition of Chinese olive cultivation in Fujian Province.

12 橄欖, 木端直而高, 秋實, 先苦後甜, 脆美者曰碧玉。

at the opening of his poem titled *Sensations upon Eating Olives* (食橄榄有感), reveals to us:

> When I first tasted olives, I frowned and wanted to spit them out. Then, savoring them gradually, a charm lingered long in my memory[13] (Fu 1991, XXII: 88).

Turning to cultural and social meanings, the olive first becomes an object of gift-giving among the Chinese elite, as testified by the quatrain of Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) titled *Thanking Wang Ziyu for the Gift of Olives* (謝王子予送橄欖):

> Just when I think of the "taste of good counsel",
> olives arrive in my study on a golden tray;
> This is what they share with "sweetness that endures",
> the authentic taste after long bitterness.[14]
>
> (Huang 2001: 278)

This text is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, some elements make us question whether we are still speaking of the Chinese olive or of *Phyllanthus emblica*, whose Chinese name is *yougan* 油柑, but also *yugan* 餘甘 (meaning "sweetness that endures", third verse), and, once again, *ganlan*. On the other hand, the term *weijian* 味諫, "taste of good counsel", present in the first verse, also returns, as we have seen, to the term *ganlan*. If on one hand the degree of terminological ambiguity already noted increases, we are at this point induced to think that *ganlan*, rather than referring to a specific fruit, instead denotes *various* fruits that share characteristics such as shape, colour, consistency, and partly taste (for example, the bitterness that becomes sweetness, proper to both the Chinese olive and amla), somewhat like what happens with our term "nut", which, beyond denoting a specific fruit, refers to any fruit with a woody shell. Furthermore, the passage from initial bitter taste to sweet taste opens the way to metaphorical reflection on life. Indeed, in the final verse, the term *zhenwei* 真味, "true taste", connotes the true sense of things or the most genuine intentions, so that the closure becomes something similar to "only through suffering does one understand the true sense of things" or "only through suffering are results achieved".

Another order of symbolic meanings is linked to the provenance of the Chinese olive from the South (of China and beyond), a topos that well suits the themes of nostalgia, the suffering of exile, and degradation to positions of little prestige in the peripheries of the empire for officials. Testimony to this is the poem composed around 1240 by Liu Kezhuang 劉克莊 (1187–1269), an official and poet often removed from court for the excessive frankness of his opinions. It is the second poem of the cycle *Three Poems from Haikou* (海口三首):

13 余初食橄欖，眉蹙口欲吐．稍稍滋味之，久乃見媚撫。

14 方懷味諫軒中果/忽見金盤橄欖來/想共餘甘有瓜葛/苦中真味晚方回。

Constant mist on the island, dissolves at evening,
beyond harsh dunes, distant vessels;
Wind raises cold sound among trees,
high tide fades across the bridge [...];
Eternal the wandering of an official through mountains,
like the sea in a cup the thoughts of the exile;
When I think of this wandering, emotions become intense,
it is like the first tasting of olives.[15]

(Beida 1998: 32600)

Explicit considerations on life come to us from a couplet of the aforementioned Huang Tingjian, taken from the poem titled *In Response to Ziyou, Who, Falling Ill at Jixi and Recalled to Court, Resides with Wang Dingguo* (次韻子由績溪病起被召寄王定國):

The bitterness of life seems eternal,
like the first tasting of the olive.[16]

(Huang 2001: 24)

A final relevant theme found among numerous references to *ganlan* in Song era poetic texts concerns loyalty. For example, the celebrated litterateur and poet of the Song era, Zhao Fan 趙蕃 (1143–1229), in a couplet from the quatrain titled *Commander Jian Yu* (簡俞尉) links, by contrast, suasive words (but evidently false) to the bitter taste (but true) of the olive:

People are always attracted to sweet words,
and many disdain the taste of olives.[17]

(Beida 1998: 30784)

However, we owe to Wang Yucheng 王禹偁 (954–1001), another poet and official confined to the South of the empire due to his excessively open political criticism, lucid and explicit considerations that connect the olive to loyalty, in a poem titled *The Olive* (橄欖):

In Jiangdong abundant fruits abound,
but the olive is considered rare and precious;
When one tastes it accompanying wine,
people from the North initially pull a face;
The rind and pit, bitter and astringent,

15 島煙常至晏方開/沙際參差辨遠桅/風挾寒聲從樹起/潮分末勢過橋來[…]歸憶斯遊非冷淡/如嘗橄欖味初回。

16 端如嘗橄欖/苦過味方永。

17 世人往往嗜甘言/正味多嫌橄欖嚴。

at first bite are despised;
After a while, though, there comes a lingering taste,
sweet as grain syrup;
What metaphor am I making?
I am comparing the olive to the words of a loyal official.
Speaking openly can offend the sovereign's ears,
and those who do so are banished to the world's borders;
Then, in times of chaos, one recalls those words,
but by then what good are regrets?
This I wish to say to collectors of poetry:
do not take lightly verses about the olive![18]

(Beida 1998: 687)

Summarizing, we have thus far traced the principal stages that attest to the presence and diffusion of the olive in China through some sources of non-literary type and, in parallel, have identified, from Song era poetic sources, how a symbolic and metaphorical patrimony gradually formed around *ganlan*. A patrimony that revolves around principal directions such as exoticism, nostalgia, existential reflection, giving, and loyalty. At the same time, we have been able to corroborate through texts some intuitions of the past (Laufer 1919; Deng 1958), according to which, except in the rarest of cases, when the term *ganlan* is mentioned in ancient times, it refers to *Canarium album* or at most to *Phyllanthus emblica*, that is, two plants introduced and acclimated in China well before *Olea europaea*.

Before proceeding to an examination of the symbolic value of the olive in the twentieth century, it must be considered that imperial literary production was strongly elitist in nature. In fact, the common people, largely illiterate, could not have access to written texts, much less to those written in literary Chinese. Therefore, one cannot speak of a symbolic patrimony uniformly shared, a situation destined to change radically with the birth of the new China.

The Olive as a Symbol of Friendship: A Story from the 1960s

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought to completion a profound change in the production and consumption of culture. The new political class had as its primary necessity the education, including ideological education, of the popular masses. This impelled both the introduction of new, more modern, and certainly more capillary means of communication, and the gradual elevation of literacy levels. Regarding the description of the symbolic value of the olive, it therefore becomes essential to examine other forms of narration beyond literary

18 江東多果實/橄欖稱珍奇/北人將就酒/食之先顰眉/皮核苦且澀/曆口複棄遺/良久有回味/始覺甘如飴/我今何所喻/喻彼忠臣詞/直道逆君耳/斥逐投天涯/世亂思其言/噬臍焉能追/寄語采詩者/無輕橄欖詩。

ones, particularly those linked to new media such as photography, cinema, and television. One of the characteristics of modernity, indeed, is the value of the image, through which objects seem to enter physically into daily life. As for the European olive, it makes its visual appearance in China in the 1960s, thanks to photos in articles and newsreels. With these images, the term *ganlan* loses its indefiniteness in favor of an "objective" visual consistency.

How much, before the twentieth century, this tree was known among the people is difficult to say. From the presentation of Italy in chapter 298 of the encyclopedia *Complete Analysis of Historical Sources and Documents of the Qing Dynasty* (清朝文獻通考), commissioned by Qing Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) in 1747, it is possible to infer that the olive was at that time foreign to most. In these pages we find a description evidently made for a reader entirely ignorant of its characteristics. It is stated:

> They possess [in Italy] the fruit of a tree called olive. When ripe, oil can be made from it. It is used mostly when fresh and has excellent taste. The pits are used as fuel. The residues are used as seasoning, while the leaves can be used as food for cattle and goats[19] (Zhang 1936: 7467).

The term used in the text, *aliwa* 阿利襪 (see *supra*), demonstrates that whoever writes either does not identify the plant with the already well-known *ganlan* or deliberately differentiates the two plants. In any case, this reference is linked to a tree present in a distant country, Italy, little known if not entirely unknown to most. It remains, however, information directed always to the class of literati.

Twentieth-century texts, instead, allow us to get an idea of how widespread the Mediterranean olive was in the country and, therefore, known to the common people. In those that reconstruct the history of its diffusion in China, the news of the introduction of the tree at the beginning of the century often returns, effected by French missionaries and Chinese students coming from France (Shi, Sun et alii 2011: 572). It would have been they who brought the plant to certain areas of Yunnan, to Chongqing, to Fujian, and to Taiwan. This would suggest that in the 1960s, at least in those zones, people had already had the opportunity to see it. In more recent sources, however, one can find information on only two trees. The first would have been planted in 1907 in the vicinity of the Catholic church of the village of Cizhong, in Yunnan. According to what is reported in the 1995 book *Monumental Trees of Yunnan* (云南名木古树), which presents a photo and description of the tree, it would have flowered and fruited numerous times, and would even show a production of 9.1 kg of olives in 1980 (Shi, Sun et alii 2011: 572; Li 2006: 8). Another source states that in 1990 it would have reached a height of 8 meters (Gu

19 有樹頭果, 曰阿利襪, 熟可為油, 生最繁味美而用多, 其核可為炭滓, 可為鹼葉, 可食牛羊。(Quoted in Masini 1989: 291).

2022). The second, of the Frantoio variety, would have been brought to China by a French student in 1940 and planted on a small hill in Mengzi county in Yunnan. We know furthermore that the tree was uprooted in 1978 due to poor growth (Shi, Sun et alii 2011: 572). In fact, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Christian missionaries brought the plant with them for the symbolic and liturgical value it held in the religion they preached. This explains why the only olive tree of which traces remain is linked to a Catholic church and also why the tree's entry into China was not followed by its diffusion, since it would have been imported for its religious rather than economic value.

It is only between 1956 and 1962, due to food and oil shortages, that the olive begins to be considered for its economic and nutritional value. The newly born People's Republic, indeed, includes it in its national import program, and the Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Forests import 12 varieties and 1,800 plants together with seeds from the Soviet Union and Albania to conduct cultivation trials in some botanical gardens and in the fields of the South (Shi, Sun et alii 2011: 572; Lin 2020; Li 2006: 8). It is in these years that, thanks to articles published in the *People's Daily*, the European olive tree – now called "oleiferous olive" to distinguish it from the simple "olive" – enters the daily life of Chinese citizens thanks to news concerning the friendly Albania. In these articles, the olive is spoken of as a crop that "adds beauty and wealth to Albania with its thousand hills" (Wang 1961)[20] and that is the protagonist of the new course of politics followed in the country where, finally, thanks also to these choices in the agricultural field, well-being begins to spread (Wang 1961). In some of these articles images of the tree are also present, but it is especially in the subsequent three-year period 1963–1965 that images of the olive spread extensively throughout China.

These are years of a transitional phase in the strategy of Mao Zedong's economic policy (Samarani 2004: 257), in preparation for the implementation of a new five-year plan. In this period, various actions were implemented to remedy and correct errors of economic policy such as those of the Great Leap Forward.[21] In particular, work was done on revitalizing production, also considering the importation of crops that appeared suited to what is today defined as heroic agriculture. Within the framework of this political will, various experts were sent to friendly countries to identify new products suited to Chinese territory.

Chinese agronomists discovered the economic and nutritional potential of the Mediterranean olive during some stays in Albania (Wang 1961). These discoveries soon reached the ears of Prime Minister Zhou

20 橄榄给多山的阿尔巴尼亚增添了美丽和财富。

21 The expression "Great Leap Forward" refers to the economic and social policies pursued between 1957 and 1962, during which reforms were promoted in agriculture and industry in order to avoid importing heavy machinery from abroad, through intensive use of peasant labor.

Enlai (Zhuo 2019: 36), who made a strong contribution to the development of olive cultivation, first by sending other agronomists to Albania, and then by negotiating the sending of plants and experts in exchange for the aid provided by China to the Adriatic country (Zhuo 2019: 36; Li 2006: 8), which was experiencing a politically delicate moment. These diplomatic actions received some attention in the press, and images of the tree of Athena began to circulate in the country. In these texts, the olive was defined as the "plant of friendship", a term still used today that emphasizes how in this period the olive tree became a symbol of solidarity between the two peoples.

In the Maoist era, there were various "friendship plants". For a period a variety of Comfrey from North Korea was thus called, considered useful as medicinal and as forage, as well as a high-yielding rice variety, IR-8, transferred from Pakistan to China, before the latter re-established ties with the United States (Schmalzer 2019: 197). None of these, however, received the media attention reserved for the olive, a tree that in 1964 even appeared in newsreels.

The images from a *Brief News* (新闻简报) newsreel, transmitted in cinemas and on television and reproposed today on the Youku platform (Li, Cheng 1964), allow us to reconstruct the symbolic value attributed to the olive in those years. In a clip of one minute and thirty seconds, a narrator recounts the two news episodes whose images scroll by. Firstly, the arrival at the port of Zhanjiang in Guangdong, on February 18th of that year, of 10,000 young olive plants donated to China by the president of the Albanian Council, Mehmet Shehu, together with two Albanian agronomists; and then the visit, on March 3rd, of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in the fields of Haikou, over 40 kilometers from Kunming, together with two other Albanian agronomists, to inspect the condition of the young olive plants and personally plant some. Carrying forward an analysis of the filmic statement from the perspective of the ideational metafunction, translated as "representational" in the multimodal grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), it emerges that the representation proposed in these images, realized by proposing groups rather than individuals, aims to introduce the spectator into a space where the individual exists only in relation to the group, within a broad context that we could define as historical. In the news images, produced mostly with medium or medium long shots in which space is predominant over the human figure, the individual exists within the group and the explanation of his presence is found only in relation to the olive plant, the only true protagonist. Indeed, if the first framing sees a ship approaching the port and immediately thereafter experts descending, welcomed by young people framed in close-up, the scene is immediately stolen by the trees that in a second wide shot are unloaded and then positioned at the centre of every subsequent image, where peasants and agronomists are seen planting the young trees working in perfect harmony. Even the scenes in which Prime Minister

Zhou Enlai appears are not dissimilar. He is seen working and listening to instructions from experts always next to a tree or behind a row of trees.

The representation proposed highlights the transition of the olive from plant to symbol. In the composition of the image, the datum is the group born thanks to solidarity in work. The plant is a promise of novelty and well-being. In the interaction between participants internal to the images and those external (the spectators), the plants play a role of conjunction, placed as they are always at the center of the scene or as a symbolic barrier between those filmed and those watching. The olive tree is here a symbol of friendship between peoples nourished by solidarity, collaboration, and mutual respect between equals, in the name of which even Prime Minister Zhou Enlai dedicates his time to the precious gift.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in every reference to the olive in Chinese newspapers, this symbolic value remained clear. The olive tree existed only insofar as it was a form of solidarity between peoples and the fruit of the hard work of the individual, necessary to achieve collective well-being. Consider as examples some sentences from a 1972 article titled *The Tree of Friendship Blooms and Bears Fruit on the Shores of the Yangzi* (友谊之树在扬子江畔开花结果):

Zhou Enlai planting an olive tree

> These olives are the precious friendship trees donated [...] during comrade Zhou Enlai's visit to heroic Albania in 1964. [...] Now, these olives, symbol of friendship between China and Albania, have grown from 400 to 1,149. Last year, 171 plants flowered and 140 bore fruit, producing 334 kilograms of fresh fruit. This year, another 260 plants have flowered and 181 have borne fruit, and production will be significantly greater than last year. [...] During harvest, looking at the olive groves laden with fruit, workers relive the words of Mao Zedong: "Though friends may be far away, their hearts are always close." Although China and Albania are separated by thousands of mountains and rivers, their hearts are united. They remember with emotion how these friendship olives have overcome various natural disasters and bloomed. [...] Reflecting on the happy days in the company of Albanian friends, workers affirm with emotion that the fruits of friendship of the friendship trees have been watered by the shared sweat of the peoples of China and Albania[22] (*Youyi zhi shu* 1972).

The name of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, the only politician to remain steadfast in his role for his entire life, is inseparably linked to this tree, even iconographically. Even today, in any publications linked in any way to olive plants, his photograph always appears while planting one. The link between the politician and the olive tree is a historical fact. Zhou Enlai actively committed himself to the spread of the plant throughout the country. During his travels, he repeatedly requested and obtained donations of plants to pursue production in various areas (Xu, Wang 2004: 5). But as time passed, historical reasons were replaced by a symbolic link.

With the beginning of reforms following Mao Zedong's death, the process of scientific growth through the support of friendly countries came under attack for the meager results obtained. According to studies following Zhou Enlai's death, olive cultivation, like most of Chinese agronomy, lacked adequate agricultural practices and expertise, probably precisely because of choices, such as where to plant the crops, made without sufficient scientific knowledge. In the early years of the reform undertaken by Deng Xiaoping, responsibility for these errors was attributed precisely to choosing partners in scientific activities based on "friendship" rather than competence. In other words, errors and the poor success of the crops were attributed to the scientific limitations of the countries that had donated and overseen the production of the "friendship plants", and for this reason the search began for partners from European countries

22 这是一九六四年周恩来同志访问英雄的阿尔巴尼亚时[…]的那一批珍贵的友谊树 […] 现在，这批象征中阿友谊的油橄榄树已经由四百株发展到一千一百五十九株。去年有一百七十一株开花，一百四十株结果，收鲜果三百三十四公斤。今年又有二百六十株开花，一百八十一株结果，产量将比去年有较大的增长。收获季节，所里职工们望着果实累累的油橄榄林，重温毛主席的教导："'海内存知己，天涯若比邻'。中阿两国远隔千山万水，我们的心是连在一起的"，心情特别激动。他们不由得回忆起这批友谊树以坚强的生命力，战胜各种自然灾害，在这里开花结果的历程 […] 回顾同阿尔巴尼亚战友欢聚的日子，林业科学研究所的同志们激动地说：友谊树结出友谊果，是中阿两国人民共同用汗水浇灌培育出来的。

who would collaborate in joint venture enterprises to produce quality oil (Xu, Wang 2004: 279). This polemic called into question the reality itself of scientific exchange and even the true sense hidden behind the word friendship. As Schmalzer writes:

> Many international specialists who have visited China over the past half-century [...] may rightly wonder how much actual learning occurred. How important was that visit for the circulation of knowledge, and how much of the sweat served more symbolic (albeit certainly important) political and diplomatic purposes? [...] The leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, wrote harshly in an April 20, 1973 diary entry about Chinese "revisionism" (this was, after all, the period when China began renewing relations with the United States) and complained that "the Chinese are publishing nothing about us, apart from welcoming and farewelling of football and volleyball players and Chinese acrobats" (Halliday 1986, 299). Celebrating Sino-Albanian friendship by irrigating olive trees with the pooled sweat of Chinese and Albanian people might arguably fall under a similar category of symbolic friendship without true political commitment (Schmalzer 2019: 202).

These reflections brought about a change in the symbolic value attributed to olive plants. Even today some bloggers speak of the olives donated by the Albanians as a plant "with more than unique symbolic value" (Yuanshan 2019), although this tree has now lost its value as a symbol of solidarity between peoples. Unchanged, on the other hand, remains the link with the figure of Zhou Enlai, so much so that it is called the "Premier's Tree" (Yi 2018). An example of how the tree of Athena became the tree of Zhou is given by the words of Li Juzhen, an agricultural technician who visited Albania in 1964 and remained always linked to the world of olive cultivation:

> The Chinese olive project is infused with the care and affection of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. The realization of the Premier's desire for China to enter the world map of olive oil production must be ensured[23] (Quoted in Schmalzer 2019: 208).

Or again, in a recent article:

> We are realizing Zhou Enlai's desire to plant olives to green barren mountains and bring well-being to the people, achieving a "dual victory" of prosperity and green[24] (Li 2024).

The tree of Zhou, therefore, is the symbol of the loyalty of the good politician toward his people, of benevolence and justice, and no longer of friendship between peoples.

23 中国的油橄榄事业浸透着太多周总理的关心和爱护，我们一定要让总理想在世界橄榄油分布图上加上'中国'这个名字的愿望得以实现。

24 实现周恩来总理引种油橄榄绿化荒山、造福人民的"绿富双赢"夙愿。

The Olive Today: A Familiar Stranger

With the change of direction imparted by reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s, the olive – now visually and lexically identified and therefore distinguishable from the plants denoted by the vague term *ganlan* – is clearly recognized as a foreign product linked to distant, ancient, and vaguely exotic cultures. A widespread information operation, carried out with the production of numerous works of popular science (articles, documentaries, and subsequently websites), makes known the symbolic and metaphorical values of the olive within the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean in different historical periods. The reference to the olive thus becomes enriched with meanings. In some cases it again comes to symbolize distant countries, recalls the nostalgia felt whether for one's native country or for the foreign country now left behind, although not that of the exile or degraded official. Exemplary of this symbolic use are the words of the well-known Taiwanese pop song, written by San Mao, sung by Chyi Yu 齊豫 to music by Li Tai-Hsiang 李泰祥, much known also in mainland China, titled *The Olive Tree* (橄欖樹) of 1979:

> Do not ask me where I come from,
> My homeland is far away.
> Why wander?
> Wander far away...wander...
> For the birds flying in the sky,
> For the streams flowing gently through the mountains,
> For the vast meadows,
> Wander far away, wander,
> And still... still...
> For the olive of my dreams.[25]
>
> (Chang 2019)

This text is inextricably linked to the figure of its author: Chen Maoping 陳懋平, known by the pseudonym San Mao 三毛 (Three Coins), probably a reference to a well-known comic character born from the pen of Zhang Leping 張樂平. An author among the most popular in the Sinophone world of the 1970s and 1980s, she is also famous for her adventurous and passionate life, which led her to reside for long periods in countries such as the Western Sahara and the Canary Islands, and travel in the Americas and mainland China. If this song is still considered an anthem to freedom, to movement without restraint from one country to another (so much so that its diffusion was not authorized on Taiwan radio and television because it was accused of

25 不要問我從哪裡來/我的故鄉在遠方/為什麼流浪/流浪遠方流浪/為了天空飛翔的小鳥/為了山間輕流的小溪/為了寬闊的草原/流浪遠方/流浪/還有還有/為了夢中的橄欖樹。San Mao wrote the lyrics in English, which were later translated into Chinese by Yang Zujun 杨祖珺.

inciting young people to flee their homes), the expression "olive of my dreams" leads one to think nostalgically of one's distant homeland. As in the aforementioned post by Gu Shan, where the author, after illustrating characteristics and symbolic meaning of the European olive, says:

> In my dreams there is no olive tree; my native land is far away and no olives are produced there, but it is an earthly paradise. There will be no olives in my Hangzhou, but it is nonetheless worthy of being remembered with affection[26] (Gu 2024).

The reference to the foreign olive appears sometimes with a provocative sense, as in this sentence by Wang Xiaobo 王小波:

> In ancient Greece, the greatest sin of man was to cut down olive trees during war. In modernity, the greatest sin of intellectuals is to build prisons for their own thoughts. Cutting down olives is destroying the fertility of the earth, while constructing ideologies is destroying the wealth of thought; I believe the latter sin is the greatest: without olive oil, at most one does not eat salad; without thought, man dies[27] (Wang 2010: 156).

A quotation that, confirming the perception of estrangement of this tree from Chinese culture, at the same time highlights how familiar the olive is to Chinese people today. On the other hand, it could not be otherwise, given that currently it is possible not only to satisfy on the web the curiosity of knowing any plant, but also to find typical products from different parts of the world in the large supermarket chains spread throughout China.

Indeed, after the food scandals of the early 2000s, particularly that of melamine-contaminated powdered milk produced by the Sanlu Group, Chinese consumers became increasingly attentive to food safety. In 2012, the oil sector was also involved in a very serious scandal for the discovery of poisoning caused by the sale of oil obtained from animal fat from sewage, then processed to be transformed into edible oil (Badkar 2013).[28] This scandal caused an increase in olive oil sales only very limitedly covered by local production (8,000 tons out of 57,500 purchased in 2022), so that, despite the use of olive oil still being niche, China is currently the fifth largest world importer, just above Japan and the United Kingdom (Hernandez 2023). Today, therefore, thanks also to careful marketing policies, the olive is associated with an idea of health and nature, as this advertising slogan proclaims: "Olive Oil: the sensation of a happy, healthy, and natural life".[29]

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26 我的梦中没有橄榄树，我的故乡在远方，在不产橄榄，但是有着人间仙境的地方。故乡杭州没有橄榄，但是，它照样值得怀恋。

27 在古希腊，人最大的罪恶是在战争中砍倒橄榄树。在现代，知识分子最大的罪恶，是建造关押自己的思想监狱。砍倒橄榄树是灭绝大地的丰饶，营造意识形态则是灭绝思想的丰饶；我觉得后一种罪过更大— 没了橄榄油，顶多不吃色拉；没有思想人就要死了。

28 This oil was called "gutter oil" (*digouyou* 地沟油).

29 带给天然，健康，快乐的生活感受。Slogan appearing in olive oil advertisements in China.

In a culture that attributes fundamental value to gift giving as a method for creating networks of relationships for social life, wholesome olive oil has become the ideal gift for important people (for affective ties, but also because they can help in one's career), so much so that according to Daxue Consulting data, more than 60% of the total oil sold is intended as a gift, as the *ganlan* had been in the imperial era.

Conclusions

The massive introduction of *Olea europaea* in the twentieth century brings with it metaphorical and cultural baggage already consolidated over centuries. The polysemy of the term *ganlan*, extensively documented in this paper, which links this plant to two other species already present locally, would lead one to think that one would arrive at a symbolic value traceable to the diverse implications accumulated over the previous two millennia. In ancient symbology, the tree and fruit *ganlan* were symbols of exoticism, nostalgia, loyalty, as well as a precious gift and a companion in reflections on the joys and pains of life, naturally within a system of values shared by a very restricted socio-cultural elite. Despite this complex heritage, when the Mediterranean olive tree enters China, in the 1960s, within the framework of precise economic and diplomatic policy, it becomes a symbol of friendship and brotherhood between ideologically similar regimes. The crisis of a development model, also scientific, based on these policies fosters a return to previous symbologies and, particularly, to the link between olive, loyalty, and intellectual honesty. The *you-ganlan* becomes the tree of Zhou Enlai, the politician who was opening new relationships that went beyond ideological communion.

With the spreading of well-being, the increase in international relations, and globalization, paradoxically those values that had been linked to an old society and culture – and therefore rejected in the Maoist era – regain ground and link specifically to the Mediterranean olive, which becomes, after a brief parenthesis in which it appeared as a symbol of freedom (San Mao's song), a symbol of exoticism, but also of luxury and fashion. Once again, a word linked to daily life reveals a complex and stratified world of meanings. To paraphrase Wang Yucheng: do not take lightly the words about the olive!

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Лука Стирпе, Валерија Вариано

Перле уља између стихова и слике: путовање кроз културна значења ганлана у Кини

Резиме

Овај чланак представља анализу симболичке вредности која се приписује маслини у древној и модерној кинеској култури. Полазећи од испитивања које открива лексичку ситуацију много сложенију него што се обично прет-

постављa, у чланку се закључује да се термин *їанлан* може односити, у зависности од контекста, на најмање три различите биљке: *Canarium album*, *Olea europaea* и *Phyllanthus emblica*. Анализа различитих књижевних докумената омогућила је широку реконструкцију фаза присуства или увођења *їанлана* у Кину, и његовог све већег значаја у царском економском и пољопривредном систему. Песме династије Сон (аутора као што су Уан Цуан, Хуан Ћинђијен, Лијо Кцуан, Цао Фан и Уан Ичен) расветлиле су развој сложеног симболичког и метафоричког система у древним временима. Надаље, расправља се о ширењу дрвета у Кини у XX веку, наглашавајући одлуку Комунистичке партије Кине да ову биљку интегрише у пољопривредни систем. Новинарски и филмски наративи о доласку неких биљака из Албаније 1964. године, поставили су темеље и за нове и за древне симболизме. У овом чланку истражујемо те симболизме кроз анализу песме „Дрво маслине“ Сана Маоа те представљамо осврт и на нове обичаје и навике у савременој Кини.

Кључне речи: маслина у Кини, *їанлан*, поезија Сон, Цоу Енлај, симболизам, Албанија

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