

## Luriana Lurilee and the China rose

I guess I'm not the first to be intrigued and not a little entranced by a poem whose fame rests almost solely on the appearance of fragments of it in one of Virginia Woolf's finest scenes. In *To the lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsey and her family and guests at their holiday house are sitting around the dinner table, and Woolf inhabits the mind and eyes of Mrs Ramsey as she roams among those at the table. Mrs Ramsey thinks she hears her husband reciting some lines:

*"Come out and climb the garden path, Luriana Lurilee.  
The China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the yellow bee.*

*The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from the mall, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves.*

*And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be  
Are full of trees and changing leaves.*

*She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside herself, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things. She knew, without looking round, that everyone at the table was listening to the voice saying:*

*I wonder if it seems to you,  
Luriana, Lurilee*

*with the same sort of relief and pleasure that she had, as if this were, at last, the natural thing to say, this were their own voice speaking."*

Victoria Glendinning, in her biography of Leonard Woolf<sup>1</sup>, tells us that this was a poem that Leonard and Virginia shared, and it appears in Leonard Woolf's autobiographical account of his time serving in Ceylon from 1904 to 1911. It was written by Charles Elton (1839-1900), dated Whitsuntide 1899, though not published until 1945 in an anthology edited by Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicholson, almost 20 years after *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927<sup>2</sup>. It was a poem known to the Woolfs and probably the Bloomsbury circle, and likely not anywhere else.

### *A Garden Song*

*Come out and climb the garden-path,  
Luriana Lurilee,  
The China rose is all abloom  
And buzzing with the yellow bee  
We'll swing you on the cedar-bough,  
Luriana Lurilee.*

*I wonder if it seems to you  
Luriana Lurilee  
That all the lives we ever lived  
And all the lives to be,  
Are full of trees and waving leaves,  
Luriana Lurilee.*

*How long it seems since you and I,  
Luriana Lurilee.  
Roamed in the forest where our kind  
Had just begun to be,  
And laughed & chattered in the flowers,  
Luriana Lurilee.*

*How long since you and I went out,  
Luriana Lurilee  
To see the kings go riding by  
Over lawn and daisylea,  
With their palm-sheaves and cedar-leaves  
Luriana Lurilee.*

*Swing, swing on the cedar bough!  
Luriana Lurilee  
Till you sleep in a bramble-heap  
Or under the gloomy churchyard-tree,  
And then fly back to swing on a bough,  
Luriana Lurilee.*

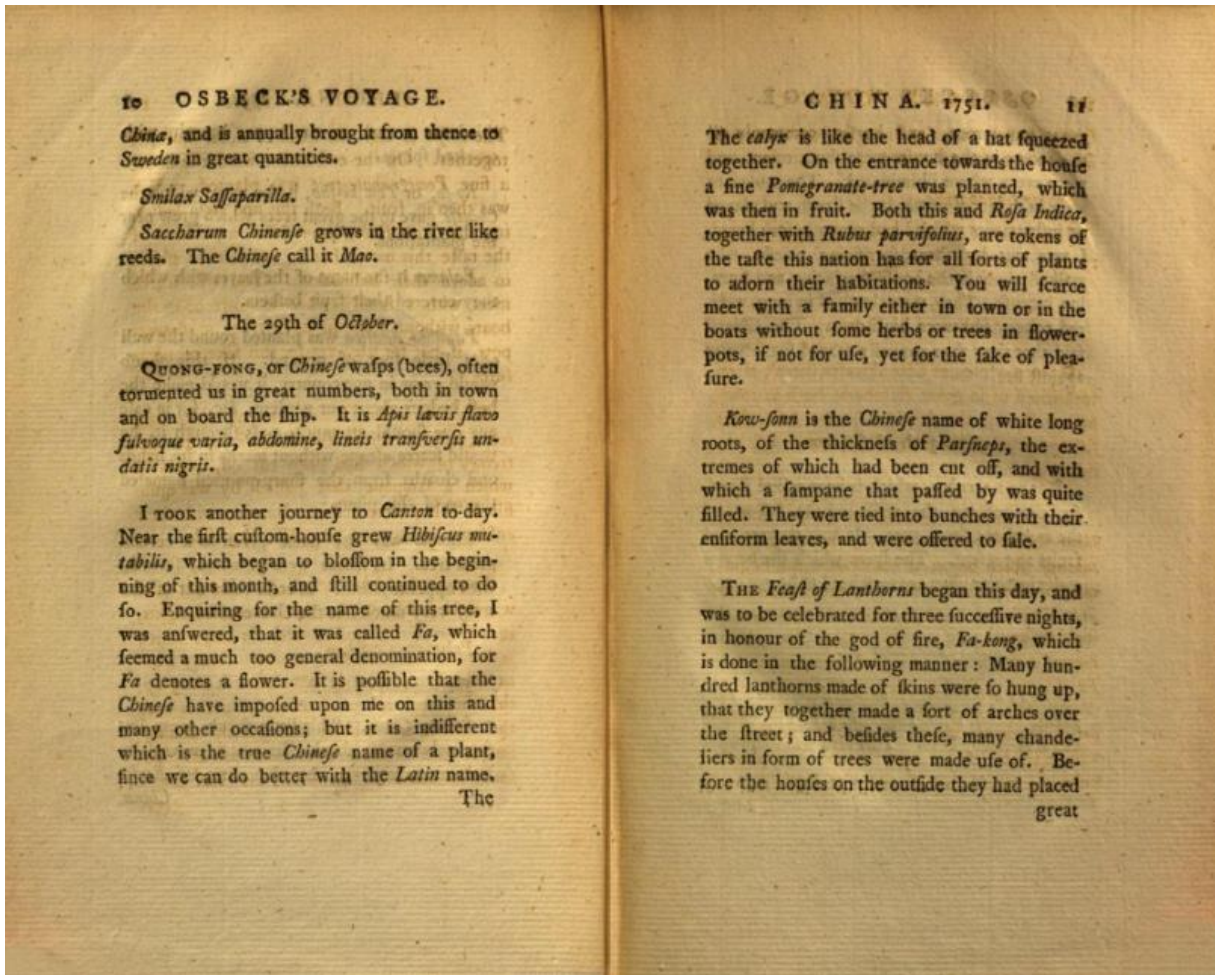


*Rosa chinensis* var.  
*chinensis*, or *Rosa*  
*semperflorens*. W Curtis,  
*Botanical Magazine* 7-8:  
t. 284, 1794

Apart from the catching lines on all the lives we ever lived and those to be, the mention of the China rose immediately attracts attention, at least for those for whom the word 'China' raises a flag. At first I thought it might be Robert Fortune's Double Yellow, among the species that Fortune collected in China at the behest of Kew Gardens. However, it doesn't seem to have thrived in England. The China rose will have been *Rosa chinensis*, long cultivated in China, and possibly first described in in 1768 in Europe by Nikolaus Joseph von Jacquin, botanist at the University of Vienna, and who never travelled to China. There is a plate in vol. 3 of his *Observationum Botanicarum* which shows the rose with the rosehip after the petals have fallen. However, it is likely that the specimen described was a cultivated variety rather than the true species.<sup>3</sup> Later plates of the rose were published from then onwards, for example that by W Curtis published in the *Botanical Magazine* in 1794. Earlier collections of Chinese plants, such as that by Michael Boym, the Polish Jesuit who travelled



to China in the 17<sup>th</sup> C and published his *Flora Chinensis* in Vienna in 1656, make no mention of roses. The rose was inevitably cross-bred and today's hybrid varieties in pinks and reds are not much like the original. Modern nurserymen' catalogues show the range. *R. chinensis* came from the south western provinces of Guizhou, Hubei and Sichuan, probably brought into Europe in the 1750s, and form the basis for much of modern rose breeding since then.<sup>4</sup> The Swedish botanist and explorer and pupil of Linnaeus, Peter Osbeck, visited China in 1751 and published his account of the journey, in which he records seeing *Rosa indica* in Canton, which may be *R. chinensis*<sup>5</sup>. The record is more one in passing, though *R. indica* does get listed in his *Flora Sinensis* at the back of vol. 2.



Two rose species were amongst the plates published in *Icones Plantarum sponte China Nascentium, E Bibliotheca Braamiana Excerptae* in 1821, a collection brought back from China by Andrea Everadus van Braam Houckgeest, a member of the Dutch Embassy to China in the 1790s. van Braam published his own travel account<sup>6</sup>, but the plant specimen plates, drawn and coloured in China were not published until after his death. Bretschneider lists them, and the two white roses there are *Rosa bracteata*, Wendl and *Rosa laevigata*, Michx.<sup>7</sup> The definitive history of the Chinese rose origins is tangled and still unresolved.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Glendinning, V., Leonard Woolf. A Biography. London, Simon & Schuster, 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bookword.co.uk/tag/luriana-lurilee/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rosegathering.com/china.html> (accessed 28 July 2023)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.countrygardenroses.co.uk/about-us/history-of-the-rose/china-rose/> (accessed 28 July 2023)

<sup>5</sup> **Osbeck, Pehr / Toréen, Olof / Ekeberg, Carl Gustav** A Voyage to China and the East Indies by Pehr Osbeck. Together with a voyage to Suratte by Olof Toreen. And an Account of the Chinese husbandry by Captain Charles Gustavus Ekeberg, translated from the German, by John Reinhold Forster. To which are added, a faunula and flora sinenses. Two volumes. London, printed for B. White, 1771. The book was first published in Swedish in 1857, translated into German in 1865 and this version translated by Georg Forster into English in 1771.

<sup>6</sup> **Houckgeest B** An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, To The Court of the Emperor of China, in the Years 1794 and 1795; (Subsequent to that of the Earl of MacCartney). Containing a description of several parts of the Chinese Empire, unknown to Europeans; taken from the journal of Andreas Everard Van Braam, Chief of the direction of that company, and second in the Embassy. Translated from the Original of M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery. With a correct chart of the route. London: R. Phillips, 1798.

<sup>7</sup> **Bretschneider, E.** History of European Botanical Discoveries in China. London, Sampson, Lowe, Marston & Co., 1898, vol. 1, pp 187-189.