



The tulip 'bubble' in Holland in the 1630's is well

known. The events are briefly summarized below, as an introduction to what happened in China around 350 years later.

Over a three-year period rare tulip bulbs changed hands in Holland for sums that would have bought a house in Amsterdam! Thousands of people, from the wealthiest of merchants to the lowliest of street traders, were caught in a frenzy of buying and selling.

The most valuable bulbs were rare, and the flowers they produced were extraordinarily beautiful (usually due to a mosaic virus, which caused an attractive streaking). However many bought, not because they wanted the plants, but to sell on at a profit. Prices had already risen rapidly for more than two years. Buyers believed that the huge sums the bulbs commanded were justified by the fact that they were in high demand and in short supply. Prices were confidently expected to go higher still.

But then the bubble burst. Tulip prices dropped suddenly and without warning. Within a matter of days confidence evaporated and flowers plummeted to one-tenth or less of their old values.

By the end of February 1637 men who had been amongst the richest in Holland had lost everything they had, and those who had invested heavily in tulips faced bankruptcy and ruin. The tulip mania had run its course.

Similar plant-related manias have recurred from time to time, fed on the human emotions of appreciation of beauty and greed for money. There was a craze for dahlias in France around 1838. In 1912 it was the turn

THE GREAT CHINESE CLIVIA 'BUBBLE'

John van der Linde

of Dutch gladioli to enjoy a very similar, but equally short-lived, boom.

Clivia had their turn in the 1980's when a mania broke out in China, almost exactly following the pattern of the Dutch tulip craze three and a half centuries before.

Clivia reached China from Europe in the latter half of the 19th century, introduced by German missionaries. A secondary introduction occurred when the Japanese invaded China from 1931 onwards. They annexed Manchuria in the north-east and set up Puyi, ('the last Emperor' who had been forced to abdicate as a six year old boy as Emperor of China in 1912) as their 'ruler' of the occupied territory. Changchun was made the seat of government of the Japanese puppet state and Puyi had his palace and court there. Changchun lies just below the 44th parallel, some 850 kilometres to the Northeast of Beijing. It is today the capital of Jilin Province, which has over 26 million inhabitants.

Japanese horticulturists brought some excellent flowers from Japan, including *Clivia*. Also, rare *Clivia* were presented to Puyi by the Japanese emperor. These 'royal' plants could only be seen at the palace in Changchun at receptions, banquets, funerals, etc, as ornamental plants. Thus they could only, in practice, be enjoyed by a small number of the Japanese, the royal family, courtiers and high government officials. Laymen had no access to these particular plants.

At the end of the Second World War the three north-eastern provinces were recovered and Puyi was disgraced. From 1945 onwards *Clivia*, including the rarer specimens, slowly became accessible to a wider public, but how did this occur?

The Emperor's second concubine, Jade Years, had died in 1942 and her funeral was held at the Guardian Wisdom Temple in Changchun where a pot of *Clivia* was displayed on the orders of Emperor Puyi. This pot was not returned to the palace after the funeral and the plant continued to be cultivated by a monk of the temple. This plant was duly named 'Monk' when it reappeared in the 1960's.

A pot of *Clivia* taken from the palace was later presented to Chanchun Park. To celebrate the People's Liberation this plant was named 'Great Victory'. Another pot came into the possession of the manager of the Changchun Tung Hsing Dyeing Factory. This plant became known as 'Dyer'.

Until the later 1950's plants only became available from offsets, so it was difficult for many *Clivia* enthusiasts to have even one super quality plant. Then growers began to pollinate the flowers, as they did with cherry flowers, and in the early 1960's a crossbreeding union was established. Over the next few years excellent plants were developed, like

'Engineer Huang' and 'Painter' (Botanists are known in China as Plant Engineers, and Huang was a botanist or horticulturist rather than someone working with machines). Ownership of special plants rapidly became more widespread.

Then came the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. Young people, the so-called Red Guards, campaigned to destroy remnants of the old society. They destroyed temples and historic sites, and broke into private homes to smash and burn books, jewellery and art. In Changchun many special *Clivia*, which had historically been seen as a mark of distinction and thus

elitist, were destroyed, and prominent *Clivia* growers were amongst those who faced persecution and even death.

Clearly, many *Clivia* plants escaped destruction because by 1980, it is estimated, half the families (maybe 150,000) in Changchun grew the flower. Indeed, the flower was so prominent that it was designated the official flower of the City.

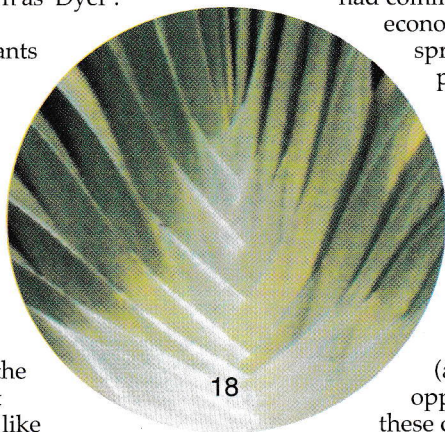
Until this point it would seem that *Clivia* growing, and serious breeding, was largely confined to just one city, Changchun.

Clivia mania only broke out in earnest a few years later, after the Chinese government

had commenced a process of economic reform. Markets sprang up for all sorts of products, including household plants. The situation in Changchun was then quite similar to that in Holland during the 1630's. Because of the increased economic activity people had surplus cash at their disposal, but investment (as opposed to spending) opportunities were few. In these circumstances, the *Clivia*

growers, especially the serious breeders in Changchun, took advantage of the increasing investment demand for their flowers from neighbouring regions. As one pair of writers put it, 'The development came into a sudden luxuriant phase, and *Clivia* fever quickly occurred in the three provinces in the North-eastern Region of China, and the wave later reached nationwide. At a time *Clivia* swept the whole nation.' As prices began their inevitable rise, speculation – financed in many cases with borrowed money – followed right behind.

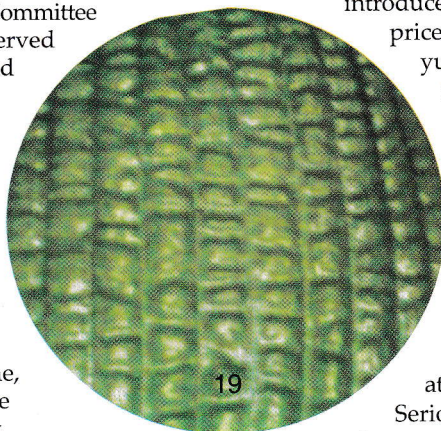
In 1981 or 1982, prior to the boom, desirable plants were selling for 100 yuan. I don't



know the equivalents at the time, but at 2001 rates of exchange 100 yuan would get you around R100 or 12 US dollars. This was already a considerable sum of money for a plant, given the low level of incomes then usual in China. But by 1985, plants with the loveliest characteristics are reported to have changed hands for the stratospheric amount of 200,000 yuan, an amount that puts even the sums paid at the height of the Dutch tulip craze to shame. In fact, the highest prices quoted during the Chinese *Clivia* mania were equivalent to around 300 times the then annual earnings of the typical Chinese University graduate, a quite staggering sum.

A newspaper article of the time states 'The Communist Party Committee of Changchun City observed these cases seriously and established a *Clivia* control public office to watch transactions and prosecute tax evasion. However, it does not seem to be an easy thing because many of the officials of the City and the authorities themselves are *Clivia* enthusiasts!' At one time, up to 30000 people were trading plants each day.

In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that the *Clivia* craze was short-lived even by the standards of flower manias. It collapsed in the northern summer of 1985. The whole market was quickly flooded with panicked dealers desperate to sell, and prices fell sharply. Just as the Chinese boom had exceeded even the heights attained during the tulip years, so the crash, when it came, was still more severe. By the time the *Clivia* market stabilised at last, prices had plunged by anything up to 99 per cent. As contemporary Chinese writers have said, 'Price of *Clivia* fell into the bottomless pit.'



Through the boom and bust of every flower mania there are those who persist in their enthusiasm. The same writers refer to *Clivia* lovers who are 'unchanged in their infatuation' and who 'respect and are intoxicated with such richly elegant royal beauty'. They add 'as consistent introduction of excellent cultivars of *Clivia* continues, its history of development will lead to the brilliant future'.

Thus, as *Clivia* ceased to be a public craze, they nevertheless remained a private passion amongst dedicated collectors. Large sums were still demanded for highly regarded plants. For example, 'Sparrow *Clivia*' was

introduced to the market in 1992, priced post-mania at 180,000 yuan. A plant 'Steel Wall Short-Leaf' which had been awarded a gold prize at a Chinese Flower Exhibition was traded at a price in the order of 100,000 yuan. The fashion amongst serious collectors tends to be to cultivate single specimens of the most attractive plants.

Serious growers try to keep the supplies of the most favoured plants low. They thus try to maintain prices - rather like pharmaceutical companies - exploiting the drugs they have developed and patented - and resist the temptation to risk flooding this specialist market, because rarity commands a premium. In time, even rare plants become more commonplace, so growers continually try to breed new plants that will be attractive to connoisseurs; how many Chinese *Clivia* are today being sold around the world? There is nothing new in this - it is all good capitalistic logic and marketing strategy, is it not?

Looking at the four flower manias I have mentioned - tulips ex Central Asia, dahlias ex Mexico, gladioli from Africa and the Middle East, and *Clivia* ex South Africa - and their associated price 'bubbles', there seem to be several common factors, including

In each case the plants were not indigenous;

They were relative newcomers to the markets in which they had become highly desirable;

It was not the native species that were in demand, rather people craved the newly developed advanced strains;

There was a long time lag in years from seed to mature flowering plant, i.e. a high 'anticipation factor';

Demand, fuelled by borrowings, increased substantially but, because of the long growing time, supplies could not be increased immediately;

In each case, confidence, which had fed on itself and sustained prices, collapsed, bringing the market crashing down.

In the case of *Clivia*, there is an additional factor, possibly unique to China, which may explain why their boom reached such dizzying heights. *Clivia* (Jun zi lan, or noble orchid in Mandarin) beautify and are hardy and long-lived. They are symbolic of long life, strength and fortitude, qualities highly admired in Chinese culture. Mystique commands a premium price.

Finally two speculations: Just before Japan surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, Soviet forces in north-east China dismantled key industrial installations and removed them to the Soviet Union. Did they 'liberate' any *Clivia* plants at the same time, especially any of those in Puyi's palace?

In March 1960, after release from prison and 're-education', the former Emperor Puyi was given a part-time job as an assistant at the Beijing Botanical Gardens, transplanting seedlings and cleaning hothouses. Who knows, he may even have worked with *Clivia* seedlings bred from the very plants taken from the palace where he had reigned as Emperor?

In writing this article I have relied heavily on four primary sources:

'A random walk down Wall Street', by Burton Malkiel;

'Tulipomania', by Mike Dash;

'Chinese *Clivia*', by Tao Men and Wang Yung Pao; and

A newspaper cutting sent to John Winter by Yoshikazu Nakamura.

I am sure that there will be readers of this article who will be able to add to (or correct) my interpretation of this interesting episode in the ongoing Great *Clivia* Story.

