

THE CUCUMBER

9. Another dogma of the Changkienomaniacs is that the renowned General should have also blessed his countrymen with the introduction of the cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*), styled *hu kwa* 胡瓜 ("Iranian melon") or *hwan kwa* 黃瓜 ("yellow melon").¹ The sole document on which this opinion is based is presented by the recent work of Li Ši-čen,² who hazards this bold statement without reference to any older authority. Indeed, such an earlier source does not exist: this bit of history is concocted *ad hoc*, and merely suggested by the name *hu kwa*. Any plants formed with the attribute *hu* were ultimately palmed off on the old General as the easiest way out of a difficult problem, and as a comfortable means of saving further thought.

Li Ši-čen falls back upon two texts only of the T'ang period,— the *Pen ts'ao ši i*, which states that the people of the north, in order to avoid the name of Ši Lo 石勒 (A.D. 273–333), who was of Hu descent, tabooed the term *hu kwa*, and replaced it by *hwan kwa*;³ and the *Ši i lu* 拾遺錄 by Tu Pao 杜寶, who refers this taboo to the year 608 (fourth year of the period Ta-ye of the Sui dynasty).⁴ If this information be correct, we gain a chronological clew as to the *terminus a quo*: the cucumber appears to have been in China prior to the sixth century A.D. Its cultivation is alluded to in the *Ts'i min yao šu* from the beginning of the sixth century, provided this is not an interpolation of later times.⁵

According to ENGLER,⁶ the home of the cucumber would most prob-

¹ BRETSCHNEIDER, *Chinese Recorder*, 1871, p. 21 (accordingly adopted by DE CANDOLLE, *Origin of Cultivated Plants*, p. 266); STUART, *Chinese Materia Medica*, p. 135. In Japanese, the cucumber is *ki-uri*.

² *Pen ts'ao kañ mu*, Ch. 28, p. 5 b.

³ A number of other plant-names was hit by this taboo (cf. above, p. 298): thus the plant *lo-lo* 羅勒 (*Ocimum basilicum*), which bears the same character as Ši Lo's personal name, as already indicated in the *Ts'i min yao šu* (see also *Ši wu ki yüan*, Ch. 10, p. 30 b; *Či wu miñ ši t'u k'ao*, Ch. 5, p. 34; and *Pen ts'ao kañ mu*, Ch. 26, p. 22 b). He is said to have also changed the name of the myrobalan *ho-li-lo* (below, p. 378) into *ho-tse* 訶子. There is room for doubt, however, whether any of these plants existed in the China of his time; the taboo explanations may be makeshifts of later periods.

⁴ This is the *Ta ye ši i lu* (Records relative to the Ta-ye period, 605–618), mentioned by BRETSCHNEIDER (*Bot. Sin.*, pt. 1, p. 195). The *Pen ts'ao kañ mu* (Ch. 22, p. 1) quotes the same work again on the taboo of the term *hu ma* (p. 288), which in 608 was changed into *kiao ma* 交麻.

⁵ Cf. *Či wu miñ ši t'u k'ao*, Ch. 5, p. 43.

⁶ In Hehn, *Kulturpflanzen*, p. 323.