

HERB TRAVELS IN CHINA

Nina Zhao-Seiler



The origins

The idea to organize trips to the Chinese countryside where we would search for medicinal plants and meet their cultivators was born while I lived in Chengdu, from 1995 to 1998. I was there to get some clinical practice after my theoretical schooling in TCM, that I had gotten in Europe before. Longing to see live the plants that my teachers were prescribing day after day (and longing for breaks from the crowded city), I travelled to the countryside nearby looking and asking around. I found many herbs being dried on the roads having trucks run over them, I met people who were growing and processing herbs on steep mountain slopes, dry-roasting them in bamboo baskets over the fire with the help of the whole family, experimenting on their own with new processing methods in their kitchens and back yards, while being hunted by Japanese land-scouts looking for farmers and land to lease and cultivate according to their instructions.

I felt that an abundance of traditional knowledge and ideas about the identities as well as about the cultivation and processing of medicinal herbs was scattered over the ocean of people here in bits and pieces, being stirred up by the wind of economic growth. I really wanted to learn more about these complex methods that brought together old knowledge and new techniques, and at the same time to initiate an exchange between herb cultivators and herb prescribers. I felt and still feel that the possibility of an exchange in this area can enrich and strengthen the understanding of „our“ medicinal herbs, and therefore our ability as practitioners to use them in the clinic. It might be called a more „wholistic“ understanding. Even though this word has been overused, I do think this is an appropriate place for it.

From Chengdu to high mountain meadow

In 1996 I was lucky enough to meet two professors of pharmacognosy/medicinal plant identification and analysis from Southwest Medical University (now part of Sichuan University), and was invited to participate in their medicinal plant identification excursions, something that had not been possible at the TCM University where I was doing my clinical practice. So the high mountain meadows I had travelled with friends before, became more familiar: I got to know a lot of the plants there by name!

These memories and the wish to return with a group of TCM practitioners stayed with me when I returned to Switzerland in 1998.

TCM medicinals: getting to the source

It took me three years, and after I happened to mention the idea to a colleague who gave me very encouraging feedback by saying he would register as soon as possible, to actually start planning a trip. By then TCM was becoming ever more popular in Europe and the lack of knowledge we had about the medicinals we worked with became more and more obvious to me. We were confused about different botanical species being used as the same TCM medicinal, some of them being wrong but then some of them supposedly being the right ones after all, even if they didn't carry the Latin names we had learned. We were angered about polluted herbs, but angered as well about importers not being able to deliver enough herbs in perfect quality and to a decent price when we needed them.

We just wanted clean, nicely grown, processed and stored herbs, with a clear identity, at a reasonable price. And this seemed to be something very difficult to obtain. When talking to pharmacists selling Chinese herbs I realized that most of them were just as confused and frustrated about the situation as we practitioners were. And at the time even our importers knew little themselves about the origin, the cultivation and processing situation of the herbs they imported. Most of them completely relied on their contact person in Taiwan or Hongkong who in turn bought from Chinese wholesalers with whom it was impossible to communicate as a non-Chinese, and who would try to deliver herbs with fake certificates as a rule. More or less that's what I heard from our importers.

The urge to organize excursions „to the origins of our medicinals“, to find out more for myself and others became stronger and stronger. I decided to organize my first group by trying to motivate our pharmacists, our importers, as well as TCM practitioner friends. It worked!

Herb Travels

In Summer of 2003 the first TCM herb trip to Sichuan took place with a small group of enthusiastic participants. Having to endure the longest drives along the worst country roads (compared to the trips thereafter), many of which were just being constructed, and sleeping in Tibetan tents up in the grasslands at 3500 meters above sea level with temperatures close to zero in July, this trip was an exciting pioneer experience. We started learning about the difference between a pharmaceutical and botanical name of a plant (of course after repeating what a botanical name was in the first place: family, genus, species, subspecies...) We learned that the majority of medicinal plants are gathered in the wild (and this is still true in 2011!) since few people are willing to invest in the cultivation of herbs that are too cheap to make a lot of money with (though by 2011, since more herbs are close to extinction and farmers cannot find enough of them to gather as a side income, more of them are willing to participate in cultivation projects, mostly led by engaged, non-profit-oriented scientists).



Gongashan, highest peak of Sichuan, about 7700m above sea level, taken from Tibetan grassland, western Sichuan, Ganzi region Summer 2006



Buying wild tianma on a mountain pass in south-western Sichuan Summer 2006



Wild qinjiao, Tibetan grassland, western Sichuan Summer 2009

Finding a way to cultivate a wild growing plant is not an easy thing to do and sometimes takes many years of trial. We then learned how particular some of the herbs are, if they are to be cultivated, like Huang lian/Coptis, with its leaf cover and dark shade and the soil having to wait for at least ten years after it can grow Huang lian again. Or Fuzi/Radix Aconiti Carmichaeli (and others as well) being dug out and brought down from the mountains to the lowlands in the fall to grow their roots larger. Of course there are many stories to tell of plants with peculiar habits...and just as many peculiar cultivation and processing techniques for them.



Chuan bei mu trial field in Tibetan grassland, western Sichuan, over 3500 m above sea level. Summer 2004



Farmer and me on the dahuang trial field, above Kangding, western Sichuan Summer 2004



Cultivating banlangen, Daofu county , Ganzi region, western Sichuan. Summer 2004



Talking to curcuma farmers in Wenjiang (west of Chengdu), whence the name of one of the curcumas (wenyujin). Summer 2009

We also learned what it means to try to reduce the number of species used for a particular medicinal to just one or two and to standardize their cultivation, as was tried along with the implementation of good agricultural practice (GAP) for medicinal herbs a few years ago. This project has been largely given up again now (luckily, in my eyes), because it is simply not practicable with so many small producers of medicinal herbs. It would have meant to reduce herb production to monocultures of large companies, the only ones who could have guaranteed uniformly using the standardized seeds or seedlings. And it would mean to disregard the herbs of all the other producers as non-conforming herbs.

By now concepts like sustainable wildgathering, half-wild cultivation and organic herb cultivation are widely discussed, and many pilot projects have been started. On the first visit, and all the subsequent trips as well, we have seen successful half-wild cultivation of several difficult plants and we have been able to talk to many very dedicated

agronomists and cultivators. These are already promising beginnings. But reality is not there yet, and there is still a long way to go.

The question of identity

Another important area of learning was about the question of identification, which of course has given rise to a lot of confusion. The easier thing is simply learning to differentiate the various preparation forms like *chao bai zhu* versus *sheng bai zhu*, as well as learning the names that tell you about the area the plant comes from (or should come from) as in *Huai Shanyao* (Shanyao from Henan, which is called *Huai* and which is where traditionally the best, *daodiyao cai*, Shanyao comes from). For this one just has to learn a few Chinese words, which comes in handy anyway in our profession. What's a bit harder to swallow (and to follow) is that such a large number of TCM medicinals can be made of several plants, sometimes quite different from the point of view of the modern scientific botanical nomenclature. Or that the use of some plants or plant parts as TCM medicinals is being tried out (for economic reasons, for example if the original plant is becoming rare), and then abandoned again if experience shows that it doesn't work well. This has been the case for *Herba Asari* as *Xixin* where now again just *Radix Asari* is used because *Herba Asari* contains too high a risk of too much of the carcinogenic aristolochic acid. Another case is *Ji Xue Teng*, a medicinal that only became popular in the 1980s and then three possible plants could be used for it: *Spatholobium suberectus*, *Millettia reticulatae* and *Millettia dielsiana*. It should now only be made from *Spatholobium suberectus* since the other species don't seem to work as expected.

Well, all of these are complicated matters that we dip into. I think it is worthwhile though, because it helps us appreciate the medicinal we hold in our hands, specially if we bought it from responsible professionals: it has undergone a long process through growth, harvesting, processing, and transportation.

Diving into the pot

Besides all the learning about medicinal plants before they become „our medicine“, the herb trips are very much about China as a whole: we practically dive (not just dip) into not the melting-pot but the cooking-together-pot of cultures, experiences, and (hi)stories of the areas we travel to. Since we don't follow the lines of mainstream tourism—although we do cross those lines at particularly beautiful places sometimes—our paths are not as hardened and immobile, in fact they are quite flexible, adjusting to the weather, the roads, the people. The line we follow being the herbs: we go where we get the opportunity to see the most interesting plants, shown to us by competent people, in a particular year.

Guangxi 2011: preparations

In the past 8 years I have organized five herb trips to China. The one planned for summer 2008 had to be cancelled due to the Sichuan earthquake, which happened in the very area I had been to on my trips before and had wanted to go again. The last one took place in April 2011 in the autonomous region of Guangxi in the very south of China, where a year ago, in summer 2010, I had been lucky enough to meet Professor Liu Shouyang, a passionate expert on pharmacognosy at the Guangxi TCM College in Nanning. I had gone there to get to know him in August which is the middle of rainy season there, where the air is so humid, it hardly makes a difference if it is raining or not. We got along immediately and decided to travel to one of the mountains with a lot of wild growing medicinal herbs as soon as the rain stopped (which he predicted would be in 3 days, even though weather forecast didn't say so). Well, he was right and we left the hot lowlands on an adventurous journey by public bus, truck, 3-wheel taxi and tourist bus. The way back was easier, since we hitched a ride with a driver going all the way back to Nanning. I think it was a bit of a test for the Professor and me together, to see if we would get along under stressful circumstances. We had a wonderful time, saw many many herbs and I arrived back in Nanning being absolutely convinced that Professor Liu knew every single medicinal plant in the whole region, not just official TCM plants but medicinally used plants of all the major local medical systems, of which there are at least three: Zhuang, Miao, Yao.

We then went to a few other places he suggested would be worth visiting with a group, cancelled one due to bad weather and, together with his two assistants, started planning the trip for the following year, 2011.

Guangxi 2011: travels with the group

When I arrived in Nanning in April, ahead of my group, I wasn't sure how well this was going to work. I had got to know the professor as well as the whole area only the summer before, and was not very familiar with the city (compared to Chengdu and Sichuan where I have known people and known my way around for 15 years!). But one by one all the plans we had made worked out, and even the weather adjusted to them. With our own bus this time, we travelled up the mountains, deep into the countryside close to the Vietnamese border, all around the woods surrounding Nanning (where we actually drove into a star aniseed plantation and a small outdoor distillery just processing cinnamon bark and extracting cinnamon oil from twigs and leaves!) and all the way to the ocean.

We had some wonderful encounters like seeing beautiful and fragrant leaved Shichangpu growing deep in a canyon beside the waterfalls and several kinds of blooming Gouteng in the wild as well as in the beautiful little medicinal herb garden inside the college campus.

Of course we visited the large—maybe THE largest—medicinal herb garden in Nanning as well. We stayed there one whole day, taking hundreds, maybe thousands of pictures, very impressed by its tidyness as well as by its size and its immense variety of plants, common ones „that everybody(?) knows“ but also very rare and unknown species.



With Prof Liu Shouyang in medicinal herb garden, Nanning, discussing questions of identification. April 2011



Nina with group, Nanning fresh herb street market. April 2011



Prof Liu Shouyang stops on a side path, southern Guangxi, and finds wild lulutong April 2011



With Doris Lei and Mazin Al Khafaji, Daming mountains, southern Guangxi. April 2011



Herb market, Longzhou, southern Guangxi (including fresh yuxingcao, banana flowers and dried ji gu cao). April 2011



Large medicinal herb garden, Nanning-- learning about the ginger family. April 2011



Fresh, 'bleeding' jixueteng, herb market, Longzhou April 2011

While in the mountains we discovered two flowering Chonglou/Qiyeyizhuhua in the wild. Our assistant resisted the intense urge to dig them up, since they have become quite rare, leaving them to the next passers-by with a bit of herbal knowledge. Of course we also learned to eat some wild growing foods, like little fern-potatoes and mustard fruit, very exciting. Besides driving safely—which was most important to me—our driver stuck to his grumpyness, but showing those fern potatoes to us and singing well at our karaoke evening were two delightful events we were able to share even with him. Together with the group of enthusiastic TCM practitioners who dared to take part in this trip, I once again had a wonder-full and mind-widening, knowledge-deepening time.

Next year it will be Sichuan again.



The wonders of modern photography: in Longzhou market with Guido Brun, the pharmacist of our group. April 2011

About the Author

Nina Zhao-Seiler was born in 1965. She is a qualified naturopath. Starting in 1985, she studied TCM for 6 years in private schools in Europe, followed by 3 years of internship and further study in Chengdu. Since 1998 she has had a private practice in Zurich, Switzerland. She speaks German, Chinese and English fluently. As her article testifies, she has travelled extensively in Sichuan and made the personal acquaintance of local specialists. During the trips that she organises she leads her groups and translates for them throughout the journey.