

# AN INTERVIEW WITH NINA ZHAO-SEILER

Sarah Price



**Could you say something first about your origins, about your family, where you were born and grew up?**

Well, I was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1965, but grew up in the east of the United States and in the south of France till I was seven. I then spent nine years, which means most of my school time, in what at the time was west Berlin, with an interim year in France again in between.

I am the oldest of three children, having a sister born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a brother born in Berlin. My parents were both born and raised around Lake Zurich. My father's profession and passion is theoretical physics and mathematics, the only one in a family of medical doctors, and my mother was a primary school teacher while her passion was gardening and crafts, which hadn't seemed appropriate for her in the eyes of her family. She later became a very good photographer and is a professional potter.

Being a bit of an independent spirit and already used to changing places, I left home when I was 15, shortly after my parents' divorce, and quit school a few months later. At the time I felt that I could learn more useful knowledge for life by going out into the streets. That meant leaving a given daily structure and protection behind, but, having no awareness of, let alone appreciation for its advantages, I didn't feel any loss. Much to the contrary my parents, for whom my behaviour was of course worrying and troublesome, did feel at a

loss, but, as probably often in such situations, communication was not successful. I also felt that I could make more of an impact on changing society for the better by becoming part of the youth and squatters movement, which was happening at that time in Berlin, and participating in demonstrations against all kinds of injustices, inequalities, atrocities and indifference.

**I see you had quite a difficult start to life, with those teenage years being rocked by your family breakdown. And you effectively ran away, is that how it felt?**

Actually at the time it felt more like trying to „do the right thing“ and not getting stuck in a life situation where I would not be able to move, to help change anything to the better. Today's perspective of course is a different one. I would just say, as a result of my relatively radical breaking away from a family setting as a teenager, I haven't had such a straight line career. I see this as having advantages as well as disadvantages. There are so many people who have much worse circumstances than me, I don't think of mine as particularly difficult. I did not have a conventional education then, but about ten years ago I did decide to go back and finish school about ten years ago, so now I am going to University. I can only take few classes per semester in my spare time but I like it, it inspires me and helps me work more systematically.

**Was it exciting to leave home at such a young age, or did you feel like a lost soul?**

There is always part of a lost soul feeling, somehow that is part of life, I think, for me at least. But I was convinced that this was the best thing I could do at the time: initiate change – that was the idea. I felt that life was very stuck, and I wished to be part of change, of movement, and joining the squatters felt like the best thing to do at the time. From my adult perspective I believe 15-year olds can benefit when making decisions like mine, if more experienced people get into close enough communication with them to give advice and support, help them to take more longterm aspects into consideration and to see the usefulness of doing so. Though it is of course never completely clear how well communication works (or would have worked in my case), one should always again give it a try.



**Visiting my grandmother in Switzerland on my way hitchhiking from Berlin to southern Europe October 1981**

### **What followed your Berlin activities?**

The process of leaving my squatters-life was difficult. I went through quite desperate internal struggles searching for alternatives to my Berlin mindset, which was heavily influenced by political-punk, combined with utopian ideas, which felt increasingly problematic and were not working for me. I left Berlin to work on small organic farms for three years, first far away in the Swiss alps, then in the hills around Zurich. My motivations were very basic: still, as before, „try to make an impact for the better“ but also „do no harm“ and finally „find out who you are“. Learning by doing, I slowly connected to the idea of self-sufficiency, and started to embrace it as acceptable option for an ethically sound way of life (as I saw it).

### **How did you first develop an interest in natural medicine?**

Before I left Berlin I had been experiencing a series of chronic infections. These were very probably to a large extent due to self-inflicted malnutrition. I had been acting out the struggle with myself in this world partly with anorexia and later bulimia--both combined with an obsession about food, its mechanism of absorption and its healing powers, which started at the age of 13. Some of the infections were quite severe, leaving me largely bedridden and distinctly more lonely than usual for almost half a year. This also made me think and ponder about health and disease and all kinds of things more than usual, and brought me into my first closer contact with medicinal herbs (it took me a lot longer to establish reasonable eating habits. The time I spent on the farms more or less gave me a break from those problems, but they came back later and had to be dealt with.

So I developed a special interest in growing and picking medicinal herbs and wild-growing food plants. I tried a few oils and creams and dried my own herbal teas. I also looked into schools for naturopathy but didn't find anything convincing, as

very few things would have seemed convincing enough to me at that time.

Work on the farms was such a thing. It was very hard, very close to nature, and by producing food without poisoning the earth could count as morally justified in my radically critical eyes. But even though I loved the work, farming felt increasingly lonely, leaving me too tired at the end of the day to go far to meet people whom I could relate to and who were interested in relating to me.

### **By what path, then, did you come to Chinese medicine?**

When I was 20 years old, I moved back into the small city of Zurich. I was looking for more human exchange and something meaningful for me to engage in, more middle-wayish than what I had been doing before, when I had gone from trying to break things down in order to change society for the better, to trying to build things up with as little interaction with society as possible (to reduce the risk of being part of what I disapproved of).

It was around this time that I first encountered East Asian medicine/healing arts. I enrolled in a martial arts class, to satisfy my need for physical exercise which was missing after I left the farm, and to practise my self-defense and self-control ability which I felt were frustratingly weak. I found my first martial arts teacher, a young woman who had just gotten her first black belt. I was able to convince her to start a school for women (which was what I had wished for) by guaranteeing her that I would find enough women to participate, which I did. Martial arts became an important part of my life. At the time I was making my living by working in a small health food store and being a part time vegetarian cook in a local community centre.

I then met friends who were into macrobiotic cooking (a Japanese style of traditional Chinese medical qingdan diet) and other friends who were studying medical five phases theory and acupuncture with two Japanese teachers. Both inspired me very much. I enrolled in a two-year medical massage programme in order to have some kind of diploma and to be able to work as „something“ in a field I was interested in (acupuncture was illegal for non-doctors at the time) as well as in the acupuncture class and gradually developed my vegetarian cooking to macrobiotic and five phases cooking, my customers going along with my experiments benevolently. Yin-Yang and five phases theory was part of my daily life now and I was excited about getting to know a philosophy that seemed to be focused on balancing out equally valued extremes, on the search for harmony and the mechanisms of change, (little did I know about its origins...), even though many paradoxes appeared and questions arose.

After a couple of years I felt there must be more to these ideas, I wanted to continue learning and practising in the Asian healing arts as well as in the „martial“ art of self-knowledge, self-control and self-defense. I was drawn back to America, to Oakland, California, to study with a martial arts teacher who had repeatedly impressed me when I took part in her workshops in Europe. I entered her dojo/school, was introduced to zen buddhist practise, found jobs as a macrobiotic cook, an attendant for people with disabilities, and as an acupressure and massage practitioner at the large TCM clinic of Dr Angela Shen from Hongkong. My job was to give each patient a 15-minute massage before Angela or one of her students came in to needle them and write out their herbal prescription which was then prepared in the herb dispensary in her clinic.



**Self-defence exercises during a belt test at the Kajukenbo martial arts centre, Oakland, California 1989**

This was when I experienced Chinese medicine for the first time in a comprehensive way, and I knew very soon that this was the medical system I wanted to study and practise: it seemed to encompass what I felt was essentially important. Looking at humans as whole systems, themselves embedded in the „system“ of the world around them, interconnected and therefore interdependent, but still each with their individual characteristics, making them unique. The idea of a network. The strategies to help restore relative balance. And the system of thought (yinyang and five phases) used to analyze a given situation aimed at just that. The methods including physical (acupressure and acupuncture), spiritual (not usually named but naturally included by the nurturing approach of both its theory and practice), and natural medicinal (materia medica) methods. All of this seemed to correspond to what I thought was „a good way“.

Living in the San Francisco Bay Area had been a revelation for me, making me feel like I could fit into society somehow, at least into the society there! But I was longing for a life closer to nature again. Since all the TCM schools were in the city and it didn't seem possible to commute from the countryside all the way into town, I decided to

return to Europe to find a school where public transport would make commuting without a car possible and where distances were usually shorter.

### **What kind of Chinese medicine training did you find?**

Well, back in Europe I met Claude Diolosa, a very charismatic French-Italian teacher of Chinese medicine with a background in martial arts and macrobiotic cooking! In addition to all of this he was also a buddhist teacher in a line of Tibetan buddhism. He had studied Chinese medicine with Chinese teachers in Paris and in Chengdu, China as well as with a Russian teacher in Germany. The TCM Education he offered was a course of three years including basic theory, acupuncture, herbology and nutrition as therapeutic methods, with one weekend a month, two weeks intensive each in the two summers and a six-week trip to China with him after we graduated, where he would organize for us to be able to practise and study in a TCM hospital, spend an intensive study week in the mountains and another in and around Lhasa with him as a guide to buddhist culture.

All of this sounded very fitting to me so I enrolled in the course, and started saving money, so I would be able to stay in China for more than six weeks three years later. I regarded this trip as my door opener. The class-time seemed little, but since I was used to studying by myself, I didn't mind and it was easier to keep my jobs and save money this way too. So this was my first Chinese medicine teacher and I think he definitely left a mark with me, even though I didn't continue training with him after that time.

As I had planned, I stayed in Chengdu, Sichuan (where we had gone with the teacher) for more than six weeks. I had vaguely envisioned staying for two years (vaguely, since I couldn't really envision anything about where I was going before I arrived!) In fact I stayed for three.



**Nina with son Manuel Chengdu, winter 1997**

## Interview

During that time I followed several doctors in their clinics in acupuncture as well as herbal medicine and took classes with them on chosen topics that I wanted to deepen. In my last year I reduced my clinical practice, intensified Chinese written language study, and gave birth to my son Manuel. In April of 1998 I returned to Zurich with Manuel and my partner, his father Zhaohong, and opened the clinic I am still running now.



**Nina with her partner Zhaohong and son Manuel, Chengdu autumn 1997**

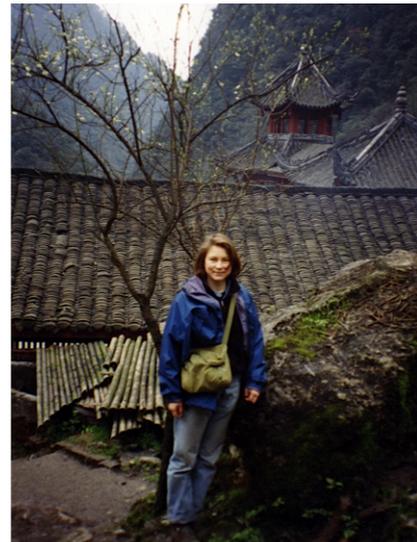
**Were certain teachers in China especially influential, and have certain strands of the Chinese medicine tradition been particularly important to you?**

During that time and later I have had many impressive and inspiring teachers and it is hard to start naming them. My formula studies teachers were very important, and of course I continue to learn from the exchange with my patients and from colleagues.

Important influences in Chinese medicine have been the books *Yijing*, *Shang Han Lun*, and the works of Sun Si miao, Qian Yi and Zhang Jing Yue, though I have only read tiny parts of their work and hope to read more in the future. Also, in understanding the concept of yin and yang in relation to the human body in health and disease, my practise of taijiquan and the hints and feedback I get from my Taiji teacher have been and remain extremely useful.

**How did your herb travels in China develop?**

Even before I went to China, when studying TCM herbology I had started wondering about where the herbs came from, how they were cultivated and processed, all the paozhi we heard about in school sounded so interesting. While I was living in China I travelled to the countryside as often as I could, looking for herb plantations, talking to growers. Finally I was introduced to two pharmacognosy specialists with whom I was allowed to go on herb excursions, together with their students.



**Scouting for herb plantations in the mountains near Chengdu, spring 1996**



**Picking sea buckthorn near four girl mountains, Sichuan autumn 1996**

That is when I decided that I would like to show this side of our profession to interested colleagues. I hoped to be able to stimulate an interest in the source of our herbs among colleagues in the TCM field and further on to initiate an exchange of knowledge and experience on the topic between chinese and non-chinese practitioners. Well the last part is quite a large step further on, but it is still in my view.

Back in Europe I carried this idea around within myself, not knowing how to start, until a colleague, whom I happened to tell about the idea, asked me when it was going to happen, and said that he would definitely come. That got me going. Together with my Chinese friends we organized the first trip to central and northern Sichuan in the summer of 2003.

A group of excited and courageous participants came along. We had snowfall in July at 3500 meters above sea level when sleeping in Tibetan tents. At that time most of the countryside roads in Sichuan were not in very good shape, so we also experienced a few difficulties getting through, but with patience and a good car and driver we were able to overcome all our obstacles.

with more or less success, by the more or less joint effort of farmers, businesspeople, scientists and others. It is therefore a dive not just into the herbs themselves but into the culture which has grown around them. The more participants are fascinated by herbs, the more they usually get out of the tour. My trips are a bit of an unconventional mix of professional study and exchange, and culture-experience.



**Gastrodia, Tianma  
Chengdu market 2003**



**Near Kangding, Ganzi county, Sichuan,  
looking at wild growing herbs, 2004**



**Fu Zi production, Jiangyou county, Sichuan  
(daodi area for Fu Zi) 2003**



**Dahuang tral plantation near Kangding, Ganzi  
county, Sichuan, 2004**

Further trips followed to central and western Sichuan in 2004, 2006 and 2009 (originally planned for 2008, had to be cancelled and rescheduled due to the big Sichuan earthquake on the 12th May 2008) and to southern Guangxi in 2011. The next one will happen this summer and will take us to southern Sichuan and Yunnan. I am just now taking care of all the planning details. It's going to be a great trip, I am very excited!

My trips have not changed fundamentally since I started organizing them, they still are a dive into all aspects of the world of medicinal plants in China before they are sold to the pharmacy as finished herbs ready for us to be used: herbs growing wild in the Chinese countryside with its immense (though rapidly declining) biodiversity compared to Europe; being picked and dried; being cultivated



**Huangqi growing wild, at over 3000 m.  
Sichuan, 2006**

**Your story is so interesting—the idea of a search, joining a committed group in the city, leaving that for farming and more connection with the earth, and now the theme of going back to the earth appears again. As herbalists we can be quite far removed from the plants in the ground, there is a long line of process between the growing plant and me giving the medicine to my patients, but you have gone right back to the source.**

Yes, this felt like where I came from in the first place. Somehow it is this interconnectedness that I am looking for and it is this that appealed to me very much in farming, and also in Chinese medicine: interconnectedness in the theory and also in the substances and practices. It took me a while to realise that many people in Chinese medicine aren't that interested in the whole „ where do the herbs come from“ thing, that they feel it would take attention away from their focus, the medical, clinical side, which may of course be true.

**Are there other things about the practice of Chinese medicine that surprise you? In the way people practice that you don't quite relate to?**

There are many different approaches to practice. Some people are much better able to specialise in one field of Chinese medicine and be happy with that and very good at what they are doing--that is a great quality of course. I have less ability there. For me interconnectedness is an important part of my whole clinical approach which includes the herbal material I use as medicine. I guess that's where the wondering about herbal whereabouts comes from.

**One connection that strikes me is that you started using food as medicine, and this led onto herbal medicine. In practice, do you often think in terms of food rather than medicine?**

No, not exactly. People come to my clinic with specific health problems and I use herbal medicine, acupuncture, acupressure and conversation as therapeutic methods. Though my general approach is that I try to harmonise and bring back into balance, and to encourage people to then try to keep finding that balance in their everyday lives themselves, to that end I may discuss eating habits, life rhythms, posture. But I try not to interfere too much with people's lifestyle unless they specifically ask me what Chinese medicine in my understanding has to say. I think that way around is much more sustainable.

**You also have another unique perspective in that you have been exposed to many forms of practice: in the US, in China, and in Europe. Have you seen a large range of styles, for**

**example in relation to the whole person approach. You might talk about their behaviour, lifestyle and their diet whereas other practitioners might be very clinical and not engage much in that?**

Yes, of course there are such differences. I don't see a distinctively European, US-American or Chinese style of Chinese medicine though. People have their very personal focus and style, and they also adjust to the culture in which they conduct their practice, so if I want to understand the work of any practitioner that I study with, why they do what they are doing, I have to look at it in both the context of their momentary environment and their original background as well, otherwise I don't think I could grasp what they are doing. And then I can decide if it makes sense to me or not.

I think there is a difficulty happening in the transmission of Chinese (or Asian) medicine from China/Asia to western culture countries. If one doesn't look at the context, present and historical (at least within our particular field!), there can be a lot of misunderstanding in interpreting what people do, specially between the Chinese speaking world and the West. The cultural difference is relatively large here, and so verbal communication is all the more important. Too few people are interested enough in the roots of this medicine to go through the process of learning the language, even if it's just the basics (which already makes a big difference I think). If we don't learn the language, we cannot understand enough of the context. A Chinese practitioner is working in, and then we are prone to get very fragmented impressions that need a lot of imagination from us to make any sense. For example in a Chinese clinical setting different advice is needed than in a US clinic. People may do different things and know different things about their health. But also our understanding of the theoretical background stays fragmented, if so few of us read secondary sources let alone primary sources ourselves. If you don't understand at least a little bit about the context in which someone is working, it makes it harder to understand how they are working.

**You have been travelling to China for 18 years. In that time have you seen changes in the way the Chinese practise, or in the relationship between the practitioner and the patient?**

China is so large, maybe what I see is different from other areas of China. I find there is an overall tendency of renewal, modernisation and increasing quality awareness in the whole medical system, modern medicine as well as Chinese medicine. When I started, the hospitals were very simple, sometimes unfinished buildings, with low hygiene standards and equipment. The educational standards of all the healthcare workers has

increased in this time. Now the hospitals and equipment are much more modern. I am mainly in Chengdu – there are many people there to treat and not enough doctors, so each doctor has to work fast to see enough patients, which may not give the individual enough time to say all that they need to say. The impression might be that doctors are too busy or not really enjoying their work. In the Chengdu area the impact of the earthquake in Sichuan initiated a major change. It seemed like not only were most of the medical personnel working in a much more serious and well organised way but they had also changed their attitude after this, especially towards rural people, where before there was still some prejudice by city folk to people from the countryside.

Within Chinese medicine I also notice an increasingly obvious division within Chinese medicine. One strand is to make Chinese medicine more modern and scientific, for instance by using more extracts with few or single active substances of certain medicinal herbs that have shown effect in clinical, mostly animal, trials, or else, while still prescribing whole herbs in combinations nevertheless bypassing the traditional pattern-diagnostic process by prescribing more or less exclusively according to diseases. Another strand is to move somewhat further away from modern medicine, and focus on traditional theory and philosophy, to go back in the direction of the philosopher doctor. These two directions have become more obvious and the latter has gained some ground. Between the two are those doctors who look at both systems as separate entities, well aware of the differences in their approaches towards health and disease, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each, trying to use or recommend each of the medical systems where it is most helpful with as little ideology as possible to the benefit of their patients.

**That is interesting because there has been an impression from different sources that the TCM in China is a second class practise compared to western medicine. Do you feel that in some ways the status of TCM is being raised?**

The economic situation reflects the difference –as a traditional medical doctor you earn much less money than as a biomedical doctor, even if you are seeing the same number of patients. The question of status is more complex though. I don't know of any other country than China, where traditional medical systems are so strongly incorporated into national healthcare and form such a prominent part of it. Traditional Chinese medicine in China is not an alternative niche outside of „regular“ or as we often say “school medicine”, it is a part of it, in education and practise. But inside of the healthcare system TCM is definitely getting less attention, less money, less recognition, less improvement in

education than modern medicine. And, yes of course I wish that TCM be given the resources and recognition needed to educate knowledgeable, sensible and competent practitioners, able to treat people in a wholistic way and by doing so work for „sustainability“ in modern healthcare in China (all of this unfortunately often not being so). But I think we have to see: modern medicine started from zero in China a hundred years ago. In many places it is still is not on the level that we have gotten used to and take for granted. People in China are struggling for better quality healthcare in general, not just in one system. So I think one should look closely if one wants to judge.

My experience in the TCM clinic is that when I first went there, older people were less trustful of modern medicine, and overall there were fewer younger people. Now, the balance has shifted a little, more young and middle class people being attracted to the fact that traditional medicine is more natural and holistic, and the idea that because it is traditional it is less valuable isn't as prevalent among them any more. There are now more people who have already tried modern medicine and turn to traditional medicine because the former hasn't worked for them. On the other hand maybe some of the older people have lost their original basic distrust of modern medicine.

**Where do you practice now, and what are your main areas of clinical interest?**

My clinic is in the city of Zurich. I work independently but share the location with four other practitioners of Chinese Medicine of diverse backgrounds. My main area of clinical interest is paediatrics, which of course includes a very large variety of problems...

**Very few people specialise in paediatrics. Can you tell me more about that ?**

I don't exclusively treat children, but its a special focus of mine and it is something that I teach as well. I mostly use herbal medicine and paediatric massage for children, with very little acupuncture. The whole concept of Chinese medicine, with its strong emphasis on supporting the centre and harmonizing the whole organism, seems to me very suitable to treat children.

The harmonizing approach is particularly important in TCM paediatrics, given the fact that children's conditions change so quickly. A bit of stabilizing is sometimes even enough for them to recover by enabling their immune system to work more efficiently. In small children I of course encounter much chronic and recurring infection of the upper respiratory tract and of the digestive system, and issues with sleeping and waking, rhythms mainly. Skin problems are an issue as well. In older children problems are more diverse.

**I understand you had your own baby in China. What was that like?**

It was in 1997, I was the first foreign woman to have her baby in that hospital, which is now one of the biggest hospitals in the world. I had met my child's father and now my partner at the end of 1995. I became pregnant at the end of 1996 and just kept going with my studies and my life there. By the time I had graduated from my Chinese language class, it was too late for me to travel anyway and that was OK for me.

My teacher of gynaecology in the TCM teaching hospital of Chengdu urged me to definitely not give birth there, as the equipment and possibilities that they had were not good enough. She looked at several options with me, we chose a hospital, but then two of the mothers died, due to bleeding problems that weren't dealt with quickly enough. We chose another where I then got my routine checks done, but in the end they wanted to charge me a fortune if I would give birth there because my partner and I were not married at the time. I finally found the right hospital a month before the due date. All the changing was a bit of a hassle, but in the end medical personnel took care of me well.

So the medical part didn't seem too much of a problem for me, it all went OK, even though I unfortunately had to have a last minute caesarian. But the time of giving birth and the period thereafter was in fact the only time during my stay in China during which I felt foreign and unfamiliar, more lost than usual. Somehow the differences like in familiar smells, in household or everyday habits, suddenly made me feel disconnected. My health was not very good in the first few months after giving birth, making me feel weaker than usual. Luckily I had loving people giving me support, since that emotional part was the most difficult for me. I guess I somewhat underestimated the overwhelmingness of giving birth to my first child. But after all it was a very special and meaningful experience in all its aspects. I don't regret having stayed.

**Because you have had this interesting journey with farming and food and martial arts and then in getting into Chinese medicine, and now becoming so knowledgeable – looking back, would you do anything differently?**

If I meet young people interested in studying Chinese medicine now, I recommend them to study in China, and the Chinese curriculum. Even though the Chinese universities might be graded lower globally, if you are genuinely interested in Chinese medicine, it is still the best way to study as it is the only way that gives you complete access to all the literature. If you have studied in Chinese, you become so familiar with searching for and reading Chinese literature that you have all the doors open

to continue on that path. None of the educations outside of China will offer you that. I had my education in Europe and then went to China to practise, and I did learn the language then but I didn't graduate from a Chinese college. Now I study Sinology and this is a hobby, so I am working on making that access easier for myself. Of course by now I can read modern Chinese without a problem, and I can now work my way through older texts, but that was only a long time after I started my practice.

**How would you say your herb travels have impacted on your clinical practice?**

I definitely have more respect for the work that has been put into these herbs before they get into my patient's prescription, and have a higher esteem for the source plants themselves. In terms of herb choice, I have a better understanding of the supply situation of herbs, which herbs might be hard to get at certain times and why, and what other herbs I can use as replacements. I have a better understanding of the identification difficulties due to different namings of herbs and their source plants, so I can avoid confusion for myself and my patients.

**What form of delivery of Chinese medicine do you mainly use?**

I almost exclusively use granules made from concentrated freeze dried decoctions sprayed on a starch base, and „hydrophil extracts“ which are a liquid form of extracted whole herbs. I admire the use of decocting machines as I have seen Mazin use for his patients, but this is something we have not been able to establish here in Switzerland so far. I do have colleagues who get their patients to prepare decoctions at home. I have not insisted on that in my patient collective, because we get satisfying results with the use of granules and liquid extracts (also for acute problems, they work fast!), combined with a situation where buying herbs for decoction at home is even more costly (only slightly, but still) than the granules, not counting the time to make it and the problem of compliance specially arising in younger patients of which I have relatively many. I still believe the decoction itself, if prepared correctly, is more potent, but considering all the above, I don't see how it would be useful to switch at this time.

**Do you have any worries or fears for the future of Chinese herbal medicine?**

Yes, it seems like it is a difficult phase. One aspect is the change in the quality of herbs, because of the changes in the market situation which have led to a shift from wild gathering to cultivated herbs. The most important herbs that are used the most have been cultivated for many years, but most species have been gathered in the wild, because no one

has taken the pains to grow them since they are cheap and not needed in such large quantities. Now, because the demand is growing, especially within China and Japan, there are not enough wild herbs and they have to be cultivated. For some of the plants it takes many years until they can be successfully cultivated, others grow well but are fertilized to the extent of vegetables which reduces their quality. The healing substances are there precisely because they have grown in defense to other organisms. So there is a quality issue, and agricultural chemicals are being foisted onto the market, so finding ways to avoid all of these is difficult for farmers. The quality of herbs may be under threat. In addition there is the problem of availability for us as practitioners here. Some herbs may be lost due to extinction, some herbs may be banned due to difficulties identifying proper species or consistently producing herbs of proper quality, as happened with Xi xin recently.



**Prof Liu, Nina and other members of the group. Showing Jiang huang in medicinal herb market, Nanning, 2011**

**Looking forward, which further trips are you planning? What do you still want to do?**

The next trip is early this summer. We will go to Sichuan again, starting in the area around Chengdu and from there travelling south toward the Liangshan and Panzhihua areas into Yunnan Zhaotong and Kunming. I am very excited about this new route, specially about the part in northern Yunnan. I also hope to be able to intensify the exchange with Chinese experts in medicinal plant cultivation, processing and research, that I have been starting on a small scale.

Then I have a new trip next year – a tea tour. This will include travelling to traditional tea producing areas where we will visit organic tea growers and tea brokers. The brokers also have a say in how the tea is grown, rather like in the vineyards in France. They don't just buy and sell, they rent the land, and have people growing it, and initiate specific teas to grow and are influential in the quality of the product. Of course tea producing areas are often also herb producing areas, so there will be some overlap, but the focus will be on tea, in all its processed forms: green, white, partly fermented, black, pure, its culture and its production according to organic standards.

I would like to develop my facilitating qualities, since I have access to both the Chinese and European worlds. The herb trips are one step in that direction, in which I can take people and show them the world those herbs come from.

**I think your tours sound absolutely fascinating, I would love to come on one. I will come knocking on your door soon (when the children have left) saying can I come!**

You'll be welcome!

**Note:** further information about Nina's past trips to China, and future plans including visits to tea plantations, can be found at [www.tcmherbs.org](http://www.tcmherbs.org)



**Guangxi, meeting before setting out 2011**



**Longzhou medicinal herb market, close to Vietnamese border, 2011**