

HERB TRAVELS: SOUTHERN SICHUAN AND NORTHERN YUNNAN JUNE 2013

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Preparation: summer and fall 2012

A little over a year ago, in summer 2012, when I was sitting together with my plant expert friends Professor Zhang and Dr Chen, we weren't so sure if we could find enough contacts to arrange an excursion to Yunnan. But several people had said they really wanted to include Yunnan, alongside Sichuan, on the next herb trip with me. So there were the three of us, trying to make it happen.

It would be a trip to southern Sichuan and northern Yunnan, we decided, since Sichuan and Yunnan each are as large as France and people wouldn't want to spend the whole trip driving. In Sichuan alone, which I was most familiar with, there are so many places and plantations I would love to visit once again, the question is generally one of reduction, choosing a few special places each time. In Yunnan on the other hand I had to completely rely on my friends to find places, people, herbs in the wild and herb plantations. Not so sure yet how, but with their reassurance that it would all work out fine, I left for Switzerland.

We started planning in more detail in the fall, and an exciting route emerged, driving down freeways that were still under construction but scheduled to open by spring 2013. There were some people that hadn't even been contacted yet, but those details would be dealt with in due time. Many wonderful places were waiting for us and I started getting excited: there would be several chances of exploring herbs in the wild in the high mountains above 4000 meters, several plantations for herbs like Chonglou, Chuanxiong, Taizishen, Shanyao, Dangshen, Houpo, Huangbai, Fuzi, Zhizi, Jianghuang [1] and others. People started registering and by spring 2013 luckily a full group was formed.

Two years, which is the time span between two of my herb trips, are a long time in China today, enough for many things to change: not just time for freeways, high speed trains and undergrounds to be built, but for labor, food and therefore hotel prices to go up, for rules to be altered, for life to look different.

This time my travel agent had me make reservations much earlier than in previous years, because nowadays many more Chinese tourists are travelling individually, and to unconventional places such as those that we visit on our herb trips. Travelling in large groups is „out“.

Since building and decorating rooms with wooden furniture in traditional Chinese styles is increasingly popular, I was able to choose several hotels with very pretty

courtyard gardens and traditional decor. The implications of other changes we would only be able to see after actually getting there.

Earthquake in western Sichuan

Before that, on April 20th, the earth shook once again in western Sichuan, with the epicentre right between two towns we had planned on visiting, Lushan and Baoxing. Luckily this was far less devastating than the big earthquake of 2008 near Chengdu, but it still brought loss and harm to many, with 200 people dead and almost a thousand severely injured. Newly built infrastructure in the area was stable this time, but many old buildings collapsed. For me this meant cancelling that leg of the trip since we would not want to be in the way of reconstruction works and people in the area would not be ready yet to reactivate tourism even though of course income is needed.

Finding other places where we would be able to see lots of interesting herbs wouldn't be so much of a problem, since Sichuan and Yunnan are two of the four provinces with by far the richest flora and the highest number of medicinal herbs in all of China. In fact they are home to areas with some of the richest plant biodiversity in the world! [2] I mention this just on the side, to enlighten those who imagine China as a near barren landscape where nature has been destroyed by crazed communists in capitalist disguise! Having said that, we do need to look at the real problem of rapid decline of species due to loss of habitat, overuse and pollution in recent years [3].

Finding a new route

Getting back to our trip: what can be a problem is getting people to show us the way. We brainstormed, rerouted and found new hotels, made new reservations. June was soon. As usual, I flew into China a few days earlier than the group to make sure things were lined up properly, to talk to Dr Chen and meet his colleague Dr Fang who is doing research on the question of which species to

cultivate for medicinal herbs, and who was going to accompany us, and to choose a bus and driver. By the time people arrived and took their rooms in what felt like an oasis in the middle of town for all of us, things looked pretty good.

North from Chengdu: on the edge of the Longmen fold

I had scheduled our first excursion to take us up north, across the Zipingpu dam lake which is the water reservoir for one of the larger hydropowerstations in China, and into the steep mountain valleys right behind it, up onto high mountain slopes not far from Chengdu. As these mountains and valleys are the folds of the earth „wrinkling“ itself at the edge of the Longmen fold, with the flat and low Sichuan Basin on the other side, there are many different microclimates close by each other and it is extraordinarily interesting for its rich plant and animal diversity. But on the other hand, being along the rim of two tectonic plates, this is the very area of the 2008 Yingxiu earthquake and, further south, the earthquake near Lushan/Baoxing.

That day, we crossed the lake and the many new tunnels (built to avoid landslides) on the freeways in close to perfect condition, then started climbing up the winding roads into the herb cultivating areas. Very soon we came upon some tall and pretty Magnolia trees, whose bark will provide the medicinal Houpo. This showed us that we were now already above 800 meters since these trees do not grow below that altitude.

Next we discovered abundant wild-growing Gegen and Jiaogulan along the side of our road, then some smaller patches of cultivated Chuanxiong/Rh Ligustici saplings, growing here until September, when they will be cut and replanted down in the fields of the plain where they will grow larger roots to be harvested the following summer as Chuan Xiong.

One of our destinations up here was a large field of Taizishen/Rx Pseudostellaria that Dr Fang had visited in spring. It had been a newly started project to make use of the hard-to-reach slope and had looked promising then. Now the whole field was pretty much destroyed by some kind of plant disease that hadn't been able to be treated. Of course nature is capricious year by year, but it also shows how difficult it is to start cultivating a plant in a new environment, even if in principle the soil and the climate are close to the plant's original habitat (which in this case had been checked). There is a big difference between growing a whole field of something and just growing a few plants in a garden.

We continued further to visit a few trial patches and then several larger fields of Chonglou/Rh Paridis, a

beautiful plant with a very slow growing root that until recently has been exclusively gathered in the wild. Now that it has become increasingly rare due to overpicking, many people are trying to grow it, with very varying results. The farmer we were visiting is making systematic trials with different wild species and different growing methods. And he seems quite successful. The Paris plants on his fields, shadowed between trees and under dark nets, looked good.



Paris plantation, shaded, in San Jiang valley, with Shanyao in the foreground

This area hides many smaller and larger herb fields behind the villages, in the woods. We were taken on small trails, by Dangshen/Rx Codonopsis and Shanyao/Rh Dioscorea oppositae patches, and fields with Wutou/Rx Aconiti carmichaeli plants, preparing to have their roots separated and brought down into the rich soil of the plains as Fuzi/Rx Aconiti carmichaeli pars lateralis, to be grown big and heavy. We saw Jinyinhua/Flos Lonicera japonica, here the Shanyinhua/Flos Lonicera confusa kind, which is said not to be as potent as the other but yields much more flower weight per plant. There were also Baishao/Rx Paeonia lactiflora, Mudan/Ctx Mutan Radicis, Baiwei/Rx Cynanchi, and the three medicinal trees of Sichuan: Houpo/Ctx Magnolia, Huangbo/Ctx Phellodendri, Duzhong/Ctx Eucommia.



Woman with freshly peeled hou po bark Sanjiang Valley

Herb travels

Before leaving Chengdu we -of course- once again visited those rich fields in the plains of Jiangyou where Fuzi is grown. Since we were there a few days before the summer solstice, when they are harvested, we got to see the plants still in the fields and all the processing facilities quiet, clean and ready to go (the whole business of processing is worth an article in itself)

Towards Hanyuan on the Dadu river

Still contemplating, discussing and revisiting what we had seen (on the many photographs we had already taken), we were heading west and then south, towards Hanyuan on the Dadu River. One of our next stops was at Farmer Liu's, at the very end of a small side valley, high up in the hills.



Yi village, south Sichuan

Even before we reached the few houses belonging to the village where he lives, beautiful orchids, growing on rocks that once rolled down in landslides and are now scattered all over, caught our eyes with their yellow-orange or purple-white blossoms.



**Shihu
Dendrobium
nobile**



**Shihu
Dendrobium
denneanum**



**Shihu
Dendrobium
denneanum**

We followed our Dr Fang along a narrow path, seemingly into an ever more concentrated area of such orchid-carrying rocks, until a small old house came into view. Farmer Liu has been growing Shihu orchids for more than 30 years. He and his wife, patiently enduring (maybe with a little bit of curiosity added), welcomed and watched our group of twenty flood their homestead with our interested smiles, big cameras, and colourful outdoor clothing, somehow not matching but still becoming part of the color amalgam of their home. It seemed to have melted in with its natural surroundings.



Farmer Liu showing us how to grow Shi Hu



**Wild Paris
in Farmer
Liu's
backyard**



**Curcuma,
Jianguang
flower (on
left part of a
wild Paris
flower) in
Farmer Liu's
backyard**

Behind their house we discovered bee hives in an empty barrel, in the midst of potato and taro patches, under pomegranate and pepper trees, tangerine and phellodendron (Huangbo, as a medicine--he peels off some of its bark to show us its bright yellow inside for proof), and many more treasures.

Happily smiling and our spirits lightened by Farmer Lius' homemade honey-sweetened liquor, we sat in our jeeps and bumped down the winding road again. After a short argument about the amount due for the jeep rental, we climbed into our big bus, joining with our driver who had been waiting for us at the freeway entrance, and continued south.

The Yunnan Plateau

We followed Anning River, slowly ascending its slopes, leaving the sight of abundant Mango groves behind us, until a few days later we found ourselves up on the dry Yunnan Plateau. Dali, the old kingdom, was our first stop in Yunnan. Besides many wonders and interesting encounters in Dali University, we were lucky enough to be taken up a small path into a nature reserve at the foot of the Dali mountains one morning. Here we met two people with whom we share some interest: herb gatherers, digging Paris root and other things. Well aware that we were standing right in the nature reserve, where, strictly speaking, no digging of roots is allowed, they made sure we understood they were doing so with all due care and caution towards sustainable regrowth. We chatted for a while, and for my part I was impressed by the lifestyle their profession brings with it, as well as by those stories of their experience that they were generously willing to share with us.

Of all the plants we learn to recognize on this hike, the most impressive one for us was the blooming Kunmingshanhaitang/Tripterygium hypoglaucum, a close relative of Leigongteng (Tripterygium wilfordii), in fact medically used just like the latter.



Kunmingshanhaitang
Tripterygium hypoglaucum

Again full of new subjects to talk and think about, we left the forest.

This is the kind of experience that I love, and one of the reasons why I still enjoy organizing these tours. Here I have described the first half of our June tour, and in the next issue I shall describe the second half of the trip.

Notes

[1] Throughout the article I describe the plants using the Chinese pinyin name for the medicinal that is made from them together with the corresponding pharmaceutical name, even though as a living plant they are of course not yet the medicinal.

[2] See for example:

http://www.bgci.org/china_en/2022/

[3]

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/II20Cb02.html

Photos by Axel Wiebrecht, Nina Zhao-Seiler and Mazin Al-Khafaji

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.

Further information about Nina's herb tours can be found at www.tcmherbs.org



Wild Tiannanxing, S. Sichuan