

HERB TRAVELS IN CHINA: OCTOBER 2014

Part 3: Mongolia



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None of us could summon up a recollection when thinking Inner Mongolia. Images, a concept, were not yet formed in the depths of our minds. This was the first time I had agreed to accompany a group into an area that I was not yet familiar with, but very interested in, so here we were the four of us, me and my small group waiting at Chongqing airport for our flight up north.

Where exactly to?

Due to a 3-hour flight delay, and after having overcome our initial indignation and given into the fact, we now had plenty of time to calm down and explore our imaginations. I remembered my Chinese mother in law tell me about her Mongolian father, about his wealthy and noble parents trading camels to caravans in an Inner Mongolian county the name of which I had forgotten, about everyone except for him dying in a big fire during a war, about him being able to attend a military academy and ascending to a high rank in the republican army. About her love of milk and yoghurt. About stories I had read, by the European explorers traveling the Gobi desert 100 years ago. About what I had learned in history about the Mongolian empire led by Djingis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan around 800 years ago. The story of the Wolf Totem and the Mongolian Heaven God written by an author who had been one of those urban Chinese youths scattered out from the centres and sent to the outskirts of Chinese civilization where he found himself at the centres of another fascinating culture with ancient roots. (sent as part of a movement to renew the old by way of its destruction). And finally, I remembered the herbs I knew growing there: *fang feng* (*Saposhnikovia divaricata*) and *gan cao* (*Glycyrrhiza uralensis*) the two

deep rooting sand dwellers, at home on the edges of desert and grassland, by their very existence helping to shield and expand arable land.

But with none of these memories could I connect to a 'real', that is first hand or I should say first eye, image in my mind. Curiosity made my senses grow into large, open receiver dishes by the time we arrived.

Both of our contacts, the inviting pharmacologist and ethnobotanist Dr Li, our host, as well as driver Bu, appointed by our travel agency, had waited all afternoon for us at the airport, just as we had at the other end. I realized quickly, the slight tension I felt was not at all due to their long wait, which both dealt with very professionally, but due to a lack of clarity about who was in charge of taking care of us. Dr Li had arranged for us to join him in the University's van that would drive us directly to our restaurant. Driver Bu insisted of being responsible for taking us in his van and bringing us directly to our hotel to check in on time. Both being very concerned for our and their relationship's wellbeing, we negotiated and agreed on Dr Li joining us in our van to make sure, we would check in smoothly and swiftly and to help our driver find the restaurant so we would not be late for dinner. During the next couple of days we met the challenge to negotiate the best compromise between the ambitious and interesting program Dr Li had prepared for us and the maximum number of hours per day and deviations from our route our driver was willing and able to safely drive during this one week we had together. We felt honoured and were impressed by the effort the two of them were making to show us as much as possible of the rich Mongolian herb-flora on

the one hand while staying safe on the road on the other. The only effort we had to make was to relax them and us. It worked out quite well.

The first part of our reception, scheduled for the evening, already happened while queuing for payment on the airport expressway into town. One of the representatives we were later to share dinner with, had insisted on being the first to greet us, so we became part of the evolving ceremony before even entering town, this gave us time to think about and to get used to our role as honoured guests. This extremely cordial welcome continued throughout dinner at which we met a large group of people engaged in promoting science and education in Inner Mongolia.

In fact, the hospitality we started experiencing there, we later found was at the core of all our encounters, to varying extents. It felt to me like the stirring of a fire, warming body and soul. I already mentioned the very cordial words of greeting and welcome. We were sung beautiful songs of welcome in both Chinese and Mongolian languages. We were toasted upon and toasted back while loads of lamb's meat in different, delicately prepared dishes, delicious fresh warm bread, milk tea and veggies were served. We were included in good wishes and blessings for ourselves as well as for our possibly emerging joint endeavours and presented sky-blue ceremonial scarves. The ritual concludes with every single person thanking by toasting to heaven and earth, mother and father, sun and moon and by finishing each toast oneself or asking a volunteer to help, which was often necessary since we were not used to drinking the local spirit from containers the size of rice bowls. This was lucky in my case since I therefore was in shape to volunteer for our driver when in the very last round he had been cornered by two overenthusiastic hosts. Startled and maybe a bit impressed by my manoeuvre they left him alone after that. After another happy while, when everyone had gotten drunk and sung to, we rose to a pause between two verses and approached the elevator. Dr Li responsibly accompanied us to our hotel only to return for the finishing up. Stirring the fire by nature carries a risk of overheating or I should say, overconsumption. The people present here seemed to have accepted this risk as an inevitable part of social interaction. The only way to reduce it Dr Li said, is to reduce the number of such interactions, changing the ritual seemed not to be an option. This turned out not to be entirely true...

Ordos, where we spent this first night is a ghost city. It has been built in a bubble of financial investment which has now popped. Since the old industries,

especially coal and oil, are not being encouraged by the central government any longer, prices are down and their reputation is worsening quickly as environmental pollution is becoming more and more of a mainstream issue. Against this background, large-scale production of medicinal herbs looks like a bright green light on the horizon.

Downtown was dark, our hotel's reception lights turned on when we entered the parking lot. We seemed to be almost alone in the twenty+ storey building, but who knows, we arrived late and left early. It was quiet and comfortable, new, huge and clean. Breakfast seemed to have been prepared for quite a few more people, we noticed the next morning, when, alone in the immense eating hall, we curiously opened all the dishes.

Despite a short night Dr Li returned early in the morning with one of our most helpful volunteers of the night before, to take us out to Kubuqi desert. Kubuqi is a small stretch of desert, part of the Great Gobi. After a couple of hours drive through a more and more lonesome area on increasingly sandy roads through the grasslands those roads finally turned into sand themselves, and a short while later we arrived at the piece of land Mr Zhang, who had been giving us a lead, has leased to grow *gan cao* in half wild cultivation. We met Mr Zhao, Zhang's business partner in this project, who had been expecting us. Mr Zhao works in real estate where the recent boom years had allowed him to make some money, Mr Zhang owns a coal mine, that had recently lost a lot of its profitability due to cheaper coal from Mongolia. And maybe due to the overall reduction in demand. Together they are now investing in the green economy. Dr Li, their project-counsellor, fears that their enthusiasm might not last without early revenue from the desert plants.



The Kubuqi Desert

He said it takes at least ten years until the plantation actually turns profitable. Most people give up before that. Half wild cultivation means to spread seeds or plant seedlings in an area where the plant is endemic and still growing in the wild. And then to just let them develop by themselves. In fact it is not as much 'cultivation' than it is increasing the number and therefore the chance of those plants to grow in the wild, quite similar to the method of reforestation. There is no general standard as to what is allowed and what isn't in half wild cultivation, a plant's needs and its habitat are too diverse. The bottom line is 'the least interference possible'. The questions in real life then are: how long are we willing to wait for the plants to grow? The more wild, the slower the growth. So this method is only attractive for herbs whose market price is high and where good quality field cultivation is difficult. Half wild cultivation needs a lot of patience and enough of a financial cushion.

Right then optimism prevailed and infected us. The partners and their caretaker, a man originally from the coast, who is now living on location, in the midst of the desert, together with his family, proudly presented us their recently built water well and pump with which he can bring up abundant fresh water from 450 meters under the surface within seconds. We then were taken on a little tour through the neighbourhood. Since nothing was in sight all around us except for desert loosely covered with different grasses, it seemed odd at first, but after a few minutes drive a small woman appeared. She turned out to be a Mongolian and long time inhabitant of this area, digging wild licorice roots to sell for a little extra income. We were impressed by the strength and skill needed to extract the extremely long and deep roots from the sandy soil. Later one of her sons appeared on a quick call to help. She lives on the adjacent lot with her herd of sheep, her two children having left the desert to live and work in town. Spontaneously invited, we visited the brick house she stays in now, built by her and her late husband around 10 years ago after they decided to exchange their yurt for a building. She uses solar energy for electricity, light and warm water. Her's was the first dried sheepmilkcream-crisp I ever tasted, a local speciality I would eventually get to know and appreciate in a variety of preparations. Pure and on an empty stomach it wasn't an easy first approach, I definitely preferred the fresh licorice.

Walking back the half hour on one of those sand paths seemingly leading nowhere revealed more and more different desert plants to our now accustomed eyes. Dr Li had told us that around 15 years ago the government

had spread seeds by airplane several times to halt further desertification and stabilize the soil. What we saw was the result of that endeavour. From nowhere again appeared the small house, garden and water pump of the licorice-farm-to-be, in time for us to have what would turn out, in my opinion, to be one of the best meals of our whole trip. Simple but deliciously prepared it consisted of chicken stew with potatoes cooked all morning, stir-fried fresh spinach and steamed buns. Except for the extraordinary camelmilk-wine everything was from our hosts own den and garden.



At the gan cao forager's house

Well fed and happy we left the desert behind us. After a ride that eventually turned into a very long one because we lost our way in the Baotou suburbs, we finally reached a small village to the east of the city in order to visit another young gan cao production enterprise. This cultivation project was started by two young entrepreneurs from the packaging industry and the beverage industry respectively. Both of them wished to build up a business of their own that was in closer touch with nature than the field they had worked in before. We arrived in the middle of harvesting, with most villagers busy extracting, cleaning and separating the roots, trying to get as much done as possible before sunset. Luckily there was still an hour of daylight left, so we got to see all the different steps in the process in detail from digging up the roots with a tractor quite similar to a potato-harvester, cleaning and separating the thin from the thick roots by hand. The thick vertical roots will be cut and sold as Chinese medicine, the thin horizontal ones will go through an extraction process, their extract being used in the cosmetic industry. These locals have leased their land to the start up company and are now in turn working for them.



Thick gan cao root



Thin gan cao root

Our last day in Baotou included visiting the Medicinal Plant Research Institute of Baotou Medical School where we were shown their collection of impressive local medicinal plants used in Chinese as well as Mongolian medicine and their new laboratory equipped with the latest in high tech analysis. Then the splendid lunch offered to us, and the whole institute, by another company that is in the process of diversifying from plain real estate to investing in half wild cultivation. Already quite overwhelmed we were taken to their truly noble offices for tea where we learned about their first three cultivation projects, all with plants native to the area: *gan cao*, *rou cong rong* (*Cistanche deserticola*) and *huang qi* (*Astragalus membranaceus*).

To allow our minds and bellies a break Dr Li scheduled a bike ride, in fact a tridem bike race, through the inner-city grassland park. To make it two evenly seated tridems he had called one of his students to fill the empty seat. What at first I thought of disparagingly, turned out to be a lot of fun and therefore actually a really good idea. The park is big enough to let people see these spectacular

sunsets the grassland is famous for, with darkness falling (almost) within seconds after the awe.

Dinner then came in the form of a Mongolian giant fire pot. That is: one huge pot in the middle that contains everything: meat, fresh and pickled vegetables, tofu, potatoes, noodles, buns, and lots of special spices. We did enjoy the fruit offered in the end and remembered Baotou as an extremely hospitable place. The next morning saw us leaving very early to what would be the longest ride of the whole trip, always on the border of desert and grassland. Along our road, groups of roaming camels alternated with herds of grazing sheep and horses. Every once in a while a truck went the other way. We crossed several old principalities, one of them home to the legendary female warrior Hua Mu-Lan. Dr Li as well as Driver Bu have a wealth of stories to share so time passed without us noticing when we were listening to them. Heaven is so wide out here, all the colours of the sun expand freely, and almost everything is light! When night fell we arrived in a circle of women, one of them an old classmate and friend of Dr Li, all of them doctors working in the local Mongolian medicine hospital. We sang, ate and drank, just beer and tea (so much more easy going among female hosts. One big point for them! And...yes, it is possible.), together, circled the local heaven-altar at almost freezing night-temperatures and then happily fell asleep into our hotel beds.

The next day our driver's cold had gotten to the phlegmy phase, so our main objective, besides enjoying the spectacular scenery on our drive along meandering rivers, in the middle of dry riverbeds, through steep mountains and on bits of finished freeway in between, was to eliminate the phlegm from his nose and throat so he wouldn't have to take care of that too much himself. We tried all that we had, he liked the homeopathic influenza tablets best and his raspiness definitely was reduced by the evening. Taking lots of tea breaks probably helped somewhat too and was good for all of us in any case.

Our lunch that day took place in the small town of Wuhan, in a winter garden on the top floor of a small Mongolian restaurant. We were soon joined by two friends of Dr Li, both specialists in traditional herbal medicinals from long lineages going back to age-old nobility and knowledge. I felt I had tapped into a pool full of mysteries. But after all I am a traveller so I let go and on the road we went, greeted by the sinking sun in all its yellow, orange and crimson splendour.

It was after dark when we arrived at Chifeng, so once again friends waited for us at the freeway exit to give us a lead to our hotel. It's such a nice being-taken-care-of feeling when we have people doing that for us. While our driver preferred to stay in with some vegetable soup for some calmness, we joined Dr Li and those friends, two former college mates of his, for dinner. I took a break from translation during dinner that night and discovered the laughter of the three mates was contagious enough or I should say even more so, without my translation. . Sometimes things just fit well into time.

One of the classmates stayed with us the next day. He is responsible for the registration of medicinal plant products in this area. We visited the largest Ying Pian (TCM herb slices) Production company of this area, the family business of Yu and Zhang. They produce Ying Pian of several hundred different herbs for sale to pharmacies all over China as well as uncut dried herbs to Japan and the USA. He says in general the cheaper, that is, the lower quality herbal material stays in China.

Mr Yu is also the only company in Chifeng still holding a license to buy *gan cao* roots gathered in the wild, the amount being limited to 150 tons per year. Gathering *gan cao* in the wild has been banned and therefore has been illegal for several years but since many families income has partially been dependent upon it, the government has left a five year transitional period which still lasts. He showed us some of his huge stocks of magnificent roots, some of which must have grown for well over 10 years to reach such a size.

They do grow *gan cao* on their own fields, as well as *fang feng*, *jie geng* (*Platycodon grandiflorus*), *huang qi* and *bei sha shen* (*Glehnia littoralis*). At some of these fields we had a chance to visit that morning. All along the way many people were working on the fields, digging up *fang feng* and *jie geng* roots by hand, two people being a team. Their digging forks were extremely well constructed, using the best angle to transport human energy to the tip of the fork with a small post on a hinge right above the fork.

These roots looked beautiful. The *jie geng* are sown directly into the field and harvested after two years, as opposed to *huang qi* and *gan cao* of which seedlings are grown the first year and harvest generally happens in the third year of regular cultivation. Prices are low for these medicinal roots when sold into the herbal-pharmaceutical industry, so people are looking for other ways to increase their income. In the case of *jie geng* an attractive niche is developing in the foods sector: the fresh roots are increasingly asked for as

superfood-vegetable and for that purpose prices are much better, that is higher, from the point of view of the producers.



Digging for Fang Feng and Jie Geng



Jie Geng



Jie Geng roots

We still were under the wide open sky of the inner Mongolian plateau but the landscape was already changing, we were far away from the desert now and had arrived in the broad valleys at the eastern edges of the grassland.

Back in Yu and Zhang's company we joined for a round of discussion about cultivation. Weed control is one of the most difficult issues, as it is in most places. My Bavarian experts presented their weed control machinery, impressing their Chinese counterparts most with the smart harrow. For my part I was most impressed by the sheer size of this company and the amount of herbs stored and processed here, for one, and, for the other by the realization that wherever the actual roots of *chai hu* (*Bupleurum chinese*), which is the correct part to be used medicinally, are on the market, they almost always originate from wild gathering (!). Most often what is sold as *chai hu* today though are in fact not the roots but the whole herb, because it takes too long for a root to grow into anything more than a few grams and despite it being an herb with a high demand, the price for *chai hu* is low.



Chai Hu

After lunch, including deliciously fried fresh *jie geng* roots of course, and after having tasted a few of the many house brands of herbal brandies we were ready for another part of the local culture. Chifeng had been the capital and centre for the northern Khitan Liao Dynasty (907 to 1125) so most of the relics ever found of those rulers has been found here. What really stunned me though was a skilfully crafted dark green open jade ring shaped as a slender, blissfully smiling dragon. It is the oldest jade sculpture ever found and certainly the most beautiful I have ever seen. I fell in love with it, and since this exemplary was a replica, my plans for our last day in Beijing became clear right then: I would search the new National Museum of History, where the original had

been abducted to.

Our last dinner on the plateau was typically leaning towards the lamb and fire-water side but I must admit, nevertheless delicious as well as entertaining. The air and especially the night air is cold out here, somehow talk is more serious than in the south, at least, closer to to the gathering around the 'hearth fire'. The thoughts and ideas that come up around a dinner table are not always easy to be caught and translated in time, before the next strand takes over. But I find it very meaningful to get and give insights into strands of thought from different sides of our planet, right on the spot, revealing so often points of view never thought of by whoever is the listener on the other side of my translation. Sometimes a long drive through a lonesome landscape the next day is needed to bring clarity into what was actually meant the night before. This is one of the things I love about going on these trips with a bunch of interested people.

Back to Beijing

I have had so many adventures on this trip, every day, from dawn to dusk, I would like so much to give an account of everything, in words, in images, in sounds! Even just for the last leg of our trip through inner Mongolia, so much is missing, when I look at my notes: the dunes of the desert sands in the crimson evening sun, the stubborn kindness of our hosts in the hospital for Mongolian medicine in Xilinhaote, the meal with warm, sweet sheep milk cream with toasted glutinous millet, milk-oat-soup, black lamb sausage, and crispy sheep cream stuffed with prune jam, the tridem competition experience in Baotou's city grassland park, the two noble gentlemen seeing us –almost- incognito on that hidden perch for a traditional lunch, all of those many friendly interested and interesting encounters at the table, around steaming fire pots, on the fields, bending over tractors and cutting machines, in the bureaus and laboratories of companies and universities. The humorous uncovering of a fake Tibetan tour guide by my (real) Tibetan friend in the mountains. Or the story of the kidnapping of the brave and proud Tangut Princess at whose hands the great Djingis Khan found his end, told by Dr Li.

The landscape became narrower, hillier, greener, finally the great wall was visible in the distance crawling up and down the mountain ridges. With a special permit, to be obtained at the traffic customs office on the fifth ring road, our driver was allowed to enter the capital with his ford van even though he is burning diesel and diesel is

banned in principle. Slowly the city swallowed us and we became part of her again.

After we checked in, I vanished into the largest bookshop in town, went rummaging in the rearmost shelves, drank one of those immense Beijing Cappuccino's at the snack bar in a windowless corner of the shop. As if diving deep down into these man-made structures and worlds. I took the underground back to our hotel during rush hour and went for a walk in the neighbourhood. It was an urban-dingy area. Our dinner felt somehow similar. It made us reminisce about and appreciate all over again those incredible meals we had been offered and enjoyed during our trip.

The last day I spent one third in the national museum on Tiananmen Square, where during my search for the green dragon I encountered a number of other treasures. The dragon's beauty and simplicity struck a deep chord in me.



Jade Ring carved into the shape of a dragon

Walking back to the hotel the other two thirds of the day added some new facets to my idea of Beijing. And so has this trip once again added to my perception of China, along this route of mine, being: plants used as medicine and their environment, natural as well as cultural.

Addendum: I returned to Inner Mongolia alone the following year to travel with Dr Li, visiting more of the many herb cultivation projects he advises or otherwise knows, as well as the abundant local herbal flora in hidden places. He has introduced me to wonderful people, putting their sweat and their savings into pioneering herb cultivation projects, most of them without a particularly comfortable financial situation to start with, but instead for all kinds of personal reasons, a large portion of hope and idealism towards a future more in tune with nature. On this years herb trip I will take a group of people back to see them.

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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. She has travelled extensively in Sichuan and made the personal acquaintance of local specialists. During the trips that she organizes 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