

# HERB TRAVELS IN CHINA: OCTOBER 2014

## Part 2: Sichuan

*This is the second part of an account of a herb trip which began in Sichuan, continued in Chongqing and then in Inner Mongolia. The story of the first part of the trip was in the previous issue of the Journal.*



**Nina Zhao-Seiler**

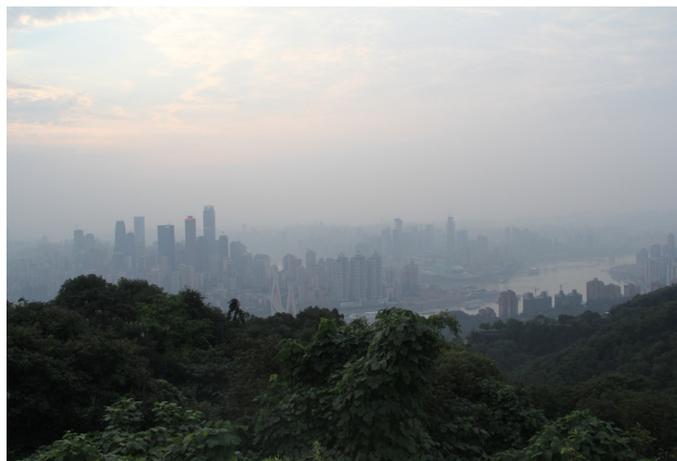
Our last day in Chengdu turned out to be an all-rounder, at least for me. Slipping out of the hotel early so I could pay another visit to my Mother-in-law before leaving, rushing back to pick up my group and accompany them to their appointment with the German general consul on time, where they were scheduled to inform him about our field-trip activities to learn about medicinal herb cultivation in Sichuan. The meeting was very efficient, so we had time to enjoy a wonderful foot massage as well as tea and lunch in the bamboo park by the river. All these are typical Chengdu socializing activities. Even the ear-cleaners with their scary pointed instruments and the wandering shoulder massage people are still in business in those teahouses. But most of the time customers are busy playing cards, chess or mahjong. After lunch we got to climb into our excellent driver Zhong's car one last time, when he met us by the park to drive us to the new high speed train station in the east. These new train stations are huge and it takes a while to find what one is looking for, even when reading Chinese is not a problem, just because there are so many different directions. Despite that little initial confusion, we did reach our train and as opposed to the 6-8 hours in older, conventional trains the trip to Chongqing now took us less than two hours. Floating through the lush, green southern Sichuan landscape, we spent the time quietly working on our diaries, calming down.

Chongqing, the megacity of bridges, tunnels and skyscrapers is surrounded by mountains and built on steep slopes that reach down to those two already quite large rivers Jialingjiang and Changjiang that merge here to form one big Changjiang/Yangtse River. The industriousness and intensity the Chongqing people are famous for is surprisingly tangible to me each

time I come. On arrival at Chongqing high-speed train station our luggage was transported to the car by three older male carriers with bamboo poles guided by Dr Li who had been waiting, followed by us hobbling behind in an effort not to lose sight. Once we caught up and were hushed in the car our new driver set out to get us through rush hour in the city centre, while we were busy getting used to his style of driving. Our Hotel was on the river, our windows faced onto the rock the hotel is built into (there was one of the biggest fairs for medical equipment happening in the city at the same time, so we were lucky to get rooms at all at this location). However, we didn't get a lot of time in the hotel rooms anyway, just enough to go for dinner next door and for a stroll along the riverside's old streets. One of these goes right through our hotel, so we could take the elevator down directly. Everything is steep here.

Early the next morning (the view from the breakfast

**Chongqing from above**



room is spectacular and makes up for all the rock in front of the bedroom windows and it's too bad we can't stay longer!) we departed for a week long trip through the mountains of Chongqing Municipality. It is the landscape of the three gorges, but on an area of 82,403 km<sup>2</sup>, where more than 20% is forest and where around 2000 kinds of medicinal herbs have been counted in the wild. It is the home and main production area of *huang lian* (*Coptis chinensis* Franch.) and an important production area for *bai zhu* (*Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz.), *xuan shen* (*Scrophularia ningpoensis* Hemsl.), *jin yin hua* (*Lonicera japonica* Thunb.), *tian ma* (*Gastrodia elata* Bl.), *hou po* (*Magnolia officinalis* Rehd. & Wils.), *du zhong* (*Eucommia ulmoides* Oliv.), *huang bai* (*Phellodendron chinense* Schneid.) and many more: we were excited to get going! Our expert, Dr Li from Chongqing Academy of Materia Medica, is the head of their institute of Chinese medicinal plant cultivation. Dr Li consults and coaches producers on site as well as several hours a day on the telephone (as far as I can tell from the week we spent on the road with him anyway). He had agreed to take us around Chongqing this whole week visiting some of the projects he is consulting for and introducing us to the herbal flora of the area.

Since my group this time consisted of three agroscientists, my Chinese (and my German) vocabulary in that field increased by the hour, challenging but very rewarding as well. The discussions between these German and Chinese professionals were real exchanges and it felt good to be part of what made that possible. In the next three days we crossed innumerable gorges and tunnels, drove through rain and lots of thick fog in the karst mountains east and southeast of Chongqing. Every now and then we wound up serpentine roads to a mountain-top or plateau, to reach one of the many secluded herb plantations out there. We saw dark green *huang lian* plants under their shading nets deep in the forest, met the friendly and cheerful forest dwelling people taking care of them who seemingly pretty much make everything they need themselves and seldom leave their mountain, and we visited the national *huang lian* stock market in Shizhu City. On the top of the 'immortal woman mountain' the fog was so thick we could hardly see the path we were walking, even less driving on, unfortunately making us miss the apparently splendid view right from the windows of our cabins. We were relieved and happy enough our driver found the accommodation in the middle of nowhere so we didn't feel like worrying about the rest. By the time we arrived at the nearby *xuan shen* experimental plantation the next morning, the fog was slightly thinner, letting us recognize the field a little before we were standing right in it between the tall plants.



View from the Hotel



Xuan Shen

This is one of Li's experimental fields where he and his co-workers are growing different varieties of *xuan shen* from all of China, examining their specific properties and needs. We were impressed by the huge roots some of them had grown in just one year. Here they are cultivated in turn with tobacco and dried on the spot, in large drying rooms, with coal fire driven hot air blowing systems. They are hung on bamboo poles, dried halfway, then left to 'sweat' for a few days and then dried through. The process of sweating is a kind of limited, desired fermentation, rendering the roots very dark and changing their chemical composition somewhat. The latter is something Dr Li has been working on to understand.

Our next destination was beautiful Xiushan in the southern most part of Chongqing, one of the autonomous regions of the Tujia and Miao ethnic nationalities. The whole management of one of the local herbal medicine production companies met us at the premises. They are combining highly scientific methods of cultivation, partly based on their own research with the production of traditional medicines from the herbs. One speciality is a species of *shan yin hua* (*Flos Lonicera macronthoides*) they have developed by selection that does not open its flower, making it



Shan Yin Hua



Huang Jing (*P. kingianum*)

much easier to be picked. They also cultivate *huang jing* but not *Polygonatum sibiricum*, rather *P. kingianum* one of the southern kinds that also grows wild in the area, the orchids *bai ji* (*Bletilla striata* (THUNB) and *shi hu* (*Dendrobium loddigesii* Rolfe.), as well as *tian men dong* (*Asparagus cochinchinensis*) and many others. All of these are being propagated in vitro, then planted out first in greenhouses, then in tunnels to acclimatize step by step before being put out into the harsh environment of the field.

We were invited to a wonderful dinner with local specialities and a taste of their new product, a *huang jing* herbal ice tea (herbal ice teas sell very well, at a better price than herbs and are being launched in large numbers) in a wonderful ambience and despite not having come during the season of the famous lantern dance we got to see it in a recording which was projected for us ad hoc onto a big screen in the courtyard. This generous reception we received everywhere was in fact an expression of gratitude for Dr Li's generous consultancy over many years that he was sharing with us. The whole of the next day was reserved for visits in the fields, but we still only managed to see a small part, they have so many projects and the area is huge. At the drying facilities we first of all got excited seeing a fresh load of *bai zhu* being discharged and loaded into the drying building by a group of about 50 people, basket by basket, heaved up by many hands together.

Just seeing such a large group of people laying hand on something together is a sight that we rarely get to see any more at home. Here the huge pile of aromatically scented rhizomes was sorted, the rhizomes filled into bamboo or plastic baskets, lifted into the dryer and later taken out to be cleaned and the small rootlets to be removed all by these many hands. My professional group was very interested in the technical data of the drying, I was more interested in experiencing the whole process. We all got our satisfaction here.



Bai Zhu



Bai Zhu loaded for drying

The root-dryer is again a hot air blow dryer driven by a coal fire. Drying *bai zhu* takes about 2-3 days at 40-60 degrees Celsius in here. The dryer and the drying process for *shan yin hua* is of course different as it is a flower. It is similar to the drying of green tea: the fresh flowers are initially 'germ reduced' (as opposed to sterilized) with a quick shot of hot steam, then dried with hot air on a moving belt at about 100 degrees Celsius. The whole process takes around 50 minutes only. Later on, on the mountain in the field we saw all the species we had seen propagating in their little glass jars at the company's lab the day before. So many species, so many kinds! And so many different phases of growth and methods of



**Ban Xia**

cultivation, since some were still being experimented with to find out how they grow best. I started to feel a bit overstrained by the scientific complexity of industrial cultivation when I suddenly recognized a small plant standing as a weed in one of the fields full of bai ji clones. It was a *ban xia* (*Pinellia ternata*) plant. That was like meeting an old friend in a strange environment and it made my day.

We bade our farewell to the Herb cultivators of Xiushan and headed back north, towards Nanchuan. We only arrived there after dusk to our meeting with Mr Deng, who was by then waiting for us out on the street. He accompanied us to our hotel making sure we wouldn't lose more time. With him we did bump into the local health deputy in the lobby, with whom Mr Deng, as an elected member of Nanchuan city council is familiar, but it was a fast introduction since we all were in the same situation : the late-for-dinner-hurry.

Deng is the founder and CEO of the largest herb cultivation and processing company of Nanchuan. A native of a small village at the foot of Jinfo mountain he was raised without schooling. As a young man he left home to try his luck in the big cities just like many other young people from the countryside. Sobered and better informed about the ways of the world out there he decided to return home and establish a medicinal herb cultivation company with the money he had saved. In the meantime his company has developed well and he has become widely known for his initiative and contribution to herb cultivation in Nanchuan Jinfo mountain which is a mountain range with a very rich herbal flora. Besides taking part in the city council as a non-party delegate he is active on several other committees. Deng's company has launched a new herbal ice tea as well and it tastes the best of all the ones we have tried, including the Chinese bestseller Wanglaoji!

The next morning before breakfast Dr Li informed me

that there was a short notice change to our programme: we were scheduled to meet the mayor who had heard from the health deputy that we were in town. It turned out to be a good but intensive half hour that we spent at the city hall. The mayor and his team are very interested in promoting herbal cultivation as an environmentally friendly, sustainable economic sector with growth potential that can be easily combined with tourism. As opposed to the aluminum and coal industry for example. With a background in forestry he seemed genuinely concerned and well informed. As we could see with our own eyes shortly thereafter, Nanchuan government was implementing its policies quite strictly, at this point at least. We passed by several relatively new coal and aluminum factories that had been shut down.

After our meeting we caught up with Deng and a local agriculture counselor specialising in orchids and mushrooms and drove to a village high on a slope, in the forest above which the villagers grow *fu ling* (*Poria cocos*).



**Fu Ling growing on a log**

The specialist scolded them for not following his instructions properly, having grown the fu ling too close to the vegetables in too shady and too wet a place, but we were very enthusiastic nevertheless. The place, the people, the culture and even the weather was finally sunny after all that fog. After another exquisite lunch full of local specialities (so far we haven't had the same dish twice) Mister Deng showed us his small but carefully kept Ying Pian (herb slices) production facility. There we left his team including the older man who is acting as senior expert/volunteer manager for Deng, a service offered by the local government for entrepreneurs who aren't familiar with rules and regulations in their sector or, as in Deng's case, have not had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Deng accompanied us to one more place, the Gardenia and Camellia garden he had just recently taken a lease on. It was a beautiful and very fitting place to say goodbye.



Gardenia Flower



Gardenia Fruit

Having been gifted with many presents for body and mind we then headed back into Chongqing city, sipping at Deng's huang jing ice tea and digesting our impressions.

After another night in the hotel between the river and the rocks, our last day in Chongqing had arrived. Dr Li took us to visit his institute, lying hidden behind one of the seven mountains Chongqing is built by. This area has been a hideout for government institutions since Chongqing became the wartime capital during the Japanese invasion of northern and eastern China and its massive bombardment of the impregnable Chongqing (imagine invading a landscape such as the three gorges). Now it is just as much a hideout to evade the smog of downtown for whoever can afford it.

We looked at labs and Herbariums and met his colleagues. At a small symposium, projects of the institute were presented and possibilities of future exchange with the scientists of my group were discussed. The fact that the Bavarian State Research Centre for Agriculture has a working group researching cultivation methods for some Chinese medicinal herbs is of great interest to their Chinese counterparts although the background and therefore the questions are not always the same. But getting to know each other and each other's projects creates a common ground. Some questions escape the formal occasion but reappear later, encouraged by the idyllic scene of our shared lunch, a Chongqing hotpot Restaurant.

Again and again I am fascinated by communication. Things that seem perfectly clear when first perceived turn out to be assumptions based on personal habit and experience combined with a lack of knowledge and understanding of the counterparts concepts. I love witnessing such surprises unveiled by careful conversation.

In the few hours left between tea and dinner, I was

delighted to hear that Dr Li had planned on taking us to exactly where I had wished to go, to Lao Jun Dong, the Daoist Temple high above bustling Chongqing, from where even the highest skyscrapers look like small peaks reaching out through the veil of smog below. The fog was hanging there just like a subtle haze, a hint of itself, so we could see all the way down into life being busy.

Calmness comes without effort at the temple, (once you actually get up there, which does take a bit of an effort). Still panting, we enjoyed. Later we got to have dinner on another one of the surrounding peaks. The view was again spectacular, the haze had turned a rose color with the setting sun.

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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](http://www.tcmherbs.org)