E. H. Wilson, Photographer

by Peter J. Chvany *

The achievements of Ernest Henry “Chinese” Wilson as a plantsman are familiar to countless plant enthusiasts throughout the world. Few temperate areas have been unaffected by his collections and introductions, yet his other activities and interests remain largely obscure. A widely read author, popular public lecturer, and interesting correspondent, Wilson also was an accomplished photographer who produced a body of work that deserves to be viewed not only for its scientific merits, but for its aesthetic qualities as well.

Throughout his travels Wilson carried at least one camera, making a total of over 5000 glass plate photographs for the Arnold Arboretum of the plants and locales to which his journeys took him, plus an estimated 5000 nitrate-base negatives for himself. At one time his photographs, sold as a large collection and as the individual illustrations in his books, carried his view of China and especially her plants across the occident.

Wilson, his “Boy,” or head bearer, and a bag of pheasants after a day's shoot.

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It is difficult to assess Wilson's early photographic training. Beyond the evidence that he took photos on the 1899 and 1903 Veitch expeditions, and his friendship with E. J. Wallis, a photographer at Kew, we know little of a substantive nature.

We should note however, that Wilson was not a professional photographer and as far as can be determined never evidenced great concern about the technical side of his photographic efforts. He sent his plates to England for processing, an expediency that may place him beyond the artistic pale in the view of modern photographers; indeed, his work contains its share of plates that are technically of a low quality. But he recognized the value of a camera as an instrument that could, with proper use, record whatever was put in front of it, and he conscientiously used it for this purpose.

Wilson had carried a "snapshot" camera on his first two journeys to China for the Veitch Nurseries. Charles Sprague Sargent, the Director of the Arnold Arboretum, insisted that he make photography an important part of his work during the trips he was to make for this institution. On the 6th of November, 1906, Sargent wrote to Wilson in England:

Dear Mr. Wilson:

I write again to remind you of the very great importance of the photograph business in your new journey. A good set of photographs are really about as important as anything you can bring back with you. I hope therefore you will not fail to provide yourself with the very best possible instrument you can, irrespective of cost, and it ought to be large enough to take pictures 6\(\times\)4 and you ought to get a stout leather case in which to have it carried. It would be well too, to take along a small instrument in case of accident. The large instrument only means another porter, and that is not a very important item. Bring, too, enough plates and films with you as there will certainly be a large amount of material to photograph.

Sargent also wrote to a dear English friend, horticulturist Ellen Willmott, asking her to use her influence and reinforce certain points.

Dear Miss Willmott:

Wilson will be leaving, I hope, about the 1st of December, but before he leaves I think it would be well for you to have a talk with him about those things which you are specially interested in and which you want him to collect. This would stimulate his interest I am sure and would, on the whole, be more satisfactory than if I talked to him more generally on the subject.

I am very anxious that he should take a good series of photographs and I have already written him on the subject. Please impress the importance of his doing this and of providing himself with the very best possible camera without regard to its cost. I wrote him, too, to take lessons in photography, and this is another thing which I hope you will insist on with him. Even if he is to delay starting for a week or two it would be best for him to be thoroughly equipped as a photographer.

In the letters between Sargent and Wilson we never obtain a clear statement of Sargent's wishes for the eventual use of the photos,
A view of the Yangtze River at Ichang; in the background are the hills in which Wilson collected.
	nor of Wilson's understanding of his photographic goals. We do know that as Sargent was developing the Arnold Arboretum he took care to obtain a photographic record of the activities and to secure botanically interesting photographic prints whenever possible from around the world. The Arboretum collection of that period includes not only the work of Wilson, but also material from Joseph Rock, Frank Meyer, Ernest Palmer, and Herbert Gleason, as well as the prints of many other men.

Wilson in his book, A Naturalist in Western China, describes the difficulties he met on his expeditions to the interior of China. From the coast for a thousand miles inland the country was a heavily populated alluvial plain with isolated chains of mountains rising from the agricultural flat; but at the city of Ichang, miles inland on the Yangtze River, the flat land abruptly changed to wilder terrain. The rivers no longer wandered across the plains but ripped their way through cliffs of stone. Here the population thinned, was poorer, and while centuries of Chinese and aboriginal kingdoms had left their marks, much of the land was still wild.

From here Wilson began his explorations. With his Chinese collectors and coolies he traversed the unkempt roads and savage countryside of Szechuan and Hupeh, sleeping in the poor inns and crossing barren mountains past fresh graves of men killed by robbers as he searched for the plants on which his fame would rest.
Wilson's travels took him to the edge of Tibet across high passes where 21,000-foot mountains rose over the path. He skirted the grave of a man recently murdered by bandits (below), and passed through countless narrow though picturesque ravines.
This crude log bridge and fast torrent are typical of the back country conditions Wilson faced in China.
Towering cliffs, narrow ravines, and trees on Wilson's arduous path.
Wilson's sedan chair is seen amidst the Coolies and coolies he needed to carry them. The chair was supposed to confer status to a traveler, which was important for foreigners in China. In A Naturalist in Western China, Wilson said he rarely used this chair.
Wilson frequently included in his tree photographs enough background to provide secondary areas of interest. This photo of a Cornus ulotricha taken beside a trail in western Szechuan helps to give an idea of what travel was like for him and his coolies and collectors.

We may catalog the incidents of extreme danger only by the most careful examination of Wilson’s letters, journals, and books, for he rarely ventured to comment in more than a few words on his personal perils. On occasion he told of the disastrous landslide that broke his leg, leaving him with a lifelong impediment; of the capsizing of his boat in a treacherous Yangtze River rapid with the loss of a
large quantity of his photographic plates; and of his near death on a cliff where only the quick action of one of his coolies saved him from plummeting hundreds of feet.

Except for an occasional glimpse or two, we are not privy to his daily battles to secure good photos. However there is one brief account that is revealing.

"May 30 — Wen-tsao. On a precipitous slope facing our lodgings a score or more Davidia trees occur; they are one mass of white, and are most conspicuous as the shades of night close in. Two large trees of *Pterostyrax hispidus* are growing amongst these Davidias, and are laden with pendulous chains of creamy-white flowers."

"May 31 — Go over and investigate the Davidia trees and the forests generally. Crossing a narrow neck a wood-cutter's circuitous path leads us down to a narrow defile through a fine shady wood. Ascending a precipice with difficulty, we soon reach the Davidia trees. There are over a score of them growing on a steep, rocky declivity; they vary from 35 to 60 feet in height, and the largest is 6 feet in girth. Being in a dense wood they are bare of branches for half their height, but their presence is readily detected by the numerous white bracts which have fallen and lie strewn over the ground. The tree starts up from below when fallen; indeed, it naturally throws up small stems after it gets old. The bark is dark and scales off in small, irregular flakes. By climbing a large *Tetracentron* tree growing on the edge of a cliff and chipping off some branches to make a clear space, I manage to take some snapshots of the upper part of the Davidia tree in full flower. A difficult task and highly dangerous. Three of us climb the tree to different heights and haul up axe and camera from one to another by means of a rope. The wood of *Tetracentron* is brittle, and the knowledge of this does not add to one's peace of mind when sitting astride a branch about 4 inches thick with a sheer drop of a couple of hundred feet beneath. However, all went well, and we drank in the beauties of this extraordinary tree."

This description is from the Veitch expeditions. Unfortunately, all but a few of the photos taken on these are thought to be lost, although an active search for them is being conducted both here and in England. Not only are we deprived of pictures that could help us trace Wilson's development as a photographer, and of more views of the trees and plants of China, but we are unable to see a very special difference between the dove tree, as Wilson would say, "at home," and as it appears in Europe and America. In China the tree produces its hanging white bracts and flowers before the leaves so that it stands forth with its bracts fully exposed to view. In Western climates, the tree leafs and then flowers so that the bracts are seen partially obscured.

The trails, paths and unmaintained roads Wilson travelled amidst the rough Chinese terrain would not permit carts, so twenty coolies transported his supplies. As a personal camera, he carried a small roll-film type, but for the Arboretum photos he chose a Sanderson whole plate field camera complete in three heavy boxes with bellows and a stout wooden support tripod. This tripod, incidentally, provided the splint when Wilson was injured in the landslide.
The great majority of Wilson's photos are of single trees seen against a general background, although many of his best pictures include specific secondary details such as the opium poppies and shrine in this picture of a Ficus lacor.
Wilson made many plates in other areas, although they are not as well known as his photos of China. This Widdringtonia juniperoides was photographed in South Africa in 1922. It not only shows the tree beautifully but also evokes a feeling for the land in which the tree is found.
Many photos of single trees also include at least one human figure, usually to provide a sense of scale and the exotic locale of the specimen. This particular photo shows the type of tree on which the species Ormosia hosiei is based.
Wilson's note on this Gleditsia photograph states that "the boards are votive offerings to the healing spirit who is supposed to dwell in the tree."
This *Sciadopitys verticillata ‘Pendula’* growing on temple grounds in Japan shows an unusual form. Wilson frequently noted the debt owed the priests of Japan and China who preserved many special trees on their temple grounds when all else was cleared for agriculture.
This photo of a Juniperus squamata shows props leaning against the cut-off branches, which have been taken to be used as incense.
Rheum alexandrae with spikes 3 to 3 1/2 ft. tall, together with the low-growing Primula involucrata photographed growing near the Tibet-China border at 13,000 ft. elevation.

While awkward and heavy, and rapidly becoming obsolete, this old-style camera met the needs required of it. Each image to be photographed could be accurately composed and focused on the large ground glass screen at the rear of the camera, and it reproduced perspectives and tall objects without distortion.

The heaviest part of the apparatus was its fragile glass plates. They nevertheless had one special advantage: the emulsion permitted the recording of great detail and produced a high level of image quality. It is interesting to note that other photographers working at the same time as Wilson made similar choices; in fact they often utilized cameras with larger plate sizes. These other men, however, rarely were as far out of contact with civilization as he and did not have to carry the quantity of supplies or trek the same distances.

In the photographs of the first expedition, we find some clues to Wilson’s approach to photography. As he journeyed from his take-off point at Ichang, he began to photograph the solitary trees that clearly revealed species characteristics. He also on occasion made a plate of an interesting shrub or herbaceous plant in bloom, while taking only a slightly lesser number of views of the Chinese land; its geographical or geological forms, its shrines and exotica. While
initially there are some plates that indicate difficulties with basic photographic techniques — a multiple exposure, some where staining has taken place, or where random and unwanted light has left its mark — the plates are generally of a rather uniform and more than adequate quality.

As the journey progresses, the balance of subjects shifts abruptly near the time that Wilson is moving rapidly back to Ichang to close off his expedition. Now we find more and more photographs of single trees, and while still of scientific merit, their aesthetic quality decreases. There are several possible reasons for this. We can deduce from Wilson's pattern of photography that earlier in his journey he was careful to save his plates, photographing only those trees that he knew he must have, but being prepared to perhaps expend extra effort in order to make each camera set-up and exposure as valuable as was possible. Husbanding his materials, he approached the end of his journey with a surplus of plates and may have begun to work more rapidly and with less selectivity.

A rich man, his family, and friends.
As Wilson traveled he made a large number of photographs of the Chinese landscape. This picture reveals interesting facts about the land.
The large scale vistas Wilson photographed often reveal information regarding Chinese agriculture customs. Here the terracing and intensive cultivation of the hillside is of interest.
A typical village in Western Szechuan.
As he passed through the countryside Wilson occasionally stopped to photograph artifacts. This memorial arch to a good widow is typical.
Crossing and recrossing many bridges in his travels, Wilson photographed several different ones.
This bridge made of plaited bamboo is typical of many of the upland river crossings.
Wilson often took photographs of tree trunks to show bark patterns, or other interesting characteristics. These are the remains of Cercidiphyllum japonicum trees measuring 55 feet in girth — a remarkable size. Unfortunately, the specimens of these Wilson brought to Jamaica Plain from China have not survived.
Wilson liked to show plants "at home," as he called it. This is a Primula sinensis growing on limestone cliffs.
Wilson had broad interests and noted not only the horticultural aspects of China, but its agriculture also. This field of Platycodon grandiflorum was grown to sell for medicine. Close examination of the photo reveals other crops.
In photos such as this of Primula polyneura, Wilson managed to convey not only a sense of the plant itself, but also of the conditions under which it grew in nature.
Not only did Wilson perform his appointed tasks as a plant collector, but as a naturalist he made rich note of the surrounding scene in terms of geology, fauna and economic botany. In at least one or two photos we see Wilson himself (travelling at this time with another occidental) posed with his dog, "Boy," and his bag of 57 pheasants, and looking much as if he'd stepped off the English moors after an afternoon of hunting (page 181). There is in this photo a pleasant lack of formality on Wilson's part. Notice how he is looking off and not at the camera, obviously not posing himself in a rigid position until the photo is taken. Without the posturing for posterity we have the feeling that we are in the hands of a man we can trust, and if a contemporary audience would find little sympathy for the hunter with his kill, at least there is no pretension on the part of the hunter.

When Wilson made his expeditions, the circumstances that caused him to take a photograph would vary. In the case of the pictures he made for the Arnold Arboretum, it must be remembered that he had already been to China twice for Veitch and knew of trees whose locale was worth revisiting for pictures as well as seeds, cuttings, and specimens of the plants he needed.

The requirements of this collecting shaped his photographic activities in several ways. Typically, Wilson lived at one central location, making journeys to find plants at appropriate seasons, and often returning to collect again at a different time. Trees observed in flower needed to be seen in fruit. Trees recognized as superlative examples could be revisited on occasion and photographed, with lesser specimens eliminated because of their unsuitability.

Wilson's daughter, Muriel Primrose Wilson Slate, who travelled with her father on his 1914 expedition to Japan, has recently described the way in which he would scout the countryside for the subjects he wished to photograph. Then he would return, often leading a small caravan on foot; his wife in a sedan chair, Muriel on a small Russian pony, the heavy camera, plates, and tripod borne behind them. At the location of his selected tree, Wilson would proceed to circle and study it from different viewpoints, reviewing his initial perceptions, making certain that the tree would reveal itself when photographed. The trunk, the branching structure, the background and other details were checked until he was at last satisfied that one particular vantage point was best; then he would set up the camera.

On occasion the entire expedition would have to be repeated. Wind jostling the branches and leaves might keep the tree in constant motion and even after several hours delay it would not be still for a single exposure. A particular time of day and sun position would be awaited only to have it pass with too much wind, for Wilson preferred to have only the optimum light for his pictures.
Wilson's photos often included typical architecture of an area. This is a castle of a rich family with woods of Pinus massoniana in the background.
The buildings of a farmhouse on the Chentu Plain are shown in this photograph.
Wilson and his men spent many nights in hostels and inns along the Chinese roads after long days of hiking. This new rural homestead was one of the inns.
As Wilson went deeper into the mountains, his accommodations changed, as can be seen from this hostel.
This is one of a series of four photos Wilson made of a European settlement in Central China. The foreign bungalows with Chinese motifs as trim, and the tennis court contrast sharply with the native structures that are closely integrated with the landscape.
Some irony occasionally surfaces in Wilson’s work. In this photo of the city of Wan Hsien, the gray native structures contrast sharply with the white facades of a Western church and the white sides of a Western gunboat.
Many of Wilson’s photos of trees not only serve scientific purposes, but are of great aesthetic merit as well. This Ficus lacor with its spreading head over 90 feet wide is simply a beautiful photograph.
Pinus tabulaeformis photographed in the mountains of Western Szechuan.
Wilson set up his camera wherever he could get a good shot of a tree that interested him. He remarks in a note that these Juniperus chinensis clumps are often found among graves.
This photo of *Salix babylonica* again shows Wilson's ability to combine a tree with the specific details of a locale in an effective and pleasing manner.
Wilson's photos sometimes record the surprising size of relatives of commonly known plants. This Senecio kenensis rising to 25 feet is closely related to our familiar ragworts.
A grass tree, Xanthorrhoea reflexa, photographed in Australia.
The largest tree Wilson found in China, a Cunninghamia lanceolata over 120 feet tall.
Many of Wilson's best photos of China are only tangentially, if at all, related to his plant interests. Unfortunately, on his later journeys there are fewer pictures such as this simple yet beautiful scene of boats and nets alongside the Yangtze.
Wilson did not make many photos of people; when he did the subject usually was shown in some context with plants or plant products. Here a coolie is carrying approximately 270 pounds of bowls carved from Pinus massoniana.
This tea coolie and the others Wilson photographed all appear at ease and unaffected before the camera. The men shown here carried about 300 pounds and averaged 6 miles a day over primitive roads from China to Tibet.
Wilson says these men are typical of types of Chinese; both served him as collectors.
Wilson had a deep respect and love for the beauty of nature. Voracious reading gave him an ever-widening context in which to place his view, yet, as his daughter has commented, he always returned to extolling the infinite variety and eloquence of natural scenes themselves, having found in the plants and views of landscape the greatest pleasure of his life. This quality of deep appreciation and sensitivity towards nature, with his commitment to reveal the best of what he saw, stands as the foundation for his photographic work.

Wilson has been described in plant circles as a man who had the ability to visualize the plants he discovered in the settings where they might finally be placed. This special talent served him well in his selection of materials for introduction, and also affected his photography, aiding him in his selection of trees to be photographed and in his choice of the right vantage point.
A portion of Wilson’s photographic work encompasses his journeys through Eastern Asia to Korea, Formosa, Japan, the Linkin Islands, as well as trips to Australia, India and South Africa. These little-known photographs are primarily scientific and serve the research of arborists in institutions around the globe.

Less frequently in these photos do we see individuals or small groupings of people, artifacts, or for that matter, wide and scenic vistas. The absence of such subjects raises a small question of Sargent’s reaction to Wilson’s photos. Did Sargent ask Wilson to restrict the valuable glass plates to subjects of prime arborial interest, or was Wilson less enamored of the people and scenes he subsequently visited than of China and the Chinese?

Wilson’s photography did not stop when he returned to the home grounds of the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain. He continued to take photographs of trees in the Arboretum itself, and at other locations around New England as well as an occasional photo in Kew or in France. Some of these photographs were taken of particularly well-known trees; trees which had a historical significance or were notable for their size or age.

Wilson used lantern slides of his Arboretum photographs in his very popular lectures, for which he received $150, a very good fee in the twenties. He had some of the slides hand-colored in China and Japan, and a few of these remain in the Arboretum’s collection.

In the last analysis Wilson achieves with his camera not only the “truth” quotient necessary for science — the proof of existence and the specific nature of the thing in situ — but also an evocation of extraordinary beauty and timeless, universal appeal.
A log of *Tsuga pacifica* is balanced on a back brace, permitting the men to stop and rest with the weight supported by the ground.
Pinus thunbergii on eroded cliffs of gray sandstone.
Most of Wilson’s photos from Japan show trees in forest situations and do not reflect his skills at composition. However, some of his photos, particularly from the seacoast, reflect his pictorial ability. This is Pinus parviflora.
Perhaps Wilson's most famous photo, this shows Pinus thunbergii in the background on the small islands and Pinus densiflora in the foreground.
Wilson carried a personal camera in addition to the camera he used for Arboretum photos—the difference in subjects is startling. Unfortunately not a great deal of information exists about the circumstances under which these photos were taken. Wilson used Formosan headhunters as guides on his visit to that island.
We can only assume that these men being crucified are criminals. It is remarkable that Wilson was able to inspire enough confidence so that he was permitted to get this kind of photo.