

INTERVIEW

Chinese Botany and the Odyssey of Dr. Shiu-ying Hu

In a brief retrospective interview, a Chinese botanist who remained in the United States, recalls some highpoints of Chinese botany at Harvard over the past several decades

In the interview transcribed below, Sally Aldrich Adams captures some of the essence of recent Chinese botany as it was experienced by Dr. Shiu-ying Hu, a former member of the staff of the Arnold Arboretum. Mrs. Adams conducted this and several other interviews at Arnoldia's request so as to document the contributions that Arboretum botanists have made to the development of botany in China.

In the years when the People's Republic of China was closed to outsiders and foreign scientists could not keep up their contacts with Chinese colleagues or pursue their studies inside the country, the Arnold Arboretum was fortunate in having on its staff a botanist, Dr. Shiu-ying Hu, who could maintain at least a thread of the former association.

Dr. Hu had come in 1946 to study with Dr. E. D. Merrill for three years, and she stayed on to work for twenty-eight more, until her retirement. She still works in her office every day.

When Chinese botanists did not dare write to Americans, they could write to her; when they needed books but could not get American dollars to buy them, they turned to her. She provided, at her own expense, the literature they asked for and for several of them paid membership fees in international scientific associations so that they could receive publications. To Dr. Hu, this was a way she could serve China.

"In Peking, in Canton, in different cities, I did that for them. While there was no communication between American botanists and Chinese botanists, there was a slight communication between Chinese botanists and I!" Dr. Hu's English slips a little when she is excited, as she was when she related this to her visitor. "Whenever they needed some literature—at that time we didn't have Xerox machines—I photographed them, or I micro-filmed, or some I typed, so whatever material

they needed in their work, I sent it to them. That has made many people know that there is a Chinese botanist at Harvard."

To go back to the beginning of Dr. Hu's story:

In 1934 Shiu-ying Hu went to Lingnan University in Canton (formerly Canton Christian College) as a graduate student in botany, with an assistantship in the herbarium. Impressed that every sheet of specimens had been identified by "E. D. Merrill," she said she wanted to study with this famous botanist and asked where he was. She was told that he was at Harvard and that Harvard "didn't take girls."

Just as Shiu-ying Hu got her master's degree, Japan started war with China, and her university moved to a safer area, the city of Chengtu, where West China Union University, also a missionary college, became host to several refugee colleges.

There, in addition to teaching courses in botany, Miss Hu was elected president of the International Women's Club, a circumstance instrumental in getting her to America to study with Dr. Merrill.

The vice president of the club was a Radcliffe graduate, and she sent Miss Hu's application to her own alma mater. When a fellowship offer came through, two other American friends provided money for Miss Hu's transportation. (Her salary from the university at the time was paid in rice, three bushels a month, a medium of exchange not readily

converted into tickets to America.)

Soon after Dr. Hu graduated from Radcliffe, a vacancy for a trained botanist who knew Chinese plants opened up at the Arnold Arboretum. "At that time, racial and sexual discrimination was very heavy, so my salary was about the same as the janitor's," Dr. Hu said with a smile. "Being a Chinese botanist, I had no business staying in America and not working for Chinese botany. But now in Harvard I was working for Chinese botany, so I felt all right."

One of Dr. Hu's projects in the 1950s was financed by a grant from a group of Chinese businessmen who, unable to return to Communist China, wanted to do something for their homeland. Her proposal was for a flora of China, and as the first step she completed an index to the flora in card-catalog form.

"Many people come and use my file, and that's one of the Arboretum's working tools in research on Chinese plants," she said.

The second step would have been to publish the index, but administrative and financial changes intervened, and only two plant families were published, the Compositæ and the Orchidaceæ.

"That desire to work on the flora of China was never dead," Dr. Hu said, "but I became old, and I said, 'If I can't finish the flora of this big area, I could work on the flora of a smaller area.'"

To this end, she went to Hong Kong six times between 1968 and 1975 at the invitation of the Chinese university there, and collected specimens while teaching two courses. While in Hong Kong in 1975, a tour was organized for faculty members to see science, education, and technology in the People's Republic of China. With great difficulty because of her American passport, Dr. Hu obtained the necessary permit to go.

"Mao Tse-tung was still alive. No Chinese botanist was allowed to see any foreign botanist." Dr. Hu told her story dramatically. "But I want to see Chinese botanists. How can I do it? If only I can let them know I'm in Beijing, I know they will see me, because they asked me to do so much. I made many petitions [to the Chinese government agent in

charge of the tour]; they just won't listen to me."

Without official sanction, Dr. Hu sent the message that she was in Beijing to a botanist friend with whom she had corresponded for years. The messenger was her nephew, who found the man in a traditional bathhouse and received only the message, "Go back." Later that night a girl appeared at Dr. Hu's hotel room and told her to go to the Institute of Botany the next day. Skipping the tour program for the day, Dr. Hu went to the institute and found a party in her honor, as well as the gratifying chance to talk with her Chinese colleagues. Further gratification came the next day as her plane was leaving. T. T. Yu, Deputy Director of the Institute of Botany and a former student of H. H. Hu, came with two other botanists to say, "Please bear our greetings to botanists elsewhere."

In 1977, after Mao died, T. T. Yu asked Dr. Hu to go to China and work with young Chinese botanists. She went the following year lecturing and giving intensive courses in Beijing, Lingnan, Manchuria, and Shanghai.

Dr. Hu made her last trip to China in 1984, when she was the keynote speaker at an international symposium in Hong Kong on Chinese medicinal-plant research and went on to Canton to give ten lectures. She was made an honorary professor at South China Agricultural University in a ceremony attended by the governor of the province and other officials. A second honor came to her in her own province, Kiangsu, where she was made an advisor of the botanical institute.

She then travelled to Tibet and Mongolia, "... and I went to places that no other foreign botanists were allowed to go. So I have in my file material to write on the frontier of Chinese botany"—both the physical frontier and the metaphorical one, she explained.

Dr. Hu is at present writing articles on Chinese food plants and on Chinese medicinal plants introduced into America as ornamental plants and weeds. "Seven hundred of them," she exclaimed. "And I had such a big part!"