How to Fund Botanical Expeditions

E. D. Merrill had become an expert on Chinese plants during his years as director of the Bureau of Science in the Philippines; his ability to identify prodigious quantities of specimens with phenomenal speed became legendary. Also extraordinarily effective as an administrator, he developed his own methods of supporting fieldwork in distant countries, as the letters below illustrate.

In the first letter that follows, Merrill—recently retired as director of the Arnold Arboretum—responds to a request for the names and addresses of responsible, trained, and experienced plant collectors in China, “all very efficient and very trustworthy.” Merrill continued this mode of funding with the Metasequoia expeditions, acting through Professors W. C. Cheng and H. H. Hu, his friend and colleague of thirty years. The $250.00 Merrill sent to Hu in 1947 financed C. T. Hwa’s trip to Sichuan and Hubei for herbarium specimens and seeds, and in 1948 two grants of $100.00 enabled Hwa to spend the summer and early fall with Cheng and K. L. Chu investigating the plant species associated with Metasequoia. The second letter, which accompanied the first of the $100.00 grants indicates some of the difficulties faced by Chinese botanists and their collaborators.

January 27, 1947

Mr. Henry Hicks
Hicks Nursery
Westbury
Long Island, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Hicks:-

I haven’t forgotten our conversation regarding “raids” on China from a horticultural-botanical standpoint, for in pre-war years I had strongly developed this field. In earlier days the only way of securing plants, seeds, etc. was to send an expedition, as Sargent financed the Wilson trips, the Purdom explorations, the Rock expeditions for the Arnold Arboretum, etc. These were super-expensive as high salaries and high travel expenses were, of course, involved.

Beginning about 1915 the situation changed with the return to China of certain Chinese students who had been sent abroad to
secure special training. . . . The result: that there is now in
China a body of trained men who know their way around in field
work appertaining to both horticulture and botany.

Beginning about 1918 I started in to take advantage of this
situation while I was in Manila, making two vacation trips to China
(Canton and Nanking) to help train Chinese botanists in field meth-
ods. After my return to the United States in 1923 I continued this
exploitation at the University of California, New York Botanical
Garden, and the Arnold Arboretum. The system is a very simple one.
I make a modest grant to this or that individual or institution in
China (these grants have varied from $50.00 to $100.00 up to
$500.00) giving the individual carte blanche on the actual expendi-
ture of the funds to cover costs of field work, the resulting col-
lections of plants and seeds to be divided equitably between the
cooperating institutions. There has not been a single failure. The
results have been most astonishing. In general, for what it would
cost to send one man from here and cover his salary and travel
expense I could maintain a dozen expeditions in China, and from
each one of the dozen would receive as our share on a 50-50 split
about as much material as the one man sent from here! This sounds
rather absurd, but it is actually the truth. It means that no
"salaries" were supplied, for the cooperating institution in China
covered the modest cost of the services of the trained collectors,
and funds that I supplied were used only for expedition expenses
in the field. . . .

I'm personally tremendously intrigued with a recent discovery
in Szechuan. A giant tree like Sequoia and Taiwania, representing a
new genus to be described as Metasequoia or some such name. Only
three living trees in the stand! Later another grove with perhaps
20 trees located. We got a botanical specimen recently & Dr. Hu has
promised to send seeds as soon as he can get them. Here is a forest
giant just on the edge of extinction! If C.S.S[argent] were alive
and learned of such an extraordinary thing he would probably send
out a special expedition to bring home the bacon. I can do it at
practically no cost.

Now I do not know what the policies of my successor here may
be and whether or not our "Field" will continue to be eastern Asia.
I've done my bit and I am rather proud of it. Let us hope that this
eastern Asiatic work will continue.

Very sincerely yours

E.D.Merrill
March 26, 1948

Professor Wan-Chun Cheng
National Central University
Nanking, China

Dear Professor Cheng:

Referring to our previous correspondence, I enclose herewith check No. 22690 in amount of $100.00 payable to you. . . . I am sure that you will be able to negotiate this check, which is drawn to your personal order, to advantage. . . .

This grant of $100.00 is to be used at your discretion, but primarily for the purposes of keeping your assistant in the field during the collecting season in the Metasequoia area. I judge from the last letter that I received from you that the Rector of the University approved your plan and that Mr. Hsueh* will remain in the field after Dr. Chaney shall have returned to Nanking. It is, of course, understood that if necessary or desirable you can utilize some of these funds for actually shipping specimens to this institution. This, to me, has been a very discouraging phase of the situation in China, in that we could have large collections made but for the difficulties in arranging for shipment of specimens to the United States, which have proved to be insuperable. Maybe, here, you could enlist the cooperation of proper representatives in the American Legation in Nanking; some years ago, when the situation in Peking became very acute after the “incident” that set off the war between Japan and China, the American officials in Peking sent an enormous lot of botanical material to the Arnold Arboretum in the diplomatic pouches. . . .

I now have, thanks to you, all of the Metasequoia seeds that we need. You sent a package. I believe, through diplomatic agencies; a few days ago this large package was delivered to me here and contains some scores of thousands of seeds. It is the package in which was also included some Metasequoia cones and a number of seeds of ligneous species. I have sent all of the latter over to our propagating house and will find out what we can do with the species under our climatic conditions.

With best wishes.

Very sincerely yours,

E. D. Merrill
Arnold Professor of Botany

*In W. C. Cheng's response on May 12, he corrected Merrill's mistake. It was C. T. Hwa, not Mr. Hsueh, who accompanied Chaney and stayed on to continue exploring through the summer and into the fall.