

ACROSS THE CHINO-THIBETAN BORDERLAND TO TACHIENLU*

E. H. Wilson

During the summer of 1908, when in Chengtu, I determined upon a journey to Tachienlu. Previously, in 1903 and again in 1904, I had visited this town by three different routes. This time I decided upon traversing the road leading from Kuan Hsien via Monkong Ting and Romi Chango. The only published account of this route that I have knowledge of is in a report by Sir Alexander Hosie [1905], erstwhile H.B.M.'s Consul-General at Chengtu, who returned from Tachienlu over this road in October 1904. What is written in this report about the forests of that region created an appetite within me which nothing short of actual experience could satisfy. Again, this route promised further acquaintance with the tribesfolk inhabiting the hinterland. Sir Alexander's description of the road portrayed a difficult journey, but I felt sure that by taking time and but lightly burdening my



Larix potaninii. Tree 60 ft x 8 ft. Forests of the Ta-p'ao-shan. Altitude 12,800 ft.

men I could get through all right. This confidence was fully justified, as events proved, and what I saw of the forests and mountain scenery, together with the quantity and variety of plants discovered and collected, abundantly repaid for the hardships experienced.

* All photographs are from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum and were taken by E. H. Wilson in 1908 during his first plant-hunting expedition for the Arnold Arboretum. The text, which is excerpted from his *China, Mother of Gardens* (1929), sketches the journey that took him to Moxi and its giant *Cunninghamia lanceolata*.

A 1976 issue of *Arnoldia*, volume 36, number 5, was devoted to "E. H. Wilson, Photographer" by Peter J. Chvany; copies are still available.



Populus szechuanica. Tree 60 ft x 10 ft. Altitude 8,400 ft.



Actinidia chinensis (now *A. deliciosa*). Flowers 1 1/2 inches across. Altitude 4,600 ft.

Early next morning we continued our journey, spending the whole day toiling up the ravine through savage, yet wondrous, scenery, with a profusion of vegetation on all sides. Coniferous trees preponderate . . . Yew is less abundant, but Larch (*Larix Potaninii*) much more so, though large trees are very scarce. To my astonishment the Larch cones were ripe, and I collected a quantity of seed. A Poplar (*Populus szechuanica*) with large leaves, silver gray on the under side, is very common, and we passed some very large specimens. A Rose with large bright red flowers made a fine display, so also did the pink flowered *Deutzia* mentioned above. . . . Many kinds of Maple, Linden, and Mountain Ash are plentiful, and *Tetracentron sinense*, an interesting tree exceeding in size all other deciduous trees of this particular region, occurs sparingly. Hydrangeas, Spiraeas, Honeysuckles, Mock-oranges, Brambles, Roses, Actinidia, Clematoclethra, Viburnum, and other ornamental shrubs struggle for possession of every available spot. The variety and wealth of bloom was truly astonishing, and I know of no region in western China richer in woody plants than that traversed during the day's march.



At Êrh-tao chiao [altitude 6,000 ft.] I photographed a magnificent Juniper (*Juniperus squamata Fargesii*), a tree 75 feet tall, 22 feet in girth, with graceful pendent branches.



At 12,000 feet, *Juniperus squamata* grows as elfin-wood.



Above 11,500 feet altitude . . . *Primula Veitchii* was a pleasing sight with its bright rosy pink flowers. All the moorland areas are covered so thickly with the Thibetan Lady-slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium tibeticum*) that it was impossible to step without treading on the huge dark red flowers reared on stems only a few inches tall.





Picea retroflexa (now *P. asperata* var. *retroflexa*), a Chinese spruce. Altitude 10,500 ft.

Photography in the forests is no mere pastime. It took over an hour on three occasions clearing away brushwood and branches to admit of a clear view of the trunk of the subject. I secured a dozen photographs, which entailed a hard day's work.



Chinese roads make a lasting impression on all who travel over them, and the vocabulary of the average traveler is not rich enough to thoroughly relieve the mind in this matter. . . . Just outside Hsin-kai-tsze the road crosses over by a log bridge to the right bank of the [Hsaochin Ho]. This bridge was being repaired, and only two very uneven logs were in position. A thin rope was stretched across to serve as a handrail on the left side. Crossing was really dangerous, the waters below being deep and turbulent. The official kindly provided local experts to carry our gear over, and the way these men accomplished the task filled me with admiration. I rewarded them with 1000 cash, to their astonished delight. My dog was lashed firmly to a flat board and carried across on a man's back. He struggled violently, and the man only just managed to get him over before he got half loose. I walked over behind the dog and was relieved when the 30 yards across the yawning gulf were safely passed. Everything came over all right, but my followers clung to the local men like grim death, the majority shaking in their nervous fright. Such dangerous entertainments are not desirable, and I heartily hoped that we had no more such bridges to cross.



The main road China to Lhasa (capital of Thibet) hereabouts blasted out of hard rocks.



Men laden with "Brick Tea" for Thibet. One man's load weighs 317 lbs. Avoird; the other's 298 lbs Avoird!! Men carry this Tea as far as Tachienlu accomplishing about 6 miles per day over vile roads. Altitude 5,000 ft.



With the weather conditions so favorable the view from the summit of the [Ta-p'ao shan] pass far surpassed my wildest dreams. It greatly exceeded anything of its kind that I have seen, and would require a far abler pen than mine to describe it adequately. Straight before us, but a little to the right of our viewpoint, was an enormous mass of dazzling eternal snow, supposed to be, and I can well believe it, over 22,000 feet high. . . . Looking back on the route we had traversed we saw that the narrow valley is flanked by steep ranges, the highest peaks clad with snow, but in the main, though bare and savage-looking, they scarcely attain to the snow-line. On all sides the scenery is wild, rugged, and severely alpine. A cold wind blew in strong gusts across the pass, and we were glad when our photographic work was finished, so that we could hurry down.