Wilson's Lost Tree

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The itineraries followed by Ernest Henry Wilson during his plant-collecting trips to China between 1899 and 1911 are notoriously difficult to reconstruct. He ranged widely over huge areas, often where maps were rudimentary or nonexistent. Many of the placenames of locations he visited—for the most part settlements comprising a few houses—were obtained from local people and written down phonetically. Added to this, the later changes in Chinese-to-English transliteration make it almost impossible to identify these places. To make things even worse, although Wilson wrote prolifically, he never produced a chronological narrative of his journeys. His primary account of the time he spent in China—A Naturalist in Western China (1913; later revised and republished as China, Mother of Gardens, 1929)—is more a series of vignettes than a travelogue. Furthermore, his personal journals are not in diary format, with one day following another, and his field notes are of little value to people trying to retrace his steps.

I have traveled in China on three occasions, but it was not until my third trip, last autumn, that I visited the western part of Sichuan province, where Wilson traveled extensively on his second and third trips. This area lies in the Da Xue Shan (Big Snow Mountains), dominated by the giant peak of Gongga Shan, at nearly 25,000 feet (7,556 m) by far the highest mountain in Sichuan.

In China, Mother of Gardens, Wilson's travels in this area are described in the chapters entitled "Across the Chino-Thibetan Borderland" and "Tachienlu: The Gateway to Thibet," which deal with the journey that he undertook for the Arnold Arboretum in the summer of 1908. In general, his route ran due west from Chengdu to Tachienlu, the latter town well known to other botanical explorers and today called Kangding. His exact course is impossible to puzzle out, however, as few modern names resemble those he cites. In addition, his narrative ends when he reaches Tachienlu on July 23, 1908, though it is clear from his photographs that he continued traveling through the rest of the summer and retraced some of his steps in the autumn to collect seeds.

My own trip to this region, under the auspices of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, was part of a collaboration between Kew and the Institute of Biology in Chengdu that since 1987 has sponsored seven expeditions to Sichuan for collecting plants of horticultural value. Our team was headed by Tony Kirkham, head of the Arboretum at Kew, and also included Steve Ruddy, an information technology specialist from Kew, and Bill McNamara, director of the Quarryhill Botanical Garden in Sonoma, California. Bill is among the most experienced of modern-day travelers in China, having visited the country more than fifteen times. Though we intended to visit Kangding, we had little expectation of finding any signs of E. H. Wilson's passing.

Starting at Chengdu, we took the recently constructed expressway to Ya'an and continued on into the valley of the Dadu River (in Wilson's day, the Tung River) via a tunnel that cuts through the lowering bulk of Erlang Shan. Our first overnight stay was in Luding, well known to plant hunters past and present and famous for its old iron bridge, which spans the Dadu River. It was over this bridge that in 1935 troops of Mao Zedong's Red Army launched a heroic and successful assault on Kuomintang positions on the opposite hillside.

The next day we drove north to Kangding, our base for a week or so while we collected in the mountains to the northwest and west. From there we returned to the Dadu River valley and headed towards the ancient town of Moxi. On the way we stopped to admire the huge, ancient ginkgo tree at Lengji. We were told that it is at
least two thousand years old. Like the old oak trees I know from Windsor Great Park, this veteran continues to defy the years despite being full of dead branches. The tree, with small buildings nestling in the folds of its trunk, is very much a part of the local community. A 76-year-old Chinese lady called Mrs. Wang related its history for us with evident pride.

We arrived in Moxi in the late afternoon of September 16. Moxi occupies a beautiful site in a deep valley, with large, snow-capped mountains to the west and rich, mixed forests covering the nearby hillsides. The town sits on an island between two arms of the Moxi River, a position that in the past was important for defensibility.

Over dinner in the recently built Red Army Hotel, we asked whether there were any old trees in the vicinity. Yin Kaipu, our expedition guide, replied that yes, there was a famous old sha shu at the top of the town. Sha shu, the Chinese fir (Cunninghamia lanceolata, Cupressaceae), is a very common tree in the temperate regions of China. Its timber is so highly valued that it is grown in plantations and large trees are rare. We therefore expressed an interest in visiting the tree. “Fine,” said Professor Yin, “but it died several years ago.” We were disappointed but still wanted to see the tree.

So after dinner we walked through the rapidly gathering twilight up the main street of old Moxi. As the tree’s silhouette came into view above the surrounding buildings, I felt a strange sense of recognition. Then, when we had cleared the last of the buildings, I blurted out, “I know this tree.” As my companions knew I had never been anywhere near Moxi before, they were rightly incredulous. “I know this tree,” I repeated. “It was photographed by Wilson.” The characteristic shape and distinctive leaning posture of the tree made me certain that it was the same one I had seen in a photograph by Wilson in W. J. Bean’s Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles (8th edition revised, 1970). But how was I to prove it?

Steve Ruddy quickly came to my assistance. Using a satellite telephone linked to a laptop computer, he e-mailed the Gardens Development Unit at Kew and asked the staff to look for the photograph in Bean and, if successful, to e-mail it to us.

The following morning there was nothing from Kew. We spent the day trekking up the nearby Yanzi valley, partly on foot and partly on
A second view of the tree and its attendant temple.

horseback, to just below 10,000 feet (3,000 m). Along the way we made some wonderful collections. The forests, almost pristine, have a huge variety of broadleaved trees and shrubs. Higher up we encountered massive specimens of Chinese hemlock trees and, eventually, Picea asperata, the dragon spruce.

Back at the hotel that evening, there was still nothing from Kew. But early the next morning, Steve woke me to say that an e-mail and the image had arrived from Kew. When the full image was finally downloaded onto the screen, the configuration of the hill in the background and the leftward lean of the tree left little doubt that it was the tree we had seen. What's more, the caption at the foot of the image read: "Cunninghamia lanceolata. A photograph taken by E. H. Wilson southeast of Tatsien-lu in 1908." Moxi does indeed lie to the southeast of Tatsien-lu (Tahienlu, Kangding).

We hurried out to compare the image with what remains of the tree, debating about where Wilson was actually standing when he took the photograph. The town has expanded considerably since Wilson's time, and the view he captured is now partly obscured by buildings.

Wilson's photograph shows a small temple at the foot of the tree and a field of maize all around it. Amazingly, the temple remains, though much changed, and the surrounding fields are still full of maize. Through our interpreter, Zhong Shengxian, we spoke with the caretaker of the temple, Feng Wan Lin. He told us that the tree was more than a thousand years old and that the original settlement of Moxi grew up around it. He said that it had caught fire in 1992—scorch marks can be clearly seen on the trunk—but there is no plan to cut it down since it is still revered despite its moribund state.

In a buoyant mood we continued our journey. For the next three weeks we skirted the great mountain of Gongga Shan, visiting several of the river valleys that discharge meltwater from the snows and glaciers of the peak.

Back in England, I began serious research into Wilson's movements during his 1908 trip to China. Though I suggested earlier that nothing in China, Mother of Gardens links Wilson to Moxi, this is not strictly true. In a later chapter, "The Principal Timber Trees," Wilson speaks of Cunninghamia and of its use by the Chinese for coffins. He discovered that the preferred timber for making coffins was called hsiang-mu (fragrant wood), which was Cunninghamia that had been buried either deliberately or by landslides. Wilson had seen coolies excavating very large trunks of hsiang-mu near the hamlet of Wan-Ting-Dung, between Fulin and Mohsi-mien
while on his way to Tachienlu in 1904. Intriguingly he added, “In all my travels in China I have seen only one living specimen of Cunninghamia approaching the size of these long-buried giants.” Surely this must have been the tree at Moxi.

I then looked at Wilson’s original expedition photographs, which were bound in ten volumes by the Arnold Arboretum and which include the photo of the Moxi tree that I had remembered from Bean. Wilson was an excellent photographer, and these images provide an invaluable record of his third and fourth journeys to China, as well as of his subsequent trips to Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Unfortunately, though they are dated and the locations are given, they are not arranged in chronological order, so I had to look through all the pictures to establish the sequence of events and correlate them with the text of *China, Mother of Gardens*.

The itinerary that I reconstructed is as follows, with modern placenames included in parentheses. Wilson’s party left Chengdu on June 15, 1908, traveling northwest to Kuan Hsien (Guan Xian). Within a few days they were in the mountains, crossing a pass in the Pan Lan Shan (Qionglai Shan) on June 21. From there they continued west, arriving at Monkong Ting (Xiaojin) on June 27 and Romi Chango (Danba) on June 30. Wilson spent the next ten days traveling south through the Da Xue Shan, arriving in Tachienlu (Kangding) on July 11. Within two days he was on the road again, crossing into the Tung (Dadu) River valley and arriving at Moxi on July 16 or 17. The photograph of the Cunninghamia is dated July 17, 1908.

To confirm matters beyond doubt, I enlisted the help of Peter Del Tredici, director of the Living Collections at the Arnold Arboretum, who kindly looked into the Wilson archive for me. Wilson’s journal contains very little information for the period in question, merely stating that the time between July 13 and 20 was spent on a trip to Moshi-mein and Ya-chia-k’an. Peter also found a letter dated December 19, 1908, and written in Kiating (Leshan) to Charles S. Sargent, the Arboretum’s director. The letter adds important information about the tree in Wilson’s photograph:

> In all my wanderings I have only met with one really large (cunninghamia) tree. This occurs two and a half days south-east of Tachienlu at an altitude of 5,000 ft. When photographing this tree I estimated it at 120 feet by 20 feet. *Seed no. 794a is from this particular tree.* [Italics are mine.]

I now felt that the evidence showed overwhelmingly that the dead tree we saw at Moxi is the same tree that Wilson visited, photographed, and collected seeds from.

One small detail remains. Remarkably, a living tree from Wilson’s collection 794a is represented in the collection at the Younger Botanic Garden at Benmore, an outstation of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, near Dunoon, Scotland; there may also be representatives in other gardens. Peter Baxter, the curator at Benmore, reports that the tree is about ten feet (three m) tall and in good health. Its history is somewhat obscure, but it is known to be a propagule from an older tree, presumably now dead. It would be a fine gesture to propagate a sapling from this tree to take to Moxi in honor of the greatest plant collector of them all.