A Lily from the Valley

Michael S. Dosmann

This story is of a flower and the man who ventured to the other side of the world, away from family and modern convenience, to collect it. The plant was not just an object of desire but one of such value that it would underwrite the most significant collecting expeditions of the day. Yet, its beauty almost betrayed the collector, nearly taking his reputation and his life. It is also a story of their redemption: the story of Ernest Henry Wilson and the regal lily (*Lilium regale*).

When I first glimpsed regal lilies in the wild, in 2014, I was in northern Sichuan Province, China, to retell Wilson’s story for CCTV’s documentary, *Chinese Wilson*. I recall how gusts filled the air with sand, as well as a bright aroma from lilies, prompting me to simultaneously squint and sniff deeply. Ensembles of the glistening, trumpet-like blossoms dotted the gray cliffs above the Min River. The blooms were sometimes a half-dozen to a stalk, predominantly a clear white, with a purplish blush on the outside and yellow throats within. I admired them from a vantage point on the narrow, rocky trail below. Most stems reached straight up to the sky, while others dangled out from the cliffs at near-ninety-degree angles. I was baffled by how they could defy gravity like that, with so little soil to cling to amidst the ever-blowing wind.

Because of my plant collecting experience in China for the Arnold Arboretum, following in Wilson’s footsteps, I had been asked to guide viewers for the documentary. The third and final episode highlighted Wilson’s collection of *Lilium regale* and a rockslide that nearly ended his life not far from where we filmed that day. The episode was rounded out with narrations of Wilson’s own descriptions of events. That part was easy. Wilson retold the story often, in numerous books and articles, with a dramatic flair that would have prompted Mark Twain’s praise. Most accounts started with a rehearsed rhetorical question, as it did in “Price of the Regal Lily,” published in *Country Gentlemen* in October 1925: “How many people know the
size of a mule’s hoof?” He then would respond, “Frankly I do not know with mathematical exactness, but as I lay on the ground and more than forty of these animals stepped over my prostrate form the hoof seemed enormous, blotting out my view of the heavens.” How is that for an opening line? The explorer went on to richly describe the dusty “rude land” south of Songpan where his “royal lady” grew: “That such a rare jewel should have its home in so remote and arid a region of the world seemed like a joke on Nature’s part.”

The disaster occurred on September 4, 1910, while Wilson was on his fourth expedition to China. “Dysentery in a mild form” had prompted him to ride in the sedan chair, yet he noted that “song was in [their] hearts” for they were near Wenchuan and just north of Sichuan’s capital, Chengdu, where good food and accommodation awaited. When the landslide struck, his chair was tossed to the river several hundred feet below. Errant boulders left the team scattered, and Wilson’s right leg shattered in two places. Luckily, he never lost consciousness, and he instructed his team to use the camera tripod to splint his leg. It was then that the mule train approached. Because the path between the cliff face and the roaring torrents below was too skinny for them to turn around, the only choice was for Wilson to remain on the ground and watch as each and every mule stepped over.

What followed was a hastened and painful three-day journey to Chengdu, with Wilson carried on an improvised stretcher constructed from the remnants of his chair. Doctors at the Friends Foreign Mission set his leg as best they could, but the possibility of amputation persisted for weeks due to nagging infection. In the end, however, his leg—now nearly an inch shorter than his left—was saved, as were the lilies. During Wilson’s recuperation, members of his team dug up a quantity of bulbs, which followed Wilson back to Boston in the spring of 1911.

Wilson was so proud of the introduction that, despite the near-death experience and life-long injury, he stated that the “lily was worth it and more.” In his 1925 monograph *The Lilies of Eastern Asia*, he went even further, proclaiming that “in adding it to western gardens the discoverer would proudly rest his reputation with the Regal Lily.” I concur, this lily is a gem. But
Wilson was responsible for introducing over a thousand plants to Western cultivation, including scores of horticultural prizes. The ghostly dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*) haunted his dreams on his first expedition for Veitch Nursery, and the yellow poppywort (*Meconopsis integrifolia*) was his muse for the second. He had also introduced his favorite shrub of all time—the beautybush (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*)—and the paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*). Wilson considered the maple, whose namesake bark is loved by connoisseurs everywhere, Hubei’s best. Perhaps these successes didn’t register to him because another collector sent one dove tree seed to France before Wilson managed to collect his bundle, and the poppywort proved a bit too finicky to cultivate broadly. As for the other two woody plants, maybe it just took longer for their [and his] value to be realized? Or, was there something more to his statement—did Wilson really believe his reputation was at stake and only redeemed by this lily?

Little is written about Wilson’s state of mind during his days of exploration, and his own correspondence barely sheds light upon such things. [Personal letters to his wife, Nellie, were destroyed by the family after the couple’s death in 1930.] His journal entries have hardly seen the light of day due to his near-indecipherable penmanship, but one entry stands out beyond others, written on September 3, 1910, the day before the landslide. Wilson described his stomach trouble, his inability to keep warm, and the terrible road conditions. He noted the abundance of regal lilies (known then as *Lilium*...
myriophyllum) upon the cliffs and described how, earlier in the day, two members of his team stayed behind in Sian Sou Qiao to investigate the region’s conifers and to secure bulbs.

The final paragraph is the most profound. While a word or two still evade “translation,” Wilson wrote of being in the same area two and a half years before. It had rained then, too, and I can imagine the drudgery, even misery, of being ill, sopping wet, loaded down with supplies, and trudging along a dangerous road still days away from civilization and convenience. “I little thought then I should ever return here!” Wilson lamented. “I am certainly getting very tired of the wandering life & long for the end to come. I seem never to have done anything other than wander wander through China!”

Between 1899 and 1911, Wilson spent almost eleven years wandering through China, despite having a wife and, eventually, a young daughter, Muriel, at home. He was tired of the explorer’s life before he wrote this entry in 1910 and was reluctant to head back after returning from his second trip for James Veitch & Sons nursery in 1905. He was then working as a botanist at the Imperial Institute of Science in London and lived at Kew, just a short walk from the Royal Botanic Gardens’ gate. But, the stubborn persistence of Arnold Arboretum director Charles Sprague Sargent (and his accomplice Ellen Willmott, who worked the local English angle) finally persuaded Wilson to return to China in 1907, for what he thought was a final time. Whereas his trips for Veitch were motivated more by profit than botany, his work for the Arnold Arboretum was a scientific endeavor, with value placed on the germplasm secured in seeds, cuttings, and plants, as well as on the collection of well-documented herbarium vouchers and photographs. Sargent, however, had arranged for a certain procurement of bulbs, which would help subsidize the 1907 expedition.

Wilson first met the regal lily in August of 1903 while traversing the Min River Valley; the following autumn he sent about three hundred bulbs to Veitch under collection number 1791. They arrived in England in the spring of 1905, flowered that summer, and were identified at Kew as Lilium myriophyllum, a species described by the French botanist Adrian René Franchet in 1892. Much was made of the free-flowering plants, with Wilson writing about the collection that year in Flora and Sylva. In 1906, Curtis’s Botanical Magazine profiled the new-to-cultivation species, complete with a beautiful illustration.

By the close of 1906, Sargent not only secured Wilson as the Arboretum’s collector in China but found a partner to share some of the financial burden: John K. M. L. Farquhar. The Scottish-born nurseryman had established R. & J. Farquhar & Co. in 1884. It became one of the most prominent horticultural businesses in America, operating out of Boston. On Christmas Eve of 1906, Sargent wrote to Farquhar, “Since our conversation of the other day I have talked over the bulb business with Wilson and have reached the conclusion … that for the species from western China, namely … [L.] myriophyllum … thirty-five cents a bulb would be a fair price, in view of the fact that these would have to be carried on men’s backs for at least two hundred miles before water transportation is reached.” Two days later, Farquhar accepted the proposal, signing a contract to receive two separate shipments of bulbs collected by Wilson, paying all freight costs and a steep price for each sound bulb delivered.

In the winter of 1907, Wilson found himself back in China and in no time reassembled his team in Yichang, Hubei Province. The collecting was good—Wilson began to accumulate vouchers, photographs, and plant material (including two Acer griseum seedlings that still grow in the Arboretum’s collection). His first batch of lilies was also coming along nicely. According to the Farquhar contract, Wilson was to collect from “Central China” (namely Hubei) ten thousand bulbs, mostly the strident orange Lilium henryi but also L. leucanthum var. chloraster and L. brownii, both creamy white. (A collection like this would be unthinkable to modern collectors, not just logistically but because it is wholly unethical to dig up bulbs like this.) For those, Farquhar would pay $0.25 each (about $7 today). In a letter to Sargent before the turn of the year, Wilson commented that he would meet the quota but was worried about the cost of freight due to the quantity and weight of the cases. Rather than balling each bulb in clay, as he had done previously for Veitch, he informed
Sargent that “this year I intend to try packing in dry sand only. This method ought to succeed but I know I shall be broken up if it fails.”

On January 17, 1908, thirteen cases—containing eleven thousand bulbs in total—left Yichang, travelling by ship down the Yangtze for Shanghai, then to England, and eventually Boston. Wilson ended up compromising on the packing. The *Lilium henryi* were packed in sand; the other two species were balled in clay. “This is an experiment tried on the grounds of economy in freight and packing cases,” Wilson wrote in a letter to Farquhar on January 29. “For if it succeeds both parties benefit. If it fails both suffer loss.” Adjusting for inflation, the bounty would fetch a sum of about $77,000 today. Farquhar would have his bulbs, Sargent a subsidized expedition, and Wilson the satisfaction of another job well done.

Wilson and his team departed Hubei that spring and headed west into Sichuan for the second part of what he thought was his final campaign. In late May and June of 1908, he saw his “royal lady” in bloom in the Min River Valley near Wenchuan and Maoxian and made multiple herbarium vouchers under number 1446. (These were later designated as type specimens for *Lilium regale.*) No doubt, he was gearing up for the next round of bulb collecting to occur that autumn.

In August, Wilson received a letter from Sargent, sent April 25. The news was devastating. Sargent reported that of the six thousand or so bulbs of *Lilium henryi*, which were not balled in clay, only four to five hundred had survived. Although it appeared that those encased in clay fared better (at least the bulbs sent to Sargent), most cuttings, grafts, and seeds of tree species had also died. “The loss of the bulbs, however is a secondary matter as that is only the loss of money,” Sargent wrote. “In the loss of cuttings and grafts of plants like Willows, Poplars and Elms, the matter is much more serious because we have not seeds of these and you are not likely to be in a region to obtain them again.” Sargent added, “We are all, of course, greatly
disappointed over the outcome of this consignment, but, as I said before, I feel absolutely sure that you did what you thought was best.”

After receiving this devastating message, Wilson responded, “I need not enter into my feelings of bitter disappointment and vexation on mastering its contents. In slang language I was ‘knocked all of a heap.’” He promised Sargent he would “remedy the failure.” On October 30, Sargent wrote to Wilson: “If it is possible to make up the loss in Farquhar’s Lily bulbs, I hope you will do so, as we counted on the profit from these bulbs to pay a considerable part of the expenses of the expedition.” This time, instead of the long-about method of getting to Boston via Europe, the bulbs would be shipped to the West Coast and travel across the continent on the Canadian Pacific Railroad (the method that Farquhar used to transport bulbs from Japan). And they would all be encased in clay, regardless of the extra freight costs.

According to Farquhar’s contract, the second shipment of another ten thousand bulbs from “Western China” (namely Sichuan) would be shipped out in February 1909. This colorful motley would comprise equal numbers of *Lilium bakerianum*, *L. leucanthum*, *L. duchartrei*, *L. sutchuenense* (a synonym of *L. davidii*), and, of course, the regal lily. For these, Farquhar would pay $0.35 for each sound bulb delivered to Boston (about $9.90 today). Wilson rallied to meet this and then some. He added a few *L. lophophorum* to the mix and, in a letter to Sargent on December 29, reported that he had secured a total of twenty thousand lily bulbs, all balled in clay. “Last year’s experiment in attempted economy has been enough!” he wrote. When the bulbs left Yichang for Boston, on February 20, 1909, the thirty-two cases included over two thousand bulbs of regal lily. “This collection is a large one, and has been got together at a great expenditure of energy, indeed, I hardly know how it has been obtained,” Wilson wrote to Sargent on March 9. “If the bulbs arrive safely Messrs. Farquhar should not complain of there being nearly 20 instead of 10,000.” Wilson continued with a boastful reflection: “It gives them, I make bold to say, the finest chance they will have of securing not only the largest collection of Lilies from Western China that has ever been made but the only large one that will be made for decades to come.” Wilson had no intention of returning.

Without a doubt, such a quantity of bulbs would satiate the enterprising nurseryman. The higher premium ($0.35 a bulb) would satisfy the Arboretum’s chief as well, for it would amount to almost $200,000 today. And lastly, having rectified the previous year’s failure, Wilson could wrap up his work in China and return to England and his family. He left Beijing in April via train, eventually taking the Trans-Siberian Railway across the expansive Russian landmass to Moscow. From there, he continued to the major cities of Europe, visiting nurseries, gardens, and herbaria along the way. By the middle of May, he reunited with his family in England and was soon looking at plants collected on earlier expeditions and reviewing the photographs that he took on the recent trip.

Waiting for Wilson at Kew, however, was a letter from Sargent, dated May 24. Sargent began by addressing an issue that must have caused him—and Wilson—some consternation: the issue of other botanical explorers in China. “Sometime ago you wrote me expressing regret that the opportunity had not been given you to remain longer in China. This I confess was a very great surprise to me for you had told me more than once that nothing would induce you to remain in China for more than two years.” In 1905, Frank Meyer began to explore China on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture (and the Arboretum, when he found woody species of interest). And in February of 1909, Sargent and Veitch Nursery jointly dispatched another Kew graduate, William Purdom, to pick up where Wilson was leaving off. While Wilson was eager to end the arduous work in China, he was also worried about his reputation and the prospect of being replaced. In the letter that Sargent referred to, dated March 9, 1909, Wilson discussed both Meyer and Purdom, and he admitted to “a slight feeling of chagrin at being passed over so completely in favour of another and without a word of warning.” He continued: “It can be interpreted unfavourable on the work I have accomplished during the past two years. I merely mention this—I do not say I think it thus intended.”
And then, Sargent dropped the other shoe. In addition to the thirty-two cases shipped to Farquhar, another five (including three cases of bulbs and other plants for Sargent’s private garden and friends) were shipped to the Arboretum. Not only had the smaller shipment “arrived in the most unsatisfactory condition,” Sargent wrote that the “bulbs sent to me were in much worse condition than those of the previous shipping. I do not think there is life in one per cent. of them.” As if Wilson couldn’t realize the magnitude of the loss on his own, Sargent spelled it out: “This is, of course, a serious matter for the Arboretum as it involves a loss of probably six or seven thousand dollars which there is now no way of making up.” In a follow-up letter to Wilson on June 3, Sargent confirmed that Farquhar’s bulbs suffered similarly. An annotated manifest noted that just 121 of the 2,182 regal lily bulbs were alive at the time of arrival. Despite careful packing, the bulbs rotted in the ship’s cargo hold.

On June 9, Wilson wrote to Sargent: “The disastrous news you sent, re. the condition of shipments, is a severe blow to me.” Wilson had spent two years of rigorous and dangerous work in China, away from his family and alone save the companionship of his Chinese team (which included Walter Zappey, who collected alongside Wilson for Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology). His own legacy’s status loomed in his mind well before getting this latest news, and with this failure, Wilson likely felt his reputation would suffer. Perhaps recognizing Wilson’s state, Sargent proposed that Wilson come to Boston that summer to work through the innumerable herbarium vouchers. Wilson—now unemployed and much in need of a salary—agreed, noting, “It will also allow the ‘rounding off’ of the expedition in a manner I hope completely to your satisfaction.”

Sargent still described the expedition as successful in a letter to Ellen Willmott on August 23, no doubt because of the photographs, vouch-
ers, and germplasm that had, in fact, survived. However, noting that the bulb debacle had cost the Arboretum nearly $8,000 (about $225,000 today), Sargent reminded her that she needed to remit to him the sum of £6.10.3 (about $1,000 today) for her subscription to Wilson’s expedition over the past two years.

That September, Wilson, his wife, and daughter sailed for Boston, and he was soon organizing his herbarium specimens and doing his best to properly identify those lacking names. Nothing documents the conversations that must have occurred between him and Sargent, but within a few months, Wilson was planning a fourth trip to China. How much of this was due to Sargent’s coaxing and how much of it was Wilson’s need for redemption, we do not know. It was likely a mixture of both. Wilson planned a yearlong trip to Sichuan, with a focus on conifers that had evaded him before. To subsidize the expedition, Farquhar would still pay $0.35 for each bulb, while other private sponsors contributed to the Arboretum’s Chinese Exploration Fund in hopes of a few plants of their own. The Wilsons departed Boston for England in the winter of 1910. Nellie and Muriel remained with relatives while Wilson retraced his journey via train back to Beijing.

After the landslide and after doctors reset Wilson’s leg, a Canadian Pacific Railroad train from Vancouver arrived in Boston. It was April 20, 1911, and the shipment carried Farquhar’s complete order of bulbs, including some six thousand of the regal lily. They were immediately placed on the ground at the nursery and covered with soil. That summer, they flowered with wanton abandon, producing copious seeds by October. In Farquhar’s Autumn Catalog, bulbs were already selling for $1.50 apiece ($40 today).

Farquhar’s Garden Annual of January 1912 lauded the regal lily, particularly the flower’s unoppressive, jasmine-like perfume, and pre-

Wilson photographed the habitat of the regal lily on August 31, 1910, just a few days before the landslide. “A typical view in upper Min Valley,” Wilson later captioned the image, “showing barren desolate nature of the country.”
dicted it the Easter lily of the future. The Massachusetts Horticultural Society awarded it a Gold Medal, and a beautiful illustration graced the November cover of The Garden Magazine (the American publication, not to be confused with the journal of the Royal Horticultural Society). Further admiration for it and other lilies appeared in an article in the same issue, with Farquhar’s advertisements promoting their near-exclusive corner on the market.

Wilson—the one who brought the horticultural world the regal lily—saw his reputation climb with that of the plant. The species, profiled on page one of Farquhar’s Garden Annual of 1913, was attributed to “the indefatigable plant collector, Mr. E. H. Wilson,” who had collected it “in remote and hitherto unexplored regions.” That June, Wilson set the taxonomic record straight in The Gardeners’ Chronicle, distinguishing Lilium regale from L. myriophyllum, the regal lily’s maiden moniker. In this short article, Wilson also told the tale about the bulbs’ transport “on men’s backs and by riverway 2,000 miles across China” while he “accompanied them in a stretcher or on crutches.” While not as colorful and descriptive as his future retellings, Wilson was finding his voice. He was certainly getting much practice; in the same year, he published A Naturalist in Western China, a two-volume set of narratives about his travels.

Farquhar’s field of regal lilies in Roslindale, barely one mile south of the Arboretum, was abundantly populated, drawing crowds each summer. The Horticultural Club of Boston—founded in late 1911 with John Farquhar and Wilson as inaugural president and secretary, respectively—made special fieldtrips to visit and witnessed some fifty thousand lilies in bloom in 1914. An article in The Florists Exchange titled “Hardy Flowers at Farquhar’s in July” commented (perhaps with some hyperbole) on the lilies’ display in 1916, noting that “as many as thirty-eight fully developed flowers have been counted from one bulb on one stem, and a four year bulb will carry six stems.” It was a popular item for sale and was frequently advertised in all the magazines. Farquhar’s sale prices barely dropped to $1.25 a bulb through the teens, though there was the occasional offer of bulbs for $0.90 each. John Farquhar died in 1921, but the nursery continued under new leadership. Over the next decade, other nurseries such as Wayside Gardens (in Mentor, Ohio) and Baums (in Knoxville, Tennessee) promoted their own regal lily stock.

Despite predictions that the regal lily would displace the common Easter lily as a forced bulb, production challenges limited this endeavor. A 1921 “Talk of the Trade” article in Horticulture Magazine noted how bulbs had to be “carried over a year in a pot without having the flowers cut,” which was impractical for most growers. Furthermore, a 1926 United States Department of Agriculture bulletin described how the market became flooded with smaller and smaller bulbs of poorer quality as growers offloaded stock, raising speculation about the species’ worthiness.

When Farquhar’s nursery published its 1929 Garden Annual, regal lily was no longer profiled on page one, but was bundled with the other hardy lilies towards the back. Bulbs sold for $0.75 apiece, a price that continued to drop during the first few years of the Great Depression. Wilson, along with his wife, died in a car accident in the autumn of 1930. In 1932, R. & J. Farquhar Co. Nurseries went bankrupt and was resurrected as Dedham Nurseries. During the liquidation sale of all nursery stock, regal lily bulbs sold for just $0.15 each.

The regal lily still sold through the mid-twentieth century but was no longer an exclusive object of desire. Gardeners can be trendy, and it was the post-war era, when modern breeding programs were seen as the source of new plants, not old-fashioned field expeditions from a bygone age. George Pride, writing in these pages in 1974, summed it up: “Although the Regal Lily has been superseded in favor with many gardeners by the fine modern trumpet strains of lilies, there are still gardeners who cherish and grow Lilium regale in its pristine, true species form and consider it still one of the best of all lilies.” Brent and Becky’s Bulbs of Virginia, one of the most well-known purveyors of geophytes in North America, currently sells the regal lily for $3.30 each.

Facing page: Wilson and the regal lily (Lilium regale) were both celebrated in magazines, catalogues, and newspapers.
The Regal Lily
Lilium regale (myriophyllum)

Acknowledged to be the finest hybrid introduction in several generations.

Flowers: white, slightly suffused with pink, with a beautiful shade of creamy yellow at the center, recalling part way up the trumpet.

Price: $1.00 each, $10.00 per dozen, $80.00 per hundred.

To the leading nurserymen in the New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and other cities.


Lilium Myriophyllum or Regale

Hardy
Fragrant
Beautiful

The Finest
Novelty
Extant

R. & J. Farquhar & Co.
BOSTON, MASS.

“The Regal Lily
Acknowledged to be the finest
Lily in cultivation.

Flowers: white, slightly suffused with
pink, with a beautiful shade of
creamy yellow at the center, recalling
part way up the trumpet.

Price: $1.00 each, $10.00 per
dozen, $80.00 per hundred.

To the leading nurserymen in the
New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and other
cities.


E. H. Wilson’s
Scientific Artist

“Consider the Lilies”
With Original Photographs

The Fruit Garden in Summer

Garden Accessories
Furniture and Water Supply

FARQUHAR’S
AUTUMN CATALOGUE
1917

Lilium Myriophyllum
(Royal Lily of China)

Royal Lily of China

One of the finest Garden Lilies ever introduced in America. In honor, origin, and cultivation unequalled.

BAILY’S HOME OF FLOWERS, Knoxville, Tennessee

DESCRIPTION

A most beautiful flowering white lily with large golden yellow center of flowers with emerald green centers of the lilies with deeper yellow edges. Fully three weeks earlier and more numerous petals. Beautiful in poor weather.

The Regal Lily
Lilium Myriophyllum or Regale

The greatest introduction in the flower line in years.

Flowers: white, slightly suffused with
pink, with a beautiful shade of
creamy yellow at the center, recalling
part way up the trumpet.

Price: $1.00 each, $10.00 per
dozen, $80.00 per hundred.

To the leading nurserymen in the
New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and other
cities.

The original charter for the Arnold Arboretum, signed on March 29, 1872, declared that the living collections “shall contain, as far as is practicable, all the trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, either indigenous or exotic, which can be raised in the open air.” Even though herbaceous plants were included, Sargent, knowing the charge was too ambitious, soon adjusted the scope to focus solely upon woody plants. His reasoning also related to the Arboretum’s relationship with the Harvard Botanic Garden, in Cambridge, and to his own desire to create something unique within the university. The botanic garden possessed well-ordered beds of herbaceous plantings, and it is likely Sargent had no interest in competing with them. He would set out to monopolize woody plants instead.

And thus, not even one of Wilson’s wild-collected *Lilium regale* bulbs was accessioned at the Arnold Arboretum. In fact, regal lilies from China were first accessioned in the autumn of 2017. Xinfen Gao, a professor of botany at the Chengdu Institute of Biology, had collected seeds while doing fieldwork near Maoxian, along the Min River. To no surprise, plants grown at her house flowered freely every year and set copious seed. She provided some to Andrew Gapinski and me for the Arboretum’s collections at the conclusion of our expedition to Sichuan in 2017. Over a hundred bulbs from this accession were planted in the collections last autumn.

This isn’t the first time the species was grown on Arboretum property, however. Numerous lilies, including this one, grew in
Wilson’s personal garden, an Arboretum-owned house across from the then Bussey Institute on South Street. And, in the fall of 1963, *Lilium regale* was included in a lily demonstration plot established at the Arboretum’s Case Estates, in Weston.

With *Lilium regale* finally growing in the Arboretum’s collections, I cannot help but ponder the persistent allure of the species. With dogged determination, Wilson pursued it for years, and the lily still draws others to the Min River Valley, including the whole entourage who worked on the CCTV documentary. Wilson noted the regal lily was limited to a fifty-mile stretch along the Min River, where it was nonetheless common. And, despite his removal of nearly nine thousand bulbs between 1903 and 1910, the species still flourishes and is not considered endangered (though it probably deserves protection). In fact, a recent paper by Wu Zhu-Hua and colleagues reported surprisingly high genetic diversity and no bottlenecks among the populations that scatter the cliffs along the Min, Heishui, and Zagunao Rivers (all within the Min River Valley). It seems that those ever-blowing gusts play a role in the regal lily’s lasting reign, for the researchers attribute the species’ survival to long-distance pollen and seed dispersal. When I was there, with the lilies’ fragrance blowing in the wind, something else was also in the air: a siren’s song—or rather a lily’s song—to lure someone back again and again.

Acknowledgments

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