Re-steal

Cheng Xinhao

1

In early 1875, 28-year-old British translator Augustus R. Margary, was traveling along the post road from western Yunnan to Burma when he passed through the village of Mangyun. Little did he know that a month later he would be ambushed and killed here on his return. The murder sparked the Margary Affair and led to the Chefoo Convention signed later that year, in effect paving the way for British trade in Yunnan and more British botanical collectors (aka. Plant hunters) into Yunnan in the years that followed. And this is where our story begins.

Forrest evades the attack with companions

2

In the summer of 1904, Scottish-born George Forrest entered Yunnan from Burma. Financed by Bees Nursery, he sought to collect rare alpine plant specimens in the Hengduan Mountains, spanning northwestern Yunnan and southeastern Tibet. The journey proved fraught with difficulties though.

The next year while collecting plants near the Lancang River valleys, Forrest encountered the Wei Hsi massacre of foreigners and locals who were converted to Christianity. Forrest and his entourage were attacked by a group of armed Tibetan lamas. Forrest only narrowly escaped death during the purge, but most of his companions were not so lucky.

The traumatic experience, however, did not deter him from his plant collecting endeavors. During the subsequent 28 years, he undertook altogether seven botanical expeditions based in Tengchong and Lijiang, achieving fruitful results. Over 30,000 plant specimens were collected by Forrest, along with thousands of seed or living species sent back to Britain for cultivation.

Among them, the rhododendron species stands out as the jewel in the crown. More than 250 out of the over 300 species he collected were new to science.

Thanks to the similarities in climate, the high-latitude,

Forrest gazes out over the Lancang River

Forrest in front of his residence in Tengchong

Forrest shows the plants he collected

low-altitude Britain proved ideal for cultivating these plants native to tropical highlands. Thus, many of the rhododendrons Forrest brought back were planted in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where some specimens thrive to this day.

Forrest's magnum opus was in 1931, the year before his death. While exploring the western foothills of the Gaoligong Mountains, his team unexpectedly encountered enormous rhododendrons: not the common shrub-like varieties, but giant trees towering over 80ft high. Forrest was thrilled. In addition to collecting standard specimens, he directed his men to fell the largest rhododendron, and sent a cross-section measuring more than two meters around back to Britain to prove the record was genuine. Forrest then referred to his find as *Rhododendron giganteum*, and he himself went down in history as the plant hunter who collected the most species of rhododendron at that time.

Forrest directs his assistants to cut down the *Rhododendron giganteum*

3

However, could a British plant hunter, as Forrest, gain direct access to Yunnan against all obstacles? Or could he truly make the knowledge he acquired from the Empire flow smoothly through the mountains and rivers of Yunnan? Between knowledge and reality, between the British body and the land of Southwest China, the presence of a go-between was essential. Forrest arrived in Lijiang in 1906 and rented a small courtyard in the Naxi village of Xuesong (aka. Yuhu) for plant collection. The Naxi people he employed here became his most important assistants for the next two decades. He chose a Chinese name for himself, Fu Lishi, while his Naxi assistants nicknamed him Fu Zi, or Mr. Fu. Forrest otherwise addressed them by their surnames, such as Lao Chao, Lao Ho, Lao Lu, directly rendered in English in the text. Among them, Zhao Chengzhang known as Lao Chao served as Mr. Fu's chief collector. Employed since 1906, he repeatedly led collection expeditions and took an active part in grouping the team, collecting plants, preparing and labeling specimens, etc. People like Lao Chao acted as intermediaries between Mr. Fu and the

Mr. Fu in his residence in Xuesong Village, Lijiang

Mr. Fu and his Naxi assistant, Lao Chao

Mr. Fu introduces his Naxi assistants

land, as the landscape unfamiliar to the Scottish experience required translation through their actions, steep mountains by tectonic collisions, torrential rivers surging between peaks, villages strung by valley roads, and plants in their rightful place, to list a few. For Mr. Fu, plants were the puzzle pieces of imperial knowledge, central to the global collecting enterprise that began in the era of Linnaeus. For the likes of Lao Chao, plants existed on another dimension of knowledge, some edible, some as materials for houses, tools, and paper. Some were used in local medicinal practices as they were long part of the herbal traditions of Han regions, and others were essential offerings to the Gods of Heaven and Wind used by Dongba priests during rituals. Amidst the blue haze of burning plants, fading spirits drifted to the realm of gods and ghosts. At the interface between these experiences and Western imperial knowledge, plants were rediscovered and thus displaced through the action chain, from Mr. Fu to assistants like Lao Chao. Yet this knowledge, born of the land and the body, could not be integrated directly into the Western system. Rather, it must be refined and distilled to its essence. The plants that Lao Chao and his team found, along their own paths, required pressing into specimens labeled with information according to Mr. Fu's instructions. These brush-written ink labels would later be replaced with English or Latin notes written in fountain pen. Throughout this process, the existence of Lao Chao and his team was almost entirely erased, including their names, their handwriting, the world in the eyes of the Naxi people, and the enduring experiences and very fabric of life behind, replaced by standardized, objective, and uniform forms of knowledge.

In 1932, Mr. Fu went for hunting outside of the town of Tengchong on a whim. He took his rifle with him to the Laifeng Mountain, and aimed at a bird poised on a twig. When he pulled the trigger, however, the bullet missed. the bird won its freedom; the man, his doom. He collapsed and died of massive heart failure days later, and was buried under the same fertile ground he studied for the majority of his life, which yet was never fully explored. Due to this sudden event, the final batch of specimens packed by Lao Chao was sent back to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh without replacing the labels. Today, the RBGE Archives still holds these inked labels by Lao Chao a century ago.

Mr. Fu's last hunt

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Two years after Mr. Fu's death, the Banhong Incident erupted along the border region between the Wa people in the Banhong region of Yunnan, China, and the British Burma. British colonists, having already occupied Upper Burma, sought to expand its influence beyond Myanmar and into southern China, which was rich in mine. When British troops attempted to assert control over the autonomous Banhong/Banlao area, they encountered united resistance from the Wa people. The incident brought unprecedented attention to the southwestern border of China. The central government at the time decided to dispatch a special envoy, in the hope of clarifying the delineation of the border, and revealing the truth behind the incident. However, venturing deep into the border regions was a perilous undertaking at the risk of one's life then. Besides the hardships of the journey itself, Yunnan's border areas also overlapped significantly with regions severely affected by malignant malaria, an Anopheles mosquito-

borne disease with a 70-80% fatality rate. Faced with this challenge, Zhou Guangzhuo, a geographer from Yunnan, volunteered to take on the task. Meanwhile, Chen Mou, then a faculty member at Central University, and Wu Zhonglun, an intern at the Biological Research Institute of the National Science Society, also decided to seize this opportunity. They would follow Zhou to Yunnan for plant collection. In their perspective, knowledge is not merely objective, neutral discourse, but rather something linked to national independence and sovereignty. The demarcation of borders and the attribution of territories require knowledge, as well as the establishment of knowledge systems concerning the geography, history, natural features, and ethnicities of these places. Chen and Wu set out in June 1934. After two months of arduous travel, they reached Dali in August, where they happened to encounter Wong Hanchen, a Chinese who had previously collected specimens for Mr. Fu. At that time, Wong was still employed by the British Consulate to collect plants. While admiring the exquisite specimens collected by Mr. Wong, Wu lamented in his diary that among China's flora, especially rhododendrons, the most extensive collection and cultivation would turn out to be in Britain's Kew Gardens. Domestic research on these plants, he noted, "remains incomplete, and instead we must go visit Britain to find specimens of all kinds." He concluded, "Should we botanists not feel heartbroken upon witnessing this?" Chen and Wong continued their journey, traversing the ancient trail over the Bonan Mountains, crossing the Lancang and Nu Rivers to reach the frontier region. They then followed the border southward, arriving at Xishuangbanna before returning northward. Amidst the arduous journey, Chen Mou fell ill and ultimately passed away in Mojiang on the way back. As for Wu, he eventually returned to Nanjing with the specimens and knowledge he had gathered during his expedition. A decade later, he traveled to the United States, where he pursued advanced studies at Yale University and Duke University. After earning his doctorate, he returned to China with great resolve, and ultimately became one of the founding figures of forestry science in the People's Republic of China.

Wong Hanchen shows Chen Mou and Wu Zhonglun the specimens he collected

Chen Mou and Wu Zhonglun gaze out over the Lancang River

The experiences of Chen Mou and Wu Zhonglun are not uncommon, but rather offered a glimpse of the predecessors for generations who devoted their lives to botanical endeavors. Through their efforts, the intellectual genealogy of China's botanical knowledge was ultimately established, and in this process, the nation truly mastered the frontiers of geography and knowledge. Yet the process is also paradoxical: the new knowledge that ultimately succeeded in resisting colonial expansion was not the indigenous knowledge of the pre-colonial era, but rather the imperial knowledge that accompanied colonial expansion itself. It was precisely through these repeated cycles

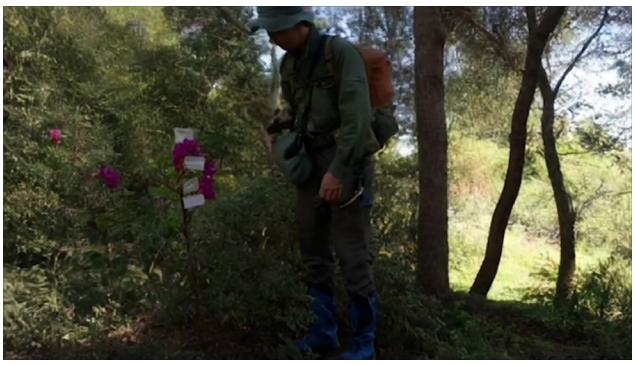
of colonial and anti-colonial struggles, through these recurring border conflicts, and through the relentless explorations by plant hunters and the persistent efforts of indigenous scholars, that imperial knowledge achieved its true expansion. However, that once-vibrant local knowledge has reduced to cultural specimens or preserved in fragments as mere supplements to modernization. Caught between expansion and resistance, indigenous knowledge has gradually been submerged in history through dual concealment.

5

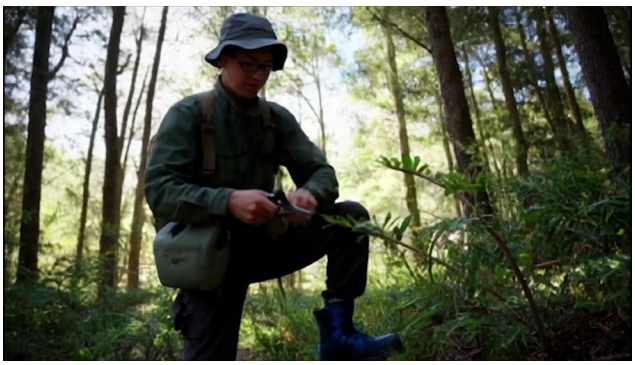
And this raises the questions as follow: How can we even speak of a plant against this backdrop? Where shall we project it to make it visible? What kind of language and tone shall we seek to articulate it? On what journey might we encounter those plants, standing solitary, pristine, unmediated yet interconnected amidst Yunnan's mountains and rivers? Or, could we at least settle for a discourse beyond the universal to invoke experiences inherent to this place and time, to a specific trek?

In 2019, following Forrest's traces, I flew from Yunnan to the UK, and arrived in his hometown of Edinburgh. Before I knew it, I started to measure the local landscapes against my hometown's experience: The Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh were almost the winding Changchong Mountains north of Kunming, while the famous King Arthur's Seat bore a striking resemblance to the Xishan cliffs in Kunming's western suburbs. As for the distant Forth River flowing into the North Sea, it was virtually a mirror image of Dianchi Lake looked down from the cliff's edge.

In the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, rhododendrons introduced by Forrest over a century ago still thrive today, blooming magnificently in their new homeland amidst the chilly April winds. This place is named the Chinese Hillside, marked with signage in English, Chinese, and Naxi Dongba script. In fact, the design of this gentle slope is meant to mimic the foothills of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in Lijiang. Today, the RBGE also collaborates with the Yunnan branch of the Chinese Academy of Sciences to reintroduce species back to their native habitats for conservation, which have become rare in Yunnan but are still preserved in Edinburgh. I spent three days wandering through the botanical garden, and examined the labels of each rhododendron. Many bear the names of familiar plant hunters: Forrest, Rock, Kingdon-Ward... And the inscription "S.W. China" in the bottom right corner undoubtedly refers to Yunnan, the distant frontier in southwestern China. At last, I found the first-planted species, a *Rhododendron vernicosum* numbered 19141012A. It was obtained by Forrest during his 1913 expedition to Yunnan. With no one around, I pulled out my pruning shears, cut a branch from it, placed it in my bag, and eventually brought it back to Yunnan. Thus, after more than a century, the rhododendron (or part of it) taken away by Forrest returned to its motherland in such manner.



The author searches for rhododendrons in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh



The author cuts a branch of Rhododendron vernicosum introduced from Yunnan by Forrest

Translated by Babel Su (苏洁涵). *All pictures are generated by AI.*