

## BACK TO SICHUAN (MAY 2012)

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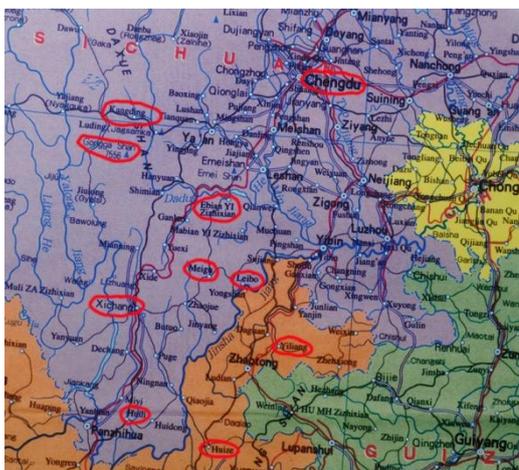


Addiction to rhododendron is an illness which first appeared in Great Britain but it seems it is now well rooted in Armorique too. In its more serious forms the patient is hardly interested in anything but rhododendron species and this is in a quasi compulsive way. For the most severely affected, the treatment requires repeat travels to the Himalayas. To see rhododendrons in their awe-inspiring environment, to photograph them, to spot the finest specimen, here are the basic ingredients for a cure...

We are (at least) six Breton people to take care of ourselves that way, with, on our passport, as time goes by, Chinese visas (Yunnan, Sichuan, Tibet) and Indian stamps for Arunachal Pradesh, that Eldorado where we went on three treks, each more difficult than the previous one. During the last one in 2011, we reached the limit of the experience: if you want to try and discover unknown areas, it gets harder and harder to put everything into motion. A week's travel each way and if the weather keeps obstinately bad, there is nothing anybody can do... So, in 2012, a trip, yes, but an EASIER one. We only have to make up our minds on the destination: a place with many endemic species, a good air and road infrastructure and hotels. In theory it is simple: only China offers such a profile but it necessitates an efficient organization to avoid the well-known local shortcomings such as the rigidity of bureaucracy, the tyrannical schedules, collateral damages due to the rivalry between provinces, their reticence concerning the taking of seed samples. Some people on a trip to Sichuan-Tibet in 2005 suffered a lot from all this although the area had shown all its richness. After reading the remarkable book 'The seeds of adventure' by P. Cox and P. Hutchinson, we make up our minds. These Scottish veterans and famous harvesters, praise the wealth of north Sichuan still wild and forested.



As far as the south of the province and the north-east of nearby Yunnan are concerned, the report in 1995 was already alarming: wooded areas disappearing, reduced to nearly nothing by a voracious agriculture but still sheltering some residual populations of exclusive endemic plants. The ultimate argument was that these areas had been the favorite hunting places of our famous ancestors the missionaries David and Delavay. What's more, it seems central Sichuan has hardly been visited since before the war and Handel-Mazetti.



So, to sum up: a road trip from Chengdu with day-treks and for two weeks only, at the end of May, between snow and monsoon. You need a very efficient tour operator... This hard to find person whom we had been looking for for a long time was finally recommended to us by the British plant-hunter Alan Clark: his own guide, Henry Cheng. A few clicks later, with the magic of the web, the deal was done for our future happiness.



And this is how, on May 18<sup>th</sup>, the mild constant mist of Chengdu welcomes us.



Henry is a tall, thin person of Han origin who speaks good English. His help is Michael, a young student. All Chinese in contact with foreigners give themselves occidental names. A smiling driver takes us around in a 10 seat Iveco van. Chengdu which counted 3 million inhabitants in 2005 has now more than 9 million people. A huge Tibetan district, in the middle of which is our hotel, has developed. An old nearby area, Jing-Li, has been rehabilitated (or rebuilt?), half medieval, half Disneyland.

It is kitsch but clean and very attractive! The local cooking still uses dynamite as a seasoning.



Jing-Li

There are no more bikes but scooters and what is more, electrical ones for the most part! Hybrid vehicles, buses and lorries running on natural gas. They are rather ahead of the rest of the world here.

After a first air-conditioned night we are on the road again. Going south and what's more on a motorway: the road network has become very modern. Halas! From what Henry told us the night before about the first stage of our journey, things don't present themselves very well.

Initially, we were going to climb Emei shan (famous Mount Omei) and we were to stay the night at the top. On Henry's insistence, it was Wawu shan, a nearby mountain, which had been chosen, not so touristic but at least equal as far as plants and flowers were concerned. We were to spend the night there in a hotel too. When we arrived, Henry told us there was a problem; and even three problems: the road was closed, as were the cable car and the refuge, all this due to exceptionally heavy winter snow. And it falls all at once... in May. China, even if it has become digital is still mysterious. In doubt, we decide to go and have a look. The road goes up along huge dam lakes which, surprise, at the end of winter, are nearly dry. This has been done on purpose, it seems, for the huge earthquake in



Wachuan in 2008 weakened all the buildings. As we arrive at the bottom of Wawu shan, we have to accept the evidence: it is blocked and climbing is impossible before several months. It is hard to swallow but at least we spare two days which could well be very useful at the end of the trip. On the road to Ebian, then, right away. It is a town located at the bottom of the Dadu Gorges. As we arrive, there is a festive atmosphere. The population is gathered on a large terrace above the river, dancing under huge masts decorated with multicolored strings of fairy lights. Our superb hotel is located above it with a computer in each room. Good occasion to check that all occidental websites are blocked!

*R. polylepis*

In the next stage towards Meigu, we should at last see some plants and as a matter of fact, the climb from the valley reveals a great number of specimens of *Magnolia officinalis* and *Davidia involucreata* in full bloom. At the altitude of 2,600 m we see our first rhododendron, a huge *R. argyrophylla*, maybe sp. *ririei*, already full of seeds. It is on foot that we finish the climb of the potholed track of the Yizi pass at 3,300 m. It marks the entrance of the Dafengding Park, the panda reserve situated furthest south.



*R. rex*

Happiness at long last! Lavender colored *R. davidsonianum*, pinkish *R. racemosum*, bright pink *R. rubiginosum*, purplish *R. polylepis* with deep-veined leaves, all are bustling on the road side. A *R. argyrophylla* exhibiting trusses of about twenty corollas is probably the species *pingianum* (now *ebianense*). There are a few specimens of *R. longesquamatum* and *R. maculiferum* but all this is literally erased by a profusion of enormous *R. rex* ssp. *rex* of a bright purplish pink with a black blotch, amazingly floriferous; it is a form absolutely exceptional and not yet introduced!

On the way down to Meigu, through the 50,000 ha of the park, we will not see a single panda but bushes of white and pink, scented, *R. decorum*. The town is of no interest and we are happy to be leaving the next day. We are going to Leibo through another area of the reserve just as rich as the first one.

The slopes are covered in blue waves: *R. hippophaeoides* in the hollows, *R. nitidulum* on the banks, the whole area dotted with *R. decorum* and *R. diaprepes* which are very similar although the latest is much later flowering.



*R.. pingianum (ebianense)*

As we arrive at the top, blue gives way to purple with *R. concinnum*, as haze makes the distant ravines indistinct.



*R. decorum*



*R. hippophaeoides*



*R. concinnum* and *racemosum*

It is lucky we had these wonderful views before enduring the hard descent towards the Yang Tse Kiang. A winding road often bordered with *Paulownia fargesii* with white or periwinkle-blue flowers, with *Cornus controversa* and *Davidia involucrata*, white handkerchiefs hanging from all branches. All this before spending ten hours in the dust of a monstrous construction site: the Quiluodu dam, the second biggest in the world. There is a motorway built on stilts overhanging above at the altitude of 115 m which will be almost level with the surface of the future lake. The valley is densely populated and you can imagine the number of people who will have to be relocated.



Cultures at 3,300 m

After Leibo we are in Yunnan. The north-east of the province is a poor, overcrowded area where cultures (corn, beans, potatoes) literally invade every inch of land, including the banks and sides of roads and motorways and this up to 3,500 m.

Nothing of interest, then, up to Yiliang, a sinister town where lodgings are packed and where occidental faces arouse curiosity and lack of understanding. What are foreigners looking for in this far away corner of the world? Even the police turn up in our hotel rooms for a 'passport control' and photos of us are taken for the local papers. The answer to all this holds in one single word: Xiaocaoba. A mythical range of mountains which has escaped from the cultivation of corn, it is an isolated and unique sanctuary of rare species situated 35 km away. It is only the day after and in the rain that we arrive at last.



Xiaocaoba cliffs



*R. simsii*

Stunning *R. simsii*, enormous red to orange coloured bushes hang from the pics. The forest crowns an uneven limestone plateau culminating at 2,700 m, covering it with marshy humus. A single track crosses the park and its surroundings are of an amazing richness.

We notice numerous camellias which are out of bloom, a first for us in China. There are three species: one with thin pointed leaves (*C. cuspidata?*), one with large reticulate leaves (*C. pitardii?*), one with small brilliant-red young leaves (?). The deciduous forest is packed with *Prunus serrulea*, *Betula albo-sinensis*, *Acer davidii*, *Aesculus wilsonii*, *Magnolia officinalis* with, at a lower level, loads of *Enkiantus*, *Styrax officinalis*, *Cornus Kousa*, *Hydrangea heteromala*. But what about rhododendrons? The most frequent lepidote is *R. lutescens*, out of bloom, but ornamented with mahogany colored new shoots. Among elepidotes, their blooming season over as well but with silk threads sticking out of its petioles, *R. strigillosum* is the king together with the very tall *R. calophytum*.

Two others still have their corollas, *R. denudatum*, white dotted with tiny purple spots and leaves with thick woolly indumentum but mainly *R. huianum* with delicate mauve flowers and V shaped leaves, narrow and acuminate.

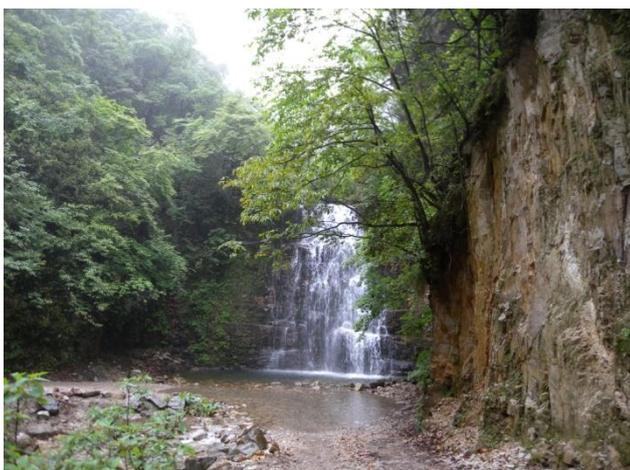


*R. huianum*



*R. denudatum*

As we follow the track, deep ravines cut through the plateau, zigzagging down; at each bend there is a majestic cascade of bluish water feeding a lagoon-like pool... under lots of *R. denudatum* on the point of collapsing under the weight of their corollas and jutting out over the cliff.



Very few places have ever been so much worth the trip. Our only regret is that we could not find the rare *R. ochraceum* which is mainly found, as far as we know, on these cliffs. However, we saw something original: a field obviously planted by human hands with specimens which looked like *R. coeloneuron*???

After a second night in Yiliang, we head on towards another mystic area: Wumeng Shan, as it is called locally, the eastern Yunnan range. On the way, we have to cross the new town of Zhaotong which is said to be the future haven of the refugees of the Leibo-Quiluodu dam. It is the Dantesque sight of a megalopolis crisscrossed by eight-lanes motorways, punctuated by traffic-lights, shaded by blocks of skyscrapers. Fifteen kilometers of uninterrupted buildings... and not a soul in sight. The brand new ghost-town has been created! Our goal is called Huize and, just above it, the Dahaico range which is over 4,000 m. We get there as the afternoon is already well under way after enduring a bumpy road up to 3,600 m. (It should perhaps be registered in the Guinness book of records???)



Dahaicao



*R. x pubicostatum*

Our trip starts from barren tops, down to a torrential valley which is very mineral and wild at the beginning but as we go down, it becomes an oasis of greenery. *R. Taliensia* are the bosses: *R. phaeochrysum*, *R. bureavii*, *R. pubicostatum* (a parent of *R. bureavii* with an indumentum in small tufts); they form compact groves on the banks of the gorge. White *R. rex* shelter in hollows. To our surprise we discover there are also small semi-deciduous plants with flat yellow flowers which are obviously part of the *R. trichocladum* species which is rarely found in west Yunnan. But it is nearly the end of the day and it is getting cooler; we cannot go on this promising trek although treasures seem to be within our reach.

As we arrive at the bus, we have a very bad surprise: Jean-François is missing. We have made a mistake which can be fatal at high altitude, we have scattered, feeling safe as there is only one path. And now, in a thick fog which prevents you from getting any landmark, the loner goes up the wrong valley, exhausts himself and wanders about. Luckily we get off with a good fright as the lost one is found just as night is falling. It is a good occasion to check the efficiency of the Chinese rescue teams Henry had meanwhile alerted: on our way down we come across the local police and emergency medical services that have come to the rescue. Two energetic-looking young women doctors ask to examine the survivor who escapes being taken to hospital only by dancing a wild jitterbug, patent proof of his resurrection! Finally, we arrive at Huize too late to have dinner and we spend quite an agitated night.



Huili

The next stage takes us further than the Yang Tse and we are back in Sichuan after a round trip in Yunnan conforming to what had been predicted: endless kilometers, a despoiled nature where only a few protected islands survive in the rare areas where agriculture is impossible. But these far away 'compulsory figures' have given us the opportunity to see what very few western people had seen before us (and after us without any doubt).

On the road again, towards Quaojia, a border town on the river and then to Huili, a superb medieval town, well preserved and authentic where it is nice to walk around even if the occidental tourist is obviously very rare and the object of laughs and chuckles from elegant young ladies sheltering under their sunshades.

Alas, the next day is an umbrella-day. Henry has planned a trip above the town in the mountains where the mythical *R. lacteum* is supposed to be found (?). To crown it all, the only ballasted track which leads there, severely eroded by the rains, is obstructed by a huge pile of gravel recently unloaded. Who wants to walk uphill for 20 km and in the rain?

Unsurprisingly, the other option meets with general approval. We keep going towards Xichang, two hours away and not far from there, we take a cable car to Luoji Shan, the 'Mountain of the fiancés', a garden of Eden according to local tourist leaflets. The photos which describe the place are amazing; you can see the 'yellow giant Puge rhododendron' and it does look like a *YELLOW rex*. That would be a scoop! We are very excited as we arrive at the large cable car parking space which is the proof that Luoji is a major local tourist attraction. We start at 2,700 m and the cable car takes us 1,100 m higher to a group of high up glacial cirques with at their bottom several lakes set in the alpine forest. Forty five minutes in the cable car take us to the station and as soon as we leave the cabin, we are in SHOCK!

Enormous yellow *R. lacteum* with a red blotch still have a few flowers. It is brand new territory for this species, never seen so far north. There are even two variants: yellow buds for one and red for the other.



*R. lacteum*

They are not the only ones: some white *R. pachytrichum* with a black blotch and to keep them company, superb *R. bureavii* as beautiful as the famous 'Ardrishaig' clone!



After settling in our hotel quarters which are very surprisingly comfortable, considering the area, we still have some time left for a stroll around the first lake which is as well the largest. To the exquisite charm of the place, heaven gratifies us of its favours and a warm sun wraps us in its late afternoon golden light. Blue skies, crystal clear water and pink bushes from pastel to bright shades which reflect themselves in it...

There is an incredible concentration of *R. souliei*, of a shade darker than all we have ever seen. This is not all: next to majestic *R. phaeochrysum* plants, an unknown *R. Taliensia* shows its pointed leaves, the largest undoubtedly of the sub-section. With a varying discontinuous indumentum, thick and hairy wood, large white flowers with pink stripes and red spots, this gorgeous stranger will be for K. Cox to classify as a new form of *R. bureavioïdes*.



*R. souliei*

Proceeding with our walk on a network of remarkable pontoons, duckboards and stairs, part wood and part concrete which spread over the site, we arrive at 3,900m of altitude where two more wonders unveil themselves: a *Taliensia* with curved orbicular leaves, their spongy underside of a fawn colour reminding *R. clementinae* (but K. Cox will name it *R. sphaeroblastum wumengense*) and *R. roxieanum cucullatum*, a plant built like a crystal with the underside of its leaves- a bright orange- proudly exposed to the eye!



*R. bureavioïdes* "new form"



*R. roxieanum* var. *cucullatum*

Not bad for a first contact. We enjoy another happy day during which, one must admit, our treasure hunt will not get much richer: just a bluish-purple *R. Lapponica* (*R. amundsenianum* according to K. Cox). It is such happiness to roam this maze of paths and discover around each corner a thousand colourful sights where, under *Abies delavayi*, the rarest rhododendrons are the kings.



*R. souliei*



*R. bureavii*

After a night in heaven we must come back down to earth. In a cable car? Not at all. There are concrete stairs winding down to the bottom which offer us a few more novelties. The first one is the fact that the colour of *R. souliei* seems to fade as we go further down, to finish completely white at about 3,500 m. The second is that the 'giant Puge dujuan', the wonderful *R. Rex*, presumed to be yellow, are huge trees between 3,500 and 3,000 m. We are too late to check what their exact colour is: they are no longer in bloom, of course! We notice a few more plants: *R. floribundum*, *R. heliolepis*, *Magnolia sinensis*. It is not that many, finally, after going down 3,000 steps. But enough to exhaust and shut everybody up, I can tell you. We are extremely happy to see the bus. Unluckily, in a hairpin bend, it squashes a tri-car. We are all frightened but luckily nobody is hurt.



After a quiet night in Xichang, some kind of water-side town near a big lake with Mediterranean vegetation, a long day on the road, going north through the Yi country is awaiting us. They are a privileged minority allowed to have two children, to keep their own language and have their own laws. They build very beautiful villages and protect their environment. We go now towards the Gongga Shan (7,500 m). Lots of people go there mainly because of its glaciers and hot springs. Before reaching our next stop, Moxi, we come across a motorway under construction.

So as not to be bothered by landslides, the new policy is to build everything on stilts which are anchored at the bottom of the valley in sediments. It looks like some kind of endless viaduct de Millau at a breath-taking height: it makes quite an impression!

High up, Moxi looks like a winter sport resort for more or less well-off tourists with its handicraft shops, numerous bars and night life. It has preserved a jewel: a French catholic mission dating back to the beginning of the 20th century which is looked after for having sheltered Mao Zedong during the 'Long March'. No, the cult of 'the Great Helm's Man' is not dead! It is in that place too that we find the best hotel of our holiday.



We spend a good night, then, before we start towards Kangding, 80 km away only. As we drive up towards Yajiageng pass (over 4,000 m) we discover a torrential valley incredibly coloured with large bright orange rocks which flash in the haze. This is due to some lichen, the only one of its kind, apparently. Successive stops will let us discover banks which are, botanically speaking wonderful like the landscape.

Yajiageng red rocks

The most common plant is *R. ambiguum*, the most beautiful of the yellow Trifloras, except that, here, it is not only yellow but shows all the shades between gold and salmon. There is no doubt concerning its hybridization with *R. concinnum* which can also be seen around. When drops of water become iridescent on the corollas, it is a magic sight.



Natural hybrid of *R. ambiguum*



*R. selense* ssp. *dasycladum*

This becomes even brighter on the large rose funnel-campanulate flowers of *R. selense dasycladum* which thrives in the area. A marvel which is unknown to us.

Large numbers of *R. longesquamatum* and *R. calophytum*, both of the best quality, grow everywhere without any flowers unfortunately.

We can see flowers however on two species as different as possible from one another: the small epiphytic *R. dendrocharis* which shelters its tiny hairy leaves and pale pink corollas in large conifers and the powerful *R. prattii* spreading its large limbs, nearly dark, and its white spotted flowers above torrents. If you add to this, long strands of fog what you have under your eyes is not far away from supreme beauty.



*R. prattii*

Kangding is not far away either and we can hardly recognize the nice place where we stayed in 2005, for a very large military camp spoils the access to the valley and pretentious concrete suburbs imitating Tibetan style have grown everywhere. Help!! What we are looking forward to, is virginal mountains. The next day we are very disappointed: as it has snowed quite a lot the trek which had been planned has to be cancelled. Henry suggests we go botanising along a new road opened in 2012; it leads to Ta Gong on the edge of the Tibetan high plateau through a pass at 4,200 m and a valley called Zhong Gu.



*R. phaeochrysum*

Very green at the start, as we climb, the gorge becomes a cut colonized by rhododendrons in a landscape which becomes more and more barren. First, we discover some *R. oreodoxa fargesii* which are weighted down under pink iridescent flowers, *R. concinnum* their corollas a colour between ruby and beetroot, *R. watsonii*, their big pale leaves with a wide triangular nervure which extends a flat petiole. There are also tiny, creeping and protruding *R. phaeochrysum*. Another Taliensia with narrow flowers and spongy indumentum could well be *R. adenogynum* and another one with narrow shiny leaves and a chocolate coloured indumentum, *R. wasonii*.



In a dry meadow, among incarvilleas we find bushes of *R. trichostomum* with small pink Daphne-like flowers. Above 4,000 m at least three different species of Lapponica colour in bluish purple the slopes dotted with yellow and deep blue giant poppies( *Meconopsis integrifolia* and *quintuplinerva?*). The cloudy sky, the wind moaning, the infinite melancholy of the high altitude steppe, everything adds to the beauty of the place. Numerous yurts of Tibetan nomads occupy the sheltered hollows.

*R. trichostomum* (Photo Henry Cheng)

They are there to harvest a very expensive medicinal plant, the Cordyceps, some kind of a plant chimera which has, across the East, the reputation of healing belly aches. These Tibetans and only them, have the privilege to collect this gold mine...

The following day, starting from Kangding once more, we get to Mugecuo Lake. We had hardly seen this site in 2005 when it was still in a natural state and known under the name of "lake of the seven shades". It is an area where hot springs are found at different levels in the forest below a big lake situated at 3,600 m. Each spring feeds a pond which micro-algae, according to the temperature of its waters, colour or make iridescent in different shades, before flowing into the main river.



Lapponica at 4,200 m



Mugecuo



Upper lake

But here again the building fever has hit. A station, in a kitsch neo-Tibetan style with a huge car park, gazebos, kiosks, rows of flashy prayer-wheels and votive ribbons everywhere...A (somewhat) Buddhist and (very) touristy paraphernalia which sounds quite false. There are shuttles to reach the upper lake and at last we are allowed to walk and go down the gorge on imitation wood pontoons made of real concrete. But let us stop joking! The site is still a fabulous place. A forest of *Taliensia* surrounds the upper lake with a mix of *R. phaeochrysum* (it is the most

ubiquitous of the subsection) and, probably *R. elegantulum* with pink flowers and thinner leaves. *R. oreodoxa fargesii* and *R. concinnum* colour the landscape from pearly pink to deep purple.

In the vale, on each side of the waterfalls, two plants are co-starring : *R. watsonii*, spreading itself, showing here the bearing of a “real big leaf” with loads of pure white flowers and mostly, *R. bureavioides* in its typical version: deep green foliage, orange indumentum and deep pink flowers. Some specimens have a crimson blotch when others do not. Most of them are over 5 m high. A perfect sight to finish on a high note.



*R. Taliensia* (Upper lake)



*R. watsonii*

For, yes, it is over and the date of our return to Chengdu is getting nearer. We would have liked to forge ahead eastwards and go on a pilgrimage to Baoxing, the Moupine of Father David. Alas, the whole area is still forbidden and impenetrable since the 2008 earthquake which destroyed so many roads, dams and even towns officially killing 90,000 people.

We must go back through Kangding and the bad roads of Erlang Shan. To crown it all, the pass bearing the same name which had dazzled the authors of “Seeds of adventure” in 1990 and 92 is now out of reach due to the suppression of the road which has been by-passed by a giant tunnel. By way of consolation, we have the retrospective pleasure of having lifted the veil on a new exceptional site, Luoji. The Cox family was about to leave for this place for an autumn trip a few months later, at a season much more favourable to collecting. To the question we had before we started, the answer is now clear: Yes, China has lost some of its political-police apparatus. The feeling of freedom is real; it seems you can do a lot here; travel as you like, in any case...



Gongga Shan



A very good cure, finally.