

Trips to China in 1999, 2002 and 2005

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South-west China shelters more than half of the 900 known rhododendron species. The subtropical climate and mountainous north-south oriented relief has turned this area into the modern sanctuary of these plants which once covered the whole of the northern hemisphere during the Tertiary. They were nearly eradicated in other places, cornered by the quaternary glaciations. They had to flee or else die; and they were able to flee and move to milder climates thanks to the south oriented valleys of these areas. The Himalayans waters use the same way forming the famous trio of parallel rivers: the Salween, the Mekong and the Yang Tse Kiang.

Geography gives birth to History: while going up the Mekong from the Tonkin region, the French missionaries of the Belle Epoque, the Gospel in their hands and their herbarium under their arm, brought our country to the pinnacle of botanical discoveries. Let's pay tribute, then, to David, Delavaye, Soulié, Farges, Ducloux, Maire, Vial, Monbeig, Bodinier, Fauri and many others. In addition to the lively catholic communities they generated, their memory goes on living in the gorgeous plants which have been dedicated to them. Their adventures have been told by Jean Lennon, a writer but also a keen gardener and pioneer of botanic collection in a small valley in Finistère in Brittany. His passion for those delicate and elegant species with their foliage, fascinating all year round has spread. A great number of amateurs, like him, appreciate these noble plants, leaving aside the common hybrids, somewhat pompous in May and boring at other times.

To follow in the path of the founding fathers, to go from collection to collecting in China our friend Jean dreamed of it. But the communist 'Bamboo curtain' was impenetrable up to the 90s and then his health got too delicate. The torch for the quest of the origins had to be passed on. It is Raymond Grall, a friend, emulator and passionate nursery man who will take over. China at the time doesn't open its doors to the newcomer and only accepts very few expeditions. So he had to join an Anglo-Saxon group of people led by the Scottish Kenneth Cox to be able to enter **Yunnan in 1994**. A trying but rich trip for the lonesome Frenchie.

Conclusion: he will have to set up a French or rather a French-Breton expedition. After five years of efforts in 1999 at last, he will succeed in taking a group of trainee explorers to central Yunnan: Cangshan, Beimashan, Litiping. Sunny adventures, wonderful discoveries, big sweats: all you need to feel like doing it again.

Yunnan, second round, then, in 2002, after a come back to fascinating Cangshan, will take us to the borders between China and Burma: the Salween valley and the border crests of Gaoligongshan. There, the scenery was different: with the early monsoon, the roads and bridges had been swept away but we also did some rough camping high in the clouds. A fine vintage.

What can we remember of these few short weeks? A few mixed and hardly surprisingly personal elements one could file like this:

- The economic explosion shakes even the remotest provinces: traditions are breaking up and the rural populations are drifting towards mushroom towns. On the other hand, roads, motorways, airports, new hotels are everywhere, making travelling easier. At the same time, nowadays, rough camping and individual travelling (with a guide, however) are possible thanks to the relaxing of the laws.

- 'The Cultural revolution' and 'the Great Leap forward' have both left scars in the landscape. The mountains often bear the stigmas of major clearings, the consequence of Mao's whim; he wanted each village to produce steel which was a technical failure as well as an ecological tragedy and the replanting of eucalyptus trees doesn't make the situation any better! 'Reformatory settlements' with fences and loudspeakers still in good repair which are now called 'Tourists residential complexes' sometimes welcome the travellers in remote valleys.

- The fauna, mainly birds, was wiped out at that time and is still absent.

- All arable soil is also cultivated which, with the absence of private property explains the lack of private gardens and the disinterest of the Chinese people for their flora. The only flower celebrated in art is the peony, the camellia being reserved for the temples; the rhododendron seems to be classified among 'weeds' or 'firewood'. Trekking is unknown, high mountains ignored and the only paths are those used for the forestry plantations. And yet! Nowhere else, probably, is nature more like a garden than in these colourful pastures, crowned by majestic mountain tops.

- The climate, Mediterranean in the dry season can become cataclysmic with the June monsoon up to the point where it can totally disrupt a trip. A pleasant path on the way up can turn into a frightening torrent on the way down. Conclusion of the hiker: you must be well equipped. Conclusion of the gardener: a well settled rhododendron doesn't fear either a long drought or a good watering!

- The flora is really impressive and in a rather small area you can find a huge number of our favourite decorative plants. The rhododendrons which are predominant on the north-west slopes are amazingly varied. It is not uncommon to see more than ten different species during a 60 minutes' walk, sometimes as isolated specimens, sometimes in large numbers or even in forests associated to a few bamboos at about 3500 meters.

The identification of the species on the field is often problematic due to two phenomena: the variability of each plant in comparison with the type of description and mainly, natural hybridization which is very frequent and most puzzling. Minute observation can then be caught out especially in the absence of flowers which is quite frequent. What is then left is what Kenneth Cox, an expert in this matter, calls Gestalt-Identification. Each species has its own personality; the synthesis-more or less

conscious- of many visual details such as: the habitat, the aspect, the bark, wood, leaf, flowers that the frequent meeting with well-labeled specimens (thanks to the Scottish parks!) let us imagine.



Some species are very common and you see them everywhere: *R. decorum*, *diaprepes*, *vernicosum*, *rubiginosum*. Others are very localized, sometimes on only a single slope in a small valley; they have been the rewards of the most memorable of our trekkings: *R. cyanocarpum*, *haematodes*, *Rex fictolacteum* (Cangshan), *wardii*, *beesianum* (Beimashan), *sinogrande*, *glischrum* (Litiping), *protistum*, *uvarifolium*, *mallotum*, *sinonuttalii* (Gaoligonshan). Another worry of the gardener-collector is the adaptability of these findings to our Western-European climate. In the Yunnan province, with its subtropical climate, the solution is the altitude: nothing will thrive under 3500 meters only the occasional exception.

So why not play on the latitude? The thirst for new horizons, the quest for hardiness: all the reasons are there to plan a new episode to this Chinese saga; this time it will be further north and it will be

Shangri La 2005

This time, the objective is an area as big as France: the province of Sichuan and more precisely its western part at the foot of the Himalayas and the portion of Tibet which was annexed to it in 1959. We have also got the permission to travel all over eastern 'autonomous' Tibet, also known as the land of Kham and our adventures will end in north Yunnan a place we have already been across in 1999. The project manager this time is 'L'Arche aux plantes de Brest' and quite a few members have joined the group.

After a short discussion we decide to call this trip 'Shangri-La' from the lost literary paradise, a mythic valley of eternal youth situated on the outer boundaries of Tibet which are awaiting us.

Our first destination after Chengdu the provincial capital always lost in mist is the Emei Shan formerly called Mount Qmei, an isolated range further south. It is a protected nature reserve as well as a place of buddhist pilgrimage which is to our advantage for it guarantees means of access and accommodation. From the foothills it is a festival for the eyes: *Magnolia officinalis*, *Davidia involucrata*, *Paulownia fargesii*, *Acer davidii*, *Cornus controversa* are everywhere in bloom. After 2000 m, the tangle of bamboos and bushes is lit by the bunches of the inflorescences of *R. vernicosum*, a Fortunea which is so common here that you tend to oversee how beautiful it is. But here comes something else: very long narrow leaves, huge pinkish inflorescences with a crimson blotch: *R. calophytum*, Fortunea as well but huge. They look like small well-shaped trees over 10 m high and covered with flowers from top to bottom. They have a reputation of hardiness. Soon they form the dominant forest just as we catch glimpse of the large esplanade which is the terminus for buses and all other vehicles. And now for some sport! There are a few thousand steps to climb to get to the hotel situated at the top, at 3000 m. The fast pace we adopt at the beginning is quickly tempered: the city dwellers are panting... The group is stretching along the slope

Luckily the sight of three new species gives us an excuse for botanizing and resting.



-*R. argyrophyllum*, a purplish pink (maybe the *pingianum* form, one of the first subspecies described by the Chinese themselves) is represented by beautiful dense specimens 3 m high with their leaves silver white underneath.

-*R. wiltonii* (the first subject we see of the subsection Taliensia, worshipped by many fanatics for the woolly indumentum of its foliage and whose place of origin is Sichuan, mainly) the leaves are bullate with a fawn underside; their trunks are contorted ,often precariously balanced over unfathomable abysses and they are used as swings by mischievous and impertinent macaques.

-*R. ambiguum*, finally,a lepidote Triflora with small drab yellow flowers ,small lanceolate leaves with a glaucous underside, their shiny trunks brass-coloured and flaky.

-From step to step, sweating and breathless we can see the temples at the top getting nearer. There are fewer and fewer conifers and Taliensias form dense clumps in the fold of the land. There are now three different species to be seen; they are not in bloom yet and only books will enable us to guess their identity later on (*R. faberi*, *watsonii*, *phaeochrysum* (var.*agglutinatum*)).

They have in common the characteristics which make the Taliensias such extraordinary plants in our gardens : a compact rounded silhouette of about the same height as a human being with a dense, dark and shiny foliage lit by a buff or fawn shade when the wind turns up their leaves. They are quite surprisingly covered with flower buds, which is in contradiction with their reputation of shyness in that matter .Their hardiness is extreme and they keep their compact shape even under the cover of other trees. Their only weakness: they are sensitive to cryptogamic diseases if they don't have an excellent drainage.

Let's come back to the top of Mount Omeï where we are welcome by temples and hotels all called the same to comfort exhausted pilgrims and tourists. After a good night's rest and a magnificent sunrise everybody is back in tip-top form. The way down is much easier as a spectacular cable-car takes everyone down to the esplanade. From there on we go down the stairs towards the bottom of the valley; this takes us through a primary forest of gigantic *Tsuga dumosa* in which a surprise is awaiting us: wonderful rhododendrons, their flowers white with a black blotch, their foliage both hairy and arachnean at the same time. This is what was once called the white *R. strigillosum* of Mount Omeï, a Maculifera rather taking after the *pachytrichum* species.

Due to lack of time we won't see any other species endemic to this place like *R. hemsleyanum*, *R. davidii*.

-However the harvest is good if we add to it several Lapponica we found in higher places: *nitidulum omeiense*, *polycladum*, *russatum*.

The second part of our trip will take us to the north of Chengdu towards another legendary site: the panda reserve of Long and the mountains of Balang Shan.



There are loads of pandas but they are in semi-captivity. The wild ones are well hidden and under intense watch. There is no town in Long but hotels by the dozen all under construction. China is anticipating mass tourism! Everywhere around the mountains are every shade of blue, from lavender to purple including periwinkle blue thanks to countless *R. augustinii*. Reality or illusion? The higher we climb the deeper the colours seem to be.

The Wolong valley stretches slowly up the Balang pass (4500m!) and it will only let us have a glimpse at its treasures. In a perpendicular sunny valley we will be able to admire on the banks of a steep-sided torrent some *Manglietias* in flower as well as a *Magnolia wilsonii*. The star will be *R. longesquamatum*, bursting from a bamboo bush, as slender as a purplish pink rock 6 or 7 m high, with dark green foliage and its hairy stems covered with leaf-bud scales like torn rags. To be seen as well: *R. sutchuenense*, *R. concinnum* of a purplish-ruby colour, *R. polylepis* a Triflora with large pink flowers and leaves with a white underside.



Unfortunately, this promising escapade is brought to an end as a footbridge has been swept away by the torrent. On the other slope, a spectacular fault will let us glimpse huge far away *R. longesquamatum* perched like sentinels on inaccessible rocky pinacles.

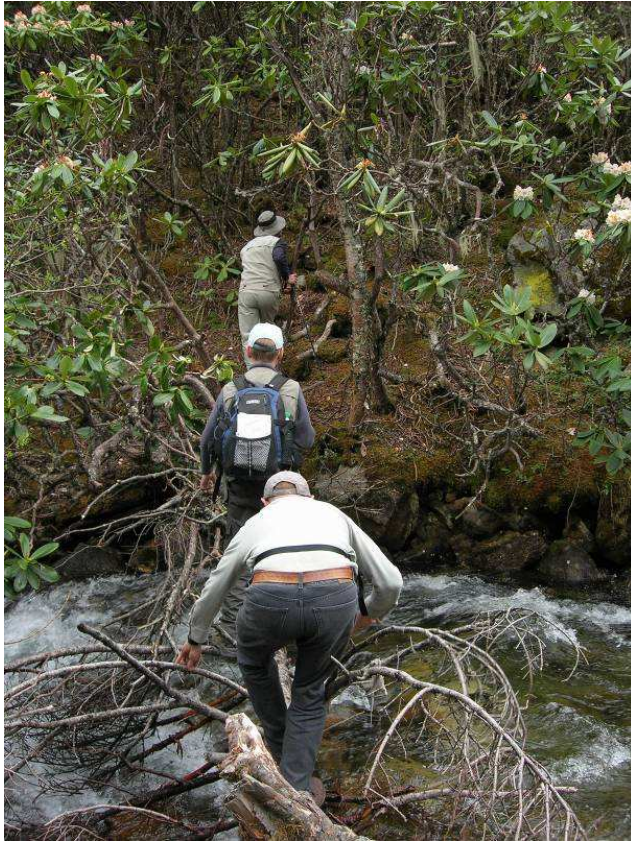


On the way back to the pass, we find ourselves again on yak pastures where meadows alternate with bamboo groves. Huge rhododendrons emerge from the tangle of greenery; we try to get near them but it is hopeless. As we catch sight of a rickety ladder roughly tied around an enormous granitic round rock of more than 10 m in diameter, we decide to climb this makeshift belvedere to try and locate some plants. And surprise, surprise! The rhododendrons are there, all cramped at the top of this rock. From this high position obviously used by the herd keepers as a watch tower, we can see similar hillocks with the same vegetation. Out of reach of the yaks, dense bushes grow undisturbed. On a few square metres in a soil only composed of vegetal scraps accumulated in rock crevices, dozens of rhodos grow, their trunks as thick as my arm. There are at least four different species. We already know two of them: *concinnum* and *phaeochrysum*. The other two have very large shiny leaves with an indumentum. In one specimen the leaves are slightly undulating with a beige indumentum; it must be *R. prattii*, the biggest leaved Taliensa. The second one, due to the fact that no specimen is accessible, will remain a mystery. Its acuminate leaves with a cream coloured underside suggest the possibility of a *R. balangense* close to the Taliensa but classified amongst the Grandia; or it could also be *R. watsonii*.

But the trip must go on. On the other side of the pass is Rilong the site of primary forests of gigantic *Betula utilis* where by sheer luck we come across a population of fragrant *R. fortunei*, their glaucous green leaves have a purple petiole; their inflorescence is a pale lilac. They are close to the ubiquitous *R. vernicosum*. There are also some *R. oreodoxa* with a thinner petiole and orbicular leaves.

Further on the area is drier as the monsoon does not go over the Balang Shan. So, for two days there is not much to see until we get to the most extraordinary place: the seven coloured lakes above Kangding, a town on the border with annexed Tibet. Imagine a lush valley with a string of lakes fed with hot mineral springs. These lakes are of a deep blue colour tinted with pink, ochre, green and all this amid an explosion of flowers. Rivulets of smoking thermal water flow into pools around which local tourists gather, seemingly indifferent to the coloured arch above them and the carpet of fallen flowers. Here, the *R. calophytum* have broader leaves than at Emei Shan. Some of them bend their stems above the largest torrent offering us a wobbly improvised bridge to gain the opposite bank, all covered in moss. White and pink flowers merge together and countless seedlings are sprouting. Among the parents which are entangled above, in addition to *R. calophytum*, one can see plants with broad oboval leaves with a yellow midrib; their white inflorescences are quite large. The underside is

covered with a silvery white indumentum. It could well be a *R. watsonii* this time, a seldom seen Grandia Higher up on the bank, a small Taliensia attracts the eye with its bright pink flowers and lanceolate leaves with a cinnamon-coloured indumentum, *R. elegantulum* most probably.



As we follow the torrent on the way down, we marvel at numerous specimens of a magnificent plant: they are about 2 m high, cup shaped, crowned by large flat bunches of bright pink flowers with a smooth and shiny foliage on the upper side and woolly and rust-coloured underside, nearly sessile. A Taliensia of course but which one? There are two possibilities: *R. bureavioides* or *R. rufum*. The glabrous branchlets make us choose the second option. A bit further down, along the path, every single person in the group, rhodophobes included (!) stop in their tracks to admire an extraordinary specimen of another Taliensia, probably *R. sphaeroblastum*, completely covered with creamy white inflorescences. The plant itself is very dense and has a regular, thickset shape. It is clad down to the ground with lanceolate leaves; they look as if they were spotted with white on the top and they have a cinnamon coloured indumentum underneath. And there will be seeds for everyone!

After such a display the following days will seem quite drab. The road we are following goes up towards the high plateau, staying above 4000m for almost a week. We go across desolate areas, rarely wet, most of the time very dry until we enter Tibet itself. The steppe vegetation only gets greener on the ridges which are exposed to the elements. The only rhododendrons to survive are of the Pogonanthum section, lepidotes with small scented foliage, some with white flowers (*primuliflorum?*), others pink (*trichostomum?*).

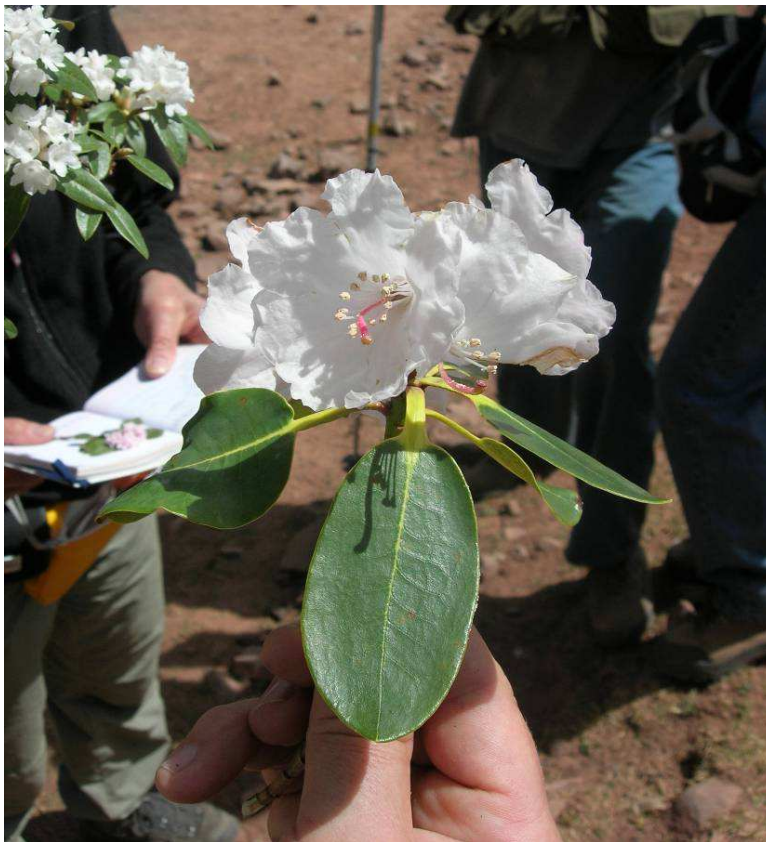
Here are plants for the dry rock garden. This climatic zone covers all south east Tibet further than Markham, its capital where the track to Lhasa and the one leading south to the Yunnan province meet. We take the latter, leaving behind us this country of tall dark-skinned people, the Kampas, who were once the keepers of lamaseries and, more recently, guerrillas feared by the Chinese army. But the times have changed.



Peace apparently reigns over the region favoured by new prosperity: the picking of wild medicinal herbs so much in favour in Beijing is reserved to the local population and it looks as if it is a gold mine. Impressive new houses built the traditional way are to be seen everywhere with a Toyota Land Cruiser parked in front of the gate!

The road to the south takes us to greener places. It is noticeable at this pass (Honglaxsue Shan 4300m) It is the southern natural barrier of Tibet where the monsoon drops the last of its water. The track is an ochre cutting, winding between wooded hills which form a palette of incredibly fresh colours: a translucent orangy copper for the poplar (*Populus szwechuanica*), a luminous pale green for the birch (*Betulus utilis*), each separated from the other by dark rows of oaks (*Quercus pannosa*). Bright pink patches in the distance signal the presence of large rhodos higher up. We must stop!!

In the morning of May 25th 2005 the sun is already warm. The bus pours its horde of collectors onto the roadside. A one hour stop, no more; we will have to yomp up and down within the time given by our Chinese guides obsessed by the schedule.



All hours are not worth the same and that one will be remembered. Who has never dreamed of finding a new beautiful and spectacular species? This is however what is going to happen to us on that day. It starts with a wood inhabited by colourful budgerigars which we follow to the edge. Above, scattered rhododendrons punctuate the laterite looking slope; most of them are *vernicosum*, mixed with *oreodoxa*. At wide intervals, more interesting, spread out and covered with flowers which remind us of strawberry ice cream, with their orbicular foliage, there are, precisely, some *R. orbiculare*.

This is when a species which puzzles us catches our eye: it is about as high as a man, rounded, compact, with bright green

leaves, with plenty of white inflorescences in rather tight trusses. It is obviously a *Fortunea*. At closer inspection we can see that the leaves are leathery, elliptic; the base and apex rounded and, what is more important, its petiole is very broad, flattened and winged, which is an exceptional characteristic. The flower has 7 joined lobes, 14 stamens, a glandular pistil and the inflorescence a dozen corollas: this does not look like anything already known or maybe it could be a distant parent of a *Thomsonia*, *R. cyanocarpum*, seen in 1999 in far away Cangshan. An ulterior bibliographic search will bring a few more elements: Peter Cox, Kenneth's father, introduced a *Fortunea* in Europe in 1999. He called it *R. platypodium* because of its flattened petioles. Here is the snag: this plant has reddish flowers and above all it originates from east Sichuan, a thousand kilometers away! We met Kenneth Cox at the end of 2006; after studying the photos he came to the conclusion that it is not a *Fortunea* but either a natural hybrid of *R. vernicosum* (but with an unknown parent) or a new species to be named. We will have to go back there, for no cuttings or seeds were taken on that day.

Other stops on that same great day will make us meet the old familiar friends: *R. yunnanense* smoothing their glittering pink corollas with red or orange spots that are never so bright in our gardens. A great collection of *R. oreotrephes*, another Triflora of a bright lavender-blue colour with glaucous leaves. On the way back to Yunnan we will be able to admire once again the Kagebo mountain (6790 m) still unconquered.

The towns have changed a lot since 1999. Dequin is not a village with beaten tracks anymore but a urban center and a holiday resort. Zongdiang has seen its population increase four times; there are now buildings where once the old Tibetan town stood. What has kept its magic luckily is the Beiman Shan which separates these two towns with summits over 4000 m high. It is now a protected area the main road hardly approaches. The old road still exists; it winds in the forests of *R. beesianum*, covered in bright pink flowers while their roots are in the snow. What a pity it is nearly impossible to grow them at home! What a challenge!

Our eyes are well-trained by now and they catch sight of several Taliensia: *R. aganniphum*, *R. adenogynum* with a rather pale-coloured flower and *R. balfourianum* much darker.

A question keeps coming to our mind: what has become of the *R. wardii* we saw half buried by roadworks in 1999? It is not easy to recognize the only vale where they grow. We are lucky and we find them at the first try.

They are still there, healthy and in full bloom. Their lovely round bright leaves serving as a setting to their orange buds, turning to pure bright yellow with no spot They grow in extremely different conditions: some grow in very wet situations, others are hanging down rocky slopes! Everywhere seedlings show a population in rapid expansion. We have a very positive feeling at the end of our trip; now, we will only see well-known plants like *R. racemosum* on the Zongdiang plateau, forming vast pink expanses with sometimes some blue spots in wet hollows: *R. hippophaeoides*.



Colourful Yunnan reminds us of the fiercer Sichuan region; Tibet was an episode full of emotions but



rather poor as far as plants were concerned. In Sichuan there was a marked contrast between the parts where the monsoon was active and the other drier areas. What stays in our minds is the impression of oases, which are often National Parks in fact. The shades of the blooms are rather pale and very different from the multicolored explosions of flowers we had in Yunnan. The true stars are the leaves well represented by the subsection *Taliensia* which reigns here. Their reputation for hardiness makes us hope for some success with the seeds we have collected. It is 1000 m further down that we found plants which will adapt themselves easily to the Breton climate.

Let us be clear; the Chinese law forbids all export of any living samples from its territory; seeds can benefit from some tolerance depending on the mood of the customs officer in charge. The hope of bringing back a few seedlings was thwarted. We had to abandon them: the central administration which was alerted by the province of Sichuan blackmailed us. We had, it is true, made two mistakes: we had taken our samples quite openly but what was worse, we used the services of our travel agency in Kunming, the rival province. They have their pride in Chengdu!! Luckily I have heard that the seeds we planted when we came back are growing fine; they are the final touch of this exciting journey we made in a wonderful weather. The feeling I have is that we have only explored superficially the area. We must come back.

The call of the novelty is getting louder. It is very tempting to escape the Chinese bureaucracy while staying in the Himalayas in an area where you can find as many species. The heights of Burma? Too insecure... Why not Arunachal Pradesh which seems to be the new Grail of plant-hunters? In 2007, for sure.

