

The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet

by Erik Mueggler. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 2011, 361 pp., 45 black and white photos, ISBN 978-520-26903-3, \$ 29.95/ £ 19.95.

Reviewed by Franklin Ginn and Mark Watson

It is not often that a scholarly book has the power to move you, but *The Paper Road* flows with such empathy, melancholy, anger, admiration, disgust, longing, and wonder that it is hard not to be drawn in. This is a supreme work, full of critical fidelity to a place, its people and their archival traces. At times, Erik Mueggler writes so deftly that you cannot but become emotionally caught up in the trials and tribulations of the lead characters, as they struggle to conduct research and even stay alive in challenging landscapes.

The Paper Road opens with a provocation. Mueggler begins by labelling a Nazi botanist from Yunnan, in southwest China, 'likely the most prolific Western botanic explorer of the early twentieth century' (p. 8). Zhao Chengzhang and his assistants from the Naxi village of Nvlvk'ö collected and despatched tens of thousands of specimens of plants to the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh, the Arnold Arboretum and elsewhere. Mueggler calls Zhao 'Western' to at once expose the paradigmatic erasure of the non-European from botanical science and at the same time signal the deep, yet fraught, bond between the man and his employer/patron, Edinburgh botanist George Forrest. Both Zhao and Forrest shared a passion not just for knowing plants, but for turning the diffuse and prolific flora of Yunnan into an equally prolific, if more orderly, series of paper traces.

The Paper Road is a thematic account of life, land and archive in southwest China in the first half of the twentieth century, centred on two botanists but necessarily involving many other people. The first is Forrest, 'an excellent, industrious and steady' man (according to his patron, Isaac Bailey Balfour of the Royal Edinburgh Botanic Garden); the second is the altogether more flamboyant Austrian-American Joseph Rock. *The Paper Road* is not overtly biographical, focusing instead on relationships, particularly between the botanists and the two successive generations

of Naxi explorers to whom they were allied. But yet *The Paper Road* is biographical, attuning us to the ways that these relationships brought the Earth its filth, mountains and flora into social being, and helping us get to know quite intimately Forrest, and especially Rock: a troubled, contradictory, difficult character. Indeed, this book brings refreshingly new perspectives on both Forrest and Rock, introducing new materials, providing insightful commentary and colour which are generally missing in published botanically-orientated biographies.

Forrest and Rock were central characters in the exploration of the botanical treasures in SW China – an area referred to as the ‘Mother of Gardens’ by fellow plant hunter Ernest ‘Chinese’ Wilson. Forrest is widely recognised as one of the most successful of all plant hunters in China, as over 28 years he made seven long expeditions and accumulated extensive collections of seeds, plants and dried specimens – especially *Primula* and *Rhododendron*. Although it was known that Forrest made extensive use of native collectors (to such an extent that they would today be seen as ‘parataxonomists’) Mueggler exposes the true extent of their contribution to Forrest’s success and the huge debt Forrest owed them. Unlike many plant hunters, Forrest and his men returned to the same areas time and again at different seasons, giving them a far better understanding of the plants, lands and people. Consequently the paper archive Forrest built up has an unmatched depth and richness. Rock spent much longer in China, living in the southwest for most of the time in the years between 1922 and 1949. Rock divided his attentions between natural history, geography, photography and linguistics, and had far better language skills than Forrest, who always had problems with communication. Rock was also able to administer medical treatment during his travels, and so he had much stronger personal connections with the Chinese people than Forrest. Rock’s paper archive of the flora is more extensive than Forrest’s, with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 80,000 herbarium specimens, and so his scientific impact has been greater. In contrast, Rock only collected seeds of about 1000 species and his legacy of living collections in Western gardens is considerably less than Forrest’s.

Part one stages a series of encounters between two archives. The first, the imperial botanic archive, is well known – precise, obsessive, scientific, moving specimens to centres of botanical calculation in the West. The second is one of ritual and memory: the Dongba cult, a pictographic set

of codified rituals, performances performed in Naxi culture, and unique in Sino-Tibetan languages. Both archival regimes moved plant to text, both were comprised of great chains of translation from experience to archive, and back again from archive to experience. They came together most overtly in Forrest's quest for the evolutionary heartland of the genus *Rhododendron* – a horticultural Mecca, the search for which Forrest became increasingly obsessed. Even after 13 years of intermittent collecting across Yunnan, Forrest still discounted any plant lore of his Naxi botanists that could not be translated into Linnaean terms. Yet his hunger to find the origin of *Rhododendron* found Forrest mirroring the Dongba archive, for to travel North and West – the direction Forrest's search took him – was to travel in the direction where Naxi ancestors first came down from the mountains, and to where departed souls returned: somewhere up there was the threshold where the dead left behind their worldly being. The two archival regimes shared the same orienting horizon, towards a place of transcendence.

Where Forrest took succour from dreams of social climbing and domestic life back home in Scotland, Joseph Rock had no such fall-back. Part two lacks the singular focus of part one, but we sense that this reflects the character of Rock more than anything else. Rock's life, the author shows, was caught between the 'timid rigidity' of his guiding formulae, like the opposition between filth ('it is difficult to show just how central mucus was to Rock's diaries', p. 164) and purity, or his ever-present racial hierarchies, on the one hand, and his capacity to take gambles with extreme courage on the other hand. Rock had more intimate relations with the earth and its archive than with fellow humans. For Rock, 'names of places and plants were bits of the earth he could hold onto; they were stepping stones through that fluid outpouring of revulsion and disgust which was so often his experience of the world' (p. 234).

The book is a beautiful rejoinder to Eurocentric histories of plant explorers. Far from journeying into the wild unknown, Forrest and Rock travelled, for the most part, over landscapes suffused with sociality, places already archived in Naxi ritual and ancestral lore. Both botanists relied systematically on Naxi botanical expertise and were utterly dependent on the dedication and loyalty of their Naxi workforce. Zhao Chengzhang and his Naxi team thought nothing of a month's walk across Yunnan to meet Forrest in Burma, and while Forrest was not in China they

continued to collect and dispatch plants, receiving their salaries via the China Inland Mission. There remains more work to be done to show how Western science was seldom about writing the Earth for the first time – it was, instead, in a long lineage of ‘using bodies and their technological extensions to generate words, images, lines, and texts from the earth; of folding them back into the earth; of making them part of the shape of the earth that is experienced by other bodies, eyes and cameras, ears and pens’ (p. 290).

What is missing? We find it strange, as a geographer and botanist interested in the ways that nature and culture collide, that Mueggler pays so little attention to plants, to their distribution, morphology, and beauty. Such things were the obsession of Forrest, Zhao and Rock, but receive little airing in the book. There are many fascinating stories that could have been told of particular plants collected, their impact on the horticultural and scientific world, and the scientific legacy that both men left behind. To natural historians this might detract from the depth of the book, but one must remember that Mueggler’s concerns are anthropological, not primarily botanical.

The Paper Road deserves a wide readership. The breadth of research, care and love that has gone into this book is, as the advertising on the back cover says, absolutely breath-taking. In unfolding archival traces of life, movement and care back out into the world once more, Mueggler’s book becomes more than a mere collection of paper and ink: it transforms into something quite magical, a text that itself hovers between archive, experience and the Earth.