

Empire of Flowers

by Carolyn Blackman



THE ADVENTURES of the great nineteenth century plant collector, Robert Fortune (1812-1880) deserve to be more widely known.

It is due to his enterprise that we have many beautiful Chinese additions to our gardens – *Anemone japonica* [*A. elegans*], *Jasminum nudiflorum*, *Mahonia bealei*, *Weigela rosea*, *Buddleia lindleyana*, *Lonicera fragrantissima* and *Prunus triloba*. In all Fortune introduced to Britain and the west 190 species or varieties of Chinese plants.

In my book, *Empire of Flowers*, I follow Fortune's footsteps as he seeks out plants in Chinese gardens, nurseries and in the wild. He was the first westerner to explore the areas around Shanghai, which he called 'one vast beautiful garden'. As the country areas were off-limits to foreigners at the time, Fortune disguised himself as a Chinese with a pigtail and Chinese gown. He travelled, with only a Chinese assistant, by canal boat and mountain chair into Zhejiang province, through Anhui and Jiangxi provinces and into the Wuyi mountains – the great green tea producing area – of Fujian province. Here he found *Abelia uniflora*.

One of Fortune's favourite places was Zhousan Island off the coast of Zhejiang province near the city of Ningbo, where so many gorgeous flowering plants grew wild:

*I here met, for the first time, the beautiful Wisteria sinensis, wild on the hills, where it climbs among the hedges and on trees, and its flowering branches hang in graceful festoons by the sides of the narrow roads which lead over the mountains ... Azaleas abound on the hillsides ... few can form any idea of the gorgeous and striking beauty of these azalea-clad mountains, where, on every side, as far as our vision extends, the eye rests on masses of flowers of dazzling brightness and surpassing beauty ... clematises, wild roses, honeysuckles and a hundred others mingle their flowers with them and make us confess that China is indeed the 'central flowery land'.*¹

Fortune's plant hunting brought him into contact with Chinese people from many different walks of life. He met mandarins, Buddhist priests, tea farmers, wealthy art collectors, boatmen and nursery gardeners. It is as if we meet them too because he describes them and his conversations with them in vivid detail. Here he describes one of the wealthy gentlemen he met near the old walled city of Shanghai:

In the gardens of the Mandarins it is not unusual to meet with the tree *Paeony* of great size. There was one plant, near Shanghai, which produced between 300 and 400 blooms every year. The proprietor was as careful of it as the Tulip fancier is of his bed of Tulips. When in bloom it was carefully shaded from the bright rays of the sun by a canvas awning, and a seat was placed in front on which the visitor could sit down and enjoy the sight of its gorgeous flowers. On this seat the old gentleman himself used to sit for hours every day, smoking pipe after pipe of tobacco, and drinking cup after cup of tea while all the time he was gazing on the beauties of his favourite 'Moutan wha' [*mudan hua*].²

Fortune's five journeys to China spanned nineteen years, from 1843 to 1862.

It was a period of enormous political and social upheaval in China, with western aggression in the form of two wars in 1842 and 1860, and internal rebellion fomented by the Taipings. The plant collector was not immune from the impact of these historic changes. In 1853 he was in Shanghai when the Small Sword Society, related to the Taiping rebels, captured the city and killed the Shanghai magistrate. In fact he saw the murdered magistrate lying in a room in his yamen that opened onto 'a pretty arbour covered with the *Wisteria sinensis*.'³

He returned to Shanghai in 1855 just after government troops had recaptured the city. He was heartbroken at the destruction wrought on the gardens and nurseries he had come to know so well, and he shares his feelings with us:

One just outside the north gate, which furnished me with some of my finest plants when I was collecting for the Horticultural Society of London, was completely destroyed. A fine *Wisteria sinensis*, which formerly covered a large trellis, was now half buried in ruins, but was still putting forth its long racemes of blue flowers half-covered with ... broken tiles and bricks ... [A] noble tree of the carnation-flowered peach, which in former years used to be loaded with rose, white and striped blossoms, and admired by all who saw it, had been cut down for firewood, and the stump alone remained to tell where it grew. Hundreds of pot-plants were ... broken and destroyed. The little house where the gardeners used to live was levelled with the ground, and the old lady, the proprietor whom I had known for some years, and who managed the concern after her husband's death, was gone - no-one knew where.⁴

While searching out botanical illustrations for the book, including that of the above-mentioned *Wisteria sinensis*, I found that Melbourne University had a limited edition facsimile copy of paintings from the Reeves Collection. They come from the British Museum of Natural History and there are only 400 copies of the work world-wide.

The Reeves Collection is made up of botanical drawings of Chinese plants done by Chinese artists

from about 1820 to 1830. John Reeves senior, for whom the collection is named, was chief tea inspector for nineteen years for the Honourable East India Company in Guangzhou. He kept a magnificent garden of southern Chinese plants in Macao where he lived for part of each year and he sent back to England the first azaleas, camellias, tree peonies and chrysanthemums to be seen there. The Horticultural Society of London commissioned him to organise Chinese artists to paint the plants so, for some years, he employed several Chinese artists who lived in his house and painted under his supervision.

After Reeves retired to London in 1831 he became chairman of the Chinese Committee of the Horticultural Society. It was this committee that appointed Robert Fortune as Chinese collector in 1842. His son, John Reeves Jnr, who also went to work for the East India Company in China, assisted Fortune during his travels in China. Fortune named three of his botanical finds after the Reeves - *Skimmia reevesiana*, *Ilex reevesiana* and *Spirea reevesiana* [*cantoniensis*].

For me, researching and writing *Empire of Flowers* has been a wonderful experience. I entered a world that has long since disappeared: the world of China, its people and places at the end of the Qing dynasty; the world of the Horticultural Society of London, its personalities and its pioneering work in bringing the flora of China to the west; the world of botanical illustration and botanical journals of the nineteenth century and the world of the plant collector in an unknown country with its risks and adventures.

When I look at the plants in my own garden I now know which came from China, the places they came from and how they were brought to the west. As for Fortune himself, he has left to us his wonderfully interesting and informative books and a wealth of beautiful ornamental plants and trees.

Carolyn Blackman has had a life-long involvement with China and Chinese people. She has lived and worked in China and Singapore and taught Standard Chinese in Australian schools and universities over many years. Two of her recent books, *Negotiating China* and *China Business: the Rules of the Game*, both published by Allen & Unwin, have been translated into Japanese and Korean.

The book *Empire of Flowers* should be available from the beginning of 2002.

1. Fortune, Robert 1847 *Three Years' Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China* John Murray (London) p. 67
2. Fortune, Robert 1850 'Notes of a Traveller No. XIV' *The Gardeners' Chronicle* p. 821
3. Fortune, Robert 1857 *A Residence Among the Chinese* John Murray (London) p. 122
4. *ibid.* p. 139

