

THE CAMELLIA OF TEN THOUSAND FLOWERS

Aug 30, 2009 – If you're a plant nut, this is not unlike many other travelogues you've encountered here and there. Cool trip. It's a faraway place. Yes, there are amazing plants, botany, and people involved. What's different about this story is a very old man. Let me explain.



Yufeng lamasery is nestled on a pine and mixed forest alpine hillside NW of Lijiang in Yunnan province. My experience there left me thinking what a magically quiet and lonely place this is! This lamasery was built at the end of the Qing dynasty in the traditional Chinese courtyard design.



Essentially a combination of the architectural styles of Tibetan and Han Buddhism, Taoism and the local Naxi Dongba ethnic group, the Yufeng temple,



surrounding grounds, and local citizens make this a very ethereal spot on earth. The “camellia of ten thousand flowers” was planted in the years of the Chenghua Ming Dynasty, and is thought to have been planted between 1465 to 1487 (there are conflicting ideas here) – anyway, it's well before the construction of Yufeng temple. The lamasery

is one of the Scarlet Sect lamaseries of Lijiang and lies about ten miles North West of the city at the southern foot Jade Dragon Snow Mountain.

This is one of many lonely lamaseries in the alpine highlands of the eastern Himalayas.

When we arrived at the base of the lamasery, we were greeted by a short line of stalls with ladies hawking tradition Chinese Arts and crafts. We were the sole visitors that

morning (August 30, 2009) and we soon learned that the Naxi are an independent sort.

According to my Chinese colleagues, they have refused to pay the bribes to Lijiang tourist bus companies and the small row of stalls was now paying a price – no visitors, no customers. The Naxi are a matriarchal

society, and traditionally the women run the show, owning property, running the

business, managing the financial resources and taking the lead on all matters family and

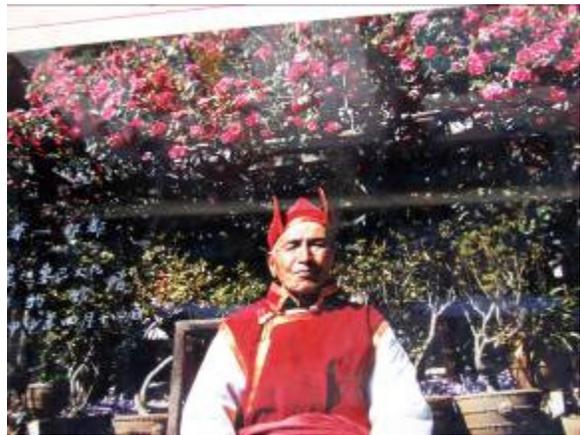
work. Hey, that sounds like America! Just joking. The men, I was told, spend most of

their time “reading, cooking, taking care of children, and hoping not to be turned out by

his woman for another man.” That doesn’t sound like America. The grounds of Yufeng



lamasery are home to several ancient trees, including a pleached 150 year old *Michelia yunnanensis* and an ancient *Magnolia delavayi*, both fine specimens in their own right. As for the camellia, it's an amazing courtyard tree, trunks and branches twisted together to cover an arbor creating about 600 m² (ft²) of shade. Off in the corner, I noticed a quiet and demure llama of 93 years sitting quietly on the porch and keeping a watchful eye on our activity. I learned that he had taken care of the tree for over forty years, and sure enough, under the eaves of the temple were old faded photographs of him as a younger man sitting in front of the tree in full bloom. While we didn't find a single bloom on our day to visit, the form and character of the tree left me more or less



speechless. There really wasn't much to say. The tree is spiritual. It reportedly blooms two colors for over one hundred days, and is thought to be comprised two grafts, a combination of the trunks and branches of the lionhead camellia and *Camellia reticulata*, both indigenous to the mixed mountain forest in western and central Yunnan (Jinhu, 1996).

Lion's head is the most popular cultivated variety among the Yunnan camellias and is often listed as *C. hiemalis* 'Shishigashira' – while others list the plant as *C. sasanqua*. I'm not totally sure of this plant's exact ancient heritage but it's known to grow fast, grow tall, and be tough as nails. Most of the 100-year old camellias in the



Yunnan are lion's head. Lion's Head flowers are colorful and grow in circles, four or five petals to a circle with about 30 petals total while *C. reticulata* blooms are smaller and white to pink to rose. One Chinese source referred to the tree with this award-winning prose, "with the irradiation of the brilliant sun glow and the contrast of the green grassland, the flowering tree looks like burning flames from beyond. It is the real 'King of

the Camellia Trees'." Well said. As we drove away, I kept thinking, "I need to get back here when it's in bloom." For some reason, I felt that old lama will still be tending to the tree and ready to greet us with his quiet charm. So the next time you're rummaging around in the garden or in the nursery and you run across a 'Shishigashira' or a Yunnan camellia or two, think of the far away high mountains and forests of western China that make up the original home of camellias.

Jinhu, Pang, Feg Zhizhou, Zhu Baohua and Guo Siqin. Camellias of China. 1996.

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150-year old *Michellia yunnanensis*



An ancient *Magnolia delavayi*

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