Cornell's Fungi of China collection has had an interesting journey…

Now showing: the Fungi of China

Kent Loeffler's show of 20 beautiful photographs is hanging in the new Mann Library as I write this. We were held over—the photos hung all summer and should have come down by Labor Day. However, the Cornell Publications and Marketing team won an Award of Excellence from the University and College Designers Association for the pamphlets, postcards, and titles they prepared for our exhibit(!).

The wizened, brown specimens in Kent's photos are from the Plant Pathology Herbarium's Fungi of China collection. This collection of about 2000 fungi has a more poignant story than you might expect—Kent and I gave a public lecture at Mann Library this summer to tell it. They're featured in photographic art because they are the subject of a repatriation effort. With Cornell President Hunter Rawlings' support, we will be sending half of most of those specimens back to China. Read on for the full story.

You should see Kent's photos full size. They're scrumptiously, vibrantly beautiful. Those of you who've spent any time looking at herbarium specimens know that the specimens themselves are seldom beautiful, which tells you something about Kent's extraordinary abilities. The whole story of these fungi is rather extraordinary.

History of the Fungi of China Collection

The collection originates largely from the work of two Cornell alumni who went on to become fathers of Chinese Mycology. S. C. Teng came to Cornell to study with Herbert Hice Whetzel and Henry Morton Fitzpatrick in 1923, and left without completing his Ph.D. in 1928. F.L. Tai studied at Cornell in the 1930s; we know little of his time here.

Back in China, Teng, and Tai, were very active collecting and classifying fungi. Both went on to write comprehensive and influential monographs on Chinese fungi. Both, but Teng, especially, sent duplicates of their collections back to their alma mater, where they were duly accessioned in the Cornell Plant Pathology Herbarium.

In 1937, the shipments stopped. In China, the Japanese had invaded, quickly taking and brutally occupying the east coast. Teng's collections were stored in Nanjing, site of the infamous Nanjing Massacre in which over 300,000 mostly civilians were killed, 20,000-80,000 women were raped, and the city all but destroyed. Somehow, before this tragedy, Teng and others managed to remove about 2000 fungal collections to Chungking. As the Japanese occupation went on, Teng and C.C. Wang divided and packed about 2000 precious specimens documenting the biodiversity of Chinese fungi. In 1940 they sent them west by ox-cart to Indochina, then by ship to Washington D.C. In Washington they were divided again. One set stayed at the National Fungus Collections (BPI) while the other traveled inland to Cornell. Most of the specimens that remained in China were destroyed during World War II.

Teng's trials weren't over. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Teng and his extended family were persecuted and repeatedly tortured. His unpublished manuscripts were

seized and many were destroyed. Long after his death in 1970, Teng's family was able to recover the manuscript of Teng's greatest work-in-progress, a book on the fungi of China. Parts were missing, but Teng's daughter Rosaline Deng worked with our own Richard P. Korf to lovingly complete and publish it. The specimens stored in the Cornell Plant Pathology Herbarium provided the vouchers for this work. Teng's great book was published posthumously in 1996, painstakingly edited and improved by Dr. Korf.

Today Cornell's Fungi of China specimens are being divided again.

The Cornell-China connection

Systematic Mycology at Cornell has enjoyed several generations of ties with Chinese Mycology. Dr. Wen-Ying Zhuang received her Ph.D. in 1988 under Fitzpatrick's successor, R.P. Korf, and is today an eminent Chinese mycologist. Just this year, Dr. Miao (Mindy) Liu received her Ph.D. under Korf's successor, Kathie T. Hodge. And today, Dr. Bo Huang, a professor at Anhui Agricultural College, is a visiting scholar working with Hodge. Similar partnerships between Chinese and Cornell researchers can be found throughout the history of our department.

Beyond mycology, Cornell itself has a strong multigenerational connection with China. Chinese language classes were first offered here in 1879. Cornell's first Chinese student, Alfred Sao-ke Sze, arrived in 1897 and graduated in 1901. He later served as China's Ambassador to the U.S. Hu Shih (Class of 1914) helped transform Chinese language into its modern form. Today, Cornell's East Asia program is very strong, and Cornell has developed collaborations and joint degree programs with various Chinese Institutions.

The Repatriation

To celebrate several generations of ties between Chinese and Cornell Mycology, Teng's specimens will be sent back to China so that a new generation of Chinese mycologists can work with them. Susan Gruff, the Curator of the Plant Pathology Herbarium, is now dividing the specimens and databasing accession information. Specimens too small to split will be kept here, but hundreds of specimens will be sent back sometime in the next year. We hope they'll support a new generation of Cornell-China collaboration.

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