

Catching *Magnolia campbellii* in flower on the Zibenshan (Salween Mekong divide)

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Business meetings got me to China early in April 2007. I was then left with two weeks with "nothing to do" before the third Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) Botanic Congress in Wuhan, which I planned to attend at the end of the month. It was an occasion to fly to Kunming and visit some great nature reserves in that province.

Most of the sites are well known and have by now been described, but few tourists come in so early in the season and so usually miss the early flowering plants.

I saw very few magnolias through my two weeks in China and my host and guide, Sun Weibang, was worried that we might not even see *M. campbellii* in flower. I saw none in the Laojunshan or Shibaoshan near Jianchuan or on the Cangshan near Dali. Happily, rhododendrons compensated for the lack of magnolias.

However, we were expecting to find them West of Dali as we crossed the divide between the Lancang (Mekong) and the Nujiang (Salween) rivers. I was driving through these amazing places after having dreamt of them for much of my life. As a student, I had read Frank Kingdon Ward's *Land of the Blue Poppy* and underlined nearly every sentence. Today, the Three River Area of NW Yunnan is a natural paradise and several national parks have been set up including the 600-mile long Gaoligong Mountain nature reserve, on the border with Myanmar. But it is far from obvious that all logging has stopped. A stop has been put to systematic logging and one can hope that the forest will grow back. The drive from Dali to the Nujiang (Salween) takes less than a full day as against ten days in the early 20th century, but the sight along the road is saddening. There is little vegetation left; much is grazed and an invasive plant from Chile (*Eupatorium adenophorum*) has taken over the landscape and the banks of the great rivers.

Between Caojian and Liuku is a low pass and a non-protected area of forest, which is at a striking contrast. It was a joy to leave the road at a milestone marked Km 51 on s228, and to head into the mountains. Immediately, the diversity of the vegetation was staggering, and within a few meters of each other we saw: *Tetracentron sinense*, *Acer sterculiaceum*, *Illicium simonsii*, *Magnolia insignis*, *Acer campbellii*. All of them, of course, were coppiced and

dramatically damaged, but otherwise healthy and vigorous. Our next stop, ten minutes later, yielded *Pieris formosana*, *Viburnum* species, *Lithocarpus* species, *Eurya*, *Cardiocrinum*, and *Rhododendron sinogrande*, all of them dominated by a few giant *Tsuga dumosa*, lonely survivors of a previous virgin forest. And still no *Magnolia campbellii*. As we continued our ascent up an unbelievable road (why didn't we walk?) we would count numerous rhododendrons, such as *R. araiophyllum*, *R. leptothrium*, *R. anthosphaerum*, *R. sidereum*, *R. neriiflorum* in several forms, *R. sinogrande*, and, finally on the plateau, beautiful forms of *R. fulvum*.

We were moving up slowly on this miserable track, all of mud and rocks, without being able to see much because of the low clouds. The mist would lift from time to time, and suddenly we noticed sticking out of the coppiced forest the glowing light of a single deep pink cup-and-saucer flower. I had been hoping to find the deep-colored forms of *Magnolia campbellii* var. *mollicomata* (which gave rise to the fabulous cultivars 'Werrington', 'Lanarth'). But this pale lavender-pink was the most we were to see. Later, on the way back after the mist had dissipated, we could see one large pink tree with hundreds of flowers the distance. At one stage, the clouds having lifted, I could count some 20 flowering trees on what I guessed to be some 100 hectares of mountain slope. I was totally confused as to what exposure these trees were on; these were normally western slopes catching dominant rains. The rain kept falling all day and cameras were getting very wet, but I nevertheless got some pictures of outstanding magnolias. It was my impression that they had probably been coppiced, as they seemed to have vigor-



Magnolia campbellii—shining like a beacon in the distance.



Magnolia campbellii.

ous dense new growth, probably sprouting from a chopped main trunk. Some larger and higher trees in the distance had sparse flowers but one good specimen presented more than a hundred superb flowers as shown in the photo. Flowers were a good cup and saucer shape. Hoping to get some seed later in the season, we left some money with a local farmer.

I had seen *Magnolia campbellii* in Bhutan twenty years ago and I must say that superficially there is very little difference between the two plants. I would not be able to tell the difference between var. *campbellii* and var. *mollicomata*, and as the color cannot be used as a characteristic, one should probably forget about these subdivisions, as they will not be noticeable in cultivation.

I saw *M. campbellii* again over the Gaoligongshan on the western slope slightly below the pass on the road to Pianma (Myanmar). Again, it was a single, isolated, beautiful white flowering coppiced plant. They would be very difficult to spot when not in flower.

All photographs by the author.