

Meconopsis – and the rest – in China

David Rankin

Meconopsis wilsonii

We have been to south-west China eleven times, mostly on fishing expeditions. Well, plant-hunting expeditions, but going to promising areas and seeing what we see. Recent trips have been with increasingly specific objectives.

In 2009 we were looking for primulas, and went to north-east Yunnan for the first time. One of the first plants we found was a *Meconopsis*, one of the tall, monocarpic ones. This had been seen and subsequently grown for more than ten years by Jamie Taggart, and had been circulated under the name *Meconopsis wumungensis*. Wu Meng Shan is the name of the range of mountains, although it has been applied to a specific mountain, correctly named as Jiao Zi Xue Shan. We did find *M. wumungensis*, and saw evidence that it is probably not monocarpic. But the other species was much more splendid, erect, with multi-lobed leaves rising at an acute angle to the stem, and with masses of rich purple flowers. Jamie's collection had paler, more pink-purple flowers. This plant was described, with Kit Grey-Wilson, as a new subspecies of *Meconopsis wilsonii*. Kit had described this species on the basis of a specimen collected 100 years ago by Wilson, and rediscovered at a single site in south-west Sichuan in 2005. He also included plants from north-west Yunnan, close to the Burma border, within the species, but as subspecies *australis*. We called the new subspecies *orientalis*.

In 2012 we went to look for *Meconopsis wilsonii* subspecies *wilsonii*, but there was not enough time to get high enough. We entered a lower valley – and very soon found our *Meconopsis* at a new site at much lower altitude than had been reported before. And the next day, about 60 km to the east and south we happened to spot it again. There were now three known sites for this subspecies. Later in the trip we visited the north side of Jiao Zi Xue Shan, and it was suggested that we climb this side with horses, and then walk down the much better known south side, where subspecies *orientalis* occurs. And we were fortunate to find it on the north side of the mountain as well, so an extra site for this subspecies was also found. We were able to compare subspecies *wilsonii* and *orientalis*. They are distinct, but subspecies *australis* seems to differ in more ways. Should it perhaps be a distinct species?

***Meconopsis integrifolia* and allies**

Meconopsis integrifolia and *pseudointegrifolia* are often encountered (although Kit Grey-Wilson explained that there are now four species in this group), but there are sometimes plants that don't seem to fit any of the descriptions. Jens Nielsen found one such in southwest Sichuan, and in 2012 we found it again. Most of the plants (but not all) only have one main leaf vein, but they have a short style, so they have characteristics of both *integrifolia* and *pseudointegrifolia*. But the most distinctive feature is the flowers, which have eight or nine pale creamy yellow petals that are wrinkled and frilly edged, and remain so even when fully mature. Jens calls this '*pseudointegrifolioides*'! Is this just a local freak variant, or yet another species?

Primula bullata

Plant hunters, ancient and modern, have hurried between the hotspots of the Cang Shan, Yulong Shan and Zhongdian Plateau, passing by the dull-looking Ma'er Shan range between Dali and Lijiang. In 2012 we crossed it for the first time, looking unsuccessfully for *Meconopsis betonicifolia* in its type location, and found populations of a plant very like *Primula forrestii*, but with some differences that linked it with *Primula rufa*, as described by Balfour, but latterly included in *P. forrestii*. This led to us taking an interest in the other members of the *Bullatae* section, particularly *Primula bullata*, which had been collected repeatedly by Delavay in the 1880s, but had been almost completely unknown since then. At the end of the 2012 trip Jens Nielsen tried to find *P. bullata*, unsuccessfully, but did

find *P. bracteata* in its type location. This name has been applied to several quite different plants since then, but real *P. bracteata* had never been recorded again since Delavay had collected it, also in the 1880s. The story of how we eventually found *P. bullata* in 2014 is recounted in the January 2015 issue of The Rock Garden. It became clear then that *Primula bullata*, *bracteata*, *forrestii* and *rufa* are all one species, *Primula bullata*, with varieties *bullata* (including *rufa*), *bracteata* and *forrestii*. Other plants grown as *P. bracteata* should now be called *P. henrici* and *P. coelata*. A plant collected in central Yunnan by Handel-Mazzetti in 1915 and named *Primula ulophylla* was clearly also in the *P. bullata* group, and in 2012 Jens set out to find it. He didn't succeed, but did find another *Primula* that Handel-Mazzetti had found on the same day – *Primula ambita*. It has only been reported on two other occasions (1911), never cultivated and never photographed. By 2014 we had grown a single plant, which flowered prolifically from April, and is still going strong at the end of October. In 2014 we returned to the area, again failing to find *P. ulophylla*, and the site for *P. ambita* that Jens had found had been destroyed by local farmers and a flash flood. After a long search we found a small population, some plants still in flower. Its existence is tenuous.

Small blue *Meconopsis*

In 2014 we again searched for *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, and again we didn't find it. Local villagers did not recognise photographs of big blue poppies. So I have still never seen one in the wild. But small blue ones are common enough – and they are not always blue. On Hong Shan, near Zhongdian, *Meconopsis rudis* and one that has been identified as *M. concinna* and as *M. lancifolia* occur side by side. Kit identified it as the newly described species *M. xiangchengensis*. Careful dissection of plants of the latter show that the pedicels, each carrying one flower, arise directly from the basal plate, and are not branching from a very short scape.

Meconopsis racemosa (or is that not the correct name?) is also common, and is usually blue, but purple and pink forms also occur. Near a pass north-west of Yungning we found a few plants with dark red flowers, more or less maroon, growing with normal blue ones. It seems that the red colour alone should not be used to differentiate one species from another.

There is still a lot to find in China, but familiar locations are becoming increasingly difficult to visit, or access is strictly controlled. New roads make new locations more accessible, but the interesting plants have to be found and identified from scratch. It is hard work, and often unrewarding. But the rewards from the good days make it all worthwhile.