

MY MEMORIES OF DR. HU

Emily W. Wood

Harvard University Herbaria, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

How does one describe such a remarkable woman? Thinking back on her life, one cannot help but be in awe – of her enthusiasm for the small happenings of every day, of the courage and aspirations of her youth, of the wisdom of her many years.

I first met Dr. Hu when I came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1981, to begin work at the Harvard University Herbaria. It was an exciting move for me, and from the start I found it a vibrant, challenging place to work. It was not long before I was introduced to Dr. Hu, as she was an “institution” in a building full of institutions – the Arnold Arboretum, the Gray Herbarium, the Economic and Orchard Herbaria of Oakes Ames, the New England Botanical Club, and the Farlow Herbarium. All of the staff were polite and helpful, but Dr. Hu stood out as one of a very few who embraced this newcomer immediately and made me feel comfortable and at home. Here was a woman who had come to this country “with one suitcase and two willow wicker cases” – all full of plants collected in the foothills of the Himalayas and to be identified.

As the years passed she became an important mentor and friend, and she was always surprising me with another bit of knowledge, another skill. She was an unfailing enthusiast not only of botany but also of cooperation among Chinese and western botanists, and she never failed to take an opportunity to bring scientists together, both at work and at the dinner table. She brought her own flair to her dinner parties, whether it was a traditional American Thanksgiving feast (at any time of the year!) in her home, or a marvelous array of Chinese dishes, complete with lengthy bi-lingual descriptions of each dish, around the lunch table at work. The food plants of China were, after all, near and dear to her heart. She introduced many a graduate student to ginkgo nuts, and every autumn, her forays to Cambridge’s largest ginkgo tree were legendary. There was never any question when the seed gathering was complete, as the acrid smell of butyric acid filled the entire herbarium. But she was always gracious in sharing her harvest – although I remember quite distinctly her warning us never to eat more than 5 a day, I never knew why, and I’ve always regretted that I never asked!

Dr. Hu was one of the most devoted employees the Arnold Arboretum has ever had. From her days as a student under Elmer Merrill, through her graduation from Radcliffe College of Harvard University, to her many years of research on Chinese and American plants, she almost never missed a day at work. Sunday was a day of rest from botany, however, as it was time for another love of her life: the church. Her Christian faith was very important to her and, no doubt, sustained her through some very difficult years as a young Chinese immigrant and as a woman in some very discriminatory times in America. She remarked once that her salary as a newly appointed Arboretum employee was “about the same as a janitor’s”. I doubt she was ever given the pay she deserved, but it was clear from her many years in retirement -- when she worked for **no** pay -- that money was not the object. It was a truly remarkable love of science that sustained her.

In the 1990’s Dr. Hu began to spend more and more of her time in Hong Kong. She was, as usual, immersed in many projects there over the years: the Compositae for the *Flora of Hong Kong*, the Botanical Garden at Chung Chi College, her friends and “students” of medicinal plants, revising her beloved

Enumeration of Chinese Materia Medica, to name just a few. She would write when she could, but she was seriously overcommitted. "If I follow my mind, you would already have received hundreds of my letters," she wrote me in March 1997. "I think of you when I see beautiful things and when I eat good food. Then the situations don't allow me to write." Undoubtedly she wrote similar words to many people, but her sentiments are still precious to me.

About five years ago, I was able to make a trip to Hong Kong, and I saw my beloved friend for the last time. We had a lovely banquet at the University with Paul But and several of Dr. Hu's other colleagues; she showed me her office, and then we returned to her home, where I spent the night. She had slowed down, but she certainly hadn't changed one bit: still the gracious host, still engaged, still eager to learn. Somehow, when I left her the next day, it was not a sad parting at all, for I knew she would be with me forever, always a bright star, looking at the positive side of life. As she once wrote while a rainstorm delayed her return to the herbarium, "Portion of the cloud is gone and the birds begin to sing. I must take the "break" to go up!" Much love to you, my dear friend, and may you rest in peace.