

Robert Fortune: Collecting the plants of China

Before starting on Robert Fortune, here is an extract of the diary I kept during my visits to China, Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, where I went once or twice a year from the late 1990s until Covid.

China diaries: 2000

Monday 26 July,

A good sleep and the weather will be very hot again. Breakfast at 8, so read for a couple of hours and finish Rabe's diaries¹. After breakfast, we go to the local fruit market. Pretty disgusting – it is where local farmers bring fruit to be sold to retailers, and there are a couple of cool stores, but useless at the moment. Saw a tray of kiwi green which looked good and Enza Gala apples which were over-ripe. Also a tray of French kiwifruit which were terrible.

They take me to the Tian pavilion (I am never told what the plans are so all is a surprise – for better or worse). This is an old home and compound for the Fan family and the oldest extant library in China (so they say). They have more than 300,000 old books, mostly unbound and dating from early Ming. The compound includes gardens and some historical exhibits, including very fine pottery from various ages. I've tried hard to define what it is about pottery which grabs me, you want to touch and hold. My friends and hosts are mainly being polite, so we don't stay for long. I have the afternoon free. I am tired of the same food in the hotel, mainly seafood, and try to select some variety. I have persuaded them that I don't need a minder for the afternoon – I can look after myself, which they don't believe. But KS goes back to Hangzhou until tomorrow night, and so they bring in another English speaker who will stay the night in the room next door in case I need him – what for? We have lunch in a revolving restaurant on the 35th floor of the highest building. We can see the whole city [Ningbo], and where the rivers join and where the old port was (was one of the Treaty Ports) – is not an important port now. After lunch I creep outside. The temperature is almost 40C, as hot as I have ever experienced. I learn to walk very slowly, keeping to the shade if possible. I walked slowly down the main street, hardly breathing in the hot air, sweat soaking my shorts. In half an hour I am back at the Tian pavilion on my own – what an adventure! I negotiate a ticket and spend a happy hour or two wandering around. There are very few people, more attendants than visitors and they all look at me curiously, the highlight of the day. I catch a taxi back with money Mr Li has given me and there is something about negotiating a taxi which makes you feel accomplished. And so dinner, and another walk out in the market at night, the temperature still above 30C.

Am reading Robert Fortune's travels in Northern China, and he spent quite a lot of time in Ningbo in the mid 19th C. There is one part which particularly resonates, where his friends have left and he retires to his room, through a small temple which is dark with a single light, and he can hear monks chanting and feels incomparably alone.

¹ John Rabe was a German businessman and Nazi representative in Nanking who is credited with saving tens of thousands of Chinese during the Japanese invasion and rape of Nanking in 1937.

Tuesday 27 July

I have breakfast with the new person, who having done night duty, a long uninterrupted, comfortable sleep presumably, then disappears for the day. At 8.30, the door rings and I open it to Miss X, a young student who cries out 'Good morning! How are you?' She has been brought along for the day as my new interpreter. We go downstairs, and we immediately reach a fine, bright, chatty relationship. She is 17 and has excellent English, all learned at college where she is majoring in International Business and English. She has 2 more years of this then one at university and she will have her degree. She says 'call me Maggie' which I do. I learn through the day that her mother is a doctor and father a chief of something. She lives with them. We drive out to Tiantung temple. During the drive, cyclists on the way to work have cell phones to their ears. The streets are clean enough to eat off and massive building is going on at the outskirts of the city.

As we go up a beautiful valley, I realise suddenly that perhaps we are going to the monastery that Robert Fortune described in the 1840s – he called it Tien-tung. We go over a pass with a fine pagoda at the ridge, and then down into a beautiful valley, cultivated with many crops, and tea bushes on the hillsides. We continue through a small town with very old houses, the streets unnaturally clean and rubbish free. Then we come to a gate and I recognise the avenue of pines that Fortune describes in the book back in my hotel room. It is still there, new trees being grown where old ones have died. Just as he describes, the avenue veers left and skirts a couple of ponds before arriving at the temple gates. The temple complex is at the head of the valley.



To one side, we drive further and stop at the Forestry Dept building, built on the side of the valley against the hills. It is old and plain. We go in and sit round a big table in the meeting room. There are plates of bananas, which no one touches, bayberries and lychees, and these are good. They provide tea and before we start, we decide to go and look at the forest. There is a paved track up through the closest part, planted with young trees, pines and broad leaf varieties, none of which I can recognise (I suppose Fortune would have). There are beautiful insects everywhere, ferns in the undergrowth and a yellow-white flowering tree which looks a bit familiar. Mr Xi limps along behind feeling the heat, which again is in the 30s but a bit cooler here in the hills. The Vice-Director airily suggest that the various trees are in NZ, and I have to explain that our flora is entirely different. The walk is not long - they have no appetite for it, and we walk back down to the temple.

We enter by a side door which seems somehow privileged. Evidently it is the nun's quarters and their washed robes are hanging up to dry in a courtyard. The temple dates from about 300 AD and lies under Yaibai mountain in Dang Xian, Yin Xian County. We walk through the ancient courtyards with many side temples containing gilded buddhas. The wood is dark and heavy. The temple is also the source of a small Japanese Buddhist sect. We climb up steps to a huge, ancient bell that Fortune mentions in his book. It is no longer used, and we also see the very old pine tree dating from Tang days (more than 1000 years old). There are not many people around and it is peaceful and very hot. The trees on the hillsides are silent without movement and the air feels thick. Some young monks are walking around

carrying plastic bags full of some sort of food and we see them eating in one of the side chambers. They look fat and contented and perhaps it is happy days for Buddhist monasteries in these times.

There is a restaurant in the forestry building on the ground floor where we eat. It is a bit noisome and musty, like the rooms above, but the food is ok. The smoke gets so bad that even my companions notice (it has to affect visibility for this to happen) and they open doors and windows. After lunch we retire to the meeting room upstairs again and sink into big leather sofas, with fans on and blinds drawn. I'm questioned until they get tired and a card game commences in the corner with our driver and the forestry guys. I snooze and we don't move until the game stops. I don't know what we are waiting for. I feel that days and days are passed in a place like this without much being done, filling in time, waiting for something to happen. Most time seems to be spent eating, and sitting and talking, playing cards, but then perhaps there is nothing much to do, with the trees growing.

We leave and head to an insect museum in honour of an eminent entomologist. Room after room of his photos and mementos, and a couple of rooms of his insect collection which is more interesting, just. No one is interested apart from myself and I do the rounds myself since it is clearly laid on for me. We repeat all this at the next place, a museum devoted to one of the greatest calligraphers. I guess it is art and beautiful, but the niceties need to be explained to me, and aren't. Then off to a near-by lake. We are taken for a short motorboat ride, and the lake is filthy and heavy with fish farms. It seems impossible that it will ever be cleaned up. I am not too unhappy to return to Ningbo and suspect that the day out for the guys has soon palled too. Dinner with the guys and then cards in KS's room, now that he's back. I still can't get the hang of the game and watch ballroom dancing on the TV. This is as strange as anything I have seen over the last few days.

Robert Fortune

Fortune, R Three Years' Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China. 1847

Fortune, R A Journey to the Tea Countries of China; 1852

Fortune, R Two visits to the tea countries of China, 1853

Fortune, R A residence among the Chinese. 1857

Fortune, R Yedo and Peking. 1863

There has been much written on Robert Fortune (1812-1880)². He was born in Scotland and at the age of 28, moved from Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Gardens to the Chiswick gardens of the Horticultural Society in London. A couple of years later, in 1843, he was sent by the Society to collect plants in China. The Treaty of Nanking was signed in 1842, ending the first Opium War and providing greater accessibility with



² The two most recent popular accounts are: **Rose, Sarah**, For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History. London, Viking, 2010; **Watt, Alistair**, Robert Fortune, A Plant Hunter in the Orient. London, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2017. A detailed account of the plant collecting described in Fortune's books is given in **Bretschneider, E.**, History of European botanical discoveries in China. Vol 1. 1898, reprinted by Zentral-Antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Leipzig, 1981.

the five Treaty ports, and the breakdown of the restricted single trading system through Canton.

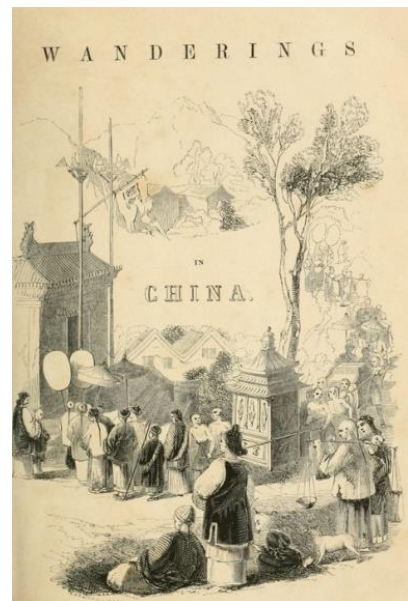
Fortune spent most of the next ten years in China collecting, as well as in Formosa and Japan in the later years, working for both the Horticultural Society and the East India Company. He wasn't the first to collect plant material. This had been done since the 17th century, with travellers such as the Polish Jesuit priest Michal Boym³. Later in the 18th century, for instance, travellers such as the Dutch trader van Bram Hoekgueest⁴ brought back specimens and dried material to Europe. Members of British missions such as Sir John Staunton in the Macartney Embassy of the 1790s recorded plant species, and Clarke Abel a naturalist member of the Amherst Embassy in 1816, tried to bring back seeds and seedlings, though most were lost in a shipwreck. However, Fortune was one of the first to voyage out on a particular plant collecting mission that was aimed at penetrating into the Chinese hinterland, hitherto not easily accessible, and to collect tea plants for commercial development in India.

Collecting plants would seem at first a fairly harmless activity, but its not for nothing that Fortune, 180 years later, is still called a plant thief. While most of the specimens he imported into England were ornamental, and part of a thriving nursery trade in England, it was his collection of tea plants that he transferred to Bengal, along with skilled artisans in the technology of tea processing, that has hung around his neck in a chain of controversy. Tea had been discovered growing naturally in Assam, but the leaf and brew produced was considered inferior to that from China. It was the East India Company that commissioned Fortune to collect seed particularly, for transfer to Bengal.

*'Besides the collection of tea plants and seeds from the best localities for transmission to India, it will be your duty to avail yourself of every opportunity of acquiring information as to the cultivation of the tea plant and the manufacture of tea as practiced by the Chinese.'*⁵ For that, Fortune had to

penetrate coastal provinces such as Zhejiang and more remote provinces such as Fujian, Guandong and Jiangsu, where it was still forbidden to travel, and accordingly he did this in disguise. The seeds and plants he sent back, along with knowledge of the fermentation process, and proof that green and black tea were not from different species, became the basis of the Company's Bengal tea industry.⁶

Fortune recorded his travels in five books, one *Two visits to the tea countries of China and the British tea plantations in the Himalaya* published in 1853 being a two volume



*A Chinese marriage procession.
Fortune, 1847, title page.*

³ **Michal Piotr Boym** (c1612-1659) served as a missionary in China from 1643 until he early 1650s, when he returned to Europe on a mission from the Yongli Emperor. He returned to China in 1656, but died soon after arrival. His *Flora Sinensis* was published in 1656.

⁴ **Houckgeest van Bram** An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, To The Court of the Emperor of China, in the Years 1794 and 1795; Translated from the Original of M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery. London: R. Phillips, 1798.

⁵ **Rose, S.,** For all the tea in China: How England stole the world's favourite drink and changed history. London, Random House, 2010. P. 65

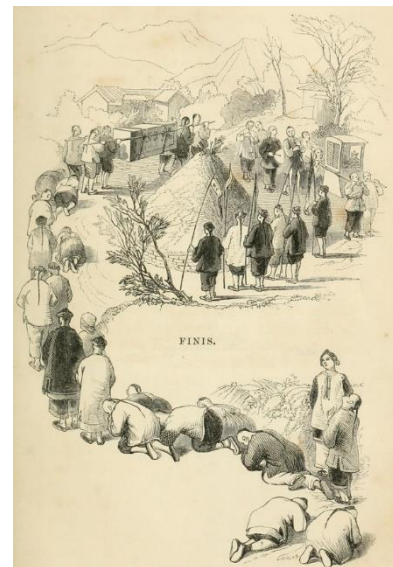
⁶

edition of the previous *A Journey to the Tea Countries of China* of 1852. He remains controversial to this day, still being called a stealer of illegal Chinese property.

In all, Fortune visited China five times, four of the journeys, in 1843-1845, 1848-1851, 1853-1856, and in 1860-1862, resulting in a book. His first book, published in 1847, covers his first expedition for the Horticultural Society.

Fortune, R. *Three Years' Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China, A Visit to the Tea, Silk, and Cotton Countries, with an account of the Agriculture and Horticulture of the Chinese, New Plants, etc.* London, John Murray, 1847. xv, 406 pp, [i], [16 page publisher's catalogue], tinted lithographed frontispiece, extra lithographed title page with vignette of Chinese wedding, 15 other illustrations including map and lithographed plates. 8vo. Cordier 2115; Lust 1236; Lowendahl 1056 (2 ed same year)

The book was published bound in embossed cloth, with a gilt emblem of a dragon on the front and gilt on the spine. It's the same dragon emblem that appears on the later two-volume work of his second trip. There are 16 illustrations and a map showing the route of Fortune's travels in the coastal provinces of (in the spelling of the time), Quang-tun, Fokien, Che-Kiang. Kiang-si and Kaing-nan, covering the area between Canton in the south, north to Nanking. There are three full page plates, two full page illustrations, one a title page and, unusually, one on an end page; the other illustrations are within the text. Although the lithographer is given, Day & Son, the artist is unknown. The end page illustration seems to match that at the beginning which is of a marriage procession, and is placed there perhaps with some wit, since it is that of a Chinese funeral.



A Chinese funeral. Fortune, 1847. p. 406.

Fortune makes clear at the start that he is disappointed with the current view of China as some sort of fairyland, that in the recent past, 'We were in the position of little children, who gaze with admiration and wonder at a penny peep-show at a fair or market-place at home..' He is not going to be one of those who 'stand manfully by what the writers of other days have told them; and faithfully hand down to posterity, by the aid of the scissors and the pen, all the exaggerations and absurdities which have ever been written on China and the Chinese.'⁷ His account will be more honest and factual, not afraid to describe the good and the bad. His views of the Chinese were not very promising at the first. The northern Chinese seem to live in a 'sleep or dreaming state', the southern coastal people are of a bad character, the glowing reports on Chinese agriculture, and their laws and administrative system are misleading, if not false, and yet 'in many respects they stand high in my estimation.' There is something of the authoritarian, superior Victorian, and later East India Company man, in the style.

The Society's instructions were very clear: 'The general objects of your mission are, 1st, to collect seeds and plants of an ornamental or useful kind, not already cultivated in Great Britain,

⁷ **Fortune, R.**, *Three Years' Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China, A Visit to the Tea, Silk, and Cotton Countries, with an account of the Agriculture and Horticulture of the Chinese, New Plants, etc.* London, John Murray, 1847. pp. 4-6.

and 2nd, to obtain information upon Chinese gardening and agriculture together with the nature of the climate and its apparent influence on vegetation.’⁸ He was to keep a journal, write home often, and for all this got £100 a year (worth about £13,000 in today’s money). The Society particularly asked him to look out for some 22 specific plant species, including tea, double roses, the rice paper plant, Peking peaches, kumquats, and other now familiar species.

Fortune spent most of his three years travelling up and down the coast, with excursions inland, particularly around Ningbo in Zhejiang province, a centre of the tea industry, basing himself in Chusan⁹, and taking a side trip in January 1845 to Manilla and inland Luzon. Despite his title, he was not travelling in the north of China, his farthest venture north only being Su Chou Fu (Suzhou), a little inland from Shanghai. He first spent some weeks exploring the new British acquisition of Hong Kong, then sailed north to the Treaty port of Amoy¹⁰, stopping at the small island of Namoa¹¹, known as an opium and pirate centre. After exploring around Amoy he sailed further north to establish his base on Chusan island, to which he returned several times over the three years.

The first parts of the book are very much those of the new visitor, not especially about plants at all, observing Chinese customs, geography and life. But by March 1844, he had explored the areas around Ningbo, Shanghai, then back to Canton, visiting gardens and nurseries, though not without difficulty. *‘They told me there were numbers of flower shops in the city, but denied having any knowledge of nurseries or gardens in the country.*

“If you want flowers,” said they, “there they are in the shops; why do you not buy them? Shanghai men do this, and you should do the same.”

“But the shops do not contain the things which I want.”

“Then give us the names of the things you want, and we will get them for you.”

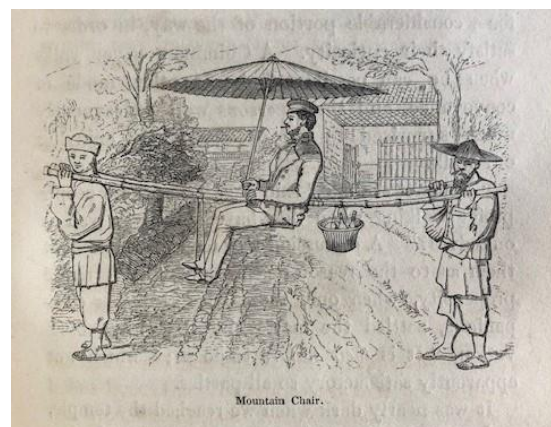
“But how can I give you the names? I do not understand your language: you would, of course, send to your nurseries for them if I could only furnish you with their names?”

“Yes.”

“Oh then, you have nursery gardens in the country?”

“Yes; but they are a very long way off.”¹²

He of course gets to gardens and nurseries, and they aren’t a long way off. His collections were by now substantial, and back in Hong Kong, he despatched them back to England in three different ships. Then it was north again, this time to explore the tea region around Ningbo and further inland. In May, 1844, he sets off with the British Consul, Mr Thom¹³ and two other gentlemen, Mr Morrison¹⁴, and Mr Sinclair, to visit the Tien-tung temple. Its only twelve to fourteen miles away, but they



Mountain chair. Fortune, 1847, p. 167. On the way to the Tien-tung temple in the Ningbo tea district.

⁸ Watt, A., op. cit. pp. 370-373.

⁹ Zhoushan, just off the coast from Ningbo in Zhejiang province.

¹⁰ Now Xiamen, in the southern part of Fujian Province.

¹¹ Nan’ao Island, about half way between Hong Kong and Xiamen.

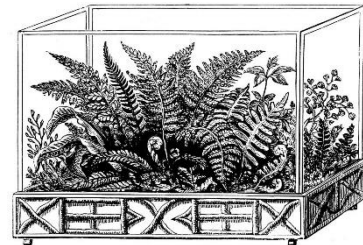
¹² Fortune, R., op. cit. pp. 130-132.

¹³ Robert Thom (1807-1846) was British consul at Ningbo. Previously he was an official linguist during the Opium war and took over from Robert Morrison as interpreter during the 1843 treaty negotiations. He also translated Aesop’s fables into Chinese amongst other translations.

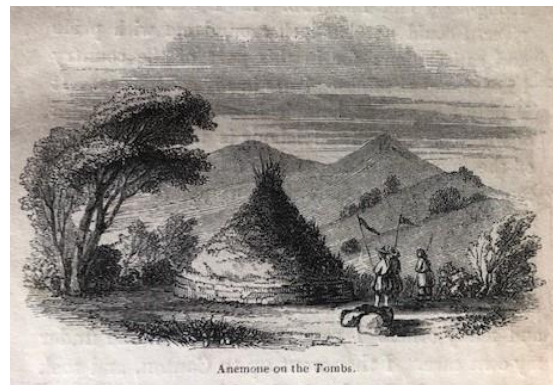
¹⁴ One of the son’s of Robert Morrison, the notable linguist and first protestant missionary to China.

travel by canal, foot and, preferably, by chair. *'The temple stands at the head of a fertile valley in the bosom of the hills. This valley is well watered by clear streams, which flow from the mountains, and produces most excellent crops of rice. The tea shrubs, with their dark green leaves, are seen dotted on the lower sides of all the more fertile hills. The temple itself is approached by a long avenue of Chinese pine trees. This avenue is at first straight, but near the temple it winds in a most picturesque manner round the edges of two artificial lakes, and then ends in a flight of stone steps, which lead up to the principal entrance.'*¹⁵ Just as it was in July, 2000.

Fortune writes extensively on tea, the plants and the manufacturing process, on cotton, the climate, and with a plantsman's eye, on agriculture. He sends more plants back to England at the end of 1844, again divided amongst different ships for safety, and in the 'Ward's cases'¹⁶ which were proving so successful. He makes his side trip to the Philippines in January 1845, then back to Shanghai in spring, south to Foo-Chou-Fu (Fuzhou). By the end of 1845, he is bringing his travels to an end. In Shanghai he collects all his specimens to go south to Hong Kong to be despatched to England, again in different ships. And there in Shanghai he is able at the last minute to cross off one of the Horticultural Society's special species: *'Amongst the more*



*important of the acquisitions which I made in the vicinity of Shanghai, I must not forget to mention a fine and large variety of peach, which comes into the markets there about the middle of August, and remains in perfection for about ten days. It is grown in the peach orchards, a few miles to the south of the city; and it is quite a usual thing to see peaches of this variety eleven inches in circumference and twelve ounces in weight. This is, probably, what some writers call the Peking peach, about which such exaggerated stories have been told. Trees of the Shanghai variety are now in the garden of the Horticultural Society of London.'*¹⁷



Anemone on the tombs. Fortune, 1847. p. 406.

He arrived back in London on 6 May, 1846, *'and at the present time (October 20, 1846), the Anemone japonica is in full bloom in the garden of the Society at Chiswick, as luxuriant and beautiful as it ever grew on the graves of the Chinese, near the ramparts of Shanghai.'*¹⁷

Fortune's book, was a great success, with a second edition published in the same year of 1847, and several reprints published over the years since. It was well-reviewed, and Fortune, living up to his name, had negotiated with the Horticultural Society to retain the income from the book sales, and this seemed to be the foundation for his growing wealth. It was not only the book that he published, but over about a 40 year period, from 1842 until 1880, he wrote around 50 papers for horticultural, gardening and other journals¹⁸, including

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 168-170.

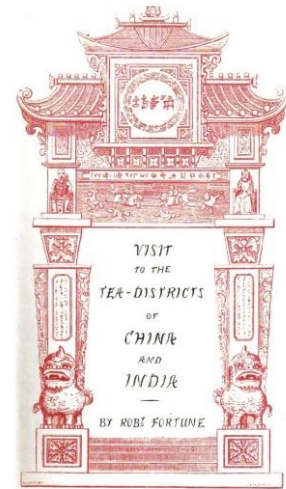
¹⁶ Closed glazed cases invented by Nathaniel Ward, in which plants could be transported, using condensation as a water source on long sea voyages. Widely used successfully in the 19th C to transport plant specimens from around the globe back to England. Fortune published papers on collecting and transporting plants and seeds in English

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 404-406.

¹⁸ **Watt, A.**, op. cit. pp. 396-398.

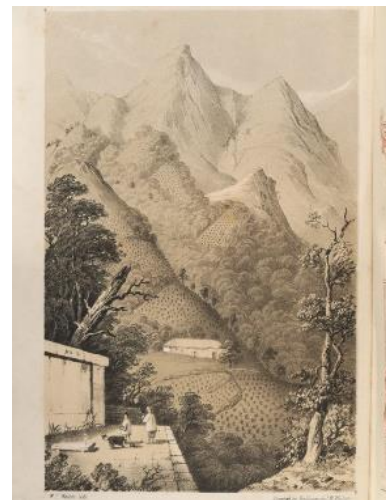
a couple in 1847 and 1848, resulting from this first journey, on collecting and transporting plants and seeds long distances.¹⁹

In 1846, with the strong support of John Lindley, Professor of Botany at London and a leading figure in the Horticultural Society, Fortune was appointed curator at the Chelsea Physick Gardens, at £100 a year plus house and coal. However, a year later, he was enticed to sail back to China, with a commission from the East India Company: ‘..[the] Company have retained and engaged the said Robert Fortune to proceed to China in order to obtain plants and seeds of the best descriptions of tea and to convey them under his charge from China to Calcutta and to the Himalayas...’²⁰. Fortune, with a 5-fold increase in salary, resigned from the Chelsea Gardens and sailed on the P&O steamer *SS Ripon*, arriving in Hong Kong on 14 August 1848. He spent another 3 years travelling and collecting. He occasionally pops up in other accounts²¹, unsurprisingly given the extent of his travelling. Over that time, he sent back some 16 letters, probably addressed to John Lindley, about his travels and botanical discoveries. These were published in the *Gardner’s Chronicle* from 1849 to 1851.²² On Fortune’s return to England, John Murray brought out his second book.



Fortune, R *A Journey to the Tea Countries of China; Sung-lo and the Bohea Hills; with a Short Notice of the East India Company's Tea Plantations in the Himalaya Mountains.* London, John Murray, 1852. xvii, 398, 32 [publisher's ads, dated November 1851] pp, 17 illustrations including tinted frontispiece, 2 plates (one tinted), map, extra engraved title-page in red and black, engraved illustrations in text, 8vo. Cordier 2116; not in Lowendahl

The first edition, first issue, was published in pictorial, dark green gilt cloth, with a gilt vignette of a mast with the title on a sail on the front board, and title and gilt vignettes of a pagoda-like structure and a Chinese man carrying a case of tea on his shoulders, on the spine. This latter image is the same as in the book on p. 202, depicting a man carrying the finest tea across the Bohea mountains. Most of the illustrations are included with the text except for a couple of full page ones, of a ‘funereal cypress’ on p. 63, and a copy of a Chinese drawing of a view of a ‘stream of nine windings’ and strange rocks, on



¹⁹ **Fortune, R.**, Experience in the transmission of living plants to and from distant countries by sea. *J. Horticult. Soc. London.*, vol.2, pp 115-121, 1847; Observations upon the best methods of packing seeds for a voyage to India or China. *J. Horticult. Soc. London.*, pp. 41-44, 1848.

²⁰ **Watt, A.**, op. cit. p. 100.

²¹ E.g. in Tyrone Power’s book on China: **Power, W.T.** *Recollections of a three years' residence in China: Including Peregrinations in Spain, Morocco, Egypt, India, Australia & New Zealand.* London, Bentley, MDCCCLIII [1853].

²² **Bretschneider, E.**, op. cit. pp. 407-414.

p. 242. There are two tinted plates. The frontispiece is of *'Tea plantations. View in the green tea district'*, showing a man bowing before a religious feature on a platform with two other men, and the plantings and mountains in the mid- and back ground. The artist is not given, though the lithographer is W L Walton, one of the first London lithographers. He is often associated with the foremost lithographic printer Charles Hullmandel, and both plates in the book are printed by Hullmandel and Walton.



The other plate is a lovely drawing *'Curious mode of gathering the Ling (Trapa bicornis)'* showing men in a river or canal floating in round, reed or wooden tubs, gathering the waterweed ling. Ling is a floating weed that bears a large, edible, winged seed or nut.

There is a full page map of the tea districts, engraved on stone by A Peterman. Augustus Peterman was a German cartographer who produced maps and atlases (including an atlas of New Zealand in 1864). The main map shows Fokien (Fujian), Che-kiang (Zhejiang) and Kiang-see (Jiangxi) provinces, with the coast from Amoy (Xiamen) north to Hang-chou Foo (Hangzhou). Inland from Hangzhou is a green coloured area labelled 'Best tea district'. There are two insets, the top one showing a larger view of the main tea region, and the lower one of the tea plantations of India, presumably those to be enhanced by Fortune's collecting.

In his preface, Fortune proudly states that he looks back on his journey with 'unalloyed pleasure'. He achieved his objectives: *'Upwards of twenty-thousand tea plants, eight first-rate manufacturers, and a large supply of implements were procured from the finest tea districts of China and conveyed in safety to the Himalayas.'* It was not only tea: *'In the course of my travels, I discovered many ornamental and useful trees and shrubs, some of which such as the Funereal Cypress²³, will one day produce a striking and beautiful effect in our English landscape and in our cemeteries.'* Something for everyone, alive and dead.

²³ *Cupressus funebris*

Fortune arrives in Hong Kong on August 14 1848, visits the local gardens and notes that he, in 1844, had provided a suitably horticultural solution to the high mortality amongst troops, and indeed, everyone else who was trying to live on the Island. The main problem was an *'absence of trees and of the shade which they afford.'*²⁴ and he was now pleased to see a newly vegetated, and presumably more healthy colony. He sailed north to Shanghai and then prepared himself for the inland journey to the Hwuy chow²⁵ green tea district in southern Anhui. He had two big problems. It was forbidden to buy and export tea plants from China, and likewise it was forbidden to travel more than about a day's journey inland from the treaty ports, both activities that he had no problem in overcoming. He didn't trust anyone to make the trip and procure the plants for him, and determined to do it himself. The two Hwuy chow men in his service procured Chinese dress for him and found a man who would shave his head; the custom he had to adopt meant a shaven head, apart from a length from the back of the head, in the form of a tail or queue. The man was no barber, and after clipping his hair, *'he took up a small razor and began to shave my head.....He did not shave, he actually scrapped my poor head until the tears began running down my cheeks and I cried out in pain.'*²⁶ He had a 'tail' from his previous visit, had it barbered and attached, dressed himself, and was all ready to creep out of the city in secret, heading for Hangzhou.

He arrived in Hangzhou on October 23, and spent the next couple of months penetrating the inland tea districts, largely by boat to the Hwuy chow district, coming across the funereal cypress, collecting tea seeds, and being outed as a foreigner, by his coolie, amongst the other passengers on his boat, though it didn't seem to matter. He finds out how the Chinese colour the tea they export, since Europeans liked a uniform colour. They use a mixture of Prussian blue and gypsum and apply it to the leaves at the last stage of roasting, and sensibly never drink such coloured tea themselves.

He was back in Ningbo later in November, travelled extensively in the region and by January 1849 was back in Shanghai and then sailed for Hongkong with his tea plants and seeds, to be shipped to Bengal with the East India Company. He returned north again, and in May started his journey from Ningbo to the black tea district of Wu yi shan, or the Bohea mountain area²⁷. He eventually arrives at the mountains, passing through the great natural gates or pillars that divide Kiang-see and Fokien²⁸. All the while he is collecting plants and seeds, and in all spends about three months travelling in the mountain and tea districts, and is back in Shanghai in August 1849, and over the next few months stays there or in Ningbo, gathering together more tea plants and seeds that he had procured inland, ready for shipping back to Hong Kong, *'...everything has exceeded far beyond my most sanguine expectations. A large assortment of implements for the*



Funereal cypress. Fortune, 1852, p. 63

²⁴ Fortune, R., A Journey to the Tea Countries of China; Sung-lo and the Bohea Hills; with a Short Notice of the East India Company's Tea Plantations in the Himalaya Mountains. London, John Murray, 1852. p. 5.

²⁵ Huizhou district, roughly equivalent to today's Huangshan City in southern Anhui.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-25

²⁷ Bohea was in the local dialect, otherwise known as Wu yi mountain. This is the modern Wuyishan, a range of mountains in the northern edge of Fujian province.

²⁸ Jiangxi and Fujian provinces.

manufacture of tea had also arrived. Nothing therefore remained for me to do except to pack my plants and proceed on my voyage to India.’²⁹

Fortune’s final two chapters cover his voyage to India, how to transport seeds and plants successfully, and describe the Indian plantations and tea culture, and plant species in India. On September 5 ‘I had the pleasure of seeing the *Victoria regia* flower for the first time in India’,³⁰ and so he sailed home, having delivered some 2000 tea plants and 17,000 germinated seeds. As an aside, Bengal and the English horticultural gardens and industry weren’t the only benefits from this trip. In 1849, four cases of plants were shipped in board the *Freak*, bound for Sydney, including some 40 species such as the double rose, bamboo and the flat peach. Fortune’s plants also leaked into New Zealand, where William Swale of Christchurch noted that he was growing some of Fortune’s plants in his garden.³¹

The book was another success, and in 1853 a two-volume edition of abridged versions of both the 1847 *Three Years’ Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China*, and this second work, was published.

Fortune, Robert. *Two visits to the tea countries of China and the British tea plantations in the Himalaya: with a narrative of adventures, and a full description of the culture of the tea plant, the agriculture, horticulture, and botany of China.* London: Murray 1853. 2 vols. 315+298 pp., 30 illustrations, folding map. Cordier 2116.

Its called the third edition, which is true of the first book, where a second edition came out in the same year as the first, but is really a second edition of the *Two Years* work. That’s really neither here nor there, except it might prevent a search for a first or second edition of these two volumes per se. Fortune explains in the preface, ‘As the style in which these works were brought out [the two original editions] did not admit them being sold at a price within the means of the great mass of the people, who are no doubt much interested in a country like China, and in the cultivation and manufacture of tea, a beverage which is now indispensable to the poor as well as to the rich - “that cheers but not inebriates,” – Mr Murray is of the opinion that and edition slightly abridged will be acceptable...’.

Fortune says that ‘I have, therefore, gone carefully over the two volumes, and struck out some things in the first which experience taught me to improve in the second. I have also omitted some meteorological and dry botanical details, which, although most acceptable to the scientific and learned, are not very interesting to the general reader.’ Thus the two volumes, in slightly smaller 8vo, do not omit all that much, and the illustrations with one map (from the *Journey to the tea countries*) are mostly still there, though distributed differently. They in all, comprise a couple of handsome volumes, in dark green cloth with a gilt oval illustration of a dragon on the front boards (as on the cover of his first book), and gilt title and illustration of a Chinese man carrying a case of tea, on the spine. Mr Murray, and Mr Fortune, would continue to have had a sharp eye on ‘the great mass of the people’.



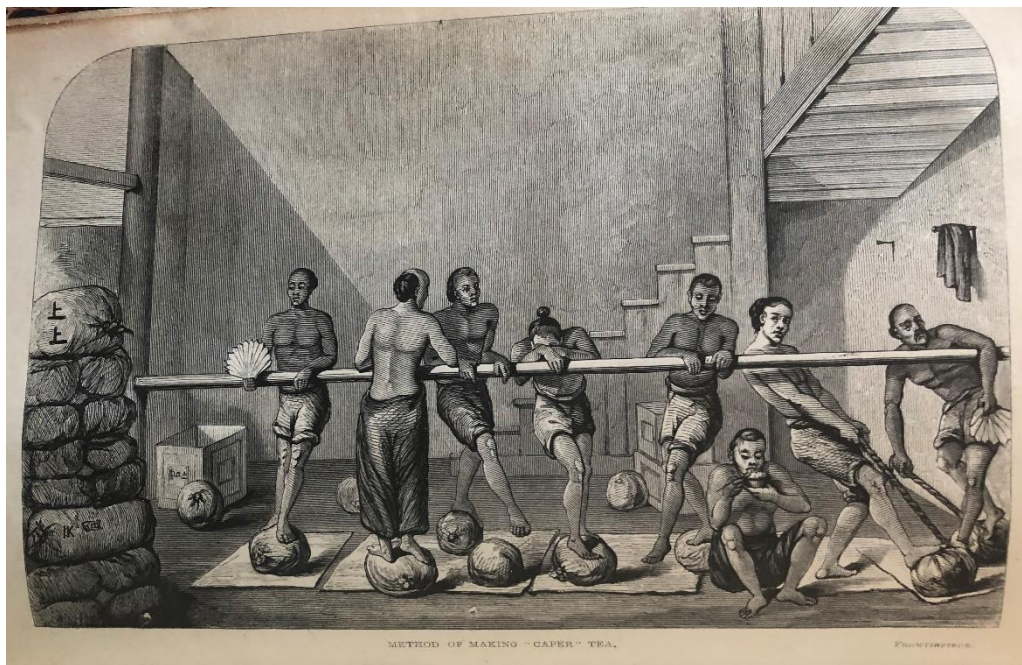
²⁹ Ibid., p. 353.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 398.

³¹ Watt, A., op. cit. pp 134-137.

Once back in England, the now quite famous plant collector was busy. He finished and published his second book, wrote horticultural and botanical articles, fathered a second child, and then at the end of 1852, by now suffering from some sort of Chinese travel compulsion, 'was deputed a second time by the East India Company for the purpose of adding to the collections already formed, and particularly of procuring some first-rate black tea makers for the experimental tea farms in India.'³² Fortune spent most of his 3 years in Zhejiang province, centre of both the tea and silk industries, collecting and shipping plant material from Shanghai to Hong Kong and on to Calcutta, revisiting Canton, and at one stage crossing to Formosa (Taiwan). He finally arrived in Calcutta himself in February 1856, inspected the regions tea plantations, and sailed on to England, reaching Southampton in December of that year. John Murray brought out Fortune's third book in the following year.

Fortune, R. *A residence among the Chinese: Inland, on the coast, and at sea. Being a narrative of scenes and adventures during a third visit to China, from 1853 to 1856. Including notices of many natural productions and works of art, the culture of silk, &c.; with suggestions on the present war.* London, John Murray, 1857. xv, 440 pp, frontispiece engraving plus 21 illustrations (plates and vignettes). 8vo. Cordier 2116, Lowendahl 1184.



Method of making "caper" tea. Fortune, 1847, frontispiece.

The plates and illustrations are by John Scarth, a businessman and friend of Fortune's who arrived in China in 1847 and spent some 10 years travelling widely, and providing a particularly objective account of the period and the Taiping rebellion. He must have sketched all through this time, using his work in his own publication,³³ and providing Fortune with illustrations. The 'caper' tea described in the frontispiece plate was black tea

³² **Fortune, R** *A residence among the Chinese: Inland, on the coast, and at sea. Being a narrative of scenes and adventures during a third visit to China, from 1853 to 1856. Including notices of many natural productions and works of art, the culture of silk, &c.; with suggestions on the present war.* London, John Murray, 1857. p. v.

³³ **Scarth, J.**, *Twelve Years in China, The People, The Rebels, and the Mandarins, by a British Resident.* Edinburgh, Thomas Constable and Co, (1860.)

rolled up into a small ball during the roasting process, thus resembling a caper, and often scented. It was regarded as a high quality, expensive tea, exported by the East India Company, and described in the early contemporary work on tea by Samuel Ball.³⁴

The other two plates are of different boats used on the rivers, and a more interesting one of a 'Curious method of fishing'. This is the same method described by members of Lord Macartney's embassy as they sailed down the Grand Canal from Peking to Hangzhou, and involved a white plank or piece of white canvas held under the water and when it gleams from the moonlight, the fish are fooled and jump onto it and so are caught.



He says in his preface that in response to readers and reviewers, he will describe 'more minutely, the manners characters and customs of the Chinese...', describe, 'for the first time by an English eye-witness' mulberry cultivation, the feeding and rearing of the silkworm and the manufacture of silk, give his views on the recent disturbance in Canton, and provide more on the issues of health of troops in China's unhelpful climate. Thus he is now more than a plant collector, but becoming an 'old hand', a China expert, amongst the likes of John Francis Davis, who was now back from an unsuccessful Governorship of Hong Kong and England's resident Sinophile, taking over that role from George Thomas Staunton, who died in 1859.

Fortune arrived in Shanghai in March 1853, meeting up with old friends, and his first chapter concerns the early stages of the Taiping rebellion, much from hearsay and his observations on the effects on the excitable Shanghai population and European response. Well-known observers, participants and writers such as Thomas Meadows and Captain Fishbourne³⁵ get quoted, and then in Chapter two he gets down to his purpose for being there. He returns to Ningbo, now so familiar to him, and again travels inland through the tea districts, for some time headquartering himself in the also familiar Tien tung temple. He collects insects too, and records how the Chinese don't understand entomology and think he is collecting for medicinal purposes. Of course they do understand entomology, just from a different angle. Much of text is about China, the culture, ceramics and art, manners and

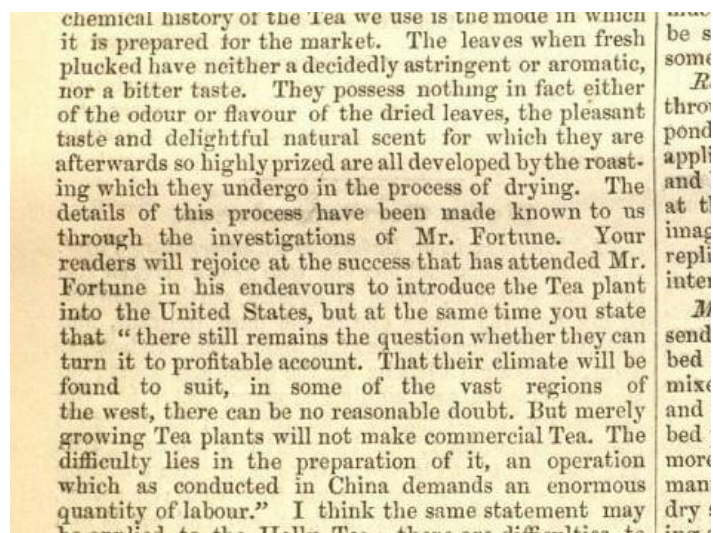
³⁴**Ball, S.** An account of the cultivation and manufacture of tea in China: derived from personal observation during an official residence in that country from 1804 to 1826; and illustrated by the best authorities, Chinese as well as European: with remarks on the experiments now making for the introduction of the culture of the tea tree on other parts of the world. London, Longmans, Brown, Green and Longmans. 1848.

³⁵**Thomas Meadows** was an interpreter and consulate official in Canton and Shanghai from 1843 until he left in 1853, one of the first Englishmen to contact the leaders of the Taiping rebellion, and publishing *Desultory notes on the government and people of China and on the Chinese language, ...* WH Allen, London. 1847, and *The Chinese And Their Rebellions,* London, Smith, Elder & Co. 1856. **Capt. Edmund Fishbourne**, commanded the British steamer *Hermes* during the outbreak and published his own account: *Impressions Of China, And The Present Revolution: Its Progress And Prospects.* London, Seeley, Jackson, ..., 1855.

customs, and after all, his English readers at this stage don't really want another book on collecting tea plants and seeds.

In April 1855, Fortune was back in the Zhejiang hinterland, this time more interested in mulberry trees, silkworms and silk. By the end of August he was out looking for black tea manufacturers, a more difficult task, he says, than collecting tea plants: '*...unfortunately the best black-tea districts of China a far inland; the natives of such districts are simple countrymen who have never seen the sea in the course of their lives, and have a very indistinct idea of the countries which lie beyond it.*'³⁶ Deciding that it would not be sensible to entice such people away, he resolves to acquire his manufacturers through the channels already available in port cities. He eventually engages two sets of black tea manufacturers from Fujian and Jiangxi, and with many thousands of tea seedlings sent to the Indian north-west provinces, plus a large number of ornamental species delivered, and a note of thanks from the Governor-general of India, Lord Dalhousie, who considered '*the results of your mission to China to be very satisfactory*'³⁷, Fortune eventually returns home.³⁸

Fortune was now well off and bought a family home in Chelsea, and then in 1858-1859, he was collecting in China again this time for the Americans. There was no book written on this, though it is noticed in the Gardner's Chronicle in December 1859.³⁹ The expedition has not been mentioned by either Bretschneider or Cox⁴⁰. The invitation came through the Commissioner of Patents of the US Government, who contacted the seed supply firm of Charlwood and Cummins in London, requesting tea seed for a potential industry in the US southern states. Fortune departed for China in March, 1858, and once in Shanghai was able in about 8 months to collect sufficient material to send more than six shipments back to the US, the last in February 1859. Fortune returned to England expecting, as per his contract to sail to the US to oversee the plantings and trialing of his material. However, he was shocked to find that his contract was terminated, and the reasons are not too clear. They seem to be a mixture of the gardeners in America wanting to handle the material themselves, perhaps a bit of jealousy, along with some embarrassment from



chemical history of the Tea we use is the mode in which it is prepared for the market. The leaves when fresh plucked have neither a decidedly astringent or aromatic, nor a bitter taste. They possess nothing in fact either of the odour or flavour of the dried leaves, the pleasant taste and delightful natural scent for which they are afterwards so highly prized are all developed by the roasting which they undergo in the process of drying. The details of this process have been made known to us through the investigations of Mr. Fortune. Your readers will rejoice at the success that has attended Mr. Fortune in his endeavours to introduce the Tea plant into the United States, but at the same time you state that "there still remains the question whether they can turn it to profitable account. That their climate will be found to suit, in some of the vast regions of the west, there can be no reasonable doubt. But merely growing Tea plants will not make commercial Tea. The difficulty lies in the preparation of it, an operation which as conducted in China demands an enormous quantity of labour." I think the same statement may be applied to the U.S. Tea, there are difficulties to

The Gardener's Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette, December 17, 1859, p. 1018.

³⁶ Fortune, 1857, pp. 116-118.

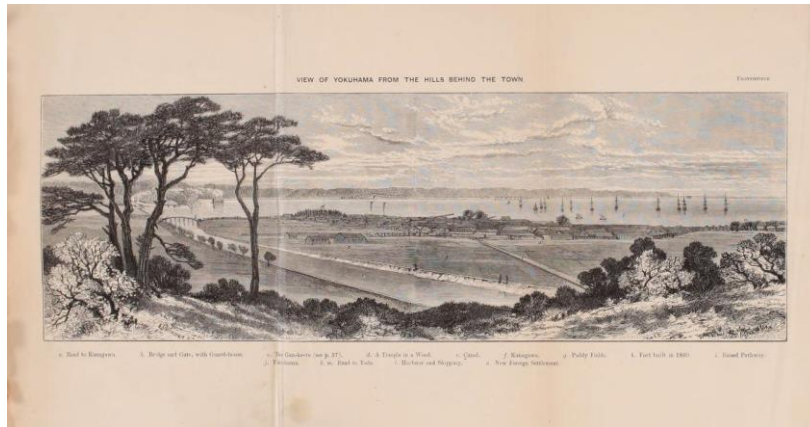
³⁷ Ibid., p. 422.

³⁸ The book is a little hard to follow, with Fortune's comings and goings through the provinces, Hong Kong, Canton, Formosa and back again. However, Bretschneider and Watt have both provided a detailed summary, Watt's particularly valuable for charting the plant collecting and the species, and the details of the tea plants and manufacturing.

³⁹ Watt, A., op. cit. pp. 183-196.

⁴⁰ Cox, E. H. M., Plant hunting in China. London, Collins. 1945.

the US Agriculture officials who were aware that there was a lack of preparation to host the now-eminent collector and horticulturist.⁴¹



View of Yokohama from the hills behind the town. Fortune, 1863, Frontispiece.

Fortune returned for the last time to China in October 1860, just after the conclusion of the second opium war. He was this time quite independent, and contracted to collect material for English nurserymen, insect specimens for commercial sale, and likewise oriental antiques.⁴² Having arrived in Shanghai, Fortune sailed on to Nagasaki, and over the next year travelled through Japan and northern China, mainly Tientsin and Peking, before shipping some of his collections back by boat and taking other material with him by the 'overland' route through Suez. He arrived back in England in January 1862, and the following year published his account, again with John Murray.

Fortune, R *Yedo and Peking; A Narrative of a journey to the capitals of Japan and China, with notices of the natural productions, agriculture, horticulture and trade of those countries and other things met with by the way.* London, John Murray, 1863, xv, 395 pp, folding panorama frontispiece, 8 plates including street-plan of Yedo, folding map of Japan and part of China, other engraved illustrations, index. 8vo. Cordier 2116; Lowendahl 1284

The illustrations are all of Japan, excepting the one at the end of the book, of the white-barked pine that Fortune observed in the outskirts of Peking. This was drawn by a Mr Wyndham of the British Legation in Peking, who accompanied Fortune on some of his botanical excursions around the city, though he only gets a single reference in the book. The Japanese drawings, including a rather special fold-out panorama of Yokohama Bay, with points of interest enumerated, with a key, were drawn either by Fortune's friend Dr Dickson or a Dr Barton. Dickson either accompanied him in Japan, and is likely to have been a medical doctor and missionary, but only gets a single mention in the book. Barton is responsible for views of the Inland Sea and that of Castle Island, Cape Gotto, and gets no mention at all, other than the preface. The fold-out map at the back shows Fortune's routes through Japan and China from Shanghai north to Peking.

⁴¹ Watt, A., op. cit.

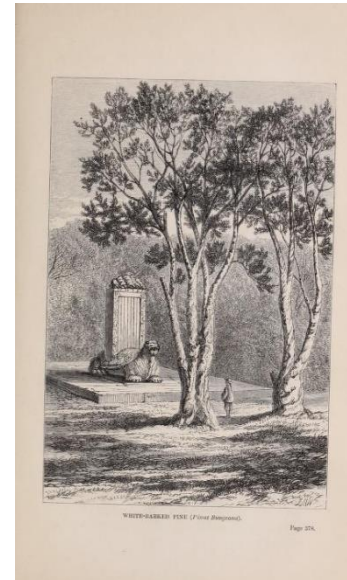
⁴² Ibid., pp. 197.

Fortune spent about two weeks in Yedo (Tokyo) travelling and collecting and was then back in Shanghai in January 1861. He returned to Japan a little later, to spend the spring and summer there, basing himself in Yokohama and travelling in the Kanagawa district. By the beginning of August he was back in Shanghai, organizing his plants for shipment, then set off north, visiting Tientsin and Peking, and returned to Shanghai, sailing home from there in mid-October.

As he left Japan, he had by then amassed a considerable collection of live plants, and the Ward's cases were essential. Indeed, his success as a collector of live material depended on them. *'A number of Ward's cases which had been made for me by Japanese carpenters were now filled with soil and planted with many rare and beautiful examples of the trees and shrubs of Japan. ...the inhabitants of Kanagawa....had never seen such queer little greenhouses before, and made many enquiries regarding treatment of the plants during their long voyage, When I told them that the plants would be four or five months at sea, and that during that long period they would never receive any water....they looked rather puzzled and credulous; but this was not to be wondered at, as that little fact had puzzled wiser heads than theirs.'*⁴³

Fortune is visiting the north in the aftermath of the war, with British troops still occupying Tientsin and in Peking. As he approaches the Peiho river and the Taku forts, he is unimpressed, but he is well-read on his predecessors. *'A wonderful change has come over the Pei-ho since the days of Lords Macartney and Amherst, and Staunton and Davis. Steam has now invaded its quiet waters, and gun-boats and other vessels go puffing and snorting upon it all day long. Instead of thousands of curious natives lining the shores and covering the salt heaps as in the days of yore, English and French soldiers and merchants were observed in considerable numbers as we approached the city, and our appearance seemed to be a matter of too common occurrence to be heeded by the natives.'*⁴⁴ He spends some time in TienTsin, visiting gardens and the institutions, and wonders at the fat and sturdy beggars, illustrated in his book from a photograph by Dr Lamprey of the hospital for the poor established by the British Army.

Fortune receives permission from the Hon F.W.A. Bruce⁴⁵, the British Minister at the Chinese Court, to visit Peking, only a few months on from the establishment of the British mission



White-barked pine Pinus bungeana. Fortune 1863, p. 378



Sturdy beggars – from a photograph, Fortune, 1863, p. 329

⁴³Fortune, R. Yedo and Peking; A Narrative of a journey to the capitals of Japan and China, with notices of the natural productions, agriculture, horticulture and trade of those countries and other things met with by the way. London, John Murray, 1863 pp. 302-303.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 308.

⁴⁵ Sir Frederick William Adolphus Wright-Bruce was the brother of the infamous Lord Elgin, and his Principal Secretary, present at the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin in 1857. Bruce was later appointed the British Minister in 1858, but wasn't able to establish the mission in Peking until March 1861.

there. He is received by Bruce at the legation in Peking *'The residence of the English minister is a most gorgeous place...It covers many acres of land, and consists of large and lofty halls, four or five in number, rising one behind the other by flights of broad stone steps, and separated from each other by paved courts....it is a fitting residence for the Minister of Great Britain, and one in which he can worthily receive the high officials of the Court of the Emperor.'*⁴⁶ The diplomats and military have more than eye for receiving high officials and things of state. *'Some of the foreign residents of Peking and Tientsin, had, from time to time, picked up some beautiful examples of Ming porcelain. His Excellency Mr Bruce, Colonel Neale, the Secretary of Legation, and Dr Rennie, had each secured many specimens of great beauty.'*⁴⁷

Fortune explored the city and environs, particularly the gardens and nurseries. By September, he is following his now very familiar pattern of preparing the specimens for shipment from Shanghai, splitting them between a route home round the Cape of Good Hope and taking the more valuable with him through Suez. *'I need not to tell how I managed my little favourites on the voyage home; how I guarded them from stormy seas, and took them on shore for fresh air at Hong Kong, Ceylon and Suez; how I brought them through the land of Egypt and onwards to Southampton.'*⁴⁸

Fortunes writings appear regularly in the horticultural literature, and in more technical reports such as on the north India Tea plantations⁴⁹. He is now more written about than read, although his books are engaging, entertaining, and particularly interesting to botanists, horticulturists and students of 19th C Chinese and English history. His first publications were particularly popular, probably because they were about the first that weren't by a military man or missionary traveller or observer. They brought a different view of China, and then there is always the tea story. His popularity resulted in translations and there is one particular little edition that catches the eye. He appears amongst a series of small books, *la Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer*, books designed to be read on the train, put out by Hachette in 1854.⁵⁰ A traveller's book to be read by travellers.



Robert Fortune spent his remaining 18 years writing botanical and horticultural articles, although these declined with a change in editorship of the *Gardener's Chronicle*⁵¹, being active in the Horticultural Society and nursery industries, sort after as the international tea expert (well, certainly outside of China), and living with his large family in Chelsea. He died of cirrhosis of the liver, which is likely from one, or all, of the effects of alcohol, hepatitis and malaria, the latter at least a matter of record. His probably long-suffering wife Jane became a rich widow.

⁴⁶ Fortune, R., op. cit., pp. 351-352.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 364-365.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 388.

⁴⁹ Report upon the tea plantations in the North Western provinces, etc. London, 1851. Selections from Public Correspondence, published by Authority N[orth] W[estern] P[rovinces]. Parts VII, X, & XI. INDIA; North Western Provinces. Published by Agra: The Secundra Orphan Press, 1849-51.

⁵⁰ Fortune, R., *Aventures de Robert Fortune dans ses Voyages en Chine a la Recherche des Fleurs et du Thé*. Traduit de Anglais (1843-1850). Paris. Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie, Rue Pierre-Sabrazin, No 14, 1854. *Bibliothèque de Chemins de Fer, Septième série, ouvrages divers*. vii, 265 pp, 12mo.

⁵¹ Watt, A., op. cit. pp. 273-294.