

## Press Release

### Long March Independent Project

#### Expeditionary Botantics

16 March 2024—30 Jun 2024

Long March Independent Space, 798 Art District, 4 Jiuxianqiao Rd, Chaoyang District, Beijing

Curated by Dai Xiyun

Research Commission by the Plant South Salesroom

Artists: Cheng Xinhao, Liu Xinyi, Liu Yu, Isadora Neves Marques, Pianpian He and Max Harvey, Wang Ye, Tant Yunshu Zhong

“Towering trees densely covered the area, shielding it from the fierce winds and rain outside, creating an atmosphere within the woods as if one were inside a house. Underneath the trees, vines entwined and hung between branches and trunks. The western Yunnan was plagued by severe malaria and typhoid fever, among other diseases, yet a group of over twenty individuals managed to avoid illness by consuming two pieces of cinchona daily. A total of fifty packages of seeds were collected during this expedition and sent to various destinations, including the Lushan Botanical Garden, the University of Hong Kong, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in the UK, and the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

During the Age of Discovery, plants accompanied the European expedition. On stern decks, they endured shifting climates, nibbling animals, and the salinity of ocean waves. The valiant ones, tested by the prolonged trials, reached the greenhouses of botanical gardens. They too participated in mapping the new world of the imperial expansion. With the opening of ports arrived plant hunters from the networks of the “informal empire”—missionaries, merchants, and explorers and their local assistants. But among them were also leading scientific figures of modern China who established scientific institutions that reciprocated the epochal demand. The nomenclature of botany, woven through “sampling” and “categorizing”, allows the seemingly ungraspable nature to become “visible” and “well-ordered”. The knowledge of plants, which had been embedded in local experience and knowledge, was transformed into a precise knowledge, embroiled in politicized science rivalry and became a symbol of science and vessel of power in constructing the nationality and statehood of modern China. Compared to the modern history of mankind, nature seems to be a slow-motion film, in which we find plants to be our objects of research, facilitating the interchange between understanding and experience. They roam the history of nature, history of science, colonization and geopolitics.

The exhibition delineates a “botanical garden” of the tropical and the local and highlights the overlooked production of the botanical garden as a historical space. In reenacting such a garden, the exhibition follows the lead of plants and offers

biographies of eight plants that grow on the fringes of Southern Yunnan – cinchona, turmeric, nutmeg, rubber, tobacco, horsfieldia, konjac and rhododendron. The exhibition also showcases their scientific portraits from the early years of Chinese modernization. This plant archive made up of scientific drawings and biographies is apposed along seven groups of art practices, creating a mutually “hunting relation”. Together they invite visitors to engage their senses and bodies, to bend down and observe, and to regain a sensibility to nature and to the minutiae. Artist Liu Yu retraces the legendary life of a blind biologist of the 17th century and in doing so, touches on a way of articulating the world. Isadora Neves Marques creates a minute sting – the diffusion of miasma, an insinuation of violence, a lurking crisis. The fragrant mix of powdered plants in Liu Xinyi’s work amplifies the web of relations among spatial powers and spices and ingredients. If plants are agents, capable of tracking themselves, then in the century-long migration of a rhododendron specimen, the act of sampling in George Forrest and Cheng Xinhao’s work becomes a method and a pathway. For Tant Yunshu Zhong, rubber is no longer an industrial raw material, but an entity in flux that awaits extraction and conflicts; it fabricates its own intentions through its ever-changing material forms. Pianpian He and Max Harvey recreate scientific images of the plants included in the commissioned research of the exhibition. Their work discusses how the technology of printing intervenes in the materiality of plants. In Wang Ye’s work, a city of ruins is engulfed by plants, echoing the backfire of modernity’s conquest of nature, an apocalyptic yet dazzling prophecy.

How did a system of knowledge, intertwined with modernity, arise during the “botanical fever”? Concretely, how do plants participate in the construction of nationality and statehood of modern China? And what are the traces that could still be found in contemporary urban life? If we regard plants as agencies possessing material bodies that participate in shaping social structures and power relations via growth, variations and interactions, then sensibility could serve as a methodology that revives our belief in the agency of nature.

1. rewritten based on notes taken by botanists Chi Wu Wang and Tse Tsun Yu during their respective sampling expeditions to southern Yunnan in the 1930s.

Text by Dai Xiyun