

China and WILD11

By River Yang, Ph.D.

At the 10th World Wilderness Congress, in Salamanca, Spain (2013), Tina Tin and I began to put pen to paper about the concept of 'wilderness' in the Chinese mind. We had met at the 9th World Wilderness Congress in Merida, Mexico (2009) and were joined there by Xi Zhinong, a famous Chinese conservation photographer. We may have been the only three people of Chinese ancestry at WILD9.

The three of us felt it was time to engage with other Chinese academics, photographers, scientists, philosophers and teachers to explore how this "western" term could be explained better in Chinese language and culture. It was a humble beginning for what has become an important conservation movement in China. For WILD11, over 30 proposals for presentations have already been received from China!

In Salamanca, we were blessed with the presence of my father, Xing Dingyuan (1934-2016), a retired teacher with great knowledge of Chinese classical literature and history. He shared his thoughts with Tina and me about the historic relationships between Chinese people and nature so evident in classical literature, traditional philosophy, religion, art, and life. That in-depth conversation set us on a path over the next few years to bridge Chinese culture and language

with western thought about the protection of nature. Tina immediately began further exploration into Chinese literature, both old and recent, to learn how other writers had represented Chinese concepts in English and how English terms had been translated into Chinese. It is an exploration that we feel has only begun.

We were able to write a short article for the *International Journal of Wilderness* (August 2016 22(2): 35-40), referencing nearly 60 sources that we consulted in both English and Chinese. I presented a summary of this paper in October 2016 in Beijing at the Global Land Project Third Open Science Meeting. At that meeting, I was fortunate to exchange ideas with scholars from China's Tsinghua and Yunnan Universities and am anxious to hear reports of their work in China at the global gathering at WILD11 in Jaipur. Shortly after that meeting my father and mentor passed away. When I was in China in 2016, I saw him for the last time during a quick visit to my childhood home in Xi'an and talked with him about the budding wilderness movement in China.

In the IJW article, Tina and I explained that in the Chinese language, although there are no exact equivalents of the word wilderness, it is commonly translated as huāng

yě (荒野) in modern Chinese. Huāng (荒) and yě (野) can be considered as synonyms, indicating places where plants and animals are not cultivated by humans. In modern Chinese, this has been extended to include places that have not been subject to human influence. Because land that has not been tamed by humans may threaten human survival, huāng yě has also adopted a connotation of being savage, violent, and dangerous. Huāng and yě can be separated and paired up with other words. For example, kuàng yě (旷野) and mǎn huāng (蛮荒) are also sometimes used to describe wilderness.

We prefer using 荒野区 (huāng yě qū; qū means area) as a translation of Wilderness Area (a category in IUCN Protected Areas), not only because it has been used in Chinese academic publications previously and among more broad wilderness interests in Taiwan for quite a few years, but because the general public does not have a clear image of the concept represented by this term. With this term, we have an opportunity to introduce a new concept in Protected Area conservation. I usually explain it in Chinese as 保持着蛮荒和野性的地区 (an area that remains original, uncultivated, uncivilised and wild), and people seem to understand the explanation and thus the term 荒野区 (huāng yě qū) very well.



ABOVE River Yang (middle), Tina Tin (left) and Xi Zhinong (right), at Wild 9 in Mexico.

FACING PAGE The author spent time with park management at Potatso National Park in Yunnan Province, China, where they discussed the concept of wilderness and how Wilderness Areas contribute to accomplishing the purposes of other Protected Areas.

In our IJW article, Tina and I concluded that in most countries that now have legal regimes of wilderness protection, wilderness was also often once considered as undesirable, as wasteland by the first settlers. Public opinion changed when the human footprint expanded so much that wilderness became a rarity, a commodity that was worth valuing. Is it possible that Chinese people are following a similar trajectory? We think so.

The Chinese population is becoming increasingly aware of the costs of prioritising utilitarian orientations toward nature at the expense of environmental quality. Differences in the past (arising from environmental and cultural history) and the present (linked more to this historical time period, advances in technology, characteristics of governance, and increasing availability of information) will continue to dictate a relationship with wilderness that will remain unique to the Chinese mind.

Just since 2016, there have been several articles published in prestigious journals in China, presenting the concepts of "wilderness," "rewilding," "free-willed ecosystems," "large scale wilderness assessments," and the international movement around Nature Needs Half. The discussion will be lively at WILD11, and I hope at least some of it is in Chinese! 🙌

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