Six days in Guangxi
Tony Curry
Assisting Scientist, Project Camellia
BGT Sydney

From the 21st to 26th February 2013, the Zhuang peoples of Nanning opened their city, and their hearts, to over 200 national and international guests as the hosts of the 3rd International Yellow Camellia Academic Forum. The Zhuang peoples are the largest ethnic minority in China, with over eighteen million people, comprising a number of ethnic groups, each with their own culture, set of beliefs, customs and traditions. Nanning is the capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and what a bright and progressive city it is! Her streets are lined with a variety of subtropical trees. The parks burgeon with grassy respite areas, floriferous garden beds, palm copses and shady avenues, and of course the mother lode for camellia lovers, the Nanning Botanical Garden and the Camellia Gene Pool Garden.

Guangxi shares a mountainous border with Vietnam and is renowned throughout history for her wild places. Guangxi’s wilderness has yielded many species of Camellia, especially Yellow Flowered Camellia Species. In fact the definition of the Chinese word ‘guang’ means ‘expanse’ or ‘open’.

Day 1: Academic Forum Nanning: We were picked up from Nanning’s airport like VIP’s and driven to the Jingdu International Hotel, Nanning where we registered and checked into our rooms.

Day 2: The official opening of the Forum, programmed to be staged in the Nanning Botanical Garden, was moved to the function room of Jingdu International Hotel due to the likelihood of inclement weather that morning. The program proceeded smoothly and according to plan despite the alteration of venue. In fact the function room provided a very cordial atmosphere for the Forum participants to mingle and get to know each other. Then we were treated to a guided tour of the Botanic Garden, the Camellia Boutique Garden and the Camellia Gene Pool. The morning’s program provided a smorgasbord of Theaceous delights for the Forum delegates to enjoy. The gardens were superbly maintained and throughout our brief visit you could sense the love, care and respect the gardens, and in particular the camellias, receive here. You could perceive that this love of plants and the need to nurture them was not only demonstrated by the garden staff but also by the visitors and the people of Nanning.

Hundreds of camellia cultivars were immaculately displayed – tended, labelled, mulched and cultivated in raised beds. It was a pleasure to walk through and experience the scale of these plantings supported by a range of traditional, and contemporary, garden landscape ornaments and styles exhibited in an uniquely Chinese way.

Camellias, large or small, are venerated and valued here. It is almost as if they were members of the city’s family and sharing their appreciation appears to be a way of life for the people of Nanning. This was particularly evident in the Camellia Gene Pool Garden, which was founded in 1981 and officially opened in 1995. The Gene Pool Garden is home to over twenty species and varieties of Camellia and it is here that they are propagated, cultivated, hybridized, studied and conserved. There are over 3000 plants in the collection and more than seven thousand crosses...
have been performed using *Camellia nitidissima* (syn. *C. chrysantha*) and other *Camellia* species as parents. Some of the other yellow flowered species in cultivation include *Camellia achrysantha*, *C. ptilosperma*, *C. tunghinensis*, *C. tienii* and *C. impressinervis*. *C. amplexicaulis*, a highly regarded, waxy, pink flowered species from Vietnam is also grown in the Camellia Gene Pool Garden.

The afternoon of our second day in Nanning was taken up by the 1st Session of the Academic Forum. Many interesting, thought-provoking and enlightening papers were presented by, and for the benefit of, camellia enthusiasts, horticulturists, technicians, botanists and researchers. All were welcome here at the 3rd International Yellow Camellia Academic Forum.

Day 3: The third morning featured the 2nd Session of the Academic Forum. Once again the program included a variety of informative papers of interest to camellia lovers, collectors and growers. That afternoon we visited the stunning South Lake Park. This parkland was full of surprises, including the Dry Lake to inform the city’s inhabitants of the need to conserve water, Mist Forest walks to reinforce the message of how important water is for the survival of plants, forests and humans and the Peepal Lawn (*Ficus religiosa*). I found a bizarrely and meticulously manicured landscape of fig topiaries, forming a life-size penjing, particularly intriguing. This unique and masterful planting seemed to jump out of the ground and the scale of the enterprise totally captured my attention.

Later that afternoon we were again treated to a wealth of botanical treasures at the Qing Xiu Shan Park (Delicate and Pretty Mountain). This Nanning landmark is an AAAA rated National Scenic Spot and it houses one of the largest, most extensive and spectacular Cycad collections in the world, including *Cycas micholitzii*, *C. pectinata*, *C. segmentifida*, *C. multipinnata* and *C. debaoensis*. In my opinion the Nanning Botanical Garden, the Camellia Gene Pool Garden, and the Qing Xiu Shan Park are not to be missed if you intend visiting beautiful Nanning.

Day 4: We were transported en masse to Fangchenggang City to visit The Fangcheng Golden Camellia Nature Reserve, which is located about two hours’ drive south of Nanning. The Reserve covers an area of about 99 square kilometres and three yellow flowered *Camellia* species are native to the forests of Fangcheng Nature Reserve namely, *C. euphlebia*, *C. nitidissima* (syn. *C. chrysantha*) and *C. tunghinensis*. At the entrance of the Reserve our bus slowed almost to a stop and we saw cameras recording the identity of each vehicle entering and leaving the Reserve. The drive to the Reserve featured even more
cameras. It felt like we were entering a botanical Fort Knox with the number of security cameras in use here. The bus stopped and we started walking up to the camellia site. To get to the site we had to pass the guards’ lodgings complete with a pack of Chinese guard dogs. We were told that recently several yellow camellia plants had been dug up and removed by poachers and that the surveillance measures were installed to thwart future forays into the Reserve. We arrived at a copse of *C. euphlebia* at the edge of the track and the sight of these rare plants growing in the wild made my heart jump. Despite the camellias not being in flower, I was encouraged knowing that these threatened populations of yellow camellias are protected and truly valued in Fangcheng. It did seem paradoxical that these remarkable plants were located only fifteen minutes’ walk from our bus.

We returned to our bus and we were then delivered to the Fangcheng Camellia Gene Bank. It too was protected by a high, chain wire fence and imposing, bolted and padlocked wrought iron gates. The opened gates revealed another treasure trove of golden camellias. The Gene Bank has an area of 0.90 hectares, with 0.72 hectares under shade houses. The Golden Camellia Gene Bank at Fangcheng has been set up to conserve and research the yellow *Camellia* species as well as to study their horticulture and use in the manufacture of herbal teas. To achieve its mission this facility is devoted to the propagation and cultivation of 28 species and variants of yellow flowered camellias, including *C. euphlebia, C. chrysantha, C. pubipetala, C. impressinervis, C. tunghinensis* and *C. ptilosperma*.

After inspection of the shade houses and photographing many of the camellia specimens in cultivation, we returned to our bus and drove three hours west to Hepu where we checked into the Red Forest Hotel. There was a special Forum dinner and entertainment organized for that evening, as it was the Lantern Festival. Our spirits, still soaring from the afternoon’s visits, were further uplifted by professional performances of traditional, modern as well as hip-hop dance and song and the performers entertained the guests throughout the many-coursed banquet.

Day 5: The purpose of our stay in Hepu City was to visit the Hepu Jiayong Golden Camellia Tea Development Company Limited. The farm/plantation cultivates thousands upon thousands of yellow flowered camellia (*C. nitidissima*) plants for the manufacture of Golden Camellia Tea in a variety of forms. This company makes teas from the leaves, flowers or stamens of yellow camellias. The prices obtained for these teas range from about $US100 to $US300 plus per kilo.

I had the time of my life inspecting and photographing the propagation, cultivation and planting methods employed at the Hepu Golden Camellia Tea Farm. With so many *C. nitidissima* plants under cultivation and so many plants in flower it was hard to resist taking photographs. I could not pass up the opportunity to take some images of two yellow camellia specimens in full flower. Wow!

What did stop us in our tracks was the Golden Camellia planting ceremony conducted by the Director of the Hepu Jiayong Golden Camellia Tea Development Company Limited, Mrs Patricia Short, President of the International Camellia Society and the Director of the Nanning Botanic Garden Camellia Gene Pool. The three *C. nitidissima* specimens planted that day commemorate the visit of the ICS delegates and the guests of the 3rd International Yellow Camellia Academic Forum to the Hepu Jiayong Golden Camellia Tea Development Company’s production facility, a major sponsor of the Nanning Academic Forum.

Day 6: 26th February was the day we said goodbye to our hosts, colleagues, friends and associates. Checking out of Nanning, the home of the Zhuang peoples and centre of their cultures, was a sad time for us all. However, fond memories of the 3rd
International Yellow Camellia Academic Forum, held in the green city, the garden city of Nanning, with her palpable love of her golden camellias, remain and will live with us. It all seems like a fantastic dream now but I put this down to the assiduous efforts of the Forum organisers and the remarkably dedicated, tireless and attentive volunteers assigned to assist and guide the delegates while promoting their city, their home.

My heartfelt congratulations are extended to all involved in staging such a wonderful forum!

The 3rd International Academic Forum on Yellow Camellias – a personal view

Waldemar Max Hansen
ICS Director, Germany

Delegates

China has captivated me well and truly. After the opening ceremony of the ICS Congress 2012 in Chuxiong, we strolled through the streets of the city so we could see what the camellia growers had to offer. And this is how I came to find the stall with the Yellow Camellias. There I met Prof. Li Jiyuan and Mr Li Zhi-hui. They told me that there would be another Yellow Camellia Forum in 2013 in Nanning. I was very interested, especially as I was at the 1st Yellow Camellia Symposium in 1994 in Nanning and these plants are very interesting species.

The written invitation duly arrived. I booked the flight and ordered the visa. The journey was terribly long. I left Stuttgart on February 20, spent six hours in Amsterdam waiting for the connecting flight and then a further six hours to Beijing. I finally landed in Nanning at 00.30 a.m. on February 22. The taxi ride to the Jingdu International Hotel took one more hour.

Nanning is the capital and the political, economic and cultural centre of the autonomous region of Guangxi Zhuang. The history of Nanning goes back more than 1,689 years, when the administration was established in the first year of the Daxing Eastern Jin Dynasty (318). With a population of nearly 7 million, it is the city with the greatest characteristics and cultural influences of the Zhuang ethnic group in China. The city lies in a sub-tropical region where the trees are green and there are flowers throughout the year. It is a modern city with a developing economy, one that is worth living in.

C. chrysantha var. phaeopubisperma

Nanning has undergone a complete change since 1994. A completely new town has been created. While bikes blocked the roads then, today it is only cars one can see. The few 2-wheelers were electric scooters. Compared with 1994, the composition of the participants at the forum was also totally different. In 1994, a third of the participants were Chinese, a third Japanese, and the rest came from all the corners of the earth. This time most of the delegates were Chinese, with a few from Vietnam and Taiwan, but no Japanese at all. Our president Patricia Short and ICS director John Fildew came from the UK: Prof. Gianmario Motta came from Italy: Dr. George Orel and Anthony Curry came from Australia and ICS director Germany/Austria Waldemar Max Hansen came from Germany.