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**Project in Sikkim (India), September 1st 2012 – April 30th 2013
as visiting Professor at RISH
Sugi in the Sikkim Himalayas**

**(CRCAO, Centre de recherché sur les civilisations d'Asie orientale - CNRS UMR 8155/
Associated member)**

Mechtild Mertz

During my mission in Sikkim from November 4 to December 1st, 2012 “**Wood Selection of Ancient Temple Structures in the Sikkim Himalayas**” I collected wood samples from different temples. From the first day on I was surprised to see trees looking like *sugi*, the Japanese cedar tree, growing along the roadside in the capital Gangtok and in the countryside. They are regarded as ornamental trees (figure 1). Thanks to the publications Rai and Rai (1994) as well as Cowan and Cowan (1929), I realized that the Japanese cedar has a long history in Sikkim and other parts of India.



Figure 1. Branch of a *sugi* tree, *Cryptomeria japonica*, near Namchi, South Sikkim, located in an altitude of 1,700 m.

The Japanese cedar was introduced to India in 1865 by Robert Fortune (1812-1880), a Scottish plant collector in China and Japan, and extensively planted since 1891. Fortune was trained at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, before moving south to the (Royal) Horticultural Society Garden at Chiswick (London). Following the 1842 Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing) and the opening up of trade with China, Fortune was selected on the society's behalf to journey to China collecting plants. For three years from 1845 he visited the treaty ports along the coast purchasing material from gardens and nurseries. Subsequently he undertook two further expeditions on behalf of the Honourable East India Company collecting seed and tea plants which helped lay the foundation of the Indian tea industry. His fourth and last journey (1860–62) was mainly to Japan where he collected among other plants *Cryptomeria japonica* (Oxford Index). Hoping to introduce this tree also to Scotland or England, he named this tree a Japanese cedar, as the term “cedar” refers to a conifer tree yielding highly esteemed timber. The European climate was not suitable for it, but in Northern India, notably in Darjeeling he found that the tree could well adapt to the climate, as well as to Sikkim, where this tree can be found all over, even as high as in an altitude of 2,900 m (Figure 2).

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Figure 2. A Japanese cedar tree next to the Mani Lakhang prayer-wheel temple in Lachen, Sikkim, at 2,900 m elevation.

This tree was introduced as a timber tree to make tea boxes in Darjeeling and Sikkim. In fact, both areas form the Sikkim Himalaya from a geographical, geological and botanical perspective (Rai and Rai, p. 9) and they yield excellent tea, although only Darjeeling-tea has worldwide renown. When traveling through South Sikkim, on my way from Gangtok to Namchi, I came across tea fields (Figure 3). And in Gangtok numerous tea shops offer various qualities of black tea from Sikkim and Darjeeling.

The cedar tree in Sikkim is growing fast, even faster than that in Japan, and easily reaches a height of 30 m. Its wood is described as soft, light and fragrant. It is also insect-proof. The tree can grow in altitudes from 900-2,100 m, but it thrives best from 1,200-1,800 m (Cowan and Cowan, p. 143).

I was told by local people that the custom of making tea boxes from the *dhupi* tree, the local Nepalese name of *sugi*, was abandoned, because the tea was permeated by the smell of the wood. Back in Kyoto, I interviewed the owner of the Araki-Ikkyūen tea shop in the Nishijin area to understand, whether Japanese tea boxes are eventually made of *sugi*. In fact, the Japanese also use, and still today, *sugi* for tea boxes.

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However, in Japan the inside of the box is lined by a layer of tin, to keep the tea dry, and so that the smell of the wood cannot permeate the tea leaves.



Figure 3. On a trip from Gangtok to Namchi (South Sikkim) I came across this tea field, just under flowering Himalayan cherry trees (in November!), *Prunus cerasoides*, and *dhupi* trees, *Cryptomeria japonica*. *Dhupi* is the Nepalese name for *sugi*.



Figure 4. A tea box made of *sugi*, belonging to the Araki-Ikkyūen tea shop, Omiya-Kuramaguchi (Kamigyo-ku), Kyoto.



Figure 5. Inside of the tea box, lined with zinc

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It was really surprising to witness the history, impact and ramification of various aspects of Japanese tea-making process in the Sikkim Himalayas.

Names	Scientific	English	Nepali
	<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i>	Japanese cedar	dhupi tarpin

REFERENCES

[1] Cowan A.M. and Cowan J.M. *The Trees of Northern Bengal: Including Shrubs, Woody Climbers, Bamboos, Palms and Tree Ferns*. Bengal: Secretariat Book Depot, 178 p., 1929.

[2] Oxford Index. Oxford University Press

<http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095830205> [accessed April 25, 2013]

[3] Rai T. and Rai L. *Trees of the Sikkim Himalaya*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company. 120 p., 1994.