On the evening of Saturday, July 4, 2009, my fellow travelers and I sat eating dinner outside the Grand Bazaar in Ürümqi, the capital of China’s Xinjiang Uighur (also spelled “Uyghur”) Autonomous Region. To one side of us, a man sold boiled sheep heads piled in a chaotic, furry stack on a food cart. Boiling had tightened their lips, so the sheep heads all possessed rictus grins. On the other side of our table, a woman served noodle soup in big bowls. The noodles were thick and long, hand-pounded that day. All of us had the noodle soup, but none chose a boiled sheep head. The scene there was lively and festive, with various food carts serving regional foods and hundreds of people at tables.

As we were eating, I noticed two black-clad Chinese security men with machine guns patrolling along the outskirts of the bazaar. They wore body armor and looked completely out of place. I leaned over to my traveling companion Tiger Guan. “Does that look very weird to you?” I gestured in the direction of the soldiers.

Tiger put down his chopsticks. “Yes, that is not anything we have seen before. Why would they carry machine guns around here?”

The two men walked by, and we did not see them again. But their presence seemed foreboding somehow.

The next morning, we departed Ürümqi and flew east toward Zhongning County in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region to see the annual goji (Lycium spp., Solanaceae) berry harvest. That afternoon, on July 5, 2009, Chinese security forces and Uighur demonstrators clashed in the same spot we had dined the evening before by the Grand Bazaar. That day and the days that followed became infamous as the Ürümqi riots.1 By many accounts, the Uighur demonstrators turned violent, and the ensuing battle between them and the Chinese security forces left almost 200 Chinese dead and many more wounded. Hundreds of Uighurs were arrested. Many disappeared and remain unaccounted for. On that day and at that time, in the name of security, a crackdown on the Uighur people of Xinjiang by the Han Chinese government commenced in earnest, a campaign now widely acknowledged as genocide.
A harvester holds two *Rhodiola rosea* roots harvested just moments before. Harvesters have about two months to harvest, due to heavy mountain snows. ©2021 Chris Kilham

At the time of our trip, about 70% of the population of Xinjiang was Uighur and small percentages of Mongolians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Manchu, Tajiks, and Tartars, and about 30% was Han Chinese. The Uighur are a predominantly Muslim Turkic ethnic group indigenous to Xinjiang. They have chafed at Chinese rule since the region was “incorporated” into China by Mao Tse-tung (Zedong) and the then-new Chinese communist government in 1949. Clashes between Uighur and Han Chinese date back to the 1950s and coincide with the beginning of the Chinese government-sponsored migration of Han Chinese to the region, which the Uighur people resent.

The Set Up

In July 2009, I traveled with several people to explore various botanicals across northern China and along the old Silk Road trading route, from Xinjiang in the far northwest to Heilongjiang in the far northeast. Botanicals of interest to us on that mission included rhodiola* (Rhodiola rosea, Crassulaceae), goji, schisandra (*Schisandra chinensis*, Schisandraceae), and eleuthero (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*, Araliaceae).

My traveling companions included Peter Sun, Tiger Guan, Sheila Guan, and two videographers, Chuen Chuen and Ching Shenglong. Peter, Tiger, and Sheila worked for botanical companies in China and were helping source ingredients for a new product that for a brief time was marketed as an instant adaptogenic herbal drink under the name VIV. Our trip and investigations were funded by entrepreneur Peter Spiegel, CEO of infomercial-based Ideal Living. The two videographers were on board to help us produce a video that I would host, documenting our travels and investigations.

Journey to the Mountains of Heaven

On July 1, a few days before the Ürümqi riots, our team of six assembled at Shanghai’s frantically busy Hongqiao International Airport, the city’s main hub for domestic flights. The mad press of travelers through Hongqiao vividly demonstrated the imponderable density of China’s population, more than 1.3 billion people at that time. We boarded a fully packed Boeing 737 and set off west for Ürümqi. We planned a busy pan-China itinerary. Both Tiger and Peter Spiegel expressed concern for my safety due to reports of ongoing conflicts between Uighur people and the Han Chinese, but I felt very much at ease. I would rather engage in ethno-botanical explorations and take care to avoid hazards than stay off the trail. This type of travel and investigation is what I know and love.

* In this article, “rhodiola” refers to *Rhodiola rosea* (Crassulaceae), not *R. crenulata*, which is more commonly found in the Tibet Autonomous Region and the southwestern Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan.²

The purpose of our journey to Xinjiang was to see and document the regional trade of *Rhodiola rosea*. Derived commercially either from a few regions of Siberia (including the Altai, Lake Baikal, and Primorsky Krai) or from the Tian Shan region of northwestern China, an extract of rhodiola would be the centerpiece of Ideal Living’s new product. Rhodiola root has remarkably broad biological activities, including anticancer properties, and traditional and modern uses (many of them clinically documented) that include fighting fatigue and combating stress. Rhodiola also can help protect the brain against oxygen deprivation, which can help treat altitude sickness; enhance overall immune function; and promote healthy sexual function. Rhodiola’s phytochemical constituents are well known and studied, and the root’s beneficial activities are largely attributed to a group of pharmacologically active compounds collectively known as rosavins. In studies of rhodiola and mental function, rhodiola extract helped improve various parameters including attention, memory, thought formation, calculating, evaluating, planning, and overall learning. Thus, it can be said that *R. rosea* is a cognition-enhancing agent.³⁻⁶

* *Rhodiola rosea* is a first-rate adaptogen, a term coined in 1947 by Russian scientist Nikolaï Lazarev to describe certain herbs that enhance the “state of non-specific resistance” to stress. The root and its extracts demonstrate an extraordinary safety profile and offer broad benefits for body and mind, specifically promoting adaptation to forms of physical and mental stress. In general, rhodiola promotes energy, endurance, and stamina, imparting a palpable sense of overall vitality. It is popular in areas where it grows, in Arctic regions of Europe, Asia, and North America, and is often consumed infused in alcohol. I have seen rhodiola roots in bottles of vodka sold at roadside stands in the Siberian Altai. The roots turn the vodka bright red.
In various published human clinical studies, rhodiola has been shown to improve strength, endurance, stamina, physical work capacity, recovery time from exertion, motor coordination, and cardiovascular health measurements. Rhodiola extract decreases fatigue and helps a person recover from exhaustion. Rhodiola extract is also considered a sports performance aid and was part of secret Russian athletic training and performance programs in the 1960s. In every respect, rhodiola seemed the right candidate for a star position in this new product.3-6

The largest autonomous region in China, Xinjiang was historically an important intersection along the Silk Road, a busy network of east/west trading routes that connected Asia and Europe and which was especially heavily traveled between the second century BCE and the 1700s CE. Xinjiang was like the hub of a great trading wheel. Also known as East Turkistan, the region borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It was a cultural, political, social, economic, and religious connecting point. People of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities traveled to and through Xinjiang. Xinjiang is about 642,800 square miles in area, slightly larger than Iran, and boasts great natural beauty and natural resources, including many of the largest oil, gas, and coal reserves in all of China. Xinjiang has about 25 million inhabitants, a population slightly less than that of the city of Shanghai. The relatively sparsely populated region grows huge amounts of corn (Zea mays, Poaceae), rice (Oryza sativa, Poaceae), millet (various genera and species in the Poaceae family), sorghum (Sorghum spp., Poaceae), tomatoes (Solanum lycopersicum, Solanaceae), and fruits and is a gigantic force in the global cotton (Gossypium spp., Malvaceae) trade. Xinjiang also features the vast Tian Shan system of mountain ranges, whose name means “Mountains of Heaven.” Xinjiang is the epicenter of the rhodiola trade in China.

The medicinal plant knowledge of the Uighur is known as traditional Uighur medicine, or TUM. Combining practices from traditional Chinese medicine, Greek medicine, Indian Ayurveda, Egyptian medicine, and Arabian medicine, TUM draws upon the diverse traditions of Xinjiang’s neighboring countries and territories in a system of medicine that is about 2,500 years old. TUM uses approximately 1,000 plant species, of which about 450 are most popularly employed. Uighur formulas are well known, and various traditional Uighur botanical formulas are patent medicines. Many of the plants used in TUM are aromatic, and one study identified 86 such plants.15,16

The Nalati Grassland and the majestic emerald Borohoro Shan, part of the greater Tian Shan mountain range.
Photo ©2021 Chris Kilham

The Uighur Genocide7-14

The ongoing genocide of the Uighur people by the Chinese government is not a matter of debate or opinion. China vociferously denies the genocide, even as hundreds of eyewitness reports, satellite images, and smuggled photos tell a very different and horrifying story.

Imprisonment, torture, rape, and violence perpetrated against the Uighur are common. Their homes are being destroyed, their mosques bulldozed, and many are now forced to work in China’s cotton (Gossypium spp., Malvaceae) trade. The Uighur also are being “re-educated” to abandon their heritage and become happy and cooperative members of China’s bustling economy.

These and other atrocities are well documented by international human rights organizations, major media outlets, and other reputable sources. Most recently, in April 2021, Human Rights Watch published an extensive, 53-page report detailing China’s crimes against humanity targeting Uighurs.
The Uighur people enjoy a long history with *R. rosea* and due to geography have probably traded in this plant more than any other group. Various species of the genus *Rhodiola* grow throughout China, while *R. rosea* is reportedly found only in mountainous areas of Xinjiang, Hebei, and Shanxi provinces. The vast Tian Shan range is greater in size than the mountains of Hebei and Shanxi, and holds the greatest volume of *R. rosea* compared to the rest of China. The wild supply of *R. rosea* used to be plentiful, and thus the Uighurs, who herd and live semi-nomadic lives, would have harvested the root from the wild and traded it, as with other botanicals in the vast and biologically diverse Xinjiang region.17

As is the case with other root products, including *Panax ginseng* (Araliaceae) and *E. senticosus*, trade in *R. rosea* involves harvesting, drying, making various preparations, distribution, and sales, thus involving a diverse group of people with varying and related talents. Use of rhodiola requires uprooting/killing the entire plant since the root is the desired part. The brief seasonal availability of the root — only after the melting of the alpine snow in early summer and before the coming of the snow again about a month or two later — means most Uighur activity harvesting and drying the root happens during the summer. During other months, there are other activities to tend to, including herding and the gathering and preparation of other botanicals.

After our five-hour flight, we touched down in Ürümqi. Once there, we stretched our legs and waited an hour or more for a smaller commuter flight that delivered us to a tiny airstrip apparently near nothing else, at Walani, which lies amid the famous Nalati Grassland along the splendid Borohoro Shan mountain range. Nalati, a subalpine meadow also known as the Sky Grassland, is part of a greater area, the Gongnaisi Grassland.

At Walani, we gathered our luggage, video equipment, and day packs and met both our driver and Chang, a rhodiola supplier. Chang and the people he would introduce us to were all Uighur. Though Chang is typically a Han surname, Uighur and other ethnic groups have intermarried for centuries. Our destination was Yining, also known as Ghulja. We packed all our gear into a van and then motored along Nalati with its variety of glistening golden and green grasses, all the while skirting the splendid Borohoro Shan, also known as Alatau Borohoro, a picturesque emerald mountain range that is part of the greater Tian Shan network of mountains, and which stretches from Ürümqi in the east to Kazakhstan in the west.

Until our trip, I had not known about either the Nalati or the Borohoro Shan. But they were among the most magnificent places I have ever seen. As we drove through the Nalati, the grasses looked soft and pliable. But when I hiked out into the grassland, I discovered that while some grasses were pliable grains, others were sturdy clusters of razor-sharp golden spikes. In other areas, baled hay waited to be trucked to storage. As we traveled, we saw many herders on horseback moving sheep and cattle. Uighur people traditionally keep sheep, cattle, and camels, and could be seen herding all over the Xinjiang countryside. They often stopped road traffic as they crossed with livestock, and always seemed to have the right of way.

Along the Nalati and Borohoro Shan, we observed a super-abundance of milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*, Asteraceae), whose bright pink blossoms thrust out from thorny green leaves by the thousands. But the most abundant wild plant we saw was wild cannabis (*Cannabis sativa*, Cannabaceae), which grew everywhere that grains or fruits grow as weeds and wild grasses are abundant.
did not. Cannabis is abundant beyond one’s wildest imagination in that region and all along the Silk Road. I had previously seen hundreds of miles and millions of tons of cannabis just north of Xinjiang in the Siberian Altai a few years before. According to Clarke and Merlin in their epic work *Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany* (University of California Press, 2016), that entire area embracing the Altai and Xinjiang was where cannabis re-emerged after the last ice age about 12,000 years ago.\(^\text{18}\) The sheer volume of biomass is almost unimaginable. And yes, the cannabis is psychoactive; it is not wild hemp. As a responsible ethnobotanist, I performed a bioassay to settle that matter.

As we rode along, we passed small villages and lonely settlements of low, mud brick homes. Many places along the way were made with brick from yellow clay found in that area. We saw cows, sheep, goats, farmers on horses, tractors carrying groaning loads of watermelons (*Citrullus lanatus*, Cucurbitaceae) and golden melons (*Cucumis melo*, Cucurbitaceae). Stands along the road sold fruits, and we stopped for flat peaches (*Prunus persica* var. *platycarpa*, Rosaceae), Hami melons (*C. melo*), and apricots (*P. armeniaca*). The fruit was sensational, the way it should be: not hybridized and modified for shipping, but fresh, natural, and juicy and as fragrant and delicious as any fruit can taste. We bought what seemed like entirely too much fruit, yet we polished much of it off in relatively short order. Sheila had me take her photograph posing with a pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*, Cucurbitaceae). Peter Sun was especially excited by the fruit stands. At one point he told me wistfully, “You know, none of us would ever come here in our whole lives if not for this project, to go around with you. We won’t ever see this again. The people we know, they will never come here. This is special for all of us.”

After three hours of spectacular scenery and baskets of devoured fruit, we eventually arrived in Yining at the large and comfortable Wenzhougang Hotel. We dropped our luggage off in our rooms and headed to dinner in the hotel where we enjoyed many regional dishes, including dried beef stew, stuffed buns, local greens, and watermelon. At one point in the meal, I alone was served a cold cooked rooster head, as I was an “honored guest.” I picked at it a bit half-heartedly. In my many journeys to China, I have learned that when I am told I am an honored guest at a restaurant, that typically means that I will be served something unusual, from fried scorpions to ant-covered rice balls to cobra-infused liquor. I often find myself grateful for the kindness and surprised by the fare. There is a certain aspect of “gotcha” to the ritual as well, as the Chinese hosts are eager to see what the foreigner will do when presented with penis soup.

After the last ice age about 12,000 years ago, *Cannabis sativa* emerged here. Cultivation has spread all over the world, but this area remains the global *Cannabis* breadbasket. ©2021 Chris Kilham

The next morning, we quickly ate some tea and buns, packed the van with the gear that we needed for the day, and set off to rhodiola country with all our crew, the driver, and Chang. The road took us west and then north. We passed through lavender (*Lavandula* spp., Lamiaceae) fields just outside of Yining, and we stopped to smell the crop and shoot pictures. Someplace in the Huocheng area — Kokdala, I believe — we pulled into town for breakfast.

At a barbeque in Kokdala, I shot photos of this woman, and she asked me to dance with her. We danced to regional folk music playing on an old radio. ©2021 Chris Kilham

Plant scientist Peter Sun is enraptured by abundant fresh Nalati fruits and the moment. “This is special for all of us,” he said. Photo ©2021 Chris Kilham
Like Americans, Koreans, and Mongolians, the Uighurs love barbeque. They love it so much they make ornate braziers festooned with shiny metal fittings to cook meat skewers. There is great artistry to the Uighur barbeques. In Kokdala we checked out several barbeque spots, settling on one that offered shade and seating. Inside a tented area a woman was hacking meat with a cleaver, listening to music on a small radio. I held up my camera and she gave me an affirmative nod. After I had taken several photos of her, she put the cleaver down, wiped her hands on a cloth, and said something to my friends. “She wants to dance with you,” said Sheila.

The radio was playing some type of regional folk music. I held the woman close in my arms and we danced for a time, both of us smiling broadly. A couple of locals clapped and commented. I spoke to her in English as we danced, assured that the words would mean nothing but the tone would convey my happiness. It was a wonderfully sweet moment.

When it was over, we thanked each other with a hug and smiles, and she went back to hacking meat. I found the situation unusual. In most Muslim areas I have visited, including Malaysia, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Ivory Coast, and parts of India and Borneo, women are typically quite reserved, and none would request a dance, and doubly so in public. In Xinjiang, everyone seemed a bit more relaxed. There were mosques in many places, but nobody was pushing for sharia law. Some women kept their hair tied up in scarves, but many did not, and I saw few women wearing hijab, and none in burqas.

While we waited for barbeque, the woman served us some thick naan bread and kvass, a fermented beverage made from rye (Secale cereale, Poaceae) bread. The kvass was tangy and refreshing. Sometimes flavored with fruit and honey, kvass is a popular Baltic and Slavic drink, and after tea is the beverage of choice in Xinjiang. It typically has a modest alcohol content of 1.5%, so is not an inebriating beverage. Sheila

For the Uighurs, a barbeque offers opportunity for artistic expression. This couple had the most ornate barbeque in Kokdala. ©2021 Chris Kilham

Sheila Guan posed with a mug of kvass, a fermented beverage made from rye bread. “Take my picture. I will do an ad for you,” she joked. ©2021 Chris Kilham

Heading up into the great Tian Shan, herdsmen with camels, sheep, cattle, and other animals share roads with heavy trucks filled with rocks, gravel, and equipment. Courtesy is key. Photo ©2021 Chris Kilham
stood before me and held up a large mug of kvass. “Take my picture. I will do an ad for you.” She liked to ham for the camera.

Our little group was somewhat of an attraction, and locals loitered about watching us. They drank kvass too. We ate barbeque, naan, and kvass, and when we were done, we waved goodbye to the locals, shook some hands, and loaded ourselves back into the van. The woman at the barbeque stood in the sun and waved.

Heading west toward Korgas and the border of Kazakhstan we reached a wide road near Chengxisancun that looked recently graded, heading north up into the high Tian Shan mountains. “This is a gas road, heading up to a big discovery of natural gas in the mountains,” Chang told us. “There are many gas roads going up into the mountains. So this is the way to get to the rhodiola harvest. The harvesters use these roads to reach the mountains.”

The dusty drive featured a lot of road construction with trucks, graders, rollers, and a tremendous amount of earth moving. We headed steadily up in altitude, passing yurts, camels, herders on horseback, sheep, and loads of truck traffic. All along we were treated to majestic views of vast conifer forests and mountain peaks, some snow-capped, stretching off into the far distance. At one point we stopped at a large roadside yurt that was gaily decorated with a bright purple dome top, and we went inside to look at some folk art. The gallery seemed way out of place in a lonely spot on a gas road in the mountains. At a few other places we idled, as large groups of sheep, horses, and a few camels blocked our way.

Harvest in the Mountains of Heaven

After more than an hour of steep travel up into the Tian Shan mountains, we arrived at an open area with trucks and men in work helmets and coveralls. Workers and trucks went busily in and out of a huge hole and tunnel in the side of a mountain. Our driver pointed to the hole and said something to Chang, who passed on the comments to Tiger. “Look at the hills and you can see [the harvesters].”

Dotting the steep slopes of the Tian Shan, men with picks swung away at the ground. There were a couple of dozen at work. I asked Chang if the rhodiola harvest was legal, or if the harvesters needed permits. He shook his head. “No, it is not legal. The harvesters are supposed to get permits, but the permits are expensive, and the money just goes to local officials. Who cares about them anyway? They don’t do anything. Usually, the harvesters don’t get caught.”
The implications of this permit-free harvesting were that alongside any legal trade with official Chinese documentation there existed a parallel Uighur chain of trade, with somewhat more money in the pockets of harvesters, and less red tape.

I asked about the harvest season. “Mostly the harvesters can start in late June or early July,” Chang said. “After the end of August there is too much snow, so the harvest is done. It is not much time. They have to work very hard, so they come up early in the morning on their motorcycles, and they stay all day. They bring some food and water or tea. All the rhodiola needed for the year gets harvested in just two months. These people can make most of their income for a year if they work hard.”

We were a little above 3,000 meters (9,843 feet) at the gas find, and there was still snow in many places on the slopes, and all over the rocky peaks. The mountains towered over us. We got out of the van, collected our cameras and day packs, and set off on a narrow and steep trail leading higher up into the mountains. The slopes were precipitous, and falling would mean injury or death. We threaded our way higher and higher up the slopes until we reached a small group of harvesters swinging slender picks and digging rhodiola roots out of the ground.

We approached the harvesters and greeted them with waves and hellos. They seemed surprised and pleased. Chang, Tiger, and Peter spoke with them, explaining who we were and what we were doing, shooting photos and video and seeing how they harvested the rhodiola. When we showed them our cameras, they all readily assented and laughed, as if having their photographs taken was the funniest thing in the world. They seemed endlessly good-humored and very hard-working. Each harvester was digging roots and filling one or more sacks. Chang said that the harvesters, all local Uighurs, knew to avoid digging younger roots and concentrated on older ones.
The slopes of the mountains were covered with thousands of wild rhodiola plants, many of them in bloom. We were told that the interior of the Tian Shan, where there were no roads, was filled with rhodiola, but getting it out was impractical due to inaccessibility. Looking at the geography of the Tian Shan range, this would mean that there is an enormous quantity of inaccessible rhodiola throughout the entire area. Still, gas and oil exploration in that region likely means that eventually, many inaccessible parts of the Tian Shan will be breached by roads. Anywhere there is an available slope, harvesters can work.

We moved from one cluster of harvesters to another, threading narrow paths higher in altitude. We hiked further up the slopes, took photographs, spoke with some of the harvesters, and shot video. The majestic views stretched far into the distance. We stayed for hours, ate box lunches while precariously perched on the trail near a gulley of deep snow, and watched the industrious rhodiola harvesters.

**The Rhodiola Cowboys**

In late afternoon, after a good long walkabout high in the Tian Shan, we made our way cautiously down from a vertiginous spot up on the slopes to our van near the entrance of the gas tunnel. We packed our gear back into the van and set off down the mountains, heading south toward the lowlands and to Chang’s home. The brief time we were in his company, I found Chang friendly, helpful, and straightforward. He seemed happy to show us the rhodiola trade, and evidently was proud of his work.

As we rode from high altitude down into the lowlands, a setting sun and longer shadows chased us along. We were afforded yet more majestic views, of smaller hills and fields and lonely spots. Chang’s house and property were situated along a small road far out in the middle of what seemed like nowhere, with no other buildings or development of any kind within view. We drove the van up to the house. In the yard near the house sat several men, who Chang said were there to help him buy rhodiola. Chang led us inside where we met his wife, a red-cheeked woman who looked like she had performed hard work her entire life. She was warm and friendly and welcomed us, and promptly busied herself preparing tea.

Tea is a bit of a misnomer, in that it suggests a singular beverage. But hospitality is an important dimension of Islam, and guests should not go hungry. Mrs. Chang made a big pot of piping hot tea, and served with it a large, thick type of round regional bread made in a wide pan over an open fire. Accompanying the bread was a thick butter, which was tangy due to lack of refrigeration and spread on the bread heavily like cream cheese, and honey to drizzle on top. We drank our tea from bowls. The combination of the tea and the homemade bread liberally smeared with tangy butter and honey was delicious. We ate bread, drank tea, took photos, and lounged around a bit, waiting for the rhodiola harvesters.

Just before dusk, they came roaring down out of the last of the foothills, making a great racket with their 125cc motorbikes. They looked like a bunch of hard-riding train robbers in a John Ford western, a cloud of dust swirling behind them as they drove toward Chang’s. From that moment, I have thought of them only as the “Rhodiola Cowboys.”

Hard working and hard riding, these harvesters arrived at Chang’s to sell their day’s rhodiola harvest. They reminded me of cowboys in a John Ford film.
Several of the men pulled up to Chang’s with their bikes idling and asked what the price for the day was. The buyers told them, and the harvesters, who had their daily harvest strapped to their motorcycles, dismissed the offer out of hand, turned around and headed off in a roar. “They’ll be back in a few minutes,” Chang told us.

Sure enough, after no time at all, the Rhodiola Cowboys returned, complaining about the crummy price that Chang was offering. One leaned insouciantly back against his motorcycle, doing a totally passable James Dean. They were also smiling, as if they were obligated to go through this game, claiming outrage. “This happens every day,” another buyer told us. “They’re all friends. This never stops.”

The Buy

After various complaints and half-hearted insults had been offered, the rhodiola harvesters untied their sacks of root and got down to business. The setup was identical to what I have seen in other collection places all over the world. The buyers would take a harvester’s sack and then empty it out onto the ground, combing through for rocks and getting rid of large clods of dirt. The harvester would watch with a keen eye. Once that inspection was done, the buyers would put all the roots back into the sack and then weigh it, using a simple stick and weight balance. The harvesters would watch, making sure they were not being shorted. The buyer and harvester would agree on the weight of the sack.

Once the weight was established, the buyer would produce a small notebook from one pocket and a calculator from another. He marked down the weight of the sack of rhodiola and the name of the harvester, and then calculated the price of the sack. The harvester would watch that process as well, and the two would agree on the price on the calculator display.

As a final step, the buyer would pull a wad of cash from another pocket and count out what was owed to the harvester. Once the transaction was completed, the harvester would hop onto his motorcycle and ride off in the setting sun.

I asked Tiger to find out from Chang what were the next steps for the rhodiola. After a bit of reconnaissance, he came back to me. “This rhodiola will stay here tonight. Then, tomorrow it will go to another place for cleaning and drying. Then, it will be bought and go for extraction.”

But First, a Feast

We had seen the rhodiola harvest in the Tian Shan and watched the buying process at Chang’s. As the sun set, our thoughts turned to dinner, and Tiger wasted no time formulating a plan. Chang knew of a restaurant in a small town nearby, and 11 of us packed into the van and onto motorcycles and headed off to dinner. Our numbers had swollen, and this was cause for a big meal.

At the restaurant, Tiger took immediate charge, ordering enough food for the foreign legion. Many types of vegetables, fish, meat, rice, and noodles wound up on our table, with dishes piled on top of one another. We also drank baijiu, the Chinese national alcohol, typically made with sorghum and rice. Somewhat unusual smelling, baijiu is nobody’s sipping choice. It is meant to be shot, and we did a few rounds before calling it a day.
Over-fed and a bit buzzed from the baijiu, we piled back into our van after saying thank you and bidding goodbye to Chang and his buyers and headed east back to Yining. We arrived dog tired at 1 am.

The Bizarre and the Bazaar

Even though we had gotten in late, we were up bright and early, fed and in the van by 9 am. We headed east again, back in the direction of Walani, once more traversing the Nalati grassland and the Borohoro Shan. The view was every bit as splendid heading east as it had been traveling west.

Early afternoon at Walani, we got onto a small plane with our gear and flew to Ürümqi, where we loaded our luggage and goods into two taxi vans, drove across town, and checked into the very strange Yema International Hotel, which featured a few narrow halls that led to an indecorous back lot, a petrified forest behind the hotel, and room calls propositioning me for “sex massage.” Behind the desk, a large cast map of the Silk Road dominated the wall, showing the ancient trading route and the position of Ürümqi on that route.

After checking in, we met in the hotel lobby and headed to the herbal market at the famous Grand Bazaar, where we saw large displays of regional herbs, and many displays of *Cordyceps sinensis* (Cordycipitaceae), in all different grades. The cordyceps was clearly the main attraction of the herbal market, and some varieties were selling for obscene amounts. After wandering the herbal market, we checked out the rest of the bazaar, which was a total letdown. The buildings were made in an attractive Islamic design, but the market sold the same kind of goods you can find anywhere at street booths in Asia: cheap knives, sneakers, poor-quality binoculars, some clothing, keychain ornaments, and clumsy-looking leather goods. We expected something remarkable from antiquity, but that was just a fantasy of times past. In the evening, we ate outdoors and enjoyed hacked lamb, bread, kvass, noodles, and local vegetables.

We spent the next day wandering Ürümqi, visiting sites of interest, eating some local foods, drinking kvass, and imagining what the place must have been like back when the Silk Road was thriving and herds of camels carried silk, herbs, and other treasures across Eurasia. Behind the Yema Hotel, we walked through a petrified forest of 200-million-year-old trees, all of them huge and as hard as stone. The place was entirely bizarre and reminded me of lyrics from Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi”: “They took all the trees and put them in a tree museum.”

That evening, after thoroughly touristic activities, we ate outdoors again by the Grand Bazaar, when and where we saw the Chinese security forces with their machine guns.

By any standard, our four days among Uighur people was insufficient to gain deep knowledge of their lives in Xinjiang. But those we encountered were a largely cheerful, friendly, and industrious people, hewing to many traditional practices like herding and farming, some living in yurts and attending mosques. We were welcomed and comfortable in their company, and we enjoyed the time greatly. It is heartbreaking to know that these people are being oppressed, and that their cultural uniqueness is being scrubbed out of existence. What has happened to Chang and the rhodiola harvesters and buyers, I cannot say. My experience with the Uighur rhodiola traders of Xinjiang was but a brief, if memorable, moment in time.

References


Chuen Chuen and me, riding camels in the Taklamakan Desert. ©2021 Ching Shenglong