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***Pterocymbium* R. Br (Sterculioideae, Malvaceae), a genus new to China and suggestions for conservation**

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1 ***Pterocymbium* R. Br (Sterculioideae, Malvaceae), a genus new to**
2 **China and suggestions for conservation**

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16 **Abstract**

17 The genus *Pterocymbium* R. Br. is new to China, and the remarkable discovery is
18 reported in the present study. *P. macranthum* Kosterm., a winged-boot tree published in
19 1962, has recently been spotted in the border regions of China and Laos. The main
20 detailed anatomical characteristics of the flower are photographed, and supplementary
21 descriptions of the species are made based on fresh materials, herbarium collections,
22 and available literature. Historically, the tree is only recorded in Southcentral Myanmar
23 to Northern and Southwestern Thailand. The new record in the present study extends
24 the known geographical range of *P. macranthum* to the northern edge of the Asian
25 tropics and contributes to the knowledge of the tree flora both in China and Southeast
26 Asia. Aided by drones, the population size of China has been rapidly assessed, and ca.
27 1000 individuals were recognized from high-resolution photos in ca. 2000 ha area.
28 Herbaria were prepared and deposited in the herbarium of Xishuangbanna Tropical
29 Botanical Garden, Chinese Academy of Sciences (HITBC).

30 **Keywords**

31 *Pterocymbium*, Malvaceae, biogeography, Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot,
32 transboundary biodiversity conservation

33

34 **Introduction**

35 The genus *Pterocymbium* was established by Robert Brown (1844: 219), and it
 36 currently includes 12 species and one variety, which are distributed from the Eastern
 37 Himalayas (NE India) through the Indo-China Peninsula (Thailand, Myanmar, Laos,
 38 Cambodia, Viet Nam and Malaysia) to some Pacific islands (Indonesia, Philippines,
 39 Papua New Guinea and Fiji) (POWO 2023). *Pterocymbium* was previously placed in
 40 the Sterculiaceae, but based on molecular data, the genus is now placed under the
 41 subfamily Sterculioideae, of the family Malvaceae (Bayer et al. 1999). Studies based
 42 on chloroplast genomic data showed that *Pterocymbium* is a sister genus to *Scaphium*,
 43 and, together with the genera *Cola* and *Firmiana*, form the *Cola* clade of the subfamily
 44 Sterculioideae (Wilkie et al. 2006; Li et al. 2021).

45 The species of the *Pterocymbium* genus have been rarely studied in the past decades,
 46 and little is known about their biological and ecological characteristics. Among the
 47 existing literature, Nurshahidah et al. (2013) pointed out that leaf venation and trichome
 48 characteristics have good taxonomic value to be used for taxonomy, and Singh et al.
 49 (2013) confirmed *P. tinctorium* (Blanco) Merr. as new to mainland India. In contrast to
 50 other species in the genus, the IUCN Critically Endangered, Fiji endemic species *P.*
 51 *oceanicum* A.C.Sm. (Rivers 2016) has drawn more attention. Keppel et al. (2021)
 52 showed that *P. oceanicum* has a narrow ecological niche, that its habitats are degraded,
 53 and that its population may be threatened by an alien species of similar ecological niche
 54 (the invasion of *Spathodea campanulata* P.Beauv.). Only 433 individuals of *P.*
 55 *oceanicum* A.C.Sm were found after an intensive fieldwork survey of its largest
 56 subpopulation and three newly found stands. Subsequently, Taoi et al. (2022) estimated
 57 its global population in over 1670 individuals in Fiji.

58 During an expedition to survey the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus* L.) forage
 59 plants in Shangyong Sub-Reserve, Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve
 60 (hereinafter referred to as SSR-XNNR), Mengla County, in February 2023, a
 61 magnificent emergent deciduous tree with full bloom flowers was encountered in the
 62 transboundary region between China and Laos. After carefully studying the living
 63 plants and specimens, and comparing them with available literature and herbarium

64 resources, we confirmed that the species and the genus are new to China.

65 In the present study, population size of *P. macranthum* in SSR-XNNR was assessed,
66 and an IUCN endangerment category was designated. In addition, forest communities
67 contain and dominated by the tree were briefly described, implications of the new
68 discovery and conservation suggestions were summarized and discussed.

69 **Materials and methods**

70 **Study area.** SSR-XNNR, located in the southernmost part of Yunnan Province, has a
71 long border with Laos. The climate is dominated by the southwest monsoon, with high
72 rainfall from May to October and low rainfall from November to April. The annual
73 mean temperature is 21.0°C, with a historical extreme low temperature of 8.9°C. The
74 annual mean precipitation is 1700.0 mm, with more than 85% occurring in the rainy
75 season and a historical extreme minimum annual rainfall of 1322 mm. Climate data
76 refers to the historical record data of the township of Mohan, where SSR-XNNR is
77 located.

78 **Population size assessment.** Given that no specific population endangerment status
79 assessment has been carried out for this species in its range states at present, neither in
80 Thailand nor in Myanmar. For the sake of guiding the development of a management
81 plan, we undertook a rapid population size estimate using high-resolution photos from
82 a drone (DJI M300, mounted with a 31.7–556.2 mm of 35 mm equivalent focal length
83 zoom lens, 20-megapixel COMS camera, Zenmuse H20T). By reviewing the habitats
84 of *Pterocymbium* spp., we set the priority survey areas to the broad river valley, below
85 1000 m in elevation. In order to obtain high-quality aerial images without losing much
86 working efficiency, we kept the flight height around 100 m above the ground, and when
87 there was a suspected individual, we lowered the drone's flight height or zoomed in the
88 lens for confirmation. Canopy heights and associated tree species in the targeted areas
89 were measured and identified with the assistance of the drone simultaneously.
90 Flowering and fruiting *P. macranthum* individuals were then identified and counted
91 directly from photos. We also recorded the distribution and interviewed local people to
92 evaluate current threats for the population. The main concerns were focused on whether
93 the tree had been noticed in the past, usages, and whether domestic or international

94 trades of the timber had been seen. The conservation assessment of the newly-recorded
95 species was evaluated using the IUCN categories of threat (IUCN 2012).

96 <insert Fig. 1 here>

97 **Results**

98 *Pterocymbium* **R. Br.** in Benn., Pl. Jav. Rar. 219, t. 45. 1844; Kosterm., Reinwardtia 1:
99 41. 1950.

100 **Chinese vernacular name:** 舟翅桐属.

101 **Description.** Deciduous trees. Leaves simple, margin entire, spirally arranged.
102 Inflorescence terminal or subterminal on branchlets, paniculate. Flowers 5-numerous,
103 unisexual, petals absent, appearing before leaves. Calyx large, orange, orange-red or
104 green, campanulate or tubular, 5-lobed, persisting in fruit. Male flowers with 8–10
105 stamens, in a whorl around the base of carpels at the apex of androgynophore, anther
106 2-celled, undeveloped pistil present. Female flowers: ovary 5-locular, sub-connate,
107 each locule with a rudder-like hook at the base outside, basally enclosed by
108 undeveloped anthers; styles sub-connate; stigmas as many as carpels; ovules 2 per
109 locule. Follicles stipitate, endocarp membranous, dehiscent long before maturity,
110 foliaceous, nerves conspicuous. Seed 1–2 per follicle, ovoid or ellipsoid, on the base of
111 the foliaceous endocarp.

112 *Pterocymbium macranthum* **Kosterm. Reinwardtia 6: 295, fig. 13. 1962.**

113 **Fig. 1. A-M.**

114 **Chinese vernacular name:** 大花舟翅桐

115 **Type.** MYANMAR, Mekhrein Chaung, Dawnas Amherst, 14 February 1927,
116 *Parkinson, C.E.* 5218 (lectotype K, photo! [barcode no. K000671560], designated here;
117 isolectotype, K, photo! [barcode no. K000671559]).

118 **Description.** Trees deciduous, bole straight, up to 50 m tall, and 1.5 m in diameter.
119 Bark grey, smooth, exfoliating in small pieces, lenticellate; twigs stout, glabrescent,
120 with prominently raised, large leaf scars. Stipules subulate, caducous. Leaves ovate or
121 cordate, 5–17 × 8–12 cm, leaf blade sub-coriaceous, base cordate, apex acute to
122 acuminate, both surfaces densely pilose when young, glabrescent above, pilose below,
123 with 5–7 palmate basal veins, lateral veins 6–7 pairs, tertiary veins reticulate, midrib

124 conspicuous raised abaxially, margin entire. Inflorescences erect, terminal or
125 subterminal, lax panicle in upper leaf scars, 6–12 cm long, covered with stellate hairs,
126 glabrescent. Pedicel slender, 6–8 mm long, broadened at the apex and articulately
127 attached to the stalk-like, 4 mm long base of the flower. Flower unisexual, orange to
128 orange-red, with male and female flowers on the same plant stalked, in clusters of 3–5,
129 narrowly funnel-shaped, 5-lobed, united $\frac{2}{3}$ at the base, 3–3.5 cm long and 2 cm
130 diameter at apex, the upper part of inner surface sparsely covered with glandular hairs;
131 calyx lobes 6–10 mm long, triangular with red dots scattered, the inner surface and
132 margin densely tomentose; bract caducous; male flowers with (8–) 10 stamens, in a
133 regular ring of the apex of minutely pilose androgynophore, undeveloped pistil covered
134 with short glandular hairs; female flowers with five sub-connate carpels, carpel covered
135 with short glandular hairs, androgynophore minutely pilose; style sub-connate and free
136 apically, curved towards the base, stigmas 5. Fruit of 5 follicles, within a persistent
137 calyx, pendulous, dehiscing before ripening; follicle membranous, winged, boat-shaped,
138 $5\text{--}8 \times 1.5\text{--}2$ cm, with a spur, inner surface of wing glabrous with some red dots, outer
139 surface glabrous or with very sparse stellate hairs, inner surface shiny, outer surface
140 look dull, with a prominent dorsal lobe. Seed 1–2 at the base of each follicle, ellipsoid,
141 wingless, $1.5\text{--}1.8 \times 1.1\text{--}1.2$ cm.

142 **Phenology.** Flowering: February–March; Fruiting: April–May.

143 **Distribution and habitat.** Thailand (Chiang Mai, Lampang, Kanchanaburi),
144 Myanmar (Amherst) (Phengklai, 1995). China: Shangyong, Mengla, Xishuangbanna,
145 Yunnan. Grows in tropical monsoon forests with an elevation of 600–1000 m.

146 **Population size.** Aided by the photos taken by drone, the flowering individuals of
147 *Pterocymbium macranthum* can be easily recognized in the top layer of tropical
148 monsoon forest in the dry season (Fig. 2 A-E). The 5-day rapid fieldwork survey
149 covered an area of ca. 2000 ha, and 1432 aerial photos were obtained, where ca. 1000
150 *P. macranthum* individuals were recognized and counted. Although the total size of the
151 tree distribution range in SSR-XNNR is relatively large, we find one site with ca. 80
152 individuals in a highly clustered distribution, while the other individuals were scattered
153 in the forest.

154 **Current threats.** In the survey, a total of eighteen people, including seven
 155 experienced woodcutters of the past, five forest rangers and six managers from both
 156 forestry and SSR-XNNR management authority were interviewed. No domestic or
 157 international trades or illegal cutting information was identified. The tree had little
 158 usage neither in the past nor at present locally. Three people from SSR-XNNR
 159 management authority had noted the tree before but without further identification work
 160 had been done.

161 **Habitat and community structure.** Distribution sites of *P. macranthum* are
 162 basically located in the riparian areas of SSR-XNNR. Vegetation can be categorized as
 163 tropical monsoon forest.

164 The height of communities that contain or are dominated by *P. macranthum*, is
 165 usually below 30 m and the tree layer is two-storied. The upper layer is around 20–30
 166 m, canopy irregular, coverage ca. 40%, and commonly associated tree species are
 167 *Pterospermum lanceifolium* Roxb. ex DC., *Tetrameles nudiflora* R. Br., *Antiaris*
 168 *toxicaria* Lesch., *Chukrasia tabularis* A. Juss., *Terminalia myriocarpa* Van Huerck et
 169 Muell.-Arg., and *Ficus callosa* Willd., among others. The canopy height of the lower
 170 stratum is below 15 m, which consisted mainly of *Dendrocalamus membranaceus*
 171 Munro, often associated with *Albizia lucidior* (Steud.) Nielsen, *Erythrina stricta* Roxb.
 172 *Dillenia pentagyna* Roxb., and *Aphananthe cuspidata* (Bl.) planch. The understory is a
 173 dense complex of shrubs, vines, grasses, and ferns.

174 **IUCN endangerment category.** Based on the results of the present study and our
 175 experience in southern Yunnan, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, we recommend that *P.*
 176 *macranthum* be designated as category Vulnerable (VU) for attention and conservation
 177 according to the IUCN criteria for evaluating endangerment levels (IUCN 2012).
 178 However, additional surveys are needed, especially in Southeast Asian countries such
 179 as Laos and Myanmar, where the flora remains poorly investigated.

180 <insert Fig. 2 here>

181 **Discussion**

182 Along with the technique development of micro-UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles)
 183 and high-performance airborne photographic system, more and more studies of plant

184 ecology, including vegetation mapping over small to medium-sized regions, have
185 applied the new macroscopic research method, providing new knowledge on both
186 species and ecosystem levels (Olariu et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2022). The approach
187 implemented here to assess the population size of *P. macranthum* sets an excellent
188 example of a rapid estimate of the population size of emergent deciduous trees in
189 tropical montane areas, especially in forests with dangerous animals (elephants) or areas
190 of difficult accessibility.

191 The study area has limited accessibility due to the presence of a population of
192 around 60 wild Asian elephants that pose a high-risk to researchers entering the forest.
193 Consequently, in our efforts to estimate the population size of *Pterocymbium*
194 *macranthum* we could only cover part of this transboundary region. Despite this
195 limitation, we could still conclude that *P. macranthum*'s population size in China is
196 small for the following reasons. First, it is not difficult to notice such giant deciduous
197 trees with hysteranthous habit in the flowering season, its inflorescences are large, with
198 numerous brightly colored flowers. Second, Xishuangbanna is a famous place where
199 plant resources have been long studied by numerous Chinese and foreign botanists, not
200 only for its extreme diverse plants and the largest, best-preserved tropical rainforest in
201 China, but also for its long history and profound ethnobotany culture. Moreover, the
202 flora of Mengla county has been well investigated, with 3170 vascular plants having
203 been recognized in its 6860.84 km² administrative territory (Chen et al. 2013). The fact
204 that *P. macranthum* had not been described earlier suggests that its population size is
205 likely to be small.

206 From the known ranges of *Pterocymbium* spp., only *P. tinctorium* (Blanco) Merr.
207 and its variety *P. tinctorium* var. *javanicum* (R.Br.) Kosterm. have broad ranges, almost
208 sharing the same range as the genus. All other *Pterocymbium* species are found in very
209 limited geographical areas (POWO 2023), most of them probably can only be found in
210 the original locations described in the protologues. This remarkable new record extends
211 northward the known range of both the species and the genus.

212 The habitat of *P. macranthum* in SSR-XNNR is mainly tropical monsoon forest, a
213 similar ecological niche to other species like *P. tinctorum* and *P. oceanicum*, and the

214 tree is an iconic tree species to such forest type, even becoming dominant in some areas
215 (Tripathi et al. 2004; Keppel et al. 2021; Hernandez et al. 2021).

216 Zhu et al. (2015) confirmed that the tropical rainforests of Xishuangbanna are part
217 of the southeast Asia tropical rainforests by analyzing floristics characteristic. They
218 share lots of rainforests typical species like Dipterocarpaceae spp., Euphorbiaceae spp.,
219 Annonaceae spp. and so on, and their rankings of the Importance Value Index are also
220 very similar. However, not many bridging species have been found to the tropical
221 monsoon forest. *P. tinctorium* is a dominant tree species of Asian tropical forests,
222 especially in dry forests. The discovery of its close relative *P. macranthum* in China,
223 further demonstrates that the tropical forest flora of China has powerful connections
224 with tropical Asia.

225 The Chinese flora increases in size at the rate of about 200 vascular plant taxa
226 annually (Du et al. 2020), but most of the new species are herbs, shrubs and vines.
227 National level new records of tree species have become rare in recent decades,
228 especially at a genus level. For example, in the period from 2000 to 2019, there have
229 been 2646 new vascular plants from the top 25 families in China. Of these, only ~69
230 (i.e., 2.6%) species, belonging to Fabaceae, Rosaceae, Rubiaceae and Magnoliaceae,
231 are probably trees. *Pterocymbium macranthum* is a large tree with high potential
232 ornamental and timber value, with its characteristic lofty and cylindrical bole, beautiful
233 tree outline, spreading canopy, blooming before leaves, with a large amount of orange
234 or orange-red colored flowers, similar to some commonly used landscape trees, such as
235 *Mayodendron igneum* (Kurz.) Kurz., *Cassia nodosa* Buch.-Ham.ex Boxb., *Catalpa* spp.,
236 and *Paulownia* spp. We therefore recommend the collection of its germplasm resources
237 and its artificial breeding to assist in the expansion of its population size. Now, the
238 discovery of the beautiful giant tree not only reveals the urgent needs to undertake more
239 surveys in the transboundary regions, but also narrows the gaps between tropical forests
240 in China and Asia. Furthermore, its emergence enriches plant resources, elevates the
241 biodiversity level in China, and brings an amazing plant to mankind for research and
242 landscaping work.

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256

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326

327 Figure 1. *Pterocymbium macranthum* Kosterm. **A** Habit in blooming season and bark
328 characteristics **B** Inflorescence **C** Size of flowers **D** Front view of a flower and hairs
329 inside calyx tube **E** Hairy calyx lobe edges **F** Female flower longitudinal section **G**
330 Androgynophore (female), gynoecium and androecium **H** Size of Androgynophore
331 (leftmost is male) **I** A carpel with 2 ovules **J-M** Leaf characters **J** Veins of leaf basal
332 area and trichome characteristics (abaxial) **K** Venation characteristics (abaxial); **L**
333 trichome characteristics (adaxial glabrous) **M** Size and shape of leaves. Photographed
334 by: Mingxu Zhao.

335

336 Figure 2. Photographs taken in population size survey **A** Formation of *P. macranthum*
337 Kosterm. and *Pterospermum lanceifolium* Roxb. ex DC., those emergent with orange-
338 colored canopies are *P. macranthum*, ca. 80 individuals **B** Side view of a full bloom
339 individual **C** An individual in the initial stage of fruiting period **D**, **E** Top view pictures
340 of Inflorescences and flowers for identification in fieldwork. Photographed by: Jinhua
341 Li and Wende Yan.



