Primula dongchuanensis (Primulaceae),
a new species from northern Yunnan, China

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Abstract
Primula dongchuanensis Z.K.Wu & Yuan Huang, a new species of Primulaceae from Dongchuan of northern Yunnan, China, is described and illustrated. Both morphological and molecular evidence support P. dongchuanensis as a member of the sect. Proliferae. It is similar to P. aurantiaca W.W.Smith & Forrest, but is distinguished by having unique raceme inflorescences. Its distribution, phenology and conservation status are also provided.

Keywords
Primulaceae, Primula dongchuanensis, new species, Yunnan, China

Introduction
Primula Linn. is one of the largest genera of Primulaceae, including about 500 species worldwide. Most Primula species are indigenous to the north temperate zone, with only a few outliers on some mountains of Africa (Ethiopia), tropical Asia (Java and Sumatra) and South America (Hu 1994, Hu and Kelso 1996, Mast et al. 2001). The modern center of diversity of Primula is in southwestern China, with ca 300 species
of 24 sections, most of which occur in western Sichuan, eastern Xizang, and northwestern Yunnan (Hu 1994, Hu and Kelso 1996). Increased exploration across this region results to the discovery and description of new *Primula* species in the past 15 years (Hu and Geng 2003, Wu et al. 2013, Xu et al. 2017a, 2017b, Yang et al. 2017, Ju et al. 2018).

Section *Proliferae* Pax (10:217, 1889) of the genus *Primula* comprises more than 20 species, mainly distributed in Eastern Himalaya and Hengduan Mountain in China. Most species in this section are horticulturally important plants. Morphologically, sect. *Proliferae* shows the distinct character of several whorls of flowers in superimposed umbels and is recognized as a ‘natural’ group in this genus. Previous studies presumed that the sect. *Proliferae* may represent the most primitive group of *Primula* alive today, and take a central position with respect to subsequent evolution and geographical migration in the genus (Richards 1993, 2002). However, molecular phylogenetic evidence posited the opposite conclusion and indicated that the sect. *Proliferae* represents relatively advanced members of *Primula* that exist today (Mast et al. 2001, 2004, Yan et al. 2015).

During the field investigation in the Jiaozi Snow Mountain in Dongchuan of Yunnan, southwestern China in 2011, we found a peculiar population of *Primula* in its vegetative stage on a small patch of alpine meadow near the mountain top. We transplanted some living individuals to Lijiang Alpine Botanical Garden (at elevation of ca. 3200m), northwest of Yunnan and they regained their bloom in subsequent years. The plant has a short rootstock and robust fibrous roots, obovate-oblong to oblanceolate leaves forming a dense rosette and flowers showed great similarity to the species of sect. *Proliferae*, except the inflorescences with obsolete scapes at early anthesis, then elongating to forming raceme at late flowering. We presumed the unusual inflorescence springs from abnormal variations of plant response to a different climate zone and soil type after translocation. After the field investigations in the same locality in 2016 and in 2019, we confirmed that the inflorescences we observed from the translocated individuals are morphologically consistent with those of the wild population. Further molecular phylogenetic analysis revealed it is an undescribed taxon of sect. *Proliferae*. We concluded that the species is new to science and describe it here.

**Materials and methods**

Morphological descriptions and comparisons were based on living plants from the Lijiang alpine botanical garden and in the field, specimens from the herbarium of Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences (KUN), and literatures (Chen and Hu 1990, Hu and Kelso 1996). All morphological characters of *P. dongchuanensis* and its morphological similar species *P. aurantiaca* were measured using a vernier caliper. The conservation status of *P. dongchuanensis* was assessed according to the IUCN Red list Categories and Criteria (IUCN 2017).
Genomic DNA was isolated from silica gel-dried leaves using a modified Cetyl Trimethyl Ammonium Bromide (CTAB) protocol (Doyle and Doyle 1987). The nrDNA and two chloroplast matK and trnH-psbA regions of *P. dongchuanensis* were amplified and sequenced using previously published universal primers (White 1990, Taberlet et al. 1991, Kress and Erickson 2007, Yang et al. 2012). Sequences of the relatives of *P. dongchuanensis* were downloaded from NCBI (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) (Appendix 1). Sequences for each region were aligned with CLUSTALX (Thompson et al. 1997) and then manually adjusted in BIOEDT 7.0 (Hall 1999). Maximum likelihood (ML) methods for phylogenetic estimation were conducted using IQ-TREE v. 1.6.10 under the GTR+G model (Nguyen et al. 2015). Clade supports were evaluated by 10000 bootstrap replicates of nonparametric approximate likelihood-ratio test (SH-alRT) and ultrafast bootstrap approximation approach (UFBoot) (Guindon et al. 2010; Hoang et al. 2018). Pairwise genetic distances among *P. dongchuanensis* and its closest relatives revealed by phylogenetic analyses were calculated using the Kimura 2-parameter method (Kimura 1980).

**Taxonomic treatment**

*Primula dongchuanensis* Z.K.Wu & Yuan Huang, sp. nov. urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:77201399-1
Figs 1, 2, 3A

**Diagnosis.** The new species most resembles *P. aurantiaca*, sharing a similar flower color, leaf shape, efarinose and glabrous, and long calyx parted below the middle. But it can be distinguished by having much smaller stature, inflorescence raceme, scapes nearly obsolete at early anthesis and deep yellow flowers. The main morphological differences between *P. dongchuanensis* and *P. aurantiaca* are summarized in Table 1.

**Type.** CHINA. Yunnan: Jiaozi Snow Mountain, Dongchuan district, ca. 3860 m, 102°55.75’E, 26°9.45’N, July 2016, Z. K. Wu & Yuan Huang, ZKWu2016060 (holotype: KUN!; isotype: KUN!).

**Table 1.** Morphological and phenological comparisons between *Primula dongchuanensis* and *P. aurantiaca*.

| Characters          | *P. dongchuanensis*                          | *P. aurantiaca*                      |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Leaf blade          | 3–6 × 2.0–3.5 cm                             | 4–15 × 1.8–5.0 cm                   |
| Scape               | scape nearly obsolete at early anthesis, elongating to 10 cm at late flowering | scape 4.5–15 cm at anthesis, elongating to 30 cm in fruit |
| Inflorescence       | inflorescences 6–20-flowered arising from leaf rosette at early anthesis, elongating to 10 cm with 2–8 flowers forming solitary racemes at late flowering | umbels 2–4(–6), superimposed, 6–15-flowered |
| Pedicels            | pedicel green, 1–3 cm long, glabrous         | pedicel reddish, 0.3–1.0 cm long, glabrous |
| Bracts              | 1–2, linear                                  | 1, linear                           |
| Flower color        | deep yellow                                  | deep reddish orange                 |
| Flowering time      | late April to early June                     | late May to early July              |
Figure 1. *Primula dongchuanensis* sp. nov. A Habit B Calyx and corolla C Calyx D Thrum flower E Pin flower F Bract.

**Description.** Perennial efarinose herb, glabrous, with a short root stock and 5–10 robust fibrous roots. Leaves forming a dense rosette, leaf blade obovate-oblong to ob lanceolate, 3–6 × 2.0–3.5 cm, base attenuate, decurrent to petiole, margin erose-denticulate, apex rounded, petiole slightly differentiated to 1/3 as long as leaf blade;
Scapes nearly obsolete with “compressed” 6–20-flowered inflorescences arising from leaf rosette at early anthesis, elongating up to 10 cm with 2–8 flowers forming solitary racemes at late flowering; bracts 1–2, linear, 1.0–1.8 cm long, glabrous. Pedicel 1–3 cm, glabrous. Flowers heterostylos. Calyx tubular-campanulate, 6–9 mm long, lobed to 1/2 of its length; lobes lanceolate, each with one prominent midvein, acuminate at apex. Corolla deep yellow; limb 1.2–1.8 cm wide; lobes obleng-ovate, emarginate. Pin flowers: corolla tube 0.8–1.2 cm long; stamens ca. 5 mm above base of corolla tube; style ca. 9 mm. Thrum flowers: corolla tube 0.9–1.4 cm long; stamens ca.
Figure 3. *P. dongchuanensis* and four of its close species **A** *P. dongchuanensis* **B** *P. aurantiaca* **C** *P. cockburniana* **D** *P. chungensis* **E** *P. pulverulenta*.

1.2 cm above base of corolla tube; style ca. 5 mm. Capsule subglobose, ca. 4 mm in diameter, ca. as long as calyx.

**Phenology.** Flowering occurs from late April to early June; fruiting from July to August.

**Distribution and ecology.** *P. dongchuanensis* is only known from the type locality in northern Yunnan, China. The plant has been found on alpine meadow and forest margin at elevation of ca. 3800–4000 m (Fig.2), associated with *Sibbaldia purpurea*.
**Figure 4.** Maximum likelihood tree of new *Primula* species and other *Primula* species based on nuclear ITS, chloroplast *matK* and *trnH-psbA* combined sequenced data, constructed by IQ-TREE under the GTR+G model, clade supports were reported as Shimodaira-Hasegawa approximate Likelihood Ratio Test (SH-aLRT)/Ultrafast Bootstrap Approximation (UFBoot), each estimated by 10000 replicates, and only support value more than 50% were reported.
var. *macropetala* (Murav.) T.T.Yu & C.L.Li, *Oxygraphis glacialis* (Fisch. ex DC) Bunge, *Androsace rigida* Hand.-Mazz. and *Primula faberi* Oliv.

**Etymology.** The epithet of the new species is derived from the name of Dongchuan in northern Yunnan, where the new species was discovered and collected.

**Vernacular name.** Chinese mandarin: dong chuan bao chun (东川报春)

**Molecular evidence.** The phylogenetic tree obtained from ML analysis is shown in Figure 4. Phylogenetic analysis showed that the new species clustered with other sampled species of sect. *Proliferae* and together formed monophyletic clade with a strong support (UFBoot value = 100%, SHaLRT value = 100%), which indicates it is a member of sect. *Proliferae*, and the tree shows that *P. dongchuanensis* is well differentiated from its close relatives; this is consistent with its special morphological characters in sect. *Proliferae*.

**Conservation status.** Currently, *P. dongchuanensis* is only known from the top of Jiaozi Snow Mountain in a single population with fewer than 1000 individuals on ca. 2000 m² occupancy along the alpine meadow. Although there is no obvious population change observed, the original habitat suffered severely from over-grazing based on three field expeditions conducted in 2011, 2016 and 2019. Living collections introduced to Lijiang alpine botanical garden in 2011 were able to flower and set seeds in the following two years, but no individuals were flowering after the fourth year. Other ex-situ conservation actions, such as seed banking, may apply to secure conservation of this unique *Primula* species. According to the guideline of IUCN red list criteria (IUCN 2017), this new species is assessed as ‘Vulnerable’ (VU D1).

**Discussion**

Sect. *Proliferae* Pax is a taxonomically well-known group in *Primula*, characterized by numerous whorls of flowers resembling candelabra (Fig. 3) (Chen and Hu 1990). Phylogenetic analyses by using DNA barcoding confirmed the monophyly of sect. *Proliferae* which could be used in narrowing the scope of identification in *Primula* (Yan et al. 2015). Preliminary molecular phylogenetic analyses in this study supports the view that *P. dongchuanensis* is a member of sect. *Proliferae*, but its molecular closed relatives are not clear yet. Further research is required to clarify the phylogenetic relationship by using enhanced molecular markers with a wider sampling in this section.

Morphologically *P. dongchuanensis* has unique inflorescences architecture compared to other members of sect. *Proliferae*. The racemose inflorescence appears in some *Primula* species, but no report in the sect. *Proliferae* till the addition of *P. dongchuanensis*, which extended the delimitation of sect. *Proliferae* and increased our knowledge of the *Primula* diversity in China. Compared to other species of the sect. *Proliferae* with bigger and upright inflorescences when anthesis begins, *P. dongchuanensis* keeps the racemes in a condensed and short form. This could flow from adaptation to the harsh habit of the mountain top where it is usually very windy and insufficient water in late April and May when it starts anthesis, and the other species of sect. *Proliferae* are usually found in the open and wet alpine meadow and have a late bloom time.
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Appendix I

**Information of samples used for phylogenetic inference in this study.**

| Species                        | Section              | GenBank accession No. | Voucher details |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| *Primula sinensis* Sabine ex Lindl. | Section Auganthus    | JF955776 JN046584 JF978054 | Y2010045       |
| *Primula chapaensia* Gapnep.    | Section Carolinella  | JF955683 JN046494 JF977966 | GBOWS681       |
| *Primula partschiana* Pax       | Section Carolinella  | JF955748 JN046558 JF978028 | Zeng Q. W. s.n. |
| *Primula rugosa* Balakt.        | Section Carolinella  | JF955764 JN046574 JF978044 | Hao 662        |
| *Primula wangi* Chen et C. M. Hu | Section Carolinella  | JF955791 JN046599 JF978067 | Hao 666        |
| *Primula becherifolia* Franch.  | Section Cortusoides  | JF955715 JN046526 JF977995 | Y2010035       |
| *Primula polynema* Franch.      | Section Cortusoides  | JF955749 JN046559 JF978029 | GLM103026      |
| *Primula septemloba* Franch.    | Section Cortusoides  | JF955767 JN046575 JF978045 | Hao & Yan 989  |
| *Primula blattariformis* Franch. | Section Malvacea     | JF955666 JN046477 JF977949 | Zhao Y. J. 029  |
| *Primula malvacea* Franch.      | Section Malvacea     | JF955720 JN046530 JF978000 | Zhao Y. J. 069  |
| *Primula oreodora* Franch.      | Section Obconicalisteri | JF955740 JN046550 JF978020 | Hao 710        |
| *Primula dongchuanensis*        | Section Proliferae   | MN181436 MN181434 MN181435 | ZKWu2016060    |
| *Primula anidosora* Balf. f. et Forr. | Section Proliferae | KP638609 KP638689 KP638569 | Y2013062       |
| *Primula aurantiaca* W. W. Smith et Fletcher | Section Proliferae | HM018224 HM018469 HM018175 | Hao 536        |
| *Primula bulleyana* Forr.       | Section Proliferae   | HM018235 HM018480 HM018186 | Wu Z.K. 2004018 |
| *Primula burmannica* Balf. f. et Word | Section Proliferae | KP638614 KP638694 KP638574 | Y2013010       |
| *Primula chrysochlora* Balf. f. et Word | Section Proliferae | KP638616 KP638696 KP638576 | Y2011005       |
| *Primula chungensis* Balf. f. et Word | Section Proliferae | HM018226 HM018471 HM018177 | Hao 465        |
| *Primula cockburniana* Hemsl.   | Section Proliferae   | KP638621 KP638701 KP638581 | Hao 1037       |
| *Primula belodotus* Balf. f.    | Section Proliferae   | HM018228 HM018473 HM018179 | Wu Z.K. 2005034 |
| *Primula mallophylla* Balf. f.  | Section Proliferae   | KP638624 KP638704 KP638584 | Y2011084       |
| *Primula melanodonta* W. W. Smith | Section Proliferae | KP638626 KP638706 KP638586 | Y2011070       |
| *Primula miyabeana* Ito et Kawakami | Section Proliferae | HM018222 HM018467 HM018173 | H280           |
| *Primula poissonii* Franch.     | Section Proliferae   | HM018241 HM018486 HM018192 | Wu Z.K. 2004011 |
| *Primula prenantha* Balf. f. et W. W. Smith | Section Proliferae | KP638632 KP638712 KP638592 | GLM92452       |
| *Primula paeoniflora* Duthie    | Section Proliferae   | HM018219 HM018464 HM018170 | Hao 230        |
| *Primula serratifolia* Franch.  | Section Proliferae   | HM018254 HM018499 HM018205 | Ge & Yuan 2003T-5 |
| *Primula smithiana* Craib       | Section Proliferae   | HM018221 HM018466 HM018172 | Hao 484        |
| *Primula wilsonii* Dunn         | Section Proliferae   | HM018220 HM018465 HM018171 | Hao 640        |
| *Primula pycnoloba* Bur. et Franch. | Section Pycnoloba  | KP638643 KP638723 KP638603 | Y2013004       |
| *Omphalogramma delavayi* (Franch.) Franch. | Section Pycnoloba | JF955759 JN046569 JF978039 | Hao 766        |

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