

Swarthmore College

Works

Chinese Faculty Works

Chinese

2005

Medicines From "The Divine Husbandman's Canon of Materia Medica"

Alan Berkowitz

Swarthmore College, aberkow1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-chinese>



Part of the [Chinese Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alan Berkowitz. (2005). "Medicines From "The Divine Husbandman's Canon of Materia Medica"". *Hawai'i Reader In Traditional Chinese Culture*. 239-241.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-chinese/47>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinese Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

36 | Medicines from *The Divine Husbandman's Canon of Materia Medica*

PHARMACY AS AN integral facet of the healing arts in China has its roots in antiquity. Traditionally, the beginning of experiential botanical knowledge is credited to the legendary Divine Husbandman, Shennong, the so-called father of agriculture who is said to have lived almost five millennia ago. There has been a vast amount of information recorded over the centuries concerning the medicinal qualities of plants, minerals, and other substances, compiled into a very large number of compendia over the centuries. The two most renowned systematizers of materia medica are Tao Hongjing (456–536) and Li Shizhen (1518–1593), and their works are the standards of the genre known as *bencao*, literally “roots and grasses” (or, according to some traditions, “basic herbs”). *Bencao* actually signifies all types of organic and inorganic materials that were understood as having some kind of utility within the healing arts and within other esoteric traditions concerning the perfection of body and spirit. The genre itself commonly is traced back to a work known as *The Bencao of Shennong*, or *The Divine Husbandman's Canon of Materia Medica*, parts of which may date to the late Warring States and the Former Han, with accretions from as late as the Later Han. The early textual history of this work is highly problematic. The earliest known version was edited by Tao Hongjing together with commentaries, and the work mostly has existed over the centuries as excerpts in larger compendia; it has been reconstructed a number of times in various recensions, but since early in the twentieth century it has been widely available in the “standardized” edition from which the excerpts below are translated. People of the Han were interested in materia medica not only for curative purposes; equally important were the qualities of the substances that might be of alchemical or macrobiotic value. At the time much thought and practice was devoted to toning the mind and body of the adept toward prolonged life and the hope of becoming a *xian*, or transcendent. It probably is not coincidental that the first substance mentioned in the work attributed to Shennong is *dansha*, cinnabar, a naturally occurring form of mercuric sulfide that was seen as the elixir ingredient par excellence. The book is said to originally have described 365 substances (corresponding to the number of days in the year and implying completeness), divided into three categories according to their medicinal utility. While these categories also correspond to Han ideas of the two threefold groupings of heaven, earth, and man, and ruler, minister, and subject, a quotation from another source that is attributed to *Shennong's Canon of Materia Medica* describes the threefold division as follows: “Of all the medicinal substances, those of the highest order nourish one's life span, those of the middle order nourish one's nature, and those of the lowest order nourish the ailing.” Materia medica on the whole are described according to their properties in terms of the categorical identifiers of “taste,” “temperature,” and modes of efficacy. The entries are terse and most often do not furnish much empirical information, such as description of the substance for the purposes of identification, or mention of curative value and how it should be ingested or otherwise used. The brief introductory notice to each of the three sections of the canon is translated below, followed by an example from each of the sections.—AB

Of the highest order of medicaments there are 120 varieties. They act in the role of “ruler.” They have a controlling influence on the nourishing of one’s life span and thereby correspond with Heaven. There are none that are toxic. Ingesting them often and over a long period of time will not harm a person. Those who desire to make their bodies light, increase their *qi*, not age, and extend their years take as their basis the first division of the canon.

Of the median order of medicaments there are 120 varieties. They act in the role of “minister.” They have a controlling influence on the nourishing of one’s nature and thereby correspond with man. Some are toxic and some are nontoxic. One should carefully consider their suitability (i.e., use them with discretion). Those who desire to curtail illness and replenish depletion take as their basis the middle division of the canon.

Of the inferior order of medicaments there are 125 varieties. They act in the role of “attendants and functionaries.” They have a controlling influence on the curing of ailments and thereby correspond with earth. Most are toxic and cannot be ingested for long periods. Those who desire to expel “cold,” “hot,” and noxious *qi*, break down accumulations, and heal illness take as their basis the final division of the canon.

[From the first division:]

Ginseng (*renshen*; *Panax ginseng*). The taste is of the category of “sweet.” It is classed as “slightly cold.” It has a controlling influence on replenishing the five visceral “storage organs” (corresponding to heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys), calming the vital forces, stabilizing the souls, stopping alarm and fear, expelling noxious *qi*, clarifying vision, developing the heart, and increasing wisdom. Prolonged ingestion will make the body light and extend one’s years. It also is called *renxian* or *guigai*. It grows in mountain valleys.

NOTE: GINSENG WAS, and still is, the medicinal substance par excellence, being prescribed for innumerable ailments and credited with great tonic and restorative properties. Its name likely derives from the resemblance of its root to a person [*ren*], and the influences it imparts from the Orion constellation [*shen*], but it has no fewer than ten other appellations. Although the part of the plant to receive the most attention has been the root, the leaves were also occasionally used. As with nearly all plants mentioned in *The Divine Husbandman's Canon of Materia Medica*, ginseng is still a part of traditional Chinese pharmacology; it also has had a place in Western European and North American healing traditions.

[From the middle division:]

Angelica (*baizhi*; *Angelica anomala*). The taste is of the category of “pungent.” It is classed as “warm.” It has a controlling influence on women’s menstrual flow and reddens pale blood. It impedes yin-induced swelling, cold and hot “winds,” oppression of the head, and tears from the eyes. It produces enduring sinews and flesh, and as it is moist and enriching, it can be used as a facial cosmetic. It also is called *fangxiang* and grows in river valleys.

NOTE: ANGELICA HAD no fewer than nine different names; both its root and leaves were used. Angelica also is part of the modern Chinese herbal tradition, as well as that of the West.

[From the final division:]

Skimmia (*yinyu*; *Skimmia japonica*, sometimes called *anquetilia*). The flavor is of the category of “bitter.” It is classed as “warm.” It has a controlling influence on noxious *qi* of the five visceral “storage organs”; on “cold” and “hot” of the heart and stomach; on consumption; on conditions similar to ague (or malaria) where the symptoms flare up at regular intervals; and on the pain of arthritis and rheumatism of the various joints. It grows in river valleys.

NOTE: THIS POISONOUS evergreen shrub was considered to have tonic and restorative properties. Pills and tinctures made from the leaves and stalks were considered particularly effective in relieving discomforts of the joints and extremities.

—AB