

Will Chinese Herbs Grown in the U.S. Be the Same?

By Jean Giblette

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During the years of our efforts to cultivate Chinese medicinal botanicals in the U.S. for study and, now, for clinical use by practitioners, we have been met repeatedly with one peculiar question. Will Chinese herbs grown here “be the same” as those grown in China?

The Question (capital Q) has many fascinating aspects, not the least being it’s usually asked by Chinese-born Americans. Later generations of Chinese-Americans, by contrast, tend to be among our most enthusiastic supporters. This fact bespeaks inter-cultural differences that may be resolved through examination of the assumptions behind the question.

Depends on what we mean by “grown.”

Probing, I have learned that Questioners are drawing on a set of assumptions related to agriculture. All we have known for the past half century in America is modern industrial agriculture. That system derives from our western philosophical inheritance of a Domination relationship to nature. You stick a seed or plant in the ground and command it to grow. If it doesn’t grow the way you want, you dump fertilizer and other chemicals on it. Or, failing that, you engineer its genetics. Industrial agriculture has caused widespread but under-reported ecological disaster.

Most people in the U.S., Chinese-born or not, know almost nothing about agriculture and, in general, suffer severe estrangement from nature. The prevalent confusion over diet, for example, is a symptom of that alienation. Although the Chinese once ranked among the best farmers in recorded history, those pre-industrial attitudes and skills have been eclipsed during the 20th century. Official China, in striving to be “modern,” has now embraced industrial agriculture along with the other worst aspects of global industrialism.

Practitioners trained in China tend to know very little about how medicinal plants are gathered or cultivated. Ever since Mao institutionalized TCM, distinct educational tracks have separated the clinicians from the “medicine materials” specialists.

Just recently in the U.S., people have begun to hear about the organic farming movement, albeit information filtered through the corporate media. What has emerged into public view is only one aspect of a sizeable agricultural reform movement, created by members of the post-WW II generation in the U.S., which has challenged the Domination relationship to nature.

Also what we mean by “same.”

The ecological farmers who are growing the Chinese medicinal herbs in the U.S. are part of this reform group. They appreciate how plants are highly adaptable, fluid creatures. For example, back in the 19th century almost every little farm in America had its own unique variety of vegetables. Such is the power of biodiversity: a plant species can adapt readily to a specific locale. If the farmer is actively selecting for certain preferred traits, the new variety can arise in as little as ten years.

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Seventy-five percent of this agricultural biodiversity was lost in the last hundred years. Organized efforts are underway to re-create some of these farm-specific varieties known as “landraces,” and to compensate for consolidation of the seed companies.

A few years ago I was told by Navaho herbalist Donna House that Native Americans did not cultivate medicinal plants, on principle. They saw each herb’s medicinal powers as intrinsic to the local terrain, soil and water, all the companion organisms, plus the specific effects of the air, sun, moon and stars. How can all those forces be known, let alone replicated?

The ecological growers agree with the worldview of the Native Americans and the Chinese-born. A plant species grown in a specific site is unique – as individual as a snowflake. And it’s not only space, it’s time that affects the plant’s specific expression of its very great adaptive capacities. Recent European studies have shown that the morphology of a species sown at different months of the year will, in certain months, resemble another species more than its own.

The possibilities seem infinite. Some farmers using biodynamic methods have observed that human intentions influence plant growth. Biodynamics, a modality of ecological agriculture originating in Europe in the 1920s, is homeopathic, thus partly an energetic practice. Energetics in agriculture is a whole new frontier, as is no-till cultivation, agroforestry, permaculture, wild-cultivation, and other lines of investigation pursued by the reform movement but little understood by the public.

And how can we tell?

In China medicinal plants are collected and/or cultivated in different regions, and their differences are recognized, contrasted and evaluated. Although this process is a highly refined aspect of culture, it depends on universal human communications skills. The cultivation part is easy compared to the problem of evaluating the medicinal qualities. Most of us were not trained in China. But we can acquire new concepts and a language to discuss the differences among the plants.

To solve this evaluation problem, the Medicinal Herb Network in Minnesota has adapted a protocol for organoleptic (taste and smell) analysis used for the past 30 years in food science. The method employs graduate students as tasters and yields replicable results. The organoleptic analysis protocol involves development of a lexicon – special terminology applied to Chinese herbs, something like the strange adjectives used in professional wine tasting. When the Minnesota team has developed the lexicon to about 50 terms, they intend to teach this system to students and professionals of traditional Chinese medicine. Our fundraising for Botanical Studies includes support for this work.

Maybe it really depends on *how we ask*.

In its essence, the Question brings up the ancient tension between agricultural societies and hunter-gatherers, and thereby goes to the crux of what it means to be human. We attempt to change nature at our ultimate peril, because we are altering a holistic system that is complex beyond our present understanding. But our lives, and those of our descendants, depend absolutely upon the whole.

What is required of us is an approach to discovery that includes utmost respect for the power of plants and the guiding forces of nature. The plants are our ultimate teachers, patient and forgiving, and will lead us to the medicine we need. Let us ask them the Question.

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