



SANQI

Panax notoginseng

HEINER FRUEHAUF

MEDICINAL QUALITY

Sanqi, often referred to as Pseudoginseng or Tianqi, is a relatively recent medicinal that officially joined the Chinese materia medica only during the 16th century. Due to its ability to treat all blood disorders it soared to great importance during Qing dynasty times—the master herbalist Li Shizhen referred to it as Jinbuhuan (Not Even Exchanged for Gold), and some later herb primers went so far to call it “the king of all herbs”—a status it has maintained until today. It is the main ingredient of the well-known patent medicine Yunnan Baiyao, which was first marketed in 1902 and remains a favorite emergency remedy for acute bleeding disorders. Most American practitioners of Chinese medicine have this remedy in their medicinary, and know to take the “red pill” included in a standard bottle for cases of sudden and dramatic blood loss. Li Shizhen already remarked in his influential *Bencao gangmu* that “in the South, this herb is used as the most important military medicine for external injuries caused by swords, knives, and arrows.” One of the plant’s oldest alternate names, therefore, is Shanqi—“the mountain herb that glues wounds together like lacquer.” During the Vietnam War, powdered Sanqi was still the primary battlefield remedy for Viet Cong soldiers.

Sanqi literally means “the three seven herb,” referring to the fact that the plant tends to form three branches with

seven leaves growing on each of them. In addition, peasant wisdom mandates that the root is harvested between 3-7 years of maturity, and grown in conditions that facilitate 3 parts sunlight and 7 parts shade. The plant is thus typically cultivated under black plastic tarps that are easily recognizable when driving through traditional Sanqi territory in Yunnan and Guangxi.

The Sanqi root exhibits a variety of botanical and biochemical similarities to regular ginseng. Especially in Cantonese circles (including the bulk of overseas Chinese), the root is consumed frequently in soup form totaling millions of doses per year. Despite this high rate of worldwide consumption virtually no side effects have been reported, making Sanqi officially one of the safest substances in the Chinese materia medica. While most often consumed as a popular food tonic, practitioners of Oriental medicine know *Panax notoginseng* root best for its excess removing qualities: move stagnant blood, stop bleeding, and resolve swelling. Both the powdered root and leaves can be applied to wounds directly, producing an immediate haemostatic effect. In contrast to the slightly warming quality of the root, the flower of the plant is generally used as a cooling and anti-cholesterol tea, similar to *Chrysanthemum*.

Much laboratory and clinical research has been conducted on the medicinal effects of Sanqi in recent years, confirming the wide variety of actions ascribed to the plant in traditional herb primers. Classical commentators have offered the following opinions about the range of organ systems that Sanqi affects or “enters”:

- Yangming: Stomach, Large Intestine; Lung (anti-inflammatory, isotonic, enhances immune system; anti-hemoptysis)
- Jueyin: Liver, Pericardium (improve blood flow through the coronary arteries: traumatic injury with bruising/swelling; arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, angina; metrorrhagia)
- Shaoyin: Heart, Kidney (adrenal tonic, anti-arrhythmic, optimizes circulation, cardio-protective, haemostatic, analgesic, diuretic)

TRADITIONAL TERROIR CONSIDERATIONS (DIDAO YAOCAL)

Sanqi is native to the Southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan, as well as Vietnam. The wild variety, while most powerful, has become virtually extinct in recent years. Very rarely, some specimens are found in the untouched mountain forests at the border between

Yunnan and Vietnam. The leaves and root of the wild plant are distinctly different from the cultivated variety: they appear long and nodulated (one node per year of growth), while the cultivated variety looks more like a solid tuberous clod.

According to Li Shizhen, Sanqi was successfully cultivated as early as the 16th century. Due to the extremely high price that the root demands on the global market today--particularly since 2012 when the price for Sanqi roots rose tenfold in one year--the cultivation of the plant has



*Rows of Sanqi growing inside traditional tent structure
(Wenshan County, Yunnan, China)*

become very common in Guangxi and Yunnan. In both provinces, the landscape at higher altitude is dotted with the black tent structures typical for the cultivation of Sanqi. In addition, highways in these regions are lined with advertisements for Sanqi specific fertilizers. Local farmers tend to experiment with a variety of fertilizers and pesticides to assure the success of their crop, which is very labor intensive and takes at least 3 years to mature. Cultivation tents are generally protected by dogs and around-the-clock guards to prevent that the precious roots are dug up and stolen at night. Another element that contributes to the value of Sanqi is the fact that the plant absorbs high amounts of nutrients from the soil. A plot where Sanqi has been grown can therefore not be used to cultivate crops for 20 years.

Similar to other expensive herbs, the trade of Sanqi is complicated by adulteration and species identification issues. Cantonese pharmacies, including those in the

US, often replace the genuine article with the much less valuable Chuan Sanqi. This replacement material is also called Xinbugan or Kaikoujian (*Tupistra chinensis*) and exhibits potentially toxic properties. There are many reports of unfavorable reactions caused by *Tupistra* in the Hong Kong medical literature. A botanically as well as visually related genuine kin of Sanqi is *Zhujieshen* (*Panax japonicus*), generally referred to as Bai Sanqi. This type of “Japanese Ginseng” grows at comparable altitude in the provinces of Hubei, Anhui and Shanxi, and is also valued for its tonic and haemostatic properties. Its root structure is very similar to that of wild Sanqi, and the plant as a whole appears to be a bridge between the more moving/transforming Sanqi and the more tonic conventional ginseng. Bai Sanqi is primarily classified as a Taiyin herb, relating its anti-bleeding properties more to the spleen’s ability to “hold blood in the vessels.” While equally rare and expensive, this species still exists in the wild in central

China, and attempts to cultivate it have been successful in Hubei Province.

TRADITIONAL PROCESSING (PAOZHI)

Today’s Sanqi farmers generally initiate harvest after 3 years of cultivation. The roots are dried in the sun and sold on the local market to large-scale distributors. Sanqi roots are naturally earth-colored. In the past, export grade Sanqi was marked with charcoal and wax, giving it the hard, shiny and black appearance that most consumers in the US have grown accustomed to. Classical Pearls prefers to use only uncolored Sanqi for its products.

Cover image: 3 year old freshly harvested Sanqi roots, brought to market by local farmers at Sanqi Trading Center (Wenshan County, Yunnan, China)