

The Lives of a Chinese Medicinal Moss: Variation and Standardization. (Oral Presentation)

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Introduction

HuiXinCao (*Rhodobryum giganteum*) is a medicinal moss used in Yunnan province, China for minor heart problems. This moss grows throughout Yunnan and is used by many of the ethnic minority groups in different areas of the province. HuiXinCao has been studied for its pharmaceutical properties in hospitals in Yunnan and elsewhere in China. Additionally, the medicinal uses of HuiXinCao have been documented in popular books on herbal medicine. These books were published in the 1970s as part of China's directive to enhance the medical system in rural China, and are now widely used throughout Yunnan.

Objectives

Since HuiXinCao is used in the context of various environments and different medical traditions of ethnic minority groups, we might expect variation in knowledge about this moss. We might also expect some homogenization in knowledge as a result of the widely available herbal books that describe the uses of HuiXinCao. These two opposing features make HuiXinCao a useful example for exploring the interplay between factors that increase variation in ethnobotanical knowledge and factors that encourage its homogenization.

Methods

I conducted ethnobotanical interviews in various parts of Yunnan to study the use and knowledge of HuiXinCao across its range. I recorded uses and names of HuiXinCao, as well as information about the place, experiences, and occupation of the people who prescribe HuiXinCao. This information was compared with documented uses and names in herbal books. I quantified variation of herbal use by comparing the components of different herbal prescriptions that included HuiXinCao.

Results

Herbal prescription components that included HuiXinCao do not correlate with ethnic group affiliation. However, there is some influence from geographic location, because some herbs are only available in certain areas of Yunnan (eg. high-alpine plants in NW Yunnan). Herbal prescription components do correlate with occupation (eg. farmer, herb seller, herb doctor). Although there was variation, some of the most commonly used herbal prescriptions are those documented in herbal books.

Conclusion

In this paper I discuss how the opposing forces of cultural variation and homogenization work to shape the current landscape of the use and knowledge of the medicinal moss HuiXinCao in Yunnan.

Keywords: ethnobotany, China, bryophytes, HuiXinCao, Rhodobryum

Selected References

None

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