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## The Pharmacology of Chinese Herbs, Kee Chang Huang, CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida. 1993

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*The Pharmacology of Chinese Herbs* Kee Chang Huang, CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida, 1993. ISBN 0-8493-4915-X. 388 pp. £100.00.

Herbal medicine, oriental or occidental, aims to treat the "whole" patient. This is achieved, we are told, by prescribing a mixture of herbs tailored to the perceived needs of the individual patient – an unashamedly empirical approach to therapy. Indeed, Huang alludes to such practice in trying to explain how a typical mixture of 10 herbs would comprise "1 ruler, 2 ministers, 3 aides and 4 guides" where the rule drug is the active principle and the other nine drugs are helpers of varying degrees of strength. Little else is presented by way of further information on the selection of herbs for inclusion in the final mixture. Later in the Introduction it becomes clear that much of the information presented in the book is taken directly from a number of Chinese reference texts published between 1954 and 1986. Those who are really interested in the rationale behind the selection of Chinese herbs for individual patients will presumably have to refer to these cited texts and, if necessary, learn to read Chinese!

After the Introduction, we find a section describing a Brief History of Chinese Medicine from the prehistoric era, through the Shang-Zhou, Qin-Han, Jian, Tsuai-Tang, Sung-Jiang-Yuan, and Ming-Chin dynasties to the present day. This serves to remind us just how far back we can trace Chinese civilisation.

Clearly, Huang's objective was not to provide an English translation of Chinese texts on herbal medicine, but rather to attempt to bridge the chasm that exists between oriental herbal medicine and occidental allopathic medicine. He admits that the complex mixtures of herbs defy scientific study, and hence chooses instead to describe the individual herbs after grouping them according to their therapeutic uses. The outcome is a book that resembles many other books on herbal medicines from around the world. The information it contains is presented in monographic format giving the scientific and Chinese names, phytochemistry, actions, toxic effects and therapeutic uses of each herb.

Huang acknowledges that traditional Chinese medicine utilises materials other than those derived from plants, for example elephant's tusk, swallow's nest and rafter dust. We may surmise from the title of the book that the author's intention was to restrict his work to plant-derived materials, but a few animal and mineral products have slipped through! Thus, we find monographs on sodium sulfate, gall

stones from cattle, and silkworm larvae that have died from *Beauveria bassiana* infection included in the relevant sections according to therapeutic uses.

One of the major problems of writing a scientific book on herbal medicines is the presentation of phytochemical data. Ideally, we might expect each monograph to provide an exhaustive review of the phytochemical literature without making any guesses, intelligent or otherwise, as to the most or least important constituents. Only where therapeutic activity has unequivocally been ascribed to particular compounds should selective presentation of phytochemical data be contemplated. Of course, it could then be argued that the herb in question had relinquished its right to be considered as a herbal remedy, its active ingredient(s) having been promoted to allopathic status! Since the source of therapeutic activity is often unclear, it is tempting to speculate and hence to present only those phytochemicals that can reasonably be considered to contribute to the biological activity of the herb. Since this book does not provide exhaustive phytochemical literature reviews, it follows that the author has elected to speculate as to the identity of the active constituents. If I were to be less charitable, I would say that the author made no attempt to exhaustively review the phytochemical literature and presented only the fragmentary data that he found in other tertiary literature sources. Certainly, with the notable exception of his monograph on ginseng, which spans 24 pages and includes 41 literature citations, he presents little evidence of having actively reviewed the primary phytochemical literature. Structures depicting pentavalent carbon (p. 167) and statements suggesting that N-methylmorpholine and galactomannan are anthraquinone derivatives (p. 75) serve to confirm to me that the phytochemical data presented in the book should be accepted with caution. Otherwise, the chemical structures he presents appear mostly to have been faithfully reproduced from their original sources, but the quality of the graphics is curiously inconsistent.

The information on actions, toxic effects and therapeutic uses is similarly unreferenced throughout most of the book. Admittedly, in the Introduction the author gives details of 15 reference books from which information has repeatedly been taken, but all of these are again tertiary sources. It would have been so much more useful if primary sources had been given where possible.

To summarise, this book provides a useful access point to the literature on Chinese herbs (but not to Chinese herbal medicine). Its main value will be as a source of crude drug names and likely botanical identity. Although not providing ready access to the supporting phytochemical/toxicological/therapeutic literature, most researchers will find sufficient information with which to initiate their own further literature search. It is the sort of book that should be found in libraries frequented by pharmacy and (phyto)chemistry undergraduates; it impinges only peripherally into the field of toxicology. Only those post-graduates actively involved in researching Chinese herbal medicines will want or need to have their own copy. Practitioners of herbal medicine (oriental, occidental or otherwise) might also find the book useful for light bedtime reading.

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