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Ethnobotany of Camptotheca Decaisne: New Discoveries of Old Medicinal Uses

Shiyou Li* and Wanli Zhang

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Abstract: Camptotheca trees had been used as fuelwood and an ornamental species in its native China. There were no reports on medicinal uses of Camptotheca in China and thus it was believed the trees had no medicinal before its antitumor activity discovered in 1957. We conducted national surveys of Camptotheca in China from 1994 to 1999. We found that Camptotheca acuminate is commonly known as happytree (xi shu) because the trees can be used as folk medicine to cure stubborn phlegm as well as other diseases, thus making patients “happy”. There are three local names to refer the uses of C. acuminate in China. In addition, there are at least 25 other local names for tree morphology and habitat of the species by 35 ethnic groups. There are two local names for C. lowreyana. The Dong people made paste from fresh leaves or fruits and powder from dry materials from any part of this tree species and mixed some or all with rice wine to cure many stubborn diseases including furunculosis, skin diseases, and even a liu (probably a kind of cancer). Medicinal and other ethnic uses of Camptotheca trees in China were reported in this study.

Keywords: Camptotheca, cancer, ethnobotany, etymology, happytree, medicinal uses, wood uses.

INTRODUCTION

The current value of plant-based drugs worldwide is estimated to be more than $200 billion a year [1]. According to Balick and Cox, nearly one out of every four pharmaceutical drugs in use today was discovered from studying plants used by indigenous peoples for healing. Undoubtedly, the ethnobotanical approach to drug discovery is important in the identification of potentially therapeutic drugs [1]. Ethnic use of happytrees for medicine in China is still a puzzle although it has drawn the attention of many medical doctors, chemists, botanists, and cancer patients for decades. Previously, it was commonly thought that the Chinese happytree was largely a fuelwood and an ornamental species [2-7]. In fact, there were no reports on medicinal uses of Camptotheca in China until 1957 when its anti-cancer activity was discovered [8, 9]. As a member of one of the first delegations of American scientists to enjoy academic exchanges with China, Dr. Monroe E. Wall, the discoverer of CPT and taxol, made a special three-week trip to China in 1976 to investigate medicinal uses of Camptotheca in southern China. Dr. Wall could not document any instances and thus concluded that no medicinal uses existed in China before the 1960s [6, 7]. These conclusions have not been questioned by scientists until now. As Li and Adair stated in 1994, however, 35 ethnic groups of people live in the native range of Camptotheca and use dozens of local names for the tree. Cultural and geographical isolations are the two major barriers to documentation of long traditions of ethnic uses of Camptotheca by minority Chinese [9].

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PE, SZ and US) were examined. Location, habitat, local name, and other information were recorded for each specimen examined. These activities have produced the largest single collection of happytree genetic stock available in the world today.

ETYMOLOGY

The genus *Camptotheca* was established by Joseph Decaisne, Director of the Jardin Des Plantes in Paris in 1873. The type *Camptotheca acuminata* Decaisne was described based on specimens collected by Father Armand David in Lushan, Jiangxi Province during his 1868-1870 plant exploration trip in China. The genus name *Camptotheca* is from the Greek "campto," meaning bent or curved and "theca," a case. The name refers to the anthers which are bent inward in a distinctive manner. The species name, *acuminata,* refers to acuminate tips of leaves.

The first appearance of the Chinese happytree (*C. acuminata var. acuminata*) in Chinese literature was as early as in 1848. In the book Zhi Wu Ming Shi Tu Kao [Illustrated Investigation of the Names and Natures of Plants] published in 1848, the happytree is identified under the name of Han Lian [10]. This Chinese herbal book briefly describes morphology and habitat, but no uses of the tree (Fig. 1). It recorded that Han Lian grew in the western mountains in Nanchang (Jiangxi), had reddish brown bark, green stems, leaves similar to those on vegetative shoots of paper mulberry, fruited in the fall with tens of individual fruits about the same size as the water bean assembled together in a ball which resembled qiu (a fur ball for a traditional Chinese game), or a cluster of small bananas.

![Fig. (1). Description and illustration of the Chinese happytree (*C. acuminata*) in Zhi Wu Ming Shi Tu Kao (植物名实图考) by Wu in 1848.](image)

Chinese names for indicating the uses of the Chinese happytree include Hua Gan Zi Shu (滑杆子树, tree for a kind of litter, in Yunnan), Jia Shu (佳树, fine tree, in Fujian) and Long Shu (龙树, dragon tree, in Yunnan). Names for describing the size and trunk morphology of the tree are Qian Zhang Shu (千丈树, thousand-sheet tree, in Sichuan), Qian Zhang Shu (千丈, thousand-zhang tree, in Sichuan), Tian Zi Shu (天梓树, heavenwood tree, in Hunan), Wan Zhang Shen (万丈深, thousand feet tree, in Sichuan), Nanjing Wu Tong (南京梧桐, Nanjing Chinese parasol tree, in Yunnan), Yang Qing Shu (杨青树, green tree, in Sichuan) and Yuan Mu (圆木, roundwood, in Guizhou). Another name Ji Zi Shu (鸡子树, chicken tree, in Guangxi) is not clear to the authors.

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![Fig. (2). Fruit of the *Camptotheca acuminata* is often known as wild anise or wild banana.](image)
Camptotheca acuminate var. rotundifolia is known only as Yuan Ye Xi Shu (圆叶喜树, round leaf happytree) in China and C. acuminate var. tenuifolia is called only as Bao Ye Xi Shu (薄叶喜树, tenuous leaf happytree).

Camptotheca lowreyana is named in honor of Mr. Lynn R. Lowrey, a horticulturist in Houston, Texas, USA, for his contributions to Camptotheca research [12]. The Chinese name of this species is Lowrey Xi Shu (洛氏喜树, Lowrey happytree). The species is also known as Lang Dong Shu (浪洞树, wave-cave tree, in Huaiji of Guangdong) and Qing Yang Hua (青杨花, cathay poplar flower, in Lian Xian of Sichuan).

The common name for C. yunnanensis is known only as Xi Shu (喜树). In fact, this species had never received recognition as a species separated from C. acuminate since it was first described in 1908 [12]. Until recently, when the senior author proposed the Chinese name of the species as Yunnan Xi Shu (云南喜树, Yunnan happytree) based on the scientific name.

ETHNOBOTANY

Medicinal Uses
The study began with anecdotal evidence on medicinal uses by native peoples in China. The field record of one specimen (McClure 6546, A) collected from Guangdong in 1921 referred to the Chinese happytree as a "drug plant," but there was no further explanation. Camptotheca is largely distributed in southwestern and southern China, which is home to some 40 Chinese minority ethnic populations. The real meaning of many local names of Camptotheca, including Xi Shu, remains unknown. Fortunately, through numerous interviews with the assistance of local translators, we have documented several traditional medical uses of the plant.

In Huaiji, the most important forestry county of Guangdong Province, people of the Dong nationality confirmed traditional folk uses of Camptotheca. According to two rural doctors, Dongda Lu and Zhiming Yang, the Lowrey happytree (C. lowreyana) locally known locally as Lang Dong Shu (浪洞树), was commonly present some decades ago and has been used for medicinal purposes by local people for as long as memory serves. At present, however, only a few trees remain in the wild and no plantations have been developed. Mr. Lu, a 79 year old man of the Dong nationality (侗族) knew the medical uses of the tree from his father (Fig. 3). The people in his community made paste from fresh leaves or fruits and powder from dry materials from any part of the tree and mixed some or all with rice wine to cure many stubborn diseases including furunculosis, skin diseases and even a liu (probably a kind of cancer). Applying the paste or powder mixture with liquor or wine once a day for three consecutive days constitutes one treatment cycle which is usually sufficient. Later, we found the same uses for extracts of Camptotheca in other Dong villages. From our understanding today, liquor or wine is actually necessary to make the drugs effective because most drugs from the tree including camptothecin, 10-hydroxycamptothecin, and 9-amino camptothecin are water insoluble, but are alcohol-soluble.

In Sichuan, Hunan, and Yunnan, hundreds of people, including doctors, farmers, foresters, and scientists were interviewed and none could describe ethnobotanical uses of Camptotheca (Fig. 4). We should caution, however, that this does not necessarily exclude historical ethnobotanical uses of Camptotheca in these provinces. The forest in the survey region had been clear cut for agricultural use early in this century. The Camptotheca developed in these provinces since 1950 has largely been for other purposes. In addition, the seed source for these plantations came primarily from other provinces as none was available locally. Obviously, the gap (at least 40-50 years) between the disappearance of wild populations and the establishment of plantations in these regions resulted in a loss of knowledge about traditional uses of the species. As we know, however, many traditional medicinal uses and recipes in China are handed down orally from parents to their children. In many cases there is no written record. More likely, with the obscen of Camptotheca populations over a long period of time, folk recipes probably lost significance and disappeared or were replaced in these regions by more modern treatments. It is now difficult to find any local knowledge of medicinal uses within these regions. It may still be possible, however, to obtain some kind of evidence on local uses through a comprehensive survey if done in a timely manner.

Recipes
Although folk uses of Camptotheca can be traced back centuries in some regions. It was only in the early 1970s, that majority Chinese doctors (Han nationality) began to use the fruit, bark, and leaves of Camptotheca to treat certain kinds of cancer in hospitalized patients. Traditional Chinese medical theory holds that Camptotheca is bitter and puckery in taste but cool in nature (Table 1). Its therapeutic action is through the liver, gallbladder, spleen and stomach [11]. All
parts of the tree, including fruit, root bark, stem bark, branches, and leaves can be used as a source for the drug. Materials can be collected in all seasons. The major products of Camptotheca are summarized in Table 2 and Fig. (5).

Table 1. Primary medical uses of fruit, bark, and leaves of Camptotheca.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Fruit</th>
<th>Bark</th>
<th>Leaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>bitter &amp; puckery</td>
<td>bitter</td>
<td>bitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>cold &amp; toxic</td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Channels</td>
<td>liver, spleen, lungs &amp; stomach</td>
<td>eliminating dampness &amp; expelling pathogenic wind</td>
<td>clearing away heat &amp; lessening virulence of any pathogenic organism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>anti-cancer, clearing away heat &amp; killing insects</td>
<td>eliminating dampness &amp; expelling pathogenic wind</td>
<td>clearing away heat &amp; lessening virulence of any pathogenic organism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>cancers, leukemia, psoriasis &amp; schistosomiasis</td>
<td>psoriasis</td>
<td>all sores, boils, carbuncles &amp; furuncles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>externally or orally (liquid)</td>
<td>externally or orally (liquid)</td>
<td>externally crush fresh leaves mixed with salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>[13]</td>
<td>[13]</td>
<td>[11]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the Zhejiang Min Jian Chang Yong Cao Yao [13], "Chinese happytree is also used for psoriasis by simmering chips of bark (or branches) in water. The concentrated liquid thus produced is then mixed with 5 to 10 parts yangmaozhi (wool fat) and Vaseline to make a 10-20% ointment for external applications. Internal medicine is made by simmering 50-100 g of bark/branches in an equal amount of water. The liquid is then taken orally once a day in various dosages depending on the severity of the malady. Leaves are also simmered in water and used to wash affected parts of the skin. There is a strong caution against the use of ironware to simmer the materials because of interactions with the drug.

In clinical trials of 101 patients with psoriasis: 13 showed 100% recovery, 29 demonstrated greater than 90% recovery, 32 had 50-90% recovery and all were treated without significant side effects [14].

Zhong Cao Yao Xue of Jiangxi (Chinese Herbs in Jiangxi) records that the Chinese happytree is used at the early stage of furuncle, skin ulcer, carbuncle and swollen extremities. Young leaves are pounded and mixed with pieces of salt for external application [11].

According to Zhong Cao Yao Xue of Shanghai (Chinese Herbs in Shanghai), the Chinese happytree is compatible with: (1) Bupleurum marginatum good for treatment of all cancers; (2) Schoepfia chihensis for cancer, leukemia and schistosomiasis treatment and (3) Rhinoceros horn for

Fig. (4). A senior native Bulang (布朗族) in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, described the local medicinal uses of Camptotheca yunnanensis (photo by S.Y. Li, 1997).

Fig. (5). Two common drugs extracted from Camptotheca in China: camptothecin (CPT) and 10-hydroxycamptothecin (photo by S.Y. Li, 1995).
Table 2.  The medical products from *Camptotheca* in China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Recipe</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Source (manufacturer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happytree fruit</td>
<td>orally &amp; externally</td>
<td>dry fruit</td>
<td>major traditional medicine markets, rural Chinese doctors</td>
<td>many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alkaloid camptothecin (95-98%)</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>extracts from any parts of plants</td>
<td>some institutions in Jiangxi, Sichuan, &amp; Yunnan</td>
<td>many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injectable sodium salt of camptothecin</td>
<td>injection</td>
<td>extracts from any parts of plants</td>
<td>some cancer hospitals. This has been superseded by new formulations</td>
<td>many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injectable 10-hydroxycamptothecin</td>
<td>intrathecal injection</td>
<td>extracts from fruit</td>
<td>one of dominant anti-cancer drugs in cancer hospitals</td>
<td>(Huangshi Feiyun Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Hubei)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension of camptothecin</td>
<td>veinal injection</td>
<td>extracts from any parts of plants</td>
<td>some major pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals</td>
<td>(Suzhou College of Medicine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injectable Happytree fruit</td>
<td>veinal injection</td>
<td>extracts from fruit</td>
<td>some major pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happytree fruit extract tablet</td>
<td>orally</td>
<td>extracts from fruit</td>
<td>some major pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happytree fruit compound tablet</td>
<td>orally</td>
<td>5,000 g Happytree fruit with 2,500 g Zhuru, 2,500 g lalong grass (root of <em>Imperata cylindrica</em> var. major, 3,000 g starch, etc.)</td>
<td>some major pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals, rural Chinese doctors</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happytree fruit-ternate pinellia tablet</td>
<td>orally</td>
<td>made from 2,500 g Happytree fruit, 250 g ternate pinellia (the tuber of <em>Pinellia ternata</em>) &amp; others</td>
<td>some major pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals, rural Chinese doctors</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happytree fruit honeyed bolus</td>
<td>orally</td>
<td>made from 2,500 g Happytree fruit, 250 g ternate pinellia, &amp; 250 g powder of Happytree fruit</td>
<td>some pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals, rural Chinese doctors</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happytree powder</td>
<td>orally</td>
<td>any parts of the plants</td>
<td>some pharmacological stores &amp; hospitals, rural Chinese doctors</td>
<td>Yang 1981</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.  Wood properties of *Camptotheca acuminata*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Density (g/cm³)</th>
<th>Shrinkage (%)</th>
<th>Bending Strength (kgf/cm²)</th>
<th>Bending Elasticity Modulus (10³kgf/cm²)</th>
<th>Crushing Strength along the Grain (kgf/cm²)</th>
<th>Hardiness (kgf/cm²)</th>
<th>Side</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>northern Sichuan †</td>
<td>0.412 0.516</td>
<td>0.149 0.307 0.475</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>284 252 386</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geju, Yunnan ‡</td>
<td>0.440 0.541</td>
<td>0.146 0.302 0.480</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>313 329 464</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


leukemia. Clearly, the Chinese happytree has a long history of use in traditional Chinese medicine [11].

Other Uses

In Yunnan and Hunan native Bai people (白族) have used the leaves of *Camptotheca* as green fertilizer for rice seedlings since at least 1950. According to local farmers, rice production is greatly increased by this application. It is also claimed that use of the leaves controls insect pests and diseases of rice. Application of the leaves as green manure challenges current theory that the Chinese happytree is allelopathic and limits the growth of many crops [15-18]. According to Yang and Li (1992), in fact, the leaves of the Chinese happytree contain 2.62% N, 0.51% P, 2.56% K in dry weight. Therefore, 500 kg of dry leaves may have the same fertility as 12.75 kg superphosphate, or 65.5 kg ammonium phosphate, or 25.5 kg potassium sulfate [19].

In Guangdong, local farmers use the fruit to make soap and detergent. There are undoubtedly additional uses; however, the above indicates that *Camptotheca* has been a part of the daily lives of Chinese people for centuries.

Wood Uses

The properties of the wood of Chinese happytree are summarized in Table 3. The wood is soft, light, odorless,
easy to dry, easy to process, insect resistant, smooth grained and even-textured with high flexibility and low strength. Primary products are rulers, packaging materials, general furniture, mine timbers, pulpwood and fuelwood [20-22] (Fig. 6).

Fig. (6). In central Sichuan, Camptotheca acuminata trees are often harvested for mining poles (photo by S.Y. Li, 1995).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Declared none.

PATIENT'S CONSENT

Declared none.

REFERENCES