

Herbs for medicinal baths among the traditional Yao communities of China

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Abstract

Medicinal baths are an important traditional way to prevent and cure common diseases among the traditional Yao communities of Jinping County, Yunnan Province, SW China. Approaches of anthropology, ethnobotany, and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) were used to investigate the herbs used for medicinal baths; and 110 medicinal plant species were found to be used by local people to treat a variety of diseases, such as rheumatic diseases, skin diseases, injuries from falls and gynecopathia. Of these 110 species, 6 (5%) had not been previously identified as having medicinal properties, while 87 (79%) were newly recorded for their use in medicinal baths. These new ethnobotanical and medicinal records are a rich source of further phytochemical, pharmacological, and clinical studies on folk herbs in SW China.

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1. Introduction

The Yao ethnic group is one of the 55 minority peoples of China. For thousands of years, this group has been famous not only for its long history, wide distribution and colorful culture, but also for its strong resistance to diseases and familiarity with medicinal herbs (Liu and Ding, 1995; Li and Long, 2000; Liu, 2002). The Red-headed Yao people have been living in poorly built houses in an environment with high rainfall, short periods of sunshine, and high humidity. At the same time, they have to work hard all around the year in order to survive. These conditions, especially high humidity and strenuous working, make them susceptible to rheumatic diseases, various body pains and gynecopathia for women. Because they live in mountainous areas and the sanitation is not good, moreover, they are more likely to get injuries from falls and skin diseases. Fortunately, their ancestors developed regimens to resist these diseases, notably medicinal baths. Over time, medicinal baths became a cultural characteristic of the Yao people.

For medicinal baths, one adds proper herbal medicines to water, decocts them for a proper time, and then uses the decocted liquid to bathe in proper temperature. Medicinal baths of the Yao are not only a remedy to cure diseases, but also an important way to keep healthy. During the course of a bath, most of the effective components of medicines can directly act on the infected or diseased region, avoiding the breakage of the alimentary canal, the first pass effect of liver and side-effects to the stomach and intestines. By virtue of the temperature stimulus of the water, the herbal liquid can promote blood circulation, improve the metabolism, and enhance the immune capability of body (Li, 1991; Yu, 1991; Liu, 1994, 2002; Wang and Zhong, 2004).

There are several articles that have recorded and briefly introduced herbs used for medicinal baths among Yao communities in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Dai and Qiu, 1997), Hunan Province (Tang and Hu, 2000; Liu et al., 2001), and Jinping County of Yunnan Province (Deng, 2002; Long and Li, 2004). Up to now, however, there is no detailed report or research on the herbs used for medicinal baths among these communities. Therefore, this ethnobotanical study was carried out in order to: (i) document the traditional uses of plants for medicinal baths; and (ii) publicize the medicinal baths, an effective remedy, to prevent and cure diseases in the target region.

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In Jinping County of Yunnan Province there are several offshoots of the Yao ethnic group, including the Red-headed (*Hongtou* in Chinese) Yao, the Indigo-blue (*Landian*) Yao, the Plane-headed (*Pingtou*) Yao and the Sand (*Sha*) Yao (Compilation Council of Miao, Yao and Dai Nationality Autonomic County Annals in Jinping, Yunnan, 1994). Red-headed Yao women customarily wear triangle caps made of red cloth and silver loops. Being the largest sub-group in Jinping, they were selected as the key informants for this study.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study area

Jinping, a county located in southeast Yunnan ($22^{\circ}26'26''$ – $22^{\circ}57'44''$ N, $102^{\circ}31'36''$ – $103^{\circ}31'50''$ E) was selected as the study area (Fig. 1). The weather in Jinping is affected by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. There is abundant rainfall, the annual average precipitation being 2330.4 mm. The area has

the largest rainfall of south Yunnan. It has long periods of fog (more than 180 days a year), heavy humidity (the relative humidity being above 85%), and a warm climate (the annual average temperature being 17.8°C). The county is a typical southern sub-tropical region, and it is rich in plant diversity (Xu et al., 2002). Every 6 days, there is herb fair in Jinping County. On that day, Yao people bring their herbs to sale, including the herbs for medicinal baths.

2.2. Ethnobotanical survey

The survey was carried out six times during different seasons over a period of 3 years in seven districts of Jinping: Shuiduichong village (where the key informant was Dr. Li Fuchao), Hetou village (Dr. Feng Wu-mei), Malutang new village (Dr. Zhao Da-mei), Taiyang village (Dr. Zhao), Bayi village (Dr. Deng), Baimahe village (Dr. Deng San-mei), and Shayipo village (Dr. Wang Yun-he). Methods of anthropology, ethnobotany and participatory rural appraisal (Lipp, 1989; Etkin, 1993;

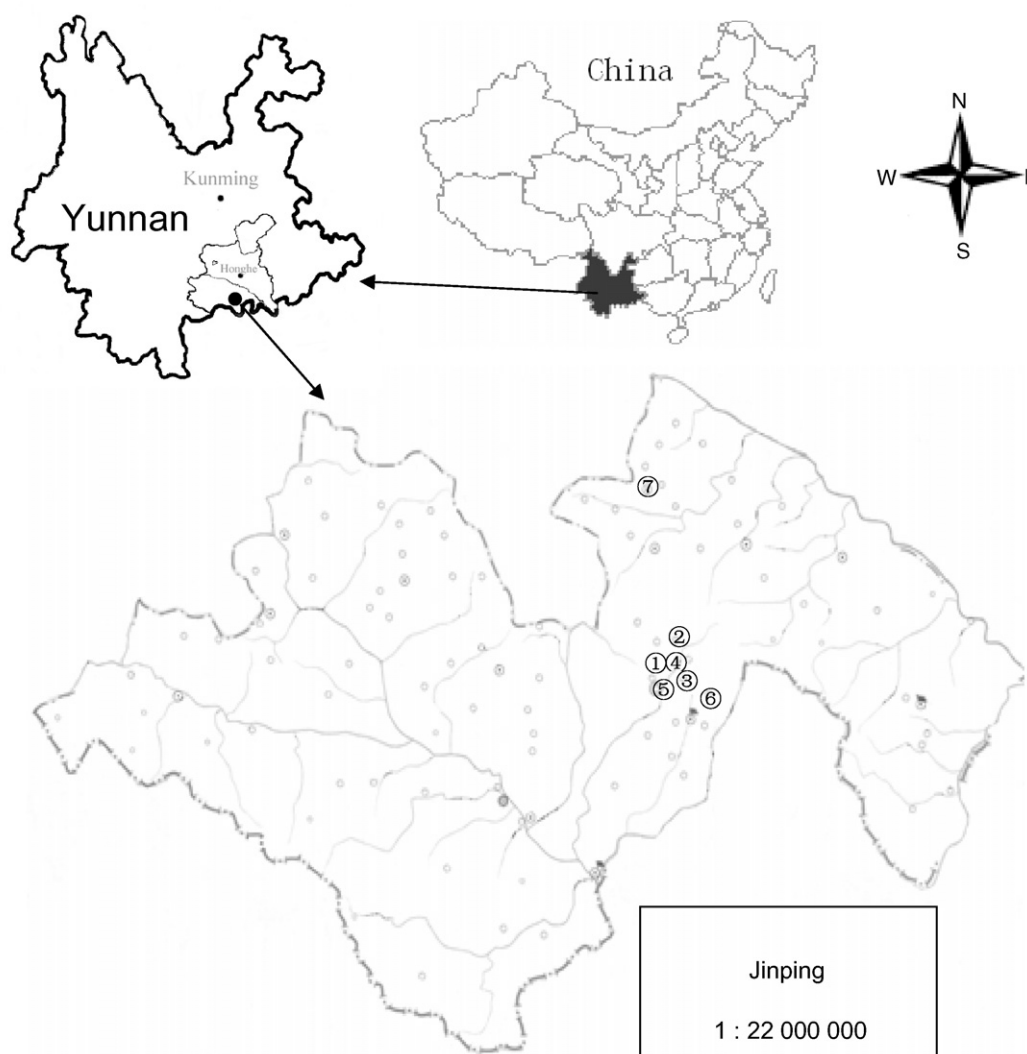


Fig. 1. Location of seven selected districts in Jinping, Yunnan province on the map (①) Shuiduichong village; (②) Hetou village; (③) Malutang new village; (④) Taiyang village; (⑤) Bayi village; (⑥) Baimahe village; (⑦) Shayipo village.

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