

Making Gold: Commodification and Consumption of the Medicinal Fungus *Chongcao* in Guangdong and Hong Kong

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, a Tibetan medicinal fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*) that grows out of a moth caterpillar (*Thitarodes* sp.), known as *chongcao* (蟲草, short for 冬蟲夏草) in Chinese, has become an expensive commodity and a fad among Han Chinese of Mainland China, despite its debatable medical efficacy. In fact Tianya. 2011. “香港药店药宰游客黑幕大揭秘!” (Shady Deals of Hong Kong Medicine Shops in Ripping off Tourists). At <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2205904.shtml> accessed on 10. August 2011 has been an important trade item between Mainland China and Hong Kong for over half a century even during the political turmoil. During the collective time, the Chinese government exported *chongcao* in exchange of foreign currency to Hong Kong that served as the international trading hub of the traditional Chinese medicine. However, since the reform and opening up of China, the economic value and cultural meaning of *chongcao* have changed significantly. In Mainland China, the once unfamiliar fungus has become a popular and valuable commodity, and with its price sometimes even exceeding that of gold, it is regarded as a symbol of wealth and circulates as gifts and bribes; while more and more *chongcao* has been travelling back to the Mainland from Hong Kong where fewer consumers can afford this culinary and medicinal material. By examining the trade and consumption of *chongcao*, this research aims to explain how a once unfamiliar fungus has become a popular and valuable commodity. This study asks the key question of economic anthropology: how is value created? In particular, how do the large sociopolitical and historical forces shape value in the more marketized China of the post-reform era? Tracing the commodity chain of *chongcao*, with the focus on trade and consumption in Guangdong Province and Hong Kong, this paper explores how its socioeconomic value and cultural significance have changed across time and geographical borders.

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Introduction

The inspiration for this article came one afternoon in August 2007 when I was spending time with my Tibetan friends in Naqchu, the well-known source of the most expensive medicinal fungus, *Cordyceps sinensis*, commonly known as *chongcao*. The gentle summer breeze could hardly ease the tense atmosphere caused by the on-going conflicts over *chongcao*. A few weeks before, a neighbouring village, headed by a town official, threatened to attack the village where I stayed if it refused to agree to their border proposal. Competition over *chongcao* – the so-called “soft gold”, whose price exceeds that of gold had turned bloody in the harvest areas that are mostly located in the Tibetan plateau. Border conflicts between villages, locals murdering poachers, bandits robbing traders were daily fare during harvest seasons. After several bottles of beer, Dawa, a man in his thirties, asked me: “So tell me, why do you Han people crave *chongcao*?” Like many other commodities, *chongcao*, although often promoted as a “wonder fungus” unique to Tibet, is largely consumed by people far away. Among them, Hong Kong has long been a significant market for *chongcao*. Were it not for the Han Chinese in Hong Kong and the big coastal cities of China, these Tibetans would not dig out the fungus that they hardly ate themselves, let alone found “wondrous” (奇迹). In spite of having grown up in a Cantonese family that “naturally” consumed *chongcao* as well as many other medicinal tonics that are known to be “good” for one’s health, I never thought about this question. Nor did I ever imagine that the people harvesting *chongcao* would find this business so puzzling. “I guess it only works on you ‘low people!’” Dawa concluded with a laugh, referring to Han Chinese living outside the plateau. Inspired by this cultural encounter, this article addresses the question raised by Dawa concerning the desire for *chongcao*, for which there turned out to be no simple answer.

Although the *chongcao* trade between Tibetans and Han Chinese dates back to the Qing dynasty, the popularity of *chongcao* among Han Chinese in mainland China is a recent phenomenon. Many pharmacists recalled how little *chongcao* was appreciated in the past: people either did not know about this weird-looking fungus or felt disgusted by it. Before economic liberalisation, state owned pharmacies often had difficulties meeting the sales targets for *chongcao*. In fact, the hardening of *chongcao* prices only occurred in the 1990s when, hand in hand with rampant inflation, it saw a dramatic growth in popularity and economic value. Adjusted for inflation, the wholesale price for *chongcao* in Lhasa only rose by 38% between 1985 and 1997; while prices witnessed an increase of 342% between 1997 and 2004 (Winkler 2008: 299). The increase in retail prices has been even more remarkable. While in 1984, the most expensive *chongcao* cost around RMB 5380 per kg, it was sold for as much as RMB 526,000 per kg in 2010. Hong Kong also saw a dramatic rise in prices during the same period. This is why *chongcao* has been referred to as “soft gold” and regarded as a symbol of wealth. By examining the trade and consumption of *chongcao*, this article sets out to explain how a once unfamiliar fungus has become a popular and valuable commodity. This research addresses the key question of economic anthropology: how is value created? And in particular, how do strong socio-political and historical forces shape value in a more marketised China of the post-reform era?

Unlike the Tibetans who feel confused about the value of *chongcao*, the Han Chinese at the other end of the long commodity chain, seemed quite confident in giving answers. In fact, many informants sneered at my research: “You nerd need to do

research to figure out the value of *chongcao*? Isn't the answer already out there? [It is traders'] speculation and [*chongcao*'s] scarcity!" A medicine trader added: "The real significant research should be a scientific one looking at *chongcao*'s medical value which is still more or less a riddle." These comments, though dismissive towards the significance of anthropology, bring up the important question as to what ought to be meant by economic value. It is true that the scarcity of *chongcao* has contributed to its high price. However, it does not tell us much about the desire for it. This article argues that neither scarcity nor utility immediately translate into economic value without interacting with desire and power. Following Arjun Apparurai's idea of "social life of things" (1986), this study examines how *chongcao*, along its whole social trajectory, passes through different value realms.

The remainder of this article divides into three parts: following a brief review of the medical debates surrounding the fungus, I dedicate two sections to examining the specific social situations under which the economic value of *chongcao* has been created. The first one focuses on how *chongcao* has been defined as a commodity and the second explores its circulation and social usage. In addition to its circulation in China Mainland, the article also looks at how the consumption of *chongcao* has transcended the border between China Mainland and Hong Kong.

***Cordyceps sinensis*: Background and Medical Efficacy**

The scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth discussion about phytopharmacy, but it is still necessary to briefly consider the medical debates revolving around *chongcao* in order to be able to examine its perceived medical value. The *Cordyceps sinensis* fungus, known as *chongcao* (蟲草, short for 冬蟲夏草 [*Dongchong Xiacao*]) in Chinese, is a parasite that feeds on the larvae of moths (Lepidoptera) in the genera *Hepialus* and *Thitarodes* (Kinjo and Zang, 2001) (Figure 1). The fungus is endemic to the grasslands mostly of the Tibetan Plateau (Winkler 2008: 294) (Figure 2) at an elevation of 3600–5000 metres. *Dongchong Xiacao* is the literal translation of the original Tibetan name Yartsa gunbu, meaning "winter-worm summer-grass," which captures the life cycle of the fungus: a worm in winter "transforms" into a kind of "grass" in the summer: the spores of the fungus infect the dormant larvae, entering its body, and feeding on it. By early summer of the following year, the caterpillar is completely taken over by the fungus, only leaving the remaining exoskeleton filled with the *Cordyceps* mycelium. A blade of "grass" protrudes from the head of the mummified larvae, and emerges above ground among other sprouting alpine grass.

In terms of its ethno medical and biomedical use, the efficacy of *chongcao* is still contested. Commercials for *chongcao* products often promote *chongcao* as a magical symbiosis of flora and fauna, unique to the mysterious Tibetan plateau. However, as mentioned before, the use of Yartsa gunbu is not particularly common in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The few people who do consume it, typically use it as a tonic and/or an aphrodisiac. In fact, some Tibetan men actually sneered at Han Chinese men: "We don't need it!" It has also never been highly prized in traditional treatises of Tibetan medicine. It was first mentioned in Tibetan medical *Mennag chewa rinsel* in the 15th century, but not included in other famous Tibetan treatises until the 19th century. In addition, the utilization of *Chongcao* was neither very common at the Kumbum

Medical Institute (Qinghai Province) nor at the Lhasa Medical and Astrological Institute before the arrival of the Chinese (Boesi and Cardi. 2009).

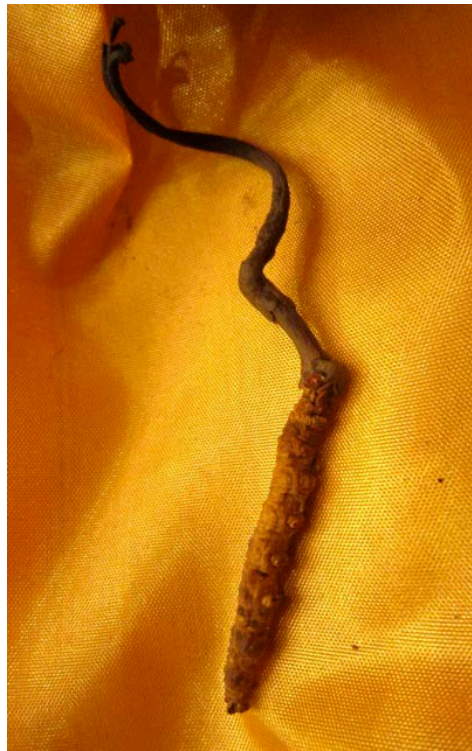


Figure 1 A mature *chongcao*. The fruiting body of the fungus grows out of the head of the host caterpillar. It is always placed vertically in the soil, with the fruiting body protruding from the ground.



Figure 2 The distribution of *Cordyceps sinensis* (Winkler 2008)

In contrast to most advertisements and some studies, the history of the medicinal usage of *chongcao* in traditional Chinese medicine is not particularly long compared with other expensive traditional medicines, such as ginseng and antler. Only in 1757 (Qing dynasty) was *chongcao* formally documented in the *Bencao Congxin* 本草

從新 (*New Compilation of Materia Medica*) treatise. Yet, the two main traditional Chinese treatises, *New Compilation of Materia Medica* and *Bencao Gangmu Shiyi* 本草綱目拾遺 (*Supplement to Compendium of Materia Medica*) that did document *chongcao*, only mentioned its effectiveness in strengthening kidneys and lungs, without granting it any special credit. My interview with a group of traditional Chinese medicine doctors indicates that *chongcao* is seldom patented, which coincides with the study by Buenz et al. (2005) that shows little ethnomedical data describing the medical usage of *chongcao* in the treatises.

At the same time, however, there exists a diverse range of research suggesting the existence of a wide variety of potential therapeutic values of *chongcao*: as an aphrodisiac (Bhattarai, 1993), analgesic (Koyama et al., 1997) immune modulator (Gong et al., 2000), and free radical scavenger (Yamaguchi et al., 2000). However, these efficacies have not been well analyzed, and many reports on its pharmacological functions contradict each other (Buenz et al 2005). For this reason, according to the regulations stipulated by the China Health Bureau, pharmacies are only allowed to cite from traditional literature, while prohibiting any references to medical efficacies specified in “clinical” or “modern medical” studies. At the same time, a few biological reports (Zhu and Rippe 2004; Bao Wu and Zheng 1994; Chen 1995 Mizuno 1999) purportedly show the positive effects of cultured *Cordyceps sinensis* mycelia in combating fatigue, hypo sexuality, cold intolerance, dizziness, frequent nocturia, tinnitus, and amnesia.

Despite so much conjecture over its medical use, *chongcao* is now promoted in China as a panacea for cancer, SARS, AIDS, angiocardopathy, impotence, liver problems, mental health etc. Indeed, there seems to be nothing that it cannot cure. I am not the only person to have been puzzled by its efficacy. Almost every *chongcao* user who I talked to asked me: “According to your research, does it really work?” Even some staff of pharmacies found a convenient moment to furtively ask: “What is its real efficacy?”

Constructing Scarcity: Telling the Differences between Wild Chongcao and the Cultured Variety

Why do people continually spend so much money on a dubious fungus especially when a cheap substitute – cultured *C. sinensis mycelium* – is available? The artificially grown *C. sinensis mycelium*, another species of *C. sinensis*, is regarded as a totally different substance. It is referred to as 蟲草花 (*chongcaohua*,) 金蟲草 (gold/golden *chongcao*) or 人工蟲草 (artificial *chongcao*) in Chinese² and often dismissed as a cheap imitation of *chongcao*. Similarly, other species of *Cordyceps* that are reported to have similar efficacy, such as 北蟲草 (*Cordyceps militaris*), which is also documented in some traditional Chinese treatises, are considered to be adulterant forms of *chongcao*. It is true that the similarities between the wild *chongcao* and the cultured ones are still untested. However, molecular phylogenetic analyses show that there exists a high degree of genetic variation even within the wild *Cordyceps sinensis* (Chen and Hseu, 1999), which has been a challenge for biological research in verifying samples (Buenz et

² Cultured *C. sinensis mycelium* is called *chongcao hua* (蟲草花) that literally means *chongcao* flower. My informants, including users and medicine dealers laughed about this name. They believed that the name was come up by the cultivators or merchants, who wanted to benefit from association with *chongcao*.

al 2005). Even though cultured *C. sinensis* contains the same active components and has been advertised as having the same effects, its price is a great deal lower than that of wild *chongcao*.³ While products of cultured *C. sinensis* are popular among Western consumers, it has hardly affected the market of wild *chongcao* in China. In fact, the price of *chongcao* is still soaring despite a brief decline in 2008 due to the global financial crisis.

Culture Matters and Money Talks

To untangle the puzzle, some refer to an Asian taste: preferences for wild medicines, the tradition of edible insects, and the “curiosity for the ‘symbiosis’ of insect and fungal world” (Winkler 2005); some others simply dismiss this choice as sheer ignorance and superstitious belief in mysteriousness – a legacy of unscientific Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as opposed to Western biomedical science. It is true that culture matters. The different names of *chongcao* illustrate that perceptions of the nature of this item vary in terms of the culture, in which the “scarcity” of *chongcao* has been constructed. *Cordyceps sinensis* refers to the species of fungus, or the “grass” – the fruiting body that grows out of the dead body of a caterpillar. However, *chongcao* – “worm-grass” – is regarded as the unity of both the fungus and the caterpillar. A retired official of a state owned pharmacy who knew quite clearly what the cultured mycelium is, still commented: “Cultured *chongcao* is a fraud! It has nothing to do with *chongcao*. You know, *chongcao* doesn’t blossom; and so far no labs succeeded in uniting the fungus and the worm. They [the businessmen marketing cultured *chongcao*] just want to benefit from the fame of *chongcao*.” Furthermore, most Chinese people regard the “worm” as being equally, if not more important. It is shown in the evaluation of the quality of *chongcao*: the bigger the worm, the higher the price; as for the “grass” – the fruiting body – the shorter the better; so many luxury pharmacies often cut the “grass” shorter. An informant commented: “The worm is meat. It must contain more nutrition, mustn’t it?” Some of my informants recalled how they used to spit out the tough and flavourless “grass”; recently, however, generally around the outbreak of SARS, they heard that the “grass” was also “nutritious”.

However, the folk taxonomy that has contributed to the scarcity of *chongcao* is hardly traditional. Nor do people simply follow the dictates of so-called culture. Indeed, the implications of these categories are ambiguous. Not many of my informants, both users and non-users, actually knew what cultured *C. sinensis* is. In fact, the cultured fungus products have been selling well ever since being available on the market. Some people consume both cultured fungus and *chongcao*. However, one thing that they are sure about is that the two must have different effects: “How can it be possible that *chongcaohua* is as effective as *chongcao*?! It is so much cheaper! Money talks.” Nevertheless, it would be too convenient to simply turn to the fetishisation of commodities that Karl Marx wrote about: consumers equate economic value with utility. All of my informants actually knew that the prices are inflated. In fact, even the sellers and traders would confess that a lot is just hype. In a recent New York Post report about the spreading interest in *chongcao* in New York, Candice M. Giove (2011) cited a Chinese herbal pharmacy owner Thomas Leung: “People always ask, ‘Is it really that

³ In 2010, the price of high grade *chongcao* reached as much as 526,000 yuan per kg, while the most expensive *C. sinensis* only cost around 400 yuan per kg.

good?’ and I say, ‘It’s not \$800 good.’” The official news agency of China, *Xinhua News Agency*, has been criticizing the price pushing of *chongcao* and called for “rational consumption” ever since 2005 (Xinhuanet 2005, 2008 & 2009). However, most *chongcao* traders would reject this condemnation, as the owner of one of the most famous *chongcao* brands pointed out: “We don’t brag about the efficacy. The sizzle has long been there”.

Consuming “Nature:” The Fetishes for Tianran (Natural) Chongcao

What all of the above shows is that people are not simply irrational, as the national news agency claimed; at the same time, however, there clearly exists a variety of fetishes pertaining to wild *chongcao*. What are these fetishes about? Or more specifically, what has made consumers value wild *chongcao* so much more than the cultured variety? The official answer given by many *chongcao* merchants can be summarised by the following advertisement (Figure 2) of Qinghai Kekexili *Chongcao* Co., Ltd. (青海可可西里蟲草有限公司):



Figure 3 An advertisement of a *chongcao* company

“Snow mountain *chongcao*; tianran (natural) and pure; the Tibetan plateau; China’s wonder grass” reads an online advertisement with a picture showing a familiar image of the Tibetan Plateau – the snowy mountains and grasslands. The company is named after the place Kekexili (可可西里), where it is not actually located. Kekexili has become famous for the movie also named after it (known in English as *Mountain Patrol*), which addresses the area’s ecological problems. The advertisement, as well as the name of the company, concisely captures two arguments that appeal to consumers: (1) the naturalness and purity of *chongcao* associated with its “pure” habitat, and (2) the magical quality attributed to the exotic Tibetan plateau. It is tempting to conclude here that the preference for wild *chongcao* simply follows the trend of the quest for exotic alternative medicine under the New Age umbrella. Recent years have also witnessed increasing popularity of Tibetan medicine in China. Nevertheless, the market for most Tibetan medicine did not expand as much as initially predicted. The reason is that many Han people believe that the Han are biologically different from Tibetans and thus, that most Tibetan medicine is not suitable for the Han. A common view is: “Tibetan medicine is too strong for us,” which echoes Dawa’s theory of the “high people” and the “low people.” The boundary between the two medical systems has been essentialised along ethnic lines. With the exception, as indicated by the above slogan, of *chongcao*, which Han Chinese regard as “the wonder grass of China”, despite growing in the Tibetan

Plateau, which is in this case a part of China. Unlike other medicinal materials that are viewed as Tibetan medicine, *chongcao* was documented in traditional Chinese treatises, hundreds of years ago, and is therefore believed to be “safe” for Han Chinese to use. Rather than “mysterious” Tibetan culture, it is the high altitude and the ensuing harsh environment that give it a sense of rarity and wonder. It is also in this sense that the “symbiosis” of fauna and “flora”⁴ is valued to such an extent: the extremely high altitude of the Tibetan Plateau is so unique that there are no other comparable places that would provide similar environments, let alone artificial labs. This explains why *Cordyceps militaris* (北蟲草), despite also being a unity of insect and fungus, is not valued as much: it is endemic to the Northeastern plains of China. What adds to its perceived rarity is all the hard work that goes into searching for and harvesting *chongcao*. During the time I spent in Naqchu, I encountered a TV production crew from Hong Kong that was out there to unveil the “secret” of the fungus. They filmed the local Tibetans throwing themselves on the ground, their hands and faces covered in dust, looking for the “wonder grass” hiding among the ordinary grass. The host followed, but failed to find any pieces, and conveyed the incredible obstacles to the audience through camera. Only Tibetans were able to see them, she explained, and after a whole day of backbreaking work, they would usually only have found a few pieces, depending on luck. Similar stories were told by some big companies sourcing *chongcao*. *Chongcao* is not only a speciality of the Tibetan Plateau, but calls for Tibetan people’s special skills. However, as I argued at the beginning, the “rarity” – as much as it is believed – is not a sufficient justification for its high price. As Appadurai suggests, exchange is a constitutive element of value, “of which scarcity is only the external manifestation” (1986: 4), but not the other way around.

The concept of *tianran* (天然) – being natural – reveals more about the habitat of *chongcao* where the fetishes are grounded. Firstly, *tianran*, literally meaning “formed by the sky,” implies a state of naturalness (自然). Ironically, the wild *chongcao* might actually be less “natural” or “pure” than the fungus cultured in labs. This is because between the time it leaves the ground and the time it is sold in retail, all the wild pieces have to go through various processes, such as metal tests, dehydration, reshaping,⁵ fumigation and bleaching (with sulphur.) There exists condemned, yet very common type of adulteration to add weight to *chongcao*, for example, by injecting mercury and lead powder, soaking it in magnesium sulphate solution, inserting iron wire etc.⁶ *Chongcao* is also often coloured in order to make it look golden and shiny. Although not well-informed about all these “unnatural” processes, consumers are aware of their existence in general. This worry among consumers has driven traders to either go to the source themselves or to spread stories about how they purchased *chongcao* directly from the point of origin. These stories, as well as the personal networks between customers and traders, serve to assure consumers that the *chongcao* they buy is more natural.

In a nutshell, purchasing wild *chongcao* that allegedly came right from the ground makes consumers believe that it is more natural than the cultured variety. The

⁴ The final form of *chongcao* is commonly viewed by both Tibetans and Han Chinese as a plant, despite its nature as fungus.

⁵ Many retail shops soak the pieces in water and straighten the usually curly caterpillar bodies before they dry them again.

⁶ This is why the famous brands of *chongcao* all claim that their *chongcao* goes through the heavy-metal testing.

word “artificial” has negative connotations, especially with regards to food; things considered “natural”, on the other hand, have become increasingly popular. Along with increasing food safety concerns in China, and especially responding to the continuous scandals in the food industry, such as the milk powder scandal in 2008, natural and green food movements have increasingly been in vogue. The scandals have undermined the general public’s trust in the state’s regulations and authority. Given the lack of transparency, consumers felt they have no choice but to rely on brands and prices, which they hoped would reflect quality. So those with access would turn to foreign goods – especially from developed countries – use their personal networks, and/or nature. It was also illustrated in the rocketing demand for imported milk powder, the boom of community farm movements and the *tianran* food movement. “China’s market has no ethics! They do whatever for money!” said a pharmacy official, who regarded the cultured fungus as a fraud, and who took the appearance and flourishing of the cultured *chongcao* as another example of this “ethical crisis.” In light of this situation, the artificially grown fungus looked particularly suspicious, since it is associated with *chongcao*, a commodity involving so much money. On the contrary, people believe Nature does not play tricks.

Moreover, *tianran* conveys a sense of nature, implying purity. Yet, what does “purity” refer to? In this case, it means more than just “food safety” or “organic.” Typing “冬蟲夏草” (*dongchong xiacao*) and “天然” (*tianran*) into Google Search, I found 945,000 results, of which 443,000 were about the differences between the “natural” *chongcao* and the cultured variety, while the rest were mostly advertisements for *chongcao* evoking the unpolluted and special environment of the Tibetan Plateau to stress the excellent quality of *chongcao*. According to my interviews, I found that the advertisement below reflects the opinions of most consumers quite accurately (my translation):

The *Dongchong xiacao* of Yushu Qinghai is among the best in the world. The special geography and environment endows it with magic medical effects. Yushu is located in southwest Qinghai, which is remote and underdeveloped (经济不发达,) which is not densely populated, yet has diverse flora and fauna, and in which the primitive ecology (原生态环境) is well conserved. Therefore, the inherent quality of the *dongchong xiacao* from Yushu Qinghai is better than that from other places... [*Qingzangqing*]

The specific implications of being pure and natural have to be understood within the context of China’s distinct ideology of development, in which the national landscape is pictured by consumers. Adopting the Marxist idea of social evolutionism, the Communist party has ranked different parts of China in a linear scheme according to their level of development. The degree of development, as defined by the Chinese government, climbs along the geographic line from the western inland to the east coast, wherein minorities, mainly occupying the western inland, are labelled as “backward” and “primitive.” Not surprisingly, the Tibetan area is at the bottom of the hierarchy. The gap has grown since the reform era when development policies prioritised the coastal cities. The economic boom, rapid industrialization and urbanization have, however, had side effects, such as serious pollution and environmental deterioration; the underdeveloped regions in West China, on the other hand, have remained largely untouched. The “backwardness” paradoxically mirrors nostalgia for the disappearing unadulterated environment. The altitude of the original habitat, linked with the

qualities of *chongcao*, not only leads people to stand in awe of nature, but more importantly, also reflects the desire for an unpolluted ambience. Therefore, among so many “efficacies” of *chongcao*, advertisements have often stressed its effect on respiratory diseases, which is believed to be a result of the “modern environment.”

Indeed, the phenomenon of associating distinctive sources with the prices of *chongcao* dates back to the collective era. Yet, they were not linked in the way they are today. Until 1988, when privatization infiltrated the pharmaceutical industry, *chongcao* was collected by the state and only categorized into two ranks according to its origins: 西藏草 (Tibet “grass”) - *chongcao* from the TAR - and 四川青海草 (Sichuan-Qinghai “grass”) - *chongcao* from Qinghai and Sichuan - with the former being more expensive (RMB 5380/kg compared to RMB 4820/kg). The reasons for such distinctions remain unclear. It might be due to accessibility rather than distinctive qualities. Since the 1990s, the *chongcao* of Qinghai has gradually separated from the former category enjoying a rise in prestige, whereas Sichuan *chongcao* has fallen out of favour with the market rapidly. The market demand has subsequently been shaped more by the geographical politics.

On the other hand, *chongcao* is a symbol for development. Firstly, the *chongcao* economy coincided with China’s project to develop its western regions and was embraced by the local governments. Government data shows that this “cash crop” contributes fifty to eighty percent of overall rural income in counties that harvest *chongcao*, with even higher figures for districts that enjoy exceptional growing conditions such as south eastern Naqchu Prefecture and northern Chamdo Prefecture (Winkler 2008: 299). Secondly, the *chongcao* boom was attributed to the development of the Tibetan Plateau, the increase in overall knowledge about this mysterious land, as well as the improvement of transportation that made vast collection and transportation of *chongcao* possible. However, the *chongcao* development has not been immune to the environmental consequences that its harvest has brought about. Consumers have been well informed by the media about how the vast and “unscientific” harvesting methods have endangered the ecology of source habitats. Although the cause is not clear yet, decreasing production of *chongcao* in some districts has been reported. Ironically, the negative impacts of *chongcao* production on the environment have actually contributed to the fetishization of nature. It was a common concern among users that *chongcao* might soon become extinct, or at least not be available on the market, like many other dying resources in China. Many of my informants pointed to analogies between *chongcao* and *facai* 髮菜 (*Nostoc flagelliforme*). *Facai*, also a kind of fungus, endemic to the grasslands of Northwest China, is popular among Cantonese and has a symbolic meaning of wealth. In 2000, the harvest and sale of *facai* was forbidden for over-harvesting had caused severe desertification. “I heard they [*chongcao* and *facai*] are similar. Both grow on the grasslands of the West [China.] It [the ecology] is fragile,” commented Ms. Xu, who (with her family) is well-known among the upper classes of Zhongshan City (Pearl River Delta) for consuming *chongcao* more than anybody else. She added after a few seconds: “Better enjoy it as much as possible before it’s gone.” As this shows, the sense of scarcity was not a result of inherent rarity, but manifested by consumers’ understanding of the development of this giant country.

As the discussion above shows, medical effects are not all that consumers look for in *chongcao*. The fetishes pertaining to *chongcao* embody the fetishization of nature, which reflects how the consumers make sense of China’s booming development and its environmental consequences, rather than showing an innate affection for nature.

“Soft Gold”: Social Usage of *Chongcao*

The discussion about *chongcao*'s value is far from complete without examining the processes of exchange, which are the source of value (Appadurai 1986: 4). *Chongcao* acquires other identities as it circulates along multiple social trajectories. It shares features of what Arjun Appadurai calls a “luxury good,” whose “principal use is rhetorical and social,” with “complex social messages” and “a high degree of linkage... to body, person and personality” (ibid: 38).

Nutrition for Guanxi: the Circulation of Chongcao

One can glimpse the social and rhetorical use of *chongcao* from its evaluation criteria. As is the case for diamonds, the evaluation of *chongcao* is based mostly on size and look but not on medicinal qualities per se. The size and intactness of the stroma matter most. While broken pieces were almost equally accepted in the early 1990s, nowadays, the products lose value dramatically if they are not complete. Many customers are well aware that the medicinal qualities should not be associated – or associated that much – with size. “Think in terms of pills. The bigger ones are not necessarily better,” a man told me when buying a *chongcao* gift pack.

In fact, *chongcao* sold as gifts, rather than as self-use items, accounts for the majority of the business. After being sold as a commodity, a significant amount of *chongcao* continues to travel along networks as gifts, being exchanged for guanxi and material benefits. Some pass through the hands of dozens of people until it finally reaches someone's mouth; some gets to the so-called “recycling spots” for encashment and enters the market as a commodity again.

Chongcao has not only nurtured Chinese people's stomachs, but also all kinds of relations, which can be roughly subsumed under three categories: emotional affection (ganqing,) long-term relationships from which material benefits are expected in the future, and short-term links for immediate material returns. On the one hand, *chongcao*, at such high prices, expresses filial piety, sympathy, commitment and love for those that one holds dear. A father told his son-in-law at his daughter's wedding: “Now I hand her to you. Treat her well. Feed her more *chongcao*!” On the other hand, *chongcao* is “thick” and “black,” to use the Chinese terms that describe the cynical tactics of guanxi.⁷ *Chongcao* is called “soft gold” not only for its high price, but also for its function as gold; interestingly, the *chongcao* at retail is all processed to look golden and shiny. *Chongcao* has become one of the most popular bribes for several reasons. Firstly, it is safer to both give and accept *chongcao* than cash or gold. On the one hand, *chongcao* as a medicinal fungus exists in a grey zone; on the other, it shares the main characteristics with the latter objects: small in size, easy to preserve, high and relatively stable in value and publicly recognised. Hua Ge, whose business relied on strong guanxi with the police, recalled cash, branded watches, clothes and accessories as the most popular bribes in the 1990s. But with stricter regulations, it has become more risky and difficult to enjoy these items. There exists a widely spread story that in city T, a corrupt bureaucrat was arrested with three million US dollars moulded under his bed, because he did not dare to spend it. In contrast to this, *chongcao* can be consumed privately. Both nutrition and

⁷厚黑學 (Thick and Black Learning) written by Li Zongwu (Li 2005) is a famous book describing the cynical tactics of guanxi.

criminal evidence are digested by stomachs without ever being known. For the same reason, expensive cigarettes and wine remain popular bribes. One informant told me how he successfully bribed his superior and got the contract for a project. He brought one hundred thousand yuan to his superior's home at night, but his superior threw the whole bag of cash out of the window. Several days later, he brought a pack of *chongcao*, which is worth about the same amount of money, to his superior's office during office hours and his superior accepted the *chongcao* happily. Such material transactions are subject to clear calculation. After Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Day, the peak of *chongcao* sale, pharmacies always receive peculiar "customers" checking the price tags.

Secondly, *chongcao* caters to the healthcare trend among bureaucrats, which is reflected in the recent popular vocabulary of "health bribing" (養生行賄). Many bureaucrats are tired of and suffer from the excessive consumption of high-protein food, alcohol and cigarettes. *Chongcao*, a mild tonic in Traditional Chinese Medicine containing the element of balance, is regarded as a remedy for the after-effects of excessive consumption, such as angiocardopathy, diabetes and other so-called "rich people's ailments". Similarly, American ginseng and Dendrobium (石斛) have also become popular gifts for bureaucrats as they are said to "detoxify" the body of the remnants of cigarettes and alcohol. It illustrates not only a switch in consumption preferences, but also indicates social change.

Stratified Food, Stratified China: Chongcao as a Symbol of Social Status

Chongcao is now replacing the traditional luxury foods such as *Bao Shen Chi Du* (abalone, sea cucumber, shark fin, fish maw) or even branded accessories and sports cars, as a significant symbol of social status. It distinguishes "the classy rich" from the "vulgar overnight millionaires." Mr. Xu, a businessman said:

Nowadays people are richer. Many people can somehow fake richness. Think about it, a new BMW costs only several-hundred thousand [yuan] and you can drive it for ten years. You can only tell [who is truly rich] from the details of daily life, the consumption habits. A decade ago, rich people favoured branded clothes, luxury accessories, big diamonds and such, now they have turned to 'taste': appreciating expensive tea, cigars, red wine, [collecting] calligraphy, painting and antiques; [cultivating] trees and Japanese carp.

To further illustrate this point, he took his friend as an example: this man was once seen buying a small amount (2 taels--around 100 grams) of the broken pieces of *chongcao*, and has been laughed at since then: "Although he is driving expensive cars, he is actually quite petty! He even grudges money on *chongcao*." The man thus lost face among his friends, as well as business partners, and felt embarrassed. It is said he learned his lesson and never bought less than one catty (half a kilogram) of *chongcao* – or at least, learned how not to be seen when buying less.

Chongcao also serves as a means to divide between "the rich" and "the ordinary people". When asked whether they eat/have eaten *chongcao*, many people answered in a self-mocking way: "That's what rich people eat. I am just an ordinary person(老百姓). I can only afford *chongcao hua* (蟲草花)". This adds one more pair to the popular "food hierarchy": carrot is the ginseng for the poor; snow fungus mirrors bird's nest; rice noodle is the cheap version of shark fin. Although *chongcao* has

always been a luxury good, it was not really a symbol of social status until the late 1980s. A pharmacy owner remembered how, back then, people felt disgusted by this weird-looking fungus. The few consumers who bought it did so for self-medical-use. Nevertheless, *chongcao* has moved from the private kitchen to the social table. Rich housewives get together every morning in teahouses, gossiping and exchanging recipes. New culinary or medicinal information spreads quickly along with the latest styles of Louis Vuitton bags. They buy expensive foods such as *chongcao* and bird-nest, prepare these materials in their own ways and treat their friends at home, and afterwards share the feedback. In this way, members in the circle can clearly indicate who consumed the most *chongcao* and who has better knowledge of healthcare. For some businessmen, luxury banquets where *chongcao* is a must-have ingredient are occasions to exchange information, maintain networks and brag about their sexuality. *Chongcao* was first introduced to Hua Ge's circle as a sexual tonic. They often boasted that their sexual potency had been increased by *chongcao*. These conversations are often associated with the topic of "second wives." They commonly said: "*Chongcao* really works! I had sexual intercourse two (or three) times with my 'girlfriend' last night after drinking *chongcao* soup!" However, Hua Ge did not believe that. Neither did they really enjoy it, he said. "It is more about social pressure and face. When most people around you all have [second wives], you also have to show you are still potent."

The change in consumers of *chongcao* reflects the transformation in social stratification. A group of informants sketched out their ups and downs over last few decades with their consumption of *chongcao*. Aunt Wang dated her use of *chongcao* back to 1980 and clearly remembered how she stopped consuming it in 2003 when prices soared:

I didn't have a concrete feeling of how expensive *chongcao* was, because we were earning a lot. Our family was one of the few 'ten-thousand-yuan households' (万元户) back at that time. It was like being a millionaire nowadays. When I started to use *chongcao*, few people even knew what it was! People used to envy me!

She concluded: "It is unaffordable not because the price increased, but because our business failed after the 1997 financial crisis." Aunt Wang is not the only case among my informants. The good old days of many people have passed.

Hard-working Hong Kong People & Overnight-Millionaire Mainlanders: the Changing Market in Hong Kong

Talking about the changing consumption patterns of *chongcao*, many Hong Kong people also feel that their good old days are gone. Hong Kong has long been an important market for *chongcao*, both in terms of wholesale and retail, which was hardly interrupted by the turmoil of the collective era. Before 1987, when the medical industry of China started the process of privatization, *chongcao* was collected by the state and mainly exported for foreign currency. Hong Kong was one of the main destinations. Some of my informants who started to consume *chongcao* as early as the late 1980s, recalled that they only bought *chongcao* from Hong Kong because *chongcao* of better quality (bigger size and brighter colour) were all exported to Hong Kong. Since the opening up of China in 1978, the trend of consuming tonics such as *chongcao*, bird's nest,

chicken essence, has gradually spread from Hong Kong to Guangdong province and later to the northern part of the Mainland. Many Cantonese people first learned about *chongcao* from advertisements on Hong Kong TV channels in the 1980s. Consuming these tonics was regarded as a symbol of the good life, not so much for their high price but for their association with the prosperous and “advanced” Hong Kong. “It meant that you could afford a life of ‘Hong Kong standard.’”

However, the situation has been reversed. Since the late 1990s, more and more Hong Kong people found they could no longer afford *chongcao* as prices skyrocketed and the economy of Hong Kong suffered from the financial crisis. In contrast with the stagnating Hong Kong economy, the purchasing power of Mainland Chinese has thrived to the extent that it reached Hong Kong. Within the last four to five years, the majority of *chongcao* sold in Hong Kong, actually traveled back to the Mainland. Few *chongcao* traders in Hong Kong would deny that they earned more Hong Kong dollars from mainland customers. Stories about rich mainlanders bringing suitcases of cash in exchange of *chongcao* widely spread around Ko Shing Street, which is also called Herbal Medicine Street of Hong Kong. “The people up there (Mainland Chinese) have to give gifts,” a trader who has been in the business for decades explained. “And also, it is so easy to become rich in the Mainland that they don’t care about money. They can earn millions overnight through a lot of shortcuts, while it takes us hard-working Hong Kong people a whole life to save the same amount of money.” He added, subtly displaying his disdain.

The tension between Hong Kong residents and Mainlanders remains – even perhaps increased – after the hand over of Hong Kong, yet with shifted dynamics. Mainland China, the once shabby and inglorious “relative” of Hong Kong, has become a strong competitor, a backstage ruler and a huge market. Since 2003, when Hong Kong signed the CEPA (Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) and further opened its border to the Mainland Chinese, it has experienced greater influence from China in terms of consumption. The influence has reached beyond economic aspects. In the case of *chongcao*, for example, its social usage in Mainland China has interrupted its original trajectory in Hong Kong. Many users who can no longer afford *chongcao* feel that they are deprived of what they deserve. The sense of deprivation has spread beyond that of luxuries and fuelled social disputes. The public discourse of Hong Kong people often condemns the Mainland consumers for taking “limited resources” from the locals and bidding up the price. A post on Tianya (天涯), a famous Mainland website, which complained about the adulteration of *chongcao* and other medicine in Hong Kong, developed into an angry debate over the relations between Mainland China and Hong Kong.⁸ The Hong Kong side urged “China,” referring to both Mainland consumers and Chinese government, to keep their hands off Hong Kong. Many Mainland Chinese interpret the anger of Hong Kong people as remaining arrogance as they face the waning power. With closer examination, however, the dynamics are more than an identity issue. Hong Kong people do not despise Mainlanders simply for being rich, but for earning “dirty” money from “shortcuts” allowed by the corrupt political system. The fact that many customers bought expensive food or medicinal materials as gifts or bribes has strengthened this impression. On the

⁸ Tianya. 2011. “香港药店药宰游客黑幕大揭秘！” (Shady Deals of Hong Kong Medicine Shops in Ripping off Tourists). At <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2205904.shtml> accessed on 10. August 2011.

other hand, many Hong Kong people have been experiencing declining living standards due to rising inflation. On top of that, more and more Hong Kong people feel frustrated by the decreasing social mobility and the widening divide between the rich and the poor. The once inspiring Hong Kong dream – you can become a millionaire starting from zero as long as you work hard, has failed them. In addition to protesting against monopolies and the Hong Kong government, it is convenient to blame the influx of “dirty” money from the mainland for contaminating the integrity of Hong Kong and washing away the good old days.

The ethic of hard work nonetheless remains a part of the identity of Hong Kong people and continues to appeal. It can be found in the Hong Kong ideology, numerous TV shows, as well as in advertisements for cultured *C. sinensis* products. In recent years, the products made from the cultured mycelium mushroomed in Hong Kong, echoing the fad of *chongcao* in Mainland China. Compared with the expensive wild *chongcao*, these kinds of products are affordable and clearly target middle-class Hong Kong people. Although different advertisements tell various stories, there seems to be a common theme. Usually beginning with “We Hong Kong people,” the advertisements stress the efficacy of combating fatigue to help the users to work more.

Therefore, the changing market for *chongcao* in Hong Kong reflects more than economic factors. The flow of *chongcao* across the border reveals the dilemma facing Hong Kong in its social transformation after the 1997 hand-over.

Conclusion

While the value of *chongcao* is not inherent in the fungus, it nevertheless embodies value. The social life of *chongcao* provides a glimpse at the cultural changes and shifting social stratification in post-reform China. At the same time, the collision of its usage in Mainland China and Hong Kong embodies the tension between the two political entities. As a widely desired commodity, *chongcao* made possible informal material transactions that are undeniable components of the economy in a more marketized China. As a symbol, it has become a vehicle through which both the rich and the ordinary can make sense of their life.

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