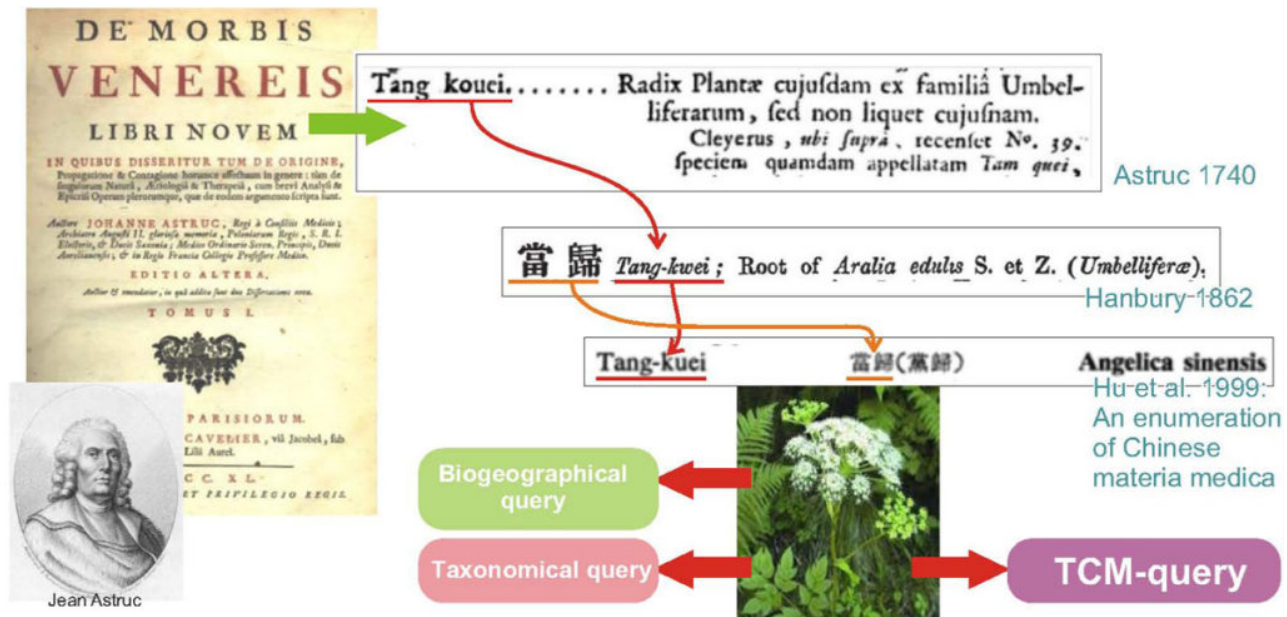


Chinese plants against syphilis from a 1740 French treatise by Jean Astruc

Historical medical sources can be still queried for forgotten cures and remedies. Chinese materia medica and remedies recorded or imported by the Europeans still reveal unknown or forgotten medicinal plants. An unknown today, versatile treatise on venerology *De Morbis venereis...* ('On venereal diseases...') by a French physician Jean Astruc (1684–1768), contains an ethnopharmacological survey he had commissioned in Beijing in the 1730's. It is an account of more than 20 plant-derived raw materials applied in China against syphilis, extracted from 5 Chinese formulas of compound antisyphilitic medicaments. In 1739, Astruc obtained samples of materia medica which constituted the formulas from the Jesuit mission in Beijing. Then he asked the brothers de Jussieu, two prominent French botanists, to identify the original medicinal plants.



A process of nomenclature-based identification of Chinese medicinal plants. Example of danggui (*Angelica sinensis*)

In Beijing, each sample was labelled by the Jesuits with a Chinese plant name (transcribed). Astruc published both transcribed Chinese names and the botanical identifications done by the de Jussieus, and the formulas. I re-interpreted the Chinese names by means of younger till most recent taxonomical and ethnopharmacological sources. Plants and drugs recognized this way were queried by me for their modern applications in traditional Chinese and official medicine with special attention to diseases or symptoms closely related to the 18th-century understanding of venerology.

For 24 items of the Astruc's medicinal stock, 34 medicinal plants have been proposed: *Acacia catechu*, *Achyranthes bidentata*, *Akebia quinata*, *Angelica dahurica*, *A. sinensis*, *Aquilaria sinensis*, *Aralia cordata*, *Aristolochia fangchi*, *Chaenomeles sinensis*, *Ch. speciosa*, *Clematis vitalba*, *Coix lacryma-jobi*, *Commiphora myrrha*, *Cydonia oblonga*, *Daemonorops draco*, *D. jenkinsiana*, *Dictamnus dasycarpus*, *Dryobalanops sumatrensis*, *Forsythia suspensa*, *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*, *Lonicera confusa*, *L. hypoglauca*, *L. japonica*, *Ligusticum striatum* (= *L. chuanxiong*), *Piper kadsura*, *Pterocarpus officinalis*, *Saposhnikovia divaricata*, *Sassafras tzumu*, *Smilax china*, *S. glabra*, *Stephania tetrandra*, *Styphnolobium japonicum*, *Trichosanthes japonica*, *T. kirilowii*; China wax is also mentioned. Out of them, only *Lonicera japonica* is being used in China in late syphilis, *Achyranthes bidentata* in gonorrhoea, and *Dictamnus dasycarpus* in gynaecological problems. In the Astruc's study, 3 medicinal plant species and 5 further plant genera are correctly determined by de Jussieu; other plant parts were misidentified. This could happen due to lack of herbaria or other reference material for Asian materia medica in the 18th-century Europe.

In conclusion, antisymphilitic actions ascribed to the Chinese medical formulas and their constituents studied by Astruc, seem to have come from Hg or As compounds rather than from vegetative materia medica. European pharmacies had offered another stock, now identified, the *radix tang-cove*, which is a root of *Angelica sinensis* (in Chinese herbalism today called *danggui*).

By providing the list of botanical identifications of forgotten antisymphilitic remedies, this work tries to suggest medicinal species worth re-investigation in the cure of syphilis.

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