

**Chu-Shan Chiang 蔣竹山, *Ren Shen diguo: Qingdai renshen de shengchan xiaofei yu yiliao* 人參帝國:清代人參的生產、消費與醫療 [The Empire of Ginseng: Ginseng Production, Consumption, and Medical Treatment in Qing China]**

**Hangzhou: Zhejiang Daxue Chubanshe 浙江大學出版社 [Zhejiang University Press], 2015. 285 pp. RMB ¥48.**

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“There are three precious treasures in Northeastern China, namely ginseng, mink, and Ula grass.” Most Chinese, whether in China or overseas, have heard this common proverb. In addition, if we were to frequent a Chinese herbal-medicine pharmacy or supermarket, we could easily purchase ginseng, which has long been prized as a valuable commodity in China. However, we actually know little about the complicated history of this root vegetable, including the production and consumption of ginseng in Chinese history. In *The Empire of Ginseng*, Chu-Shan Chiang offers a groundbreaking perspective on ginseng research by exploring how Qing China established practices for picking, collecting, and trading ginseng and how people consumed ginseng, specifically in the Lower Yangtze River region.

The body of this book is divided into eight chapters and each chapter focuses on a specific topic regarding ginseng. In chapter 1, “Plants, Medical Knowledge, and Consumption Culture: The New Direction of Ginseng Research,” Chiang investigates previous ginseng research throughout Chinese history and discusses new methods for conducting diverse types of research on ginseng. As for the previous research, Chiang summarizes six subtopics about ginseng: ginseng management, ginseng in northeastern China during the late Ming and early Qing eras, ginseng harvesting in Qing China, ginseng monopolies and their tax revenue, ginseng agriculture in contrast to wild ginseng, and the circulation of harvested ginseng. Chiang criticizes previous research for focusing only on curative effects and on harvesting. In *The Empire of Ginseng*, by contrast, Chiang combines perspectives on ginseng management, production, consumption, and medical treatment to examine its significance in the Qing era.

In chapter 2, “Classification: Texts on Ginseng,” Chiang discusses the evolution of ginseng in Chinese history prior to the Qing era and then explores the ginseng

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categories in the Qing era regarding the root's characteristics and functions. Citing texts by Western missionaries and physicians, Chiang argues that the Qing-era works ushered in a consumer-oriented direction for ginseng production and consumption. In chapter 3, "Frontier: The Problem of Ginseng along China's Eastern Borders during the Late Ming and the Early Qing Eras," Chiang discusses the conflicts that simmered and sometimes erupted in the ginseng trade undertaken by Jurchen, Ming Chinese, and the Joseon Kingdom. After 1644, when Manchu leadership asserted itself over China in the form of the Qing Dynasty, its management of ginseng collection generated significant governmental revenue. According to Chiang, the first system for ginseng collection was called Dashengwula and was overseen by the Dashengwula General Governmental Office, which dispatched men to collect ginseng. The second system was called the Eight Banners Collection System, which engaged in similar tasks. The chapter convincingly explores various policies pursuant to ginseng collection orchestrated under the above-mentioned systems.

In chapter 4, "Ginseng Politics: Monopoly Trade and the Ginseng Bureau," Chiang discusses the Qing government's ticket system, which regulated Manchu and non-Manchu people's collection of ginseng (perhaps not surprisingly, rich merchants were almost the only people able to acquire tickets). By the early Qianlong era, the Qing government established the Ginseng Bureau, which similarly issued official certificates for ginseng collection. By the late Qianlong era, when the number of people collecting ginseng declined, the Qing government revised its relevant policies to encourage more people to engage in ginseng collection.

In chapter 5, "True and False: Cultivating Ginseng and the Case of Ginseng Management," Chiang explores why planted ginseng emerged as an alternative to wild ginseng and how the Qing government responded to this shift. After the mid-Qing era, the demand for ginseng increased. Because of governmental restrictions on the harvesting of wild ginseng, people started planting the root. The agricultural product gradually infiltrated wild-ginseng markets and helped satisfy demand. In order to suppress this illegal business, the Qing government ordered mid-level officials (i.e., grand ministers of state and grand ministers of the Imperial Household) to replace the local officials in charge of ginseng collection. By the late-Qing era the ongoing decline in wild ginseng prompted the Qing government to loosen and eventually to deregulate ginseng management.

In chapter 6, "Medicine: Invigorating Culture in the Lower Yangtze River Region," Chiang turns his attention to the consumption of ginseng, which expanded at a time of cultural invigoration in the Qing era. With the aim of treating diseases and maintaining physical health, both ordinary people and wealthy people would overcome supply issues and price issues in order to consume ginseng or even overconsume it. Excess consumption, ironically, would often contribute to poor health as well as to financial impoverishment.

In chapter 7, "Consumption: The Cost of Ginseng, Trade, and Circulation," Chiang examines the prices of ginseng from the Ming era to the Qing era and discusses how merchants sold ginseng from northeastern China to consumers in the Lower Yangtze River region. Chiang combines previous research regarding the ginseng trade to argue that the Imperial Household was the chief entity responsible for this trade, which took place through a number of governmental institutions like the Jiangning Silk Manufacture Bureau, the Suzhou Silk Manufacture Bureau, the Hangzhou Silk Manufacture

Bureau, the Lianghui Salt Institute, the Zhanglu Salt Institute, Huian Customs, and Guangdong Customs. By the mid-Qing era, the emergence of ginseng reference books instructed consumers on such refined ginseng-related matters as production locations, product quality, product characteristics, and preservation methods, as well as the all-important methods for distinguishing fake ginseng from real ginseng. By the mid-Qing era ginseng had become a precious commodity not only in the imperial court, where Qing emperors awarded the root to respectful officials, but also in general society, where ginseng functioned as a valuable gift expressing friendship.

Chapter 8, “Considering the History of Ginseng from the Global Perspective of Medical History,” concludes the book. Here, Chiang first reviews the significant arguments from each previous chapter to explore how the business of ginseng in Qing China was engaged with the Qing empire’s ginseng—ranging over such practices as ginseng harvesting and quality control to ginseng distribution and consumption. Eventually, Chiang draws together global history, medical history, environmental history, and material culture to offer a bird’s-eye view of ginseng culture.

As a pioneer promoting cultural, social, and medical history, Chiang in this book greatly clarifies multiple dimensions of ginseng in Chinese history. Chiang explores the subject from the perspectives of Qing-era government, medicine, geography, and economics. In terms of primary sources, Chiang effectively uses government records, literati texts, and works of fiction to provide a comprehensive perspective of ginseng’s complicated role in the Qing empire in this well-written book.

But the book leaves a couple of questions unanswered. First, as the Manchu people were non-Han Chinese, did they observe a pertinent medicinal difference between their own ginseng consumption and the ginseng consumption of Han Chinese? Second, compared with the population in the Lower Yangtze River region, how and why did the Manchu people from all social strata consume ginseng in Beijing? These questions cover rather precise issues that the author or the researchers in the field can perhaps answer in the future. For now, those who are interested in ginseng and medicine in Chinese history will gain unexpected and detailed knowledge of Qing China’s ginseng culture in this well-polished work.

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