BOOK REVIEWS

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The world has long needed a comprehensive ethnobotany of China. For decades Hu Shiu-Ying has been the authority of first and last recourse for all of us who need accurate scientific names for Chinese plants. This huge and thorough book more than satisfies the need for an ethnobotany of Chinese food plants. Dr. Hu has already covered the medicinal plants (Hu 1999).

The book under review introduces China’s environment and agriculture, with many delightful personal reminiscences and stories. Hu then provides hundreds of botanical and ethnobotanical accounts of species ranging from algae and ferns to roses and sunflowers. Dozens of excellent drawings and photographs illustrate a wide cross-section of the flora.

China is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, spanning a huge range of habitats. Few other countries can count among their native food plants both the Arctic crowberry and the deep-tropical Canarium album (L.) tree. The Chinese have figured out ways to use almost all the flora for food.

This book catalogs plants from the most remote and obscure parts of China. Many were not known outside their tiny homelands until Dr. Hu introduced them to science; many culinary uses are described here for the first time in English. She brings to the wider world her own taxonomic revisions, especially of beans, and her discovery that the “English” or “Persian” walnut (Juglans regia L.) is apparently Chinese (pp. 337–338).

Hu goes far beyond mere technical accounts. Truly noteworthy is her long section on bupin (“supplements”). These are herbal materials that, in traditional Chinese medicine, are tonic or strengthening. (There are also countless animal bupin, but they fall outside this book.) At least bupin herbs “work” in terms of biomedicine as well. Some are rich in vitamins and minerals, such as the gouqizi, a wolfthorn berry (Lycium chinense L.), that is essentially a vitamin pill; others have chemicals with apparent stimulant effects on the body. Hu provides available knowledge of the medicinal compounds involved. She also provides something all too rare in ethnobotanies: good recipes. For all the common bupin, she gives traditional recipes, highly authentic and typical (though see below). I have had many of these dishes; some taste like medicine, but many are excellent teas and soups. The bupin section of the book could be a major stand-alone volume by itself.

Chinese names are always creative, and this book has its share of delightful ones. Yerengua, “wild man’s melon” (Holboellia fargesii Reaub.), is one; the “wild