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How well do we know the taste of our own medicine?

I mean this literally: think of a medication you once received, and try to recall what sensations it evoked. Did the taste tell you anything about its origin and materiality? Did the medication come from an animal, plant, or mineral? Was it yanked from the backyard and then handcrafted, or machine-manufactured through chemical synthesis?

The way we encounter our pharmaceuticals shapes not only our understanding of medicine but also our interpretation of health conditions. Exploring the gendering of psychopharmaceuticals, anthropologist Nathan Greenslit (2005) delved into a curious case where one chemical compound assumed two different social identities. Fluoxetine hydrochloride takes the form of white-and-green capsules when marketed as the gender-neutral antidepressant Prozac. However, when manufactured as Sarafem, a treatment promoted for premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), it instead comes in capsules of pink and lavender, an allegedly more feminine color scheme. Be it depression or PMDD, the lived experience that fluoxetine hydrochloride aims to interrupt and the gender of the bodies it acts upon are both transformed once its material properties—in this case, color and label—change.

The meaning-making practices surrounding pharmaceutical materials offer a similarly productive point of departure for exploring the interplay of gender and medicine in historical contexts. A prime example concerns the representation of the herbaceous peony (in Japanese, *shakuyaku*), or *Paeonia lactiflora*, in Japanese medicine. Dazzling its beholders with magnificent flowers, the herbaceous peony has long captured the East Asian cultural imagination. As is less often remarked, however, the plant has also carved out a place in medical literature, including works of *honzōgaku*, the systematized study of materia medica. In his monograph *The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan* (2015), the historian Federico Marcon investigates the rise and decline of *honzōgaku* from the late sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. At times compared to natural history in European contexts, *honzōgaku* drew heavily on the traditions of Chinese pharmacology and the nature encyclopedia. Its representative publications demonstrate a characteristic commitment to naming, classifying, and conceptualizing natural species, especially those of medical value. In the remaining paragraphs, I will discuss three depictions of the herbaceous peony, taken from *honzōgaku* texts of the early eighteenth, mid-nineteenth, early twentieth centuries respectively, in order to probe the plant's perceived nature as a pharmaceutical material.

The herbaceous peony of Yamato honzō (1709)

Compiled by the Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekiken (1630–1714) and initially published in 1709, *Yamato honzō* (Materia medica of Japan) provides our first example. Although the sixteen-volume *honzōgaku* work was credited as the first Japanese encyclopedia of nature, its author Ekiken did not just classify biological organisms. He ranked them using political metaphors, contextualized them within Chinese literary traditions, and established an explicit contrast between the natural and the worldly even within plants themselves.

The [herbaceous peony's] flower is second only to the tree peony. It is therefore called the Grand Chancellor of Flowers (kashō) [whereas the tree peony represents the Prince of Flowers (kaō)]. The poem "Zhen Wei" in the "Odes of Zheng" from the Book of Odes describes the herbaceous peony. That is why Wang Yuanzhi, in the preface to his poems on the herbaceous peony, remarked that its name is the most ancient among all flowers. In medicine, one should use the red and the white herbaceous peonies that grow naturally (shizen ni) in the mountains and only bear red or white flowers. Do not use the ones planted in common (sezoku) gardens intended for viewing. (2)

Yamato honzō's discussion of the herbaceous peony reveals Ekiken's complicated take on the border, or lack thereof, between nature and culture. Comparing the realm of plants to human society, Ekiken depicted the former as a monarchy, in which the majestic tree peony ruled as Prince, a masculine sovereign, and the herbaceous peony served as his court official. Predating evolutionary biology, Ekiken located the history of nature not in nature itself but in the history of imperial China. In tracing the herbaceous peony's etymology, he consulted no Japanese sources, but instead turned to the *Book of Odes*, one of the five Chinese Confucian classics, and to Wang Yuanzhi (954–1001), an accomplished scholar-official of the Northern Song dynasty who composed verses on the

plant while reminiscing about his former days serving at the imperial court (Wang 1983, 111–112). Despite an obvious attentiveness to the herbaceous peony’s political symbolism, Ekiken assessed the plant’s therapeutic value based on how removed a given specimen was from the culture and cultivation of men: only herbaceous peonies growing in their natural habitats, free from human interference, carried the healing power of medicine.

The herbaceous peony of Kohō yakuhin kō (1842)

The second example appears in *Kohō yakuhin kō* (Research on pharmaceuticals from ancient formulas), a publication of 1842 authored by Naitō Naokata (dates unknown). Like Ekiken, Naitō cited Chinese sources extensively, opening his entry on the herbaceous peony with a near-verbatim quote from the *Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica*, an essential tome of Chinese pharmacology. Unlike Ekiken, who provided no explanation of what the herbaceous peony was indicated for, Naitō detailed the effects of the medicinal plant on the human body.

The Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica remarks that the herbaceous peony is bitter and balanced. It predominantly treats malign energy (ki) and abdominal pain; eliminates blood impediments; breaks up hard accumulations, the cold and heat, as well as hernial conglomerations (senka, or shanjia in Chinese); terminates pain, helps urination, and increases energy. (Naitō 1842, 24)

In contrast to Ekiken’s descriptive and symbolic account, Naitō’s guidance was operational and practical, as it recorded the process of pharmaceutical manufacturing. Referring to the late seventeenth-century Chinese dictionary *Zhengzitong* (Mastery of correct characters; Japanese: *Seijitsū*), Naitō noted that one obtained the “red herbaceous peony” (*sekishaku*), here meaning the pharmaceutical material rather than the flower, by “sun-drying” the root of the plant (24). Alternatively, by “peeling off the skin of the root and steaming it dry,” the substance became “white herbaceous peony” (*byakushaku*).

In the *Kohō yakuhin kō* entry, a comparison to the tree peony appears only matter-of-factly at the very end of the text and, even then, as a description of the herbaceous peony’s natural rather than social history. To Naitō, whether the plant grew in medicinal gardens or remote mountains warranted neither automatic nor inherent concern over its therapeutic value, although he did consider as superior in quality specimens from selected geographic areas, especially the Kishū and Ishū regions (today’s Wakayama prefecture and southern Mie prefecture; 25). The plant itself, now stripped of cultural and political metaphors, was also without a social gender.

The herbaceous peony grows red sprouts in the spring and forms bushes, each of its stems having three branches and five leaves. It resembles the tree peony but is narrow and long, and is one to two feet tall. It blooms in the summer. Like the tree peony, there are red, white, deep-colored, and light-colored varieties. One harvests the root in winter. (25)

The herbaceous peony of Minkan yakuyō shokubutsushi (1916)

The third and final incarnation of the herbaceous peony to be discussed appears in *Minkan yakuyō shokubutsushi* (Folk medicinal flora), a 1916 publication by the *honzōgaku* scholar Umemura Jintarō (1862–1946). What distinguishes Umemura’s text from the previous examples is the explicit influence of European taxonomy. In place of 芍薬 (*shakuyaku*), the Chinese characters for herbaceous peony that Ekiken and Naitō had consistently employed, Umemura referred to the plant using the phonetic katakana syllables シャクヤク (*shakuyaku*), and in addition provided readers with one of the plant’s Latin names, “*Paeonia albiflora* Pall.” (268).

シャクヤク *Paeonia albiflora* Pall.

*The Chinese name is 芍薬. It is a perennial plant of the Ranunculaceae family, and people like to cultivate it in gardens. The branches reach approximately three feet in height. It has compound leaves, with leaflets splitting into three. No [leaf] serration. The flowers bloom around May or June, following those of the tree peony, and are often red or white in color and beautiful. The root has been used in medicine since ancient times. The ones bearing white flowers are especially appreciated. It is said that this type contains benzoic acid (ansokukō-san). There is a separate woodland peony (yama-shakuyaku, *Paeonia obovata*) that is the wild variety of the previous type and is inferior to it in form and in the color of its flowers. (268–269)*

Umemura’s discussion departed from its predecessors in several significant ways. The author’s open embrace of European taxonomy (which, incidentally, has since evolved and no longer includes herbaceous peonies among the Ranunculaceae) went hand in hand with a downplaying of Chinese influences. Chinese sources, whether literary or medical, are nowhere cited as a point of reference. Binomial nomenclature in Latin had instead taken over the task of naming. Umemura also reversed Ekiken’s ranking of peonies, the wild variety from pristine nature now yielding to its cultivated counterpart. Even as Umemura recognized the healing power of the herbaceous peony’s root, he took a further step and implied that the source of its therapeutic value lay in the benzoic acid it potentially contained. The active ingredient of the herbaceous peony, in other words, had shifted from a biological organism in its entirety, as in Ekiken’s writing, to some of its constitutive parts, as in Naitō’s discussion, and eventually to a chemical formula, as in Umemura’s narrative.

It was also in the pages of *Minkan yakuyō shokubutsushi* that the herbaceous peony assumed an explicitly gendered medical ontology. Although neither Ekiken nor Naitō had linked the plant to gendered bodies, Umemura highlighted the herbaceous peony’s utility in managing women’s bodies and, specifically, their sexual and reproductive health.

[The herbaceous peony] treats pregnancy, childbirth, and vaginal discharge, as well as all the blood illnesses of women. Roasting the root until it changes color, making it into fine powder, and then taking it with alcohol is said to be especially effective for women’s illnesses. Also, soak it in vinegar before roasting. (269)

Despite the diversity of women’s health issues and of women as unique individuals, Umemura treated women as a homogenous patient group and generic social category. In contrast to the gender-neutral “blood impediments” that Naitō and his Chinese sources had written about, Umemura’s description left the subtle impression that “blood”-related disorders were characteristically feminine. The herbaceous peony, as a pharmaceutical material, had now assumed the social identity of a “women’s medicine” (*fujin’yaku*).

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To be sure, it requires further excavation of historical sources to understand how the herbaceous peony became a medicinal plant particularly useful in addressing women’s health problems. Nevertheless, the diverse and evolving medical discourses surrounding the herbaceous peony invite us to ponder how our perception of the nature of pharmaceutical materials relates to gender. For example, does it make a difference that women take Sarafem instead of Prozac for premenstrual health challenges? What purposes does the feminization of the herbaceous peony’s therapeutic value serve? Last but not least, where exactly should we locate the pharmaceutical materiality of the herbaceous peony—in the tangible plant as a whole, in its separated and processed root, or in a chemical formula?

Cover Image

Katsushika Hokusai, *Shakuyaku kanaari* (Herbaceous peony and canary), 1833, colored woodblock print, 19.2 x 17.4 cm, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002700095/>

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