

HEALTH

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TCM

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Worm that turns

More than 1,500 years ago, the meadow regions of the Tibetan Himalayan mountains were covered with a variety of grasses and flowering plants.

Grazing cattle and sheep were drawn to an unusual mushroom-like grass. Over time, the herdsmen noticed a marked difference in the strength and agility of their herds. Word spread quickly and a few traditional medicine doctors began gathering some of this grass for their patients. The grasses had many medicinal properties useful in treating difficult diseases. It's believed this is how *Cordyceps*, which we discussed last week, was discovered.

It seems that *Cordyceps* is a plant, but it's not. It's both a fungus and an insect. Every summer, in certain areas of China above 3,000 metres, the ice melts and bat moths – *Hepialus armoricanus* – begin to lay eggs on plant leaves.

As the moth larvae eat and become obese, spores of the fungi – *Cordyceps sinensis* – penetrate the bodies of the

larvae and become parasites. The mycelium of the fungi grows and the larvae die, but the fungi keep growing to become up to 5cm-high purple-red herbs.

This is the reason the Chinese name for *Cordyceps* is *dong chong xia cao* (winter-worm summer-grass). Since the host of *Cordyceps* (bat moth larvae) can be found mainly in southwestern regions such as Szechuan, Qinghai and Tibet, wild *Cordyceps* is expensive. It can cost up to US\$1,000 for 100g. But modern cultivation techniques mean that it's now affordable.

Cordyceps is regarded as a significant herb in TCM. According to TCM theory, *Cordyceps* goes to the lung and kidney meridians to provide protection and support to these organs. Because TCM has a systemic perspective on the body, it doesn't deal with individual organs or tissues.

The kidneys are known as the root of life and are the source of reproduction, development and maturation. The lungs regulate *chi* in the entire body and rule it. *Chi* is the fundamental energy of life. The kidneys assist the lungs to rule the movement of the *chi* inside the body.

Cordyceps has been studied by western doctors. In a scientific review article in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* in 1998 the authors review *Cordyceps* from a western medical perspective, citing its use in treating fatigue, night

sweating, male and female sexual dysfunction, reducing high blood glucose and lipids, treating weakness or loss of strength after severe illness, and treating certain respiratory diseases, renal dysfunction and failure, arrhythmias and other heart and liver diseases.

A popular way of taking *Cordyceps* is by using it as an ingredient in stewed duck. When cooking with matured duck, it's said to be especially suitable for those with declined sexual function.

Although *Cordyceps*' chemical composition is complex and unclear, its functions are thought to be due to its chemical diversity. Some of these include proteins, saccharides, sterols, nucleosides, fatty acids, vitamins and inorganic salts.

Cordyceps also enjoys a reputation in athletics. In 1993, six young Chinese women broke world records for middle and long distance races. Their coach, Ma Junren, said their performance was due to a TCM diet, with *Cordyceps* as a main component.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner.