

Chinese Herbalist

07.06.2019, Episode 19

A Thousand Words

Hi. This is “A Thousand Words”, June 7th, 2019. Welcome to the podcast.

I went to a Chinese herbalist once when I was living in San Francisco. My girlfriend was sick for quite a long time, so I went out to look for an alternative to the medicine her doctor was giving her but just wasn't working.

I'm careful when it comes to doctors and people who call themselves healers [1]. She was too. We weren't Christian Scientists – we did believe in blood transfusions and surgeries and hospital equipment and the benefit of hundreds of years of human experience. But we also had a strong faith in the healing powers of our own bodies. Not to mention [2] I had a few medical mishaps with doctors when I was young that made me careful not to trust them across the board [3]. So on that afternoon, I went out to look for something new.

In San Francisco, it's not hard to find something new – art, food, fashion, hygiene, living arrangements. Sometimes the 'something new' is simply something old that was forgotten until recently. There was an Irish pub I used to go to at the weekends, and a few doors down I remembered the dark display window [4] of the Chinese herbalist shop. The atmosphere inside, when I looked through the window, was otherworldly. It was there, during the day, that I decided to go for something new.

Now, let's clear something up. In California and most of the US, we drop the H when we say the word herb: “I'm growing some herbs on my balcony; I often drink herbal tea; My uncle is an herbalist”. In English, you may have learnt that there are two ways the H can be pronounced: with or without the H sound. In most words, you're supposed to pronounce the H. The H in hope and hurry and hospital and hairy are all pronounced. But the H in hour and honest and honor and homage are not. Sometimes there are British and American versions of the same word – CONtroversy / conTROVersy; ADvertisement / adVERTISEment; PATent / patENT; (h)erbal / herbal. Herbal is just another of the many words that British and American English don't see eye to eye on [5].

The inside of the small, dimly lit [6] shop was empty of people except for me and a very old white-bearded Chinese man, who stood behind the counter. I explained to him what my girlfriend's ailments [7] were. He listened carefully, nodding at symptom after symptom. He asked no questions, and I wasn't sure he understood me. But when I finished, he reached under the counter and took out a sheet of white paper about the size of a pillow case, and spread [8] it on the counter between us. Then, he turned to the wall behind him, where dozens of small unmarked drawers [9] filled up the entire wall. One by one, systematically, he began opening drawer after drawer and removing handfuls of tree roots, dried leaves, tree bark [10], and other dehydrated things, and piled them up [11] in the middle of the sheet. I didn't count from the beginning, but at one point I started to, and calculated that he must have opened 25 different drawers before he was finished.

My girlfriend was asleep when I got back home, so I went into the kitchen and began preparing the brew [12], after the herbalist's instructions. The contents in the white sheet were to be boiled [13] in a liter of water for an hour, or until reduced to a single cup. And so I began.

“What's that smell?” my girlfriend called out from the bedroom.

I realized the kitchen door was open.

“Sorry,” I called back. “I'll close the door.”



"That's not what you went out to get for me, is it?" she called out.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll close both doors."

"You're not going to make me drink that, are you?" she said.

"Just a little." I poked [14] my head into the bedroom. "I went to a Chinese herbalist."

"Oh?"

"Don't worry, I'm not cooking you stuff that I just picked up off the ground in the park."

"You went to a shop?"

"Of course."

"A... what? an herbalist shop?"

"A Chinese herbalist," I said.

She nodded slowly. "And... he had medical certificates on the wall?"

"I couldn't see," I told her. "There were too many monkeys climbing all over the place."

I felt like young Jack who was sent out to trade a cow for something the family could use, and instead came back with magic beans; in my case, a pillow-like parcel of things one could probably have found on a two-hour hike.

An hour later, I poured the single cupful of black slime [15] into a mug [16].

"Oh, that smells bad," she said as I came closer to her with it.

"Yeah, it's kind of strong," I said. "But it should help."

She looked into the mug as if she expected something to hop out of the black slime.

"Don't put your nose too close to it," I said.

"Oh, that's helpful. My nose is kind of right next to my mouth."

"You just shouldn't smell it," I said.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Remember how you got me to try cheese?" I said. "It's meant for your mouth, not your nose."

"But it's so nasty [17]," she said. "Even just to look at."

She raised the mug to her mouth, closed her eyes, and sipped [18] and spat [19] almost at the same time.

"Oh my God! There's no way..."

"Medicine doesn't always have to taste good," I said.

She cursed [20] me, and to prove me wrong she tried to get the mug to her mouth again, but gagged [21].

"I can't drink that," she said, "not without sweetening it."

"You want me to sweeten this?"

"If you want me to drink it," she said.

"But it's medicine," I said.

Again, she give me a look.

So I went back to the kitchen. I put a peppermint teabag into the black slime, and then found some agave syrup and squeezed a good amount of that in. She was able to get the mug to her lips this time, but the tiny amount she sipped didn't stay in her mouth.

"It's got to be sweet," she said, and got out of bed and went with me to the kitchen.

"A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down?" I asked.

"That's right."

"It was just a movie, you know," I told her. "Mary Poppins wasn't a licensed doctor."

"I thought you didn't believe in doctors," she said.

"I believe in Mary Poppins," I said.

We continued to search for more sweet ingredients. We found two kinds of honey, brown and then white sugar, maple syrup [22], a bag of coconut flakes, a bottle of grenadine and amaretto. We added them all, one by one, testing each, before deciding it was impossible to drink.

She grabbed [23] a bottle of coke from the fridge and went back to bed. She was back on her feet [24] in two days.

But I felt bad about pouring the black slime down the drain [25]. For one, it cost a lot. And it was, I believed, filled with natural, healthy medicine... maybe not anymore, with everything we added. But maybe it would taste better when it cooled down.

But we never found out if that was true or not, because the next morning we both woke up to find the mug unexplainably empty in the kitchen sink.

Thanks for listening.

If you liked this podcast, or others you've listened to on our website podclub.ch, tell a friend. You can also write us a message. You can even download our app if you'd like, and we have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you hear.

What's the oldest thing you own? I'll be back on June 21st with a story about the oldest thing I own.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **healers**: people who help other people get healthy

[2] **not to mention**: in addition to; along with

[3] **across the board**: overall; completely

[4] **a display window**: the window of a shop that shows what they sell inside

[5] **to see eye to eye on sth.**: to agree; to think the same

[6] **dimly lit**: the lights are low

[7] **ailments**: physical and mental things causing discomfort

[8] **to spread something**: to open something up to its fullest

[9] **drawers**: compartments that slide out from a larger piece of furniture, used for storing things

[10] **tree bark**: the skin around a tree

[11] **to pile something up**: to put things on top of other things

[12] **the brew**: the cooked drink

[13] **to boil**: to cook in water at a high temperature

[14] **to poke**: to move something forward quickly

[15] **slime**: a wet, muddy, sticky earthy substance

[16] **a mug**: something bigger than a cup, often made of porcelain

[17] **to be nasty**: awful; horrible

[18] **to sip**: to take into the mouth a small amount of liquid

[19] **to spit (past tense - spat)**: to shoot or project something out of your mouth

[20] **to curse someone**: to call someone bad words

[21] **to gag**: a reflex in the throat, which sometimes leads to vomiting

[22] **maple syrup**: a thick sweetener made from the sap of a tree whose leaf is seen on the Canadian flag

[23] **to grab**: to take

[24] **to be back on one's feet**: to be healthy again

[25] **to pour something down the drain**: to put the contents of something into the kitchen sink pipe