

A History of Cannabis

Chapter 2:

Enter China

Professors Tengwen Long and Pavel Tarasov's theories aside (see *Chapter 1: Once Upon a Time... In the Stone Age?*), the earliest known use of cannabis for its medicinal properties can be traced back to ancient China some 5,000 years ago.⁽¹⁾ However, it is not always easy to establish accurate dates for specific events as the Chinese did not excel exactly at writing them down. In some cases, we know the periods when some of these events happened only by references made to or by emperors. For instance, Chinese Emperor Fu Hsi, who is considered to have brought civilization to China, wrote about *ma* (the Chinese word for cannabis), and gave it the attribute of having both yin and yang—the yin being the negative feminine influences whereas the yang represented the strong or positive masculine influences. The idea of all herbal medicines, at least to some extent, was to help keep the balance between the two parts.⁽²⁾

On an etymological note, the term *ma* is the oldest recorded name for the hemp plant. It has been used to describe the cannabis plant since before the invention of writing. *Ma* might share a common root with the proto-semitic word *mrr*, meaning "bitter." *Ma* is often paired with the Chinese word for "big" or "great" to form the compound word *dama*. *Dama* is sometimes used to describe industrial hemp, as there is a negative connotation meaning "numbness" associated with the word *ma* by itself.⁽³⁾

Hemp was probably the earliest plant cultivated for the production of a textile fiber. The *Lu Shi*, a Chinese work of the Sung dynasty from about 500 AD, underlines the crucial role Emperor Shen Nung played in the introduction and consolidation of *ma* in China by teaching its people to cultivate it for hempen cloth, in the twenty-eighth century BC.⁽⁴⁾ Emperor Shen Nung is also said to have discovered the healing properties of cannabis as well as those of ginseng and ephedra. He would use cannabis

as a relief for rheumatism, menstrual problems, gout, malaria or even some sorts of mental disorders. Shen Nung also composed *The Great Herbal*, a book which is still used today by practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine.⁽⁵⁾ No actual copies of *The Great Herbal* from before the Common Era have made it to our days, though. The earliest known ones are only about 2,000 years old, written sometime around 50 AD. However, it seems logical to think that such an enormous compilation of herbal medicines might have been written over a significantly long period of time. What we know for a fact, though, is that the above mentioned copies from the first century of the Common Era contain references to *ma*.⁽⁶⁾

References

1. [https://thcmuseum.org/the-history/#:~:text=The%20Cannabis%20\(Hemp\)%20plant%20evolved,China%20twelve%20thousand%2Dyears%20ago](https://thcmuseum.org/the-history/#:~:text=The%20Cannabis%20(Hemp)%20plant%20evolved,China%20twelve%20thousand%2Dyears%20ago).
2. <http://antiquecannabisbook.com/chap2B/China/China.htm>
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannabis_in_China
4. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1913*, p. 288, Washington Government Printing Office, 1914.
5. See 1.
5. See 2.