Jiuhuang bencao 救荒本草 (Materia Medica for Famine Relief or the Famine Herbal), published in 1406, was the first printed monograph on famine foods in China. The book listed 414 entries of edible plants that could be consumed in times of scarcity, with naturalistic illustrations and detailed texts about plant identification, nutrition, toxicity, and food processing. Appreciated as the bible of famine foods by scholars in late imperial China, it generated over 20 successive editions, inspired a series of publications on the same subject, and got incorporated into the official texts of famine administration since the seventeenth century. What were the ethnobotanical implications of the category “plants for famine relief” when it was created by Jiuhuang bencao in the Ming dynasty?

After analyzing the entries in Jiuhuang bencao, I found that the enumeration of famine foods included everything from common vegetables cultivated in kitchen gardens to uncommon herbs in the remote mountains. It created an all-encompassing categorical complement to 五穀 “Five Grains,” the major staples that dominated the hierarchy of foodstuff and the official discourse of famine relief in China. In contrast to the modern anthropological concept of “wild and emergency foods,” the book was not intended for any particular event of food crisis, but documented multiple non-staple food strategies that the commoners would employ under various situations of food shortage, which revealed complex relationships between the wild and the cultivated.