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# Identification of *Astragalus* Medicines Using Scar Markers

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## ABSTRACT

*Astragalus radix* is a well-known herbal material in traditional Chinese medicine. *Astragalus membranaceus* and *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* are known as the authentic origins of *Astragalus* medicines whereas *Hedysarum polybotrys* is a common adulterant of *Astragalus radix* in Taiwan. Random amplified polymorphic DNA (RAPD) primers were used to screen the polymorphic fragments. Among them, OPB-2 and OPC-14 directed the amplification of 3 specific fragments A1 (1.3 Kb), A2 (0.6 Kb) and H1 (0.8 Kb) from *A. membranaceus*, *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* and *H. polybotrys* respectively, which were further converted to sequence characterized amplified region (SCAR) markers. Primer pairs HG3 and HG4 derived from A1, HG7 and HG8 from A2, and RC3 and RC4 from H3, were successfully employed on the authentication of *Astragalus* medicines and *H. polybotrys*.

Key words: *Astragalus*, authentication, polymorphism

## INTRODUCTION

*Astragalus Radix*, also named as Huang Qi, is a well-known basic drug in traditional Chinese medicine. It has been formulated with other herbs and used as tonics for hundreds of years. In modern Chinese medicine, it is widely used as an immune-modulator or antioxidant in treating various chronic diseases such as cancer or cardiovascular diseases. The botanical origin of *Astragalus Radix* in Pharmacopoeia of China is the dried root of *Astragalus membranaceus* (Fisch.) Bge. and *A. membranaceus* (Fisch.) Bge. var. *mongholicus* (Bge.) Hsiao<sup>(1)</sup>. However, there are many other species traded as *Astragalus Radix*; among them, *Hedysarum polybotrys* Hand.-Mazz. is the most common adulterant in Taiwan. Tung, *et al.*<sup>(2)</sup> reported that over 85% of *Astragalus Radix* sold in the local markets were *H. polybotrys*. In addition to minor anatomical differences, the *Astragalus Radix* contains stone cells but no calcium oxalate crystals in root<sup>(3)</sup> apart from *H. polybotrys*. Both *Astragalus Radix* and *Hedysarum Radix* own similar features, which make identification difficult.

The molecular markers in Chinese medicinal materials have been developed to identify many plant and animal species<sup>(4)</sup>. Polymorphic bands of *Astragalus radix* identified by random amplified polymorphic DNA (RAPD) method were described by Cheng, *et al.*<sup>(5)</sup> and Na, *et al.*<sup>(6)</sup>. The disadvantage of this technique is poor fidelity since DNA quality plays a key role for the outcome of polymorphic bands<sup>(7)</sup>. The DNA extracted

from dried herbal materials is usually damaged and contaminated with proteins, polysaccharides and secondary metabolites, which might affect the reliability of the RAPD results greatly. To improve the reproducibility of RAPD markers, the polymorphic bands generated from RAPD can be converted to the sequence characterized amplified regions (SCAR)<sup>(8)</sup>, which is more specific than RAPD. It is reported that SCARs have several advantages over RAPD markers: (1) by using longer and sequence-specific PCR primers, SCARs improve the reproducibility of band polymorphism; (2) as the annealing temperatures are more stringent for SCARs than for RAPDs, only specific locus was detected by using each set of SCAR primers<sup>(9)</sup>. SCAR markers have been successfully developed to identify several Chinese medicinal materials, including *Panax* species<sup>(10)</sup>, *Crocodilian* species<sup>(11)</sup> and snakes<sup>(12)</sup>. In this study, we demonstrated that three species-specific RAPD bands obtained by cloning and sequencing were converted to SCAR markers of *A. membranaceus*, *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* and *H. polybotrys* for their authentication.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### I. Plant Materials

Dried roots of *Astragalus membranaceus* (Fisch.) Bge., *A. membranaceus* (Fisch.) Bge. var. *mongholicus* Hsiao and *Hedysarum polybotrys* Hand-Mazz. were collected from Ji-Lin, Gan-Su and Shan-Xi provinces, China, respectively. Two sliced-root products of

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*Astragalus radix* for fidelity test of SCAR primers were purchased from local stores. All samples were identified according to their anatomical characteristics<sup>(1,3)</sup>. Voucher specimens were deposited in the Development Center for Biotechnology, Taipei, Taiwan. Seeds of *A. spruneri*, *A. obseuru*, and *A. garbancillo* were gifts from the Millennium Seed Bank Project of the Kew Garden, UK. All seeds were surface sterilized and aseptically germinated on semi-solid MS medium<sup>(13)</sup> as described by Smith<sup>(14)</sup>. Three-month old micro-propagated plantlets were frozen with liquid nitrogen for further DNA extraction.

## II. DNA Extraction

Dried roots of all samples were washed in tap-water and the outer skin was removed to avoid surface contamination. After being air dried, the samples were frozen with liquid nitrogen and ground into powder. Genomic DNA was extracted from the sample using DNeasy Plant Mini Kit (QIAGEN, Germany) by following the manufacturer's instructions. The DNA pellet was rinsed with 70% ethanol and resuspended in 50  $\mu$ L TE buffer and stored at -20°C.

## III. RAPD Analysis

One hundred RAPD primers (Operon Technologies, CA, USA) were initially screened to detect species-specific markers. The PCR reaction mix (50  $\mu$ L) consisted of 100 ng of genomic DNA, 150 ng of RAPD primer, 1X PCR buffer, 1.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 250  $\mu$ M of each dNTPs and 2.5 U of *Taq* polymerase (Bertec, Taiwan). Reaction took place in a TaKaRa TP600 thermal cycler (Japan) by the following program: 5 min at 95°C, followed by 30 amplification cycles of 95°C for 30 sec, 48°C for 30 sec, and 72°C for 1 min, and finally 10 min at 72°C for elongation. The PCR products were resolved by electrophoresis on 1.5% agarose (Sigma, USA) gel and in TAE buffer.

## IV. Cloning and Sequence of RAPD Products

Three specific RAPD markers: A1 derived from the primer OPB-2 (5'-TGATCCCTGG-3') for *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*; A2 and H1 derived from the primer OPC-14 (5'-TGCGTGCTTG-3') for *A. membranaceus* and *H. polybotrys*, were excised from the agarose gel and the DNA was purified using QIAquick Gel Extraction Kit (QIAGEN, Germany). The eluted fragments were ligated into pGEM T Easy Vector (Promega, USA), transformed into *Escherichia coli* strain DH5 $\alpha$  and sequenced by ABI 3730 automated DNA sequencer (Applied Biosystems, USA).

## V. SCAR Analysis

SCAR was amplified in a 50  $\mu$ L PCR reaction mix consisting of 100 ng of genomic DNA, 150 ng of RAPD

primers, 1X PCR buffer, 1.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 250  $\mu$ M of each dNTPs and 2.5 U of *Taq* polymerase (Bertec, Taiwan). The cycling profile for *A. membranaceus* was: 5 min at 95°C, followed by 25 amplification cycles of 95°C for 30 sec, 58°C for 30 sec, and 72°C for 30 sec, and finally 7 min at 72°C for elongation. The cycling profile for *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* and *H. polybotrys* was: 5 min at 95°C, followed by 25 amplification cycles of 95°C for 30 sec, 64°C for 30 sec, and 72°C for 50 sec, and finally 10 min at 72°C for elongation.

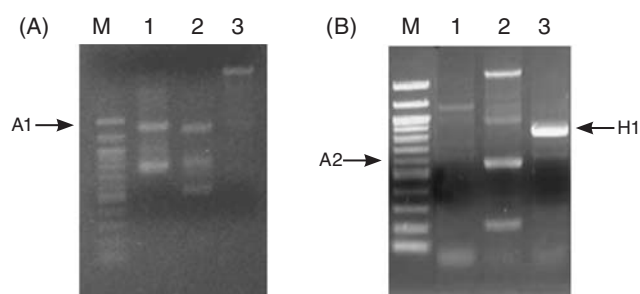
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### I. Identification of Specific RAPD Markers

RAPD method was performed in search for DNA polymorphic markers. Polymorphic profiles of *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*, *A. membranaceus* and *H. polybotrys* were screened from the 100 RAPD primers (OPA1-20, OPB1-20, OPC1-20, OPD1-20, and OPE1-20). To increase the stringency between primers and genomic DNA, the annealing temperature was increased to 48°C which was higher than the normal condition and less polymorphic bands could be generated.

**Table 1.** Primer sequences used in the RAPD and SCAR analyses

| Primer | Sequence                   |
|--------|----------------------------|
| OPB-2  | 5'-TGATCCCTGG-3'           |
| HG3    | 5'-CTATTAAGACACATTCCGGG-3' |
| HG4    | 5'-AACCGCAACGTCGAATCACC-3' |
| OPC-14 | 5'-TGCGTGCTTG-3'           |
| HG7    | 5'-ACTCGCGCAAGTTGGCTCCG-3' |
| HG8    | 5'-GTTGTTATGCTCCAGCGGGT-3' |
| RC3    | 5'-GTGCTTGGGCCAACATGGCT-3' |
| RC4    | 5'-GGGATGTCCGGGGAGAGTTA-3' |



**Figure 1.** RAPD analysis of (A) OPB-2 primer; (B) OPC-14 primer. The arrows indicate the species-specific bands A1 (1.3 Kb), A2 (0.6 Kb) and H1 (0.8 Kb). Lane 1: *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*; Lane 2: *A. membranaceus*; Lane 3: *H. polybotrys*; M: 100 bp molecular weight marker.

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1  TGGCATGCTC  CCGGCCGCCA  TGGCGGCCGC  GGGAAATCGA  TGTGATCCCT  GGTGGGTGCG  60
61  TATGGA AAAA  CATTGTGTGG  GAGCGGTCAA  CCOCTTAAT  GGATCTCAAA  TACCTCAGAA  120
121  GGATTAGTCT  CCACAGTCCG  CGTGGAGGAT  ACCTTGGTTF  ACCCAAAAAA  AAAAAGTTTT  180
181  GGTTTCAGGA  GGTGGAATCA  CATTATAGTC  ACTTGGTCT  GTAAATATGT  GAGGTGTTCT  240
241  CATTTTAGTC  CTTGAATGCA  TCAAATTTCA  AAAAATGTT  TCAAATGTT  TGTGTGTTCT  300
301  CAGTTTGGTT  CTCAAATGGG  TCTTATATTA  GTGGTCTTGG  TCCTCAGATG  TGCCTTCTAT  360
361  AAGTCATTTT  GGTCACTAGA  ATACTATTA  AGACAGATTC  GGGAATATTT  TTGAAATTTG  420
421  AACAGATTCA  GGGACTATAA  TGATAAGGCC  TGACAGATTT  AAAGATCAAA  ATGACTATTG  480
481  AACCTATTTT  TAGTCACCTT  TAAGTGTGCA  TTGTCTTTTT  ATGAACATAA  GATGGTGTGG  540
541  TTTACAAAAC  AAGTGGATAG  TAACTGCCCT  TTTTGGTATT  TCAATTCCTT  GGAGGTATGA  600
601  TGCAGAAATC  GTATGGTTTG  CAGGCAAGTC  CGTCCCAATC  ACTTGGAGG  CCTTGTCAA  660
661  GTTTTAAAAA  TTGGCCATT  AATATACTTT  TATTGAATGA  ATCACCAAAA  CCACTTTAA  720
721  CTACTTTATT  TAAATTTTAA  ATAACATCTC  AATACAACTT  TAAACTAAT  ATACTAATTT  780
781  TCAAACGATG  AATTGACAGG  GGCAGAGCTT  GGGATAGTTT  TTCAAACTGT  AGTGAACCG  840
841  CATGACCATT  TACTGGTCT  AGATTAAAAA  ATTCCAAATC  TTTTAGGACC  TATAAATTTG  900
901  ATACATGTTA  AACTTAATTT  ACTAAAAATA  AACTCATGAA  AAATTAATGC  GTGAGTTTCT  960
961  TTTTATAAGC  AAAAAGAGTA  TATTTTAAA  AAAAATAAAA  GAATATAATG  GCCATAGAAG  1020
1021  GTACCAAAA  TTGGTCAAT  GCCTTCCTAA  AAAAGATAT  AACTTTTTTG  GGGCCCTAA  1080
1081  ATTTTGATAT  AATTTATTTA  AAATAAATG  AATTTTGGG  ATATCCATCT  TAGTGGAGT  1140
1141  TAGAAGATG  TAGGGATAT  TAATTTAGA  AATAAATAA  TAATAAATTT  AAGAAAAAAA  1200
1201  GAATAATATT  AAAAGCTTAC  AACAAATTTG  TCGTCTAAG  ATATATTAAT  GAACAACGTT  1260
1261  CTATAATGG  CCTTCCAGCT  TAGTGGTATG  CTTTGACAAT  TGTGCCAGG  GATCA  1315

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Figure 2. Sequence of *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* fragment A1. SCAR was generated using primers HG3 and HG4 (underlined). RAPD primer OPB-2 is boxed.

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1  TGCGTCTTGG  CCGCTTACAA  AAACAGACCA  GATACGACGA  ACGCTATCTG  ATAGAGCTGT  60
61  TCGGATTCG  GCTCCAAATC  AGCTCGAAT  TCGCCAAACA  ACTCGGCAA  GTGGCTCCG  120
121  TTCCAATCTG  AATTCCGCTC  CAAGTCAGTT  GTTAGTGGAG  CCTAAAATCG  TGCCTTGACT  180
181  TCGGCACAAA  GCAGTGTCTG  AAGCCTATAA  AAAGGCTCTT  CCTCACTTG  ACGAAATCAG  240
241  ATCGAAAAAC  AGCAAACTCT  CCTCCGAAAA  TTCTCTCTC  TCTAAAATTC  GTGACTGGCC  300
301  TACGAGCCAG  ATTCTCTCTC  TTCTCTCTC  TTTCTGAGAG  TGGCCTACGA  GGCATATTC  360
361  CGAGTGGTTA  TAAACCATAT  TGAGAGGTGT  ATATCTCGAG  CGATTACTGA  CTGTCCAGTC  420
421  ATAATCGTAA  CTGGCTGTT  TTATCCTGGG  GGCCTCGTGG  TTGATAGTCT  GCTTGCACCA  480
481  TCGAGCAGTG  CCACGAAACG  TCTTAAAGAG  AGCGACCTAG  TCCGCGACTC  ATCCCAGTAC  540
541  TACTCTCGCC  CAAGCACGCT  CAACAAATAG  AGTTCGCTCA  AGCACGCA  588

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Figure 3. Sequence of *A. membranaceus* fragment A2. SCAR was generated using primers HG7 and HG8 (underlined). RAPD primer OPC-14 is boxed.

Most of the amplified fragments were within the range of 0.1 to 2 Kb. A number of putative species-specific bands were noted; however, most of them were faint or close to other bands. Only the fragments verified by repeated tests were considered to be potential markers. Using the RAPD primers OPB-2 and OPC-14 (Table 1), stable specific bands were identified (Figure 1). A 1.3 Kb polymorphic fragment A1 amplified by OPB-2 was specific to *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* (Figure 1A, lane 1).

A band amplified from *A. membranaceus* with similar size but slightly smaller than A1 was observed on lane 2. However, the band did not share any sequence similarity with A1 (data not shown). RAPD markers were not necessarily locus-specific<sup>(14)</sup>; polymorphic profiles could not be interpreted in terms of loci and alleles. In this case, fragments of similar size from lane 1 and 2 were not homologous. PCR of OPC-14 resulted in two specific bands, a 0.6 Kb fragment A2 was distinct to *A. membra-*

naceous, and a 0.8 Kb fragment H1 was to *H. polybotrys* (Figure 1B). These DNA fragments were subsequently cloned to pGEM T Easy Vector and subjected to sequence analysis.

## II. Sequencing and Amplification of SCAR Markers

The sequences of RAPD fragments A1, A2 and H1, represented as specific markers of *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*, *A. membranaceus* and *H. polybotrys*, were illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4, respectively. No

significant sequence homology was identified among these sequences and the entries in GenBank. Primers of HG3 and HG4 from A1, HG7 and HG8 from A2, as well as RC3 and RC4 from H1 (Table 1) were designed and used to amplify these DNA fragments under high stringent conditions. Single bands of 0.9 Kb, 0.5 Kb and 0.7 Kb (Figure 5A, B and C) were obtained in *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*, *A. membranaceus* and *H. polybotrys*, respectively as SCAR markers which were shorter than the original RAPD fragments A1, A2 and H1. Two SCAR analyses were performed to test the fidel-

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          RC3
1  TGCGTGCCTTG  GGGCAACATG  GCTGAAACCT  TCGAGCACAT  ACTGCTGTCT  CAGATGTTTC  60
61  CTCAAATTGCT  TCTTGAGATT  CCGCTACGGA  CTCGCGGGCC  GGGCCAAAGGC  TTCGCATCCA  120
121 TGTGTGTGGG  GCGTGTGAAA  GATCCATCTT  CCTCGTAGGC  GCTGTTTGAT  GGTGACAAAA  180
181 TGGGGAGAGG  TAGCAGTTCG  CTGATTAAAC  TTTTAACTTA  AGTTTCTTTT  TTTATTATTT  240
241 CTTATGCTTT  AAAAATGTTT  TCCTTGTTTT  GTGTGTATGC  TTTTATGTTT  TGCAGTATGT  300
301 ATCTAATTTT  TTAATTGTTG  TTTATTTCGT  TTGGAAACAT  GTACCTGCAC  CCTTATATTA  360
361 ATGCAAATCA  GTGTGTGAA  ATAATATCT  CTACAAATCA  TACTTTGCAT  CAACTGAGGG  420
421 GGAGTTTTTT  CCTCCACCAA  AAAGCATTCA  TAATAACATG  CATCACTCA  GGGGGAGTTT  480
481 CTTCCTTCC  TTCTACTTAT  GAATATAAAA  ACTTAATATA  TCATCTTAGA  TAAGTTTATT  540
541 ATCAACAAA  ATGGGGAGAT  TGTAAAATCA  AGATCTCAAT  ACATGTTTTG  ATGATTAACA  600
601 AAGTCTCTGA  GAGATCAACC  TAAGTTTTCA  TATCCCACTA  ATGGTTTCTA  TCTAGTTTAT  660
          RC4
661 AAAGACAGGA  AAAACAAGGT  CTAGATAACT  CTCCCGGAC  ATCCAGAGA  AAGCTGGTCA  720
721 AGTCTATCAC  GACAATGTCA  AGACAAAAC  AAGAATATTT  ATCAGTCATT  AAAATACATA  780
781 AGTTCATCT  CTATCCCGTT  GCTTAGAGA  GCTAAAGAGG  AGAGAAAATC  AAACCTATCC  840
841 TTCTCAGGCA  AGCACGCA  898

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Figure 4. Sequence of *H. polybotrys* fragment H1. SCAR was generated using primers RC3 and RC4 (underlined). RAPD primer OPC-14 is boxed.

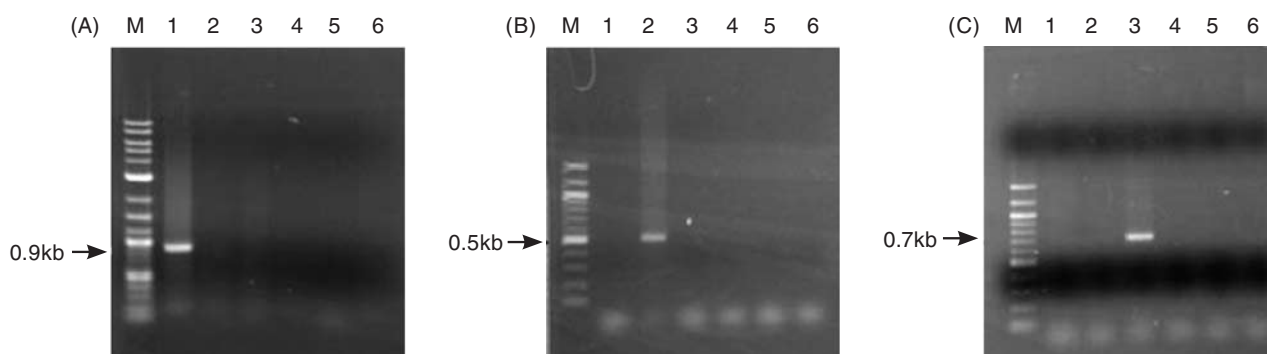


Figure 5. SCAR analysis of three other *Astragalus* plants using primers: (A) HG3 and HG4; (B) HG7 and HG8; (C) RC3 and RC4. Lane 1: *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*; Lane 2: *A. membranaceus*; Lane 3: *H. polybotrys*; Lane 4: *A. spruneri*; Lane 5: *A. obscurus*; Lane 6: *A. garbancillo*; M: (A) 2-Log molecular weight marker; (B) and (C) 100-bp molecular weight marker.



ity of SCAR markers. Firstly, DNA samples of three other *Astragalus* species *A. spruneri*, *A. obseuru*, and *A. garbancillo* extracted from fresh plants were examined by PCR. No band was found in these three *Astragalus* plants (Figure 5). SCAR markers were amplified only in the corresponding species rather than in other *Astragalus* plants. Secondly, two samples of *Astragalus* radix products purchased from local market were put to test. SCAR analysis indicated that one was *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* (Figure 6, Lane 4) and the other was *H. polybotrys* (Figure 6, Lane 5). Under microscopic examination, one sample with grayish-yellow surface color and a brown peripheral cambium ring, containing stone cells but no calcium oxalate crystals was identified as *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*. The surface color of the other sample was reddish-brown with calcium oxalate crystals fibers but no stone cells, was authenticated as *H. polybotrys*<sup>(1,3)</sup>. The microscopic examination of these two *Astragalus* radix samples agreed with the SCAR results.

Paran and Michelmore (1993)<sup>(8)</sup> indicated an advantage over SCARs by conversing a dominant RAPD marker into a codominant SCAR marker. However, in our study, the polymorphisms were retained as the presence or absence of bands when the corresponding SCAR primers were applied. Hence, these SCAR markers of

*Astragalus* medicines would still be considered as dominant markers.

Several approaches were employed to study the phylogenetic relationships of *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*, *A. membranaceus*, and *H. polybotrys*. The DNA sequences of 5S rRNA spacer, ITS, and 18S rRNA of these plant species and other *Astragalus* taxa were examined by Ma *et al.*<sup>(15)</sup> and Dong *et al.*<sup>(16)</sup>. Since *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus* was considered as a variety of *A. membranaceus*, they both share the greatest homology among those DNA sequences; rRNA sequences thus are not suitable to distinguish these two *Astragalus* medicines. It is likely that the rRNA sequences are more useful in identifying the inter-species rather than intra-species of *Astragalus* spp.

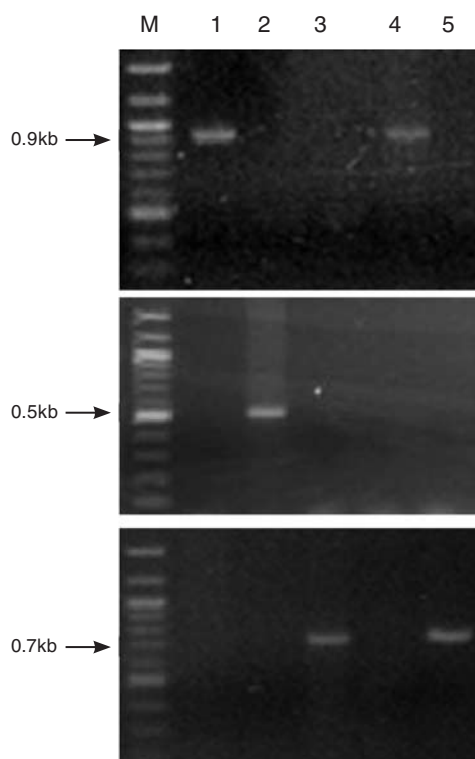
In conclusion, the identification and control of medicinal materials are closely connected to the efficacy of chinese medicine, which is the fundamental issue in the development of herbal drugs. Authentication of herbal material demands fast, reliable and reproducible protocols. In this study, we have demonstrated that two botanical origins of *Astragalus* radix and a common adulterant *H. polybotrys* could be distinguished by using sequence-specific designed SCAR markers.

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The authors wish to thank Ms. Shu-Jeng Kuo for assistance in identifying the specimens, the Millennium Seed Bank Project of the Kew Garden for providing seeds of *A. spruneri*, *A. obseuru*, and *A. garbancillo*. We also thank Mrs. Marilyn Ritzier Liu for critical review of the manuscript.

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**Figure 6.** SCAR analysis for two Huang Qi samples using primers: (A) HG3 and HG4; (B) HG7 and HG8; (C) RC3 and RC4. Lane 1: *A. membranaceus* var. *mongholicus*; Lane 2: *A. membranaceus*; Lane 3: *H. polybotrys*; Lane 4 and 5: samples from local market. M: 100 bp molecular weight marker.

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