

CHINESE MEDICINE

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In these modern times of ours, we hear and read about the ever-improving techniques and developments in Western Medicine. We all come into close contact with the latest drugs and methods of treatment. But how much does the average man-in-the-street, or a medical doctor, for that matter, know about that remote relative of Western Medicine - Chinese Medicine? Is there such a thing as Chinese Medicine? Some people might laugh, but there does exist such a realm of medical knowledge and practice.

Chinese Medicine is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, kinds of medicine ever to be practised on this earth. Compared to the grand old man Chinese Medicine, modern Western Medicine is just a youth, in this case perhaps more active than the old man. Of course, Chinese Medicine has its ancient roots in China, that huge mysterious land of which no European had ever heard until the adventurous explorer Marco Polo brought back news and products from China and the East. This man also brought back medical knowledge then existent in China, but unfortunately this more mundane news was from the beginning doomed to insignificance by the more exciting prospects of trade, gunpowder and politics. Had Chinese Medicine earned some disciples in the West, the path of medical knowledge might be vastly different from what it is now. And so it is that up till now, Chinese Medicine has been largely ignored outside the East.

When Chinese Medicine first began, no one knows. But it spread across the sub-continent throughout the centuries, passing from father to son. It was a closely-guarded profession and whatever schools of medicine existed must have been severely limiting in its choice of candidates. Most of the time it was a family affair, with the father passing

medical and surgical knowledge and techniques onto his son or sons. Sometimes such knowledge just petered out when a particular family line did not survive itself.

In more ways than one, traditional Chinese Medicine may be said to resemble Western folk-medicine of the medieval and even present times. Their reliance on herbs and a knowledge of plant secretions and alkaloids, biochemical knowledge of the properties of animal fluids and tissues, a dependence on the inclemencies of elements of nature and a general belief in the concept of body, spirit and soul, seem to have parallel examples in past Western Medicine. On the other hand, there are significant differences, like a different emphasis on surgical procedures for treatment, and the special concept of Yin and Yang as a special force behind Chinese Medicine.

The concept of Yin and Yang stems from old Chinese mysticism and simply means that the two principles are well-being and ill-health, one confronting the other. Arising from this are certain ideas; e.g. a Yin drug will support the Yin and suppress the Yang; also health is a constant dynamic balance of these Yin and Yang forces. There are many other historical points, which are not called for in this context.

In Southeast Asia at present, Chinese Medicine is still in vogue among the large populations of Chinese descent there. The popularity of Chinese Medicine there can be gauged by the fact that most of the Chinese population have at one time or another during their lives, depended on Chinese medicine for curing their ailments, major, minor, and imaginary. Sometimes a patient would receive western medical treatment in a completely modern hospital, concurrently with Chinese medical treatment from a local "Sin-Seh" (Chinese Physician). In extreme cases, there have been people who have been given up as a foregone case for the undertaker, but who,

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refusing to take this fate lying down, have switched to Chinese Medicine and have been cured. Just recently, there was a Chinese millionaire who was purported to be dying of various ills, among them a malignant cancer of sorts. Western Medicine had given him up, so he flew to China, was treated for 6 months, then returned to his home, reportedly cured of everything, especially his cancer.

A Chinese "medical man" does not have to get an M.D. or a licence to practise, but he gets flocks of patients just the same. Of course, this means that any person with enough guts, but who does not know anything about Chinese Medicine proper could set up practice anywhere, as a "quack". These are the people who give the profession a bad name, as they normally try to fleece their patients of large sums of money. But it must be made clear that there *are* "Sin-Sehs" who have really learnt their trade and profession. Nowadays they can do it not only by getting knowledge from their father, but by other means too, like working in a Chinese druggist's shop (which sells things like rhinoceros' horns, dried bats and lizards, and scented chrysanthemum petals) and learning prescriptions by rote, or attending private schools teaching Chinese Medicine, or best of all by being an apprentice to a Chinese physician.

It would perhaps be interesting to see some of the methods and ideas utilized in Chinese Medicine. In Singapore recently, there was a Chinese physician who claimed that he had "X-ray" fingers and could diagnose an illness by merely feeling the pulse-beat in a patient's hand. He does this by placing four fingers on the pulse of both wrists. Other "Sin-Sehs" have been able to stop blood circulation in any part of the body by lightly placing a finger on a crucial spot. But generally, Chinese physicians need a basic knowledge of 3 things: herbal pharmacology, acupuncture methods and diagnoses by pulse-reading.

However, we find many things clouding the picture as things tend to get too mystical. Examples of these complicating factors are:

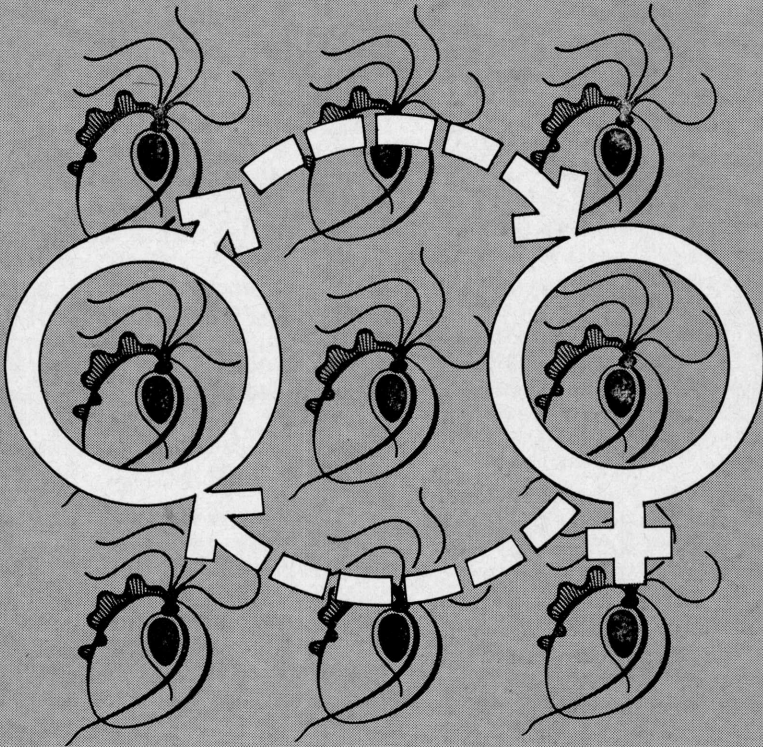
superstitions and claims regarding numbers and astrology, fantastic ideas concerning human anatomy (e.g. the liver has 6 lobes, and there are supposed to be 365 points in the body because there are 365 days in the year), relationships between the color of drugs and their actions, how drugs seem to drive out the "heat, cold, fluids and dryness" from a sick body. There has been a case in which hematemesis was instantly stopped by the patient's swallowing a live earthworm wrapped in herbs. (Perhaps a patient in the West would rather go on vomiting blood than take this cure!) Some of the anatomical and physiological ideas tend to parallel those of the olden times of modern Western Medicine. All sorts of treatment are found for all kinds of diseases, especially for children, the elderly, and expectant women. All kinds of animals and plants can be used in Chinese Medicine, but lack of space does not permit the inclusion of the more gory details.

So it can be seen that while Chinese medicine does not seem to have any apparent scientific basis for its practice, it has worked well through 2000 years, at least. It is hard to verify the claims of the Chinese physicians, for autopsies are frowned upon by the Chinese. Although Chinese Medicine seems to be incompatible with Western Medicine and its strict scientific standard and basis, more and more basic medical science researchers are finding out that purified, isolated western drugs have the same effect, if not less, as when the active principles are present in less palatable forms, e.g. a bactericidal substance might be just as effective as dried fungi. Hormones and their conjugates found in an animal are just as potent, whether the animal is swallowed whole or the hormones are extracted.

If in the future the two types of medical practice could find it possible to work together, further advances in both might be discovered. Western Medicine could stand to gain a lot, and so could Chinese Medicine. For surely, something which has worked well for so long must have at least one leg on which to stand.

References

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