

Medicine in Stamps

Li Shih-Chen (1518-1593): Herbalist of Renown

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The story of Li Shih-Chen, China's greatest herbalist, is the story of muddy and unpalatable but effective medicinal potions derived from natural sources such as plants. Chinese mythology recounts the tale of Lady White, a half-serpent half-female who ran an apothecary known as the Temple of Preserved Harmony. When an epidemic broke out in Zhenjiang ("those affected had yellowing complexions, atrophied muscles, and extremely low morale"), she proclaimed that herbs were the answer, and then set out to gather them on the Mountain of a Hundred Plants. The afflicted population miraculously recovered after drinking her herbal remedies.

Li Shih-Chen: Born in 1518 in the province of Hubei, Li Shih-Chen came from a family of prominent doctors. The elder Li, however, preferred a more prestigious career in the civil service for his son. It was destiny and China's good fortune that Li Shih-Chen failed to scale the imperial examinations necessary for entering government service. This forced him into the medical profession, which ultimately led him to emerge as China's greatest herbalist.

Several prominent Chinese physicians came before Li Shih-Chen. Among others, there was Qin Yue-Ren (407-310 B.C.), a legendary miracle-doctor reputed for exchanging the hearts of two patients to restore their health. Then there was Hua Tuo (141-208 A.D.), pioneer of Chinese surgery, who treated a patient with dysphagia due to an obstructive worm. Hua Tuo gave his patient a concoction of garlic and vinegar that caused him to vomit, thereby expelling the offending helminth. And there was Sun Si-Miao (581-682 A.D.), Asia's Hippocrates, who bequeathed the first code of medical ethics in China.

Li Shih-Chen differed from his predecessors by his single-minded devotion to researching and writing

the encyclopaedia of Chinese Materia Medica called the *Pen Ts'ao Kang Mu* or The Great Herbal. His book describes some 1,892 medicinal products derived from plants, animals, or minerals. He was 35 years old when he began, and it took over 27 years of effort to complete the task. During one stage of his work, Li is said to have stayed indoors for ten full years.

Li was also a capable clinician who emphasised preventive medicine. He identified the health risks of miners, warning them of carbon monoxide and lead poisoning ("The mine is toxic to the miner. If one confined oneself in the mine for months, one will become sallow, anorexic, and eventually die of toxicity."). He also warned that mercury poisoning could cause convulsions and gingivitis, and he was one of the first to recognise gallstones, to use ice to reduce fever, and to utilise steam and fumigation to ward off epidemics.

An ABC of Chinese Herbal Medicine:

In the beginning, there were the Chinese charlatans who profited from selling useless remedies such as spells and written charms to be hung on doors and walls. Indeed, the radical "wu" (sorcerer) forms part of the word for healer ("yi"). During the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.), shamans provided consultations regarding births, deaths, dreams, and diseases. Known for the making of fermented wine and magnificent bronzes such as vases to store the wine, the Shang period left its imprint on the profession – the radical "jiu" (wine) is incorporated into the healing character "yi". The Shang period also featured medicinal wines, decoction, and hygiene (washing of the body and hands). By the Spring and Autumn periods (770-476 B.C.), the Chinese had introduced the concepts of yin and yang. From then on, the harmony of body and spirit, influenced by both internal and external factors, would explain human health and disease.



The legendary Chinese Yellow Emperor Huang Di is credited with the authorship of the *Neiching* (Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine), the world's oldest medical text purportedly written some 5,000 years ago. It was an outgrowth of a fundamental question posed by the emperor to his personal physician, Qi Bo: "I have heard that in ancient times people lived 100 years, yet today they only live fifty years. Why is the present situation so different?" Focusing on the balance between yin and yang, nature's dual opposing forces, Qi Bo answered that perfect harmony of spirit (yang) and body (yin) was necessary for perfect health. One part of the book, the *Su-wên*, takes the form of a dialogue between the Emperor and his physician. Among other things, the *Neiching* recommends acupuncture, moxibustion, massage, drugs, and proper nutrition to achieve harmony and health.

During the Han era (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the treatise known as the Classic of Mountains and Seas (*Shanhaijing*) covered fields of botany, zoology, and medicine. It contained numerous prescriptions for the use of medicinal botanicals to alleviate disease symptoms. The book recounts how ten shamans trailed one another to climb Mount Ling to discover "the hundred kinds of drugs," and how they used chants and herbs to cure diseases such as then prevalent malaria and scabies.

In Chinese herbal therapy, several herbs are compounded to treat multiple symptoms and causes, as well as to counteract any accompanying side effects. More than 20,000 formulas have been described, but only about 2,000 are in current use. Chinese healing focuses on nutritional support for the various organs and purports to work through chi (energy) that reaches the organs through pathways known as meridians. Herbs accentuate yin-yang harmony, and prescriptions incorporate selections that can be classified into four groups: the king herb, the minister or subject herb, the assistant herb, and the servant herb. The king treats the cause or chief symptom and is aided by the minister that also neutralises any side effects from the king herb. The assistant herb provides backup reinforcement of the therapeutic effect, and further reduces side effects of both the king and minister drugs. Finally, the servant coordinates and leads the herbal remedy to the affected areas.

Herbs are boiled in water and drunk, usually about a half hour before or after eating. Occasionally, the herbs are available in tablet or powder form. Most herbs must be avoided during pregnancy and they generally should not be taken during an intervening illness such as the flu and an allergy. Herbal remedies are taken with warm water and never with tea. Different

seasons, and even the phase of the moon, are believed to influence the quality of herbal plants.

Pen Ts'ao Kang Mu – The Herbal Book: It is believed that for over 5,000 years, the Chinese have been compiling medical tracts. If the *Neiching* is China's best known medical book, then the *Pen Ts'ao* is its most comprehensive herbal encyclopaedia. Researched and written by Li Shih-Chen, the *Pen Ts'ao* had the four objectives of expanding and classifying herbal remedies, rectifying past errors, and issuing prescribing guidelines. This pharmacopoeia lists nearly 2,000 drugs, with Li himself personally introducing 374 new ones. It includes 8,160 different prescriptions. Earlier attempts had simply classified herbs into superior, intermediate, or inferior categories, based on their adverse effects. Later on, the origins of the herbs were taken into account. Li vastly expanded the number of categories and placed them into subdivisions of mineral, herbal, and animal sources. Plants were classified according to the habitat such as aquatic or rock origins, or by special characteristics, e.g. all sweet-smelling plants were grouped together. He not only corrected past errors of names and description of medicinal substances, but also their misguided preparation and use. And he denounced foolish and expansive claims of "wonder drugs". In addition to ointments, pills and powders, Li recommended boiled broths made from grains, chestnut, ginger and liver.

Li Shih-Chen's fame is memorialised in a large statute fronting the Hangzhou Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital. He died in 1593 and never lived to see his book in print. China has two copies of the first edition (1596), Japan owns three, and the U. S. Library of Congress hoards a single copy. Despite numerous subsequent editions, the *Pen Ts'ao* remained largely unknown to the West until the mid-19th century. More recently, an English version of Li's classic entitled "Chinese Medicinal Herbs" has become available, a timely reference given the healing profession's current fascination with Alternative Medicine.

REFERENCES

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