

Chinese Herbs 101: A Historical Overview

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Although some may view herbal medicine as antidotal and antiquated, despite research evidence to the contrary, it is indeed potent and effective. The cardiac glycosides (digitoxin, digoxin) used to treat heart disease are often called digitalis because of their foxglove (*digitalis*) plant origin. Reserpine, a drug used to lower blood pressure, was extracted in 1947 from the *rauwolfia*, a plant famous as a folk remedy in India.

Examine medicine across civilizations and cultures from a historical perspective and you can find a common thread. They have used herbal medicines. Civilizations used roots, barks, plants, etc., to treat ailments and to promote health and healing among its citizenry. Egyptians used bread mold as antibiotics and fed pyramid builders huge amounts of garlic, radish seeds and onions to keep them healthy. The *Ebers Papyrus* of the Egyptians indicates at least a third of the plants in modern pharmacopoeia were used in 1550 B.C. *The Rigveda* utilized by East Indians that make use of Ayurveda, lists over 1000 medicinal plants. From Egypt to Sumeria, various cultures have used herbal medicine to some capacity. Although certain cultures have experienced herbal amnesia with regard to the “roots” of medicine, herbal medicine is not new and an herbal renaissance is extending west.

With regard to Chinese herbalism, *The Nei Jing* is the oldest recorded document that outlines the principles used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) today. The text is written dialogue style between the Yellow Emperor (considered the father of TCM) and his follower Ji Bu, and dates back to 200BC-100AD. Chinese herbalism developed primarily in the south of China where the lands were fertile. Herbs, roots, barks, stems, flowers, etc. were used as medicine. Over thousands of years, the effects of these medicines were observed and chronicled. The time testing of these herbs exceeds that of any clinical trial today. A great number of Chinese herbal medicines have been cataloged and preserved. During my studies in China, I walked through the halls that housed a variable cornucopia of herbal medicine from around the world.

Although in the west acupuncture receives most of the notoriety, herbalism reigns supreme in China. While herbs are held in high esteem, its authority was threatened with the entrance of “conventional” medicine by 16th century missionaries. The beauty of Chinese medicine is the same thing that threatened its survival. Chinese medicine is very personalized and specific to the patient’s condition and constitution. In contrast, Western medicine can be broadly applied.

Chinese herbalism does not look for symptoms to identify a named disease; rather, it looks for a pattern of symptoms that gives information regarding the patient's constitutional disharmony. The previous differs greatly from western diagnosis. However, based on my externship, in China doctors of TCM are trained to diagnose disease and discern TCM patterns simultaneously.

TCM looks at mind, body, and spirit to offer treatments based on an understanding of the whole being. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 revived Chinese herbalism and with the addition of its counterpart (acupuncture, qi qong, food therapy, etc) became collectively known as Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Western medicine and Eastern medicine each have faults and benefits respectively. As stated previously, allopathic (Western) medicine has mass application advantage but may miss subtle nuances of individualized care that is a trademark of holistic (Eastern) care.

Some MD's have a pejorative view of herbal medicine; although a quarter of modern medicine (prescriptions) contains herbal constituents. Some holistic doctors have a less than stellar opinion of western doctors. The wisest recognizing both forms can be used in concert to nullify negative aspects of certain treatment protocols. For example, herbs and acupuncture can be used to assist with side effects of chemotherapy. Further, the latter group recognizes that one treatment style may be preferred at certain times (i.e. a major accident which results in internal bleeding requires imaging, sutures, etc).

While studying in Chengdu, China, I was able to observe and participate in the fluid incorporation of both styles of medicine insuring the best benefit for the patient. Only in such an environment was I able to witness chemotherapy patients simultaneously taking herbal prescriptions with full heads of hair and no pallor complexion.

The **important question** is not which type of healing is right or wrong. The goal of both forms of medicine, in its purest sense, is to alleviate human suffering and Chinese herbal medicine has filled this prescription for thousands of years.

“After taking Dr. Hotep's herbal formula my blood pressure is down, I feel less stressed, I feel great...I use to drink [alcohol]when I got stressed to unwind after work, but now when I get home I drink my herbal tea.”
~AG Male 52 Ethiopia

Phoenix residents can begin their herbal journey today! Call Qi Acupuncture & Wellness at 602.462.1115 to schedule an herbal consult.

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