

China : The Healing Arts of the Middle Kingdom

by George Parulski

The Middle Kingdom of China spans roughly the period 1046 to 256 'BCE. The word "middle" is believed to refer to the position of China below Heaven but above the rest of the world which was considered dark, alien and devoid of any refined culture. That was the understanding of at least the imperial court as far as universal values were concerned.

HEATED ROCKS, burning mugwort, stone needles and ginseng root, these were the tools of ancient Chinese physicians. The origin of their knowledge is buried in the dark folds of obscure history before the dawn of Christianity, even before the doctrine of the *Yi Jing* (I Ching). The early benefactors of their healing arts included the ancient Asian cave dwellers and later the warriors of the Chinese

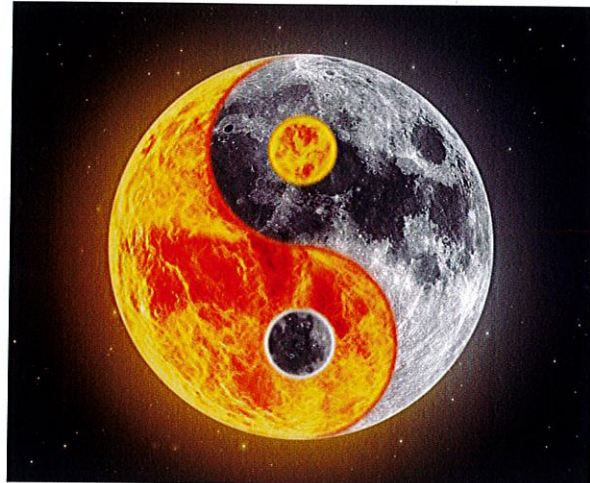
warlords. Oddly enough, many of the techniques they used were more effective in healing the sick than some of our most well known modern medicines. Perhaps medicine is after all more a spiritual art than a healing science.

For many reasons, the study of Chinese medicine is important, not just a fascinating curiosity. The use of acupuncture needles, *moxa* (a substance burned over an



acupuncture point), and an amazingly varied collection of natural medicines is older than Western civilisation and has by no means been abolished by it. Chinese medicine is not only a system of healing but is tied in with a whole philosophy, a concept of the world, outside of which it loses all meaning.

For the ancient Chinese, every human is both a “small universe” but also an image of a much larger one. That reminds us of the Western hermetic treatise *“The Emerald Tablet”* where the author says: *“...that which is above is like that which is below....”* In ancient Chinese medicine, the overall equilibrium of our bodies, indeed of all living creatures, as well as the planets and stars, are all controlled by the same mechanisms operating in analogous ways on all planes, from the largest to the smallest. Studying Chinese medicine is therefore to gain a better understanding of Chinese thought and managing to penetrate structures that at first seem not only foreign to us but even antagonistic.



Yáng and Yīn

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That dense but never indigestible study ends with a rich perspective, for thousands of years ago, the Chinese had a fully functioning corpus of wisdom and healing that in part remains beyond the reach of science, yet has as well brought into the scientific realm active ingredients that are used routinely in modern medicine. Chinese medicine is therefore a message in a bottle cast into the ocean of centuries, and it is worth our while paying attention to what it says..

Daoism: The Basis of Ancient Chinese Medicine

It is clear that a journey into Chinese medicine takes us far beyond both China and the human body. Ancient Chinese medical practices were based on the application of certain philosophical principles and to understand them better, we need to familiarise ourselves with these principles. Humans are the summary of the universe, a microcosm (from the Greek *mikros kosmos*, small world) in relation to the macrocosm (*makros kosmos* or great world). Being an integral part of the whole, and at the same time a miniature version of it, we are subject to the same universal laws. The same idea of a relation between the life of the heavenly bodies and that of earthly organisms is also found in astrology and other divinatory arts which the Chinese used for just about every aspect of life.

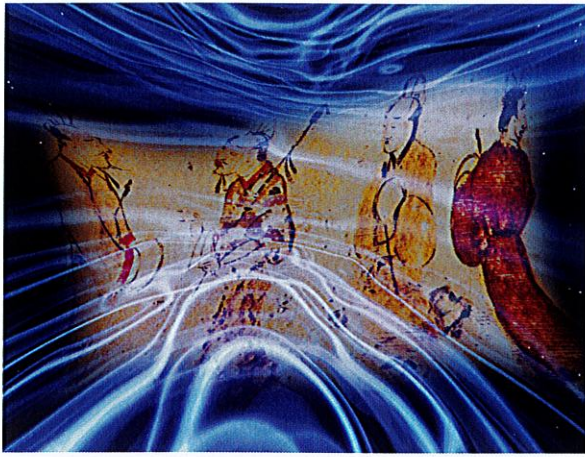
All knowledge was summed up in three terms: *Yáng*, *Yīn*, and *Dào* (Tao). The word Yang originally meant *sunlight*, or what pertained to it. Yin meant *shadow* or *darkness*. The dualistic theory of Yang and Yin is cosmic in scope, since the sky and sun are Yang while the earth and the moon are Yin. All living beings contain both principles.

- Yang is represented by the male principle. It embodies activity, splendour and hardness. It is associated with the *left* direction and its colour is *black*. The numbers corresponding to it are the odd natural numbers [1,3,5,7,9,...].
- Yin is represented by the female principle. It embodies passivity, plainness (the opposite of splendour) and softness. It is the *void* and is associated with the *right* direction and its colour is *white*. The numbers corresponding to it are the even natural numbers [2,4,6,8,10,...].

The Chinese Cosmos was controlled by waves. Modern physics is based on waves, but the Chinese, who claim to have been the first to envision the concept, never thought of applying it specifically to the interpretation of physical phenomena. The entire universe is subject to slow and opposing pulsations, waves; and the universe as a whole expanded and contracted in a yin-yang manner in vast cycles known to the learned.

On the human level, each person can be Yang in one sense and Yin in the other. The pulsation is found in the contraction and dilation of the heart-systole and diastole, succeeding one another rhythmically, keeping the blood in motion. In the lungs the pulsation is more in accordance with the rhythm of exhalation and inhalation. Yang and





For the ancient Chinese, the Cosmos was made up of and governed by waves. How very modern!

Yin are conceived as completely impersonal natural forces that never exist alone, but are always found together: *"The Tao is a Yang and a Yin."* The Tao is the divine law controlling relationships between the microcosm and macrocosm. It is also the beginning. According to the Dàodéjīng (*Tao-te Ching* or *Book of Taoist Virtue*): *"To know the supreme Tao is extremely difficult. To communicate with it is appallingly difficult. Who can boast of knowing its main characteristics?"* Yet the Tao can be known through study and learning how to decipher it.

Another school that attempted to account for both the structure and origins of the universe, claimed that it was based on *five primordial elements*. At first the two schools were unrelated to each other but later merged into a single philosophy.

- The **five elements** (*wood, fire, earth, metal and water*) are what all things were made of.
- The **five planets** (*Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus and Mercury*) were associated with the five elements that gave birth to them.

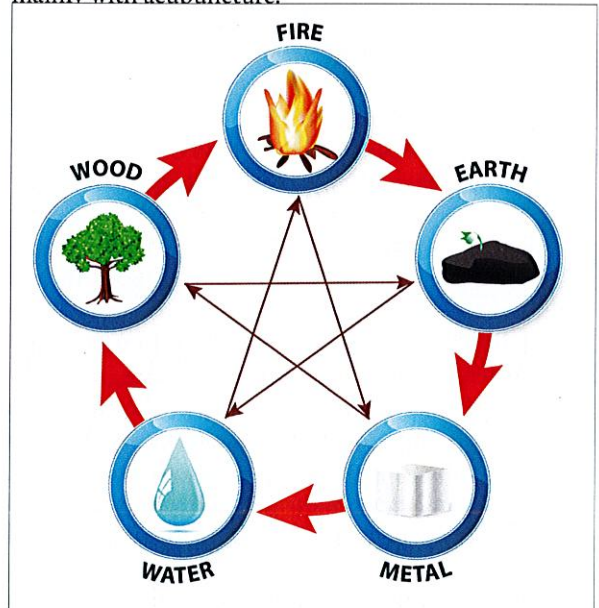
These macroscopic correspondences extended to several microcosmic ones...

- the **five organs** (*liver, heart, spleen, lungs and kidneys*),
- the **five seasons** (*winter, spring, summer, late summer and autumn*),
- the **five cardinal points** (*north, south, east, west and centre*),
- the **five colours** (*yellow, black, red, green and white*).

- the **five sense organs** (*eyes, tongue, mouth, nose and ears*).
- the **five emotions** (*anger, joy, pensiveness, sadness and fear*).
- the **five body parts** (*tendons, pulse, muscles, skin and bones*).
- the **five climates** (*wind, heat, dampness, dryness and cold*).

An individual's physical health was judged by combinations of the qualities of one or more of these groups of five. All elements reflected the principle of the central binary principle of Yin-Yang, and their interactions had medical applications in both diagnoses and treatments. It was upon these four theories, *Yang, Yin, Tao* and the *five elements*, that Chinese healers based their system of healing.

Long before recorded history, the first great Chinese healer was the legendary *Huángdì* the *"Yellow Emperor."* With his minister *Qìbó*, he would enter into heated debates about acupuncture or the influences of wind, heat, cold and humidity on the human body. The celebrated *Nèijīng* is often ascribed to him. The *Nèijīng*, the first great book of healing, consists of two parts. The first, *Suwen*, forms the basis and core of the book, embracing the entire realm of medical knowledge, from herbs through to broken bones. The second part, the *Lingshu* (spiritual nucleus), is primarily a supplement to the *Suwen*, dealing mainly with acupuncture.



Chinese elements: the individual's physical constitution, being divided into five different types, also represents the material form of the five elements.





Modern day Acupuncture.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is based on the idea that certain *channels* or *ducts*, nowadays referred to as *meridians*, extend internally, perhaps embedded in the muscles, throughout the body in a fixed network. The 365 points on the skin are where those meridians emerge on the surface. Because skin points, meridians and the viscera are interrelated, and as all of these harbour the ebb and flow of Yin and Yang, a cure is believed possible by treating one of the skin outlet points.

The insertion of needles into these strategic points is designed to diminish an abundance or replenish a deficiency, depending on the particular need of the diseased organ. It is assumed that 'stagnant' Qi (or Ch'i) is drained and young fresh Qi is substituted. Qi is the vital energy or life force, the intrinsic force flowing within the meridians and throughout the universe. There are two basic types of Qi: *Runqi* and *Weiqi*.

- *Weiqi* flows outside the body, generating and activating the flow of life, and is found in the foods we eat, the air we breathe. It is this form of Qi that sustains all life.
- *Runqi* is a liquid-like substance flowing within the meridians and maintaining an energy balance within the body. Qi energy in the body is replenished by the foods we eat and the air we breathe.

What we might ask at this point is if there is any scientific evidence to support the theory of meridians in the body? In June 1960, a team of Soviet doctors convened at the *Russian Acupuncture Conference* at Gorki (now known again as Nizhny Novgorod). While one group reported the success of acupuncture in treating impotence, other physicians at the conference told of their experiments in search of the meridians.

They found that acupuncture points, existing precisely

where Chinese physicians had known them to be for thousands of years, could be detected by rubbing a sensitive stethoscope over the skin. The sounds, they reported, differed from those in other areas of the skin. They further stated that skin at those points along the meridians was less dense than at other points of the body. Two other scientists at the conference, D.A. Galov and V.J. Piatigorski, found that skin temperature at acupuncture points differ from other skin-surface temperatures.

Professor Kim Bong Han from North Korea reported that skin cells along these meridians were structured differently from most skin cells and that in addition there were clusters of another unusual kind of cell, later named "*Bonghan corpuscles*" in his honour.

Healing With Heat

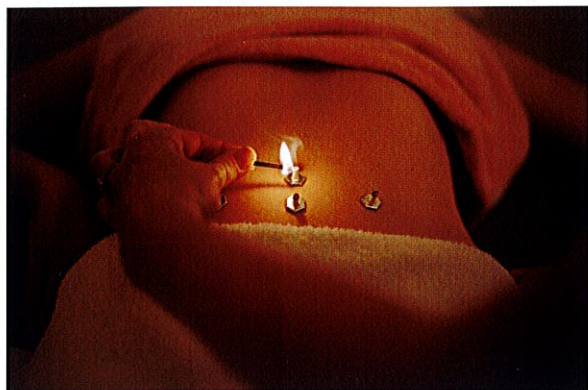
Heat treatment to alleviate certain ailments probably extends as far back as acupuncture and herbal medicine. Many prominent Chinese scholars believe that the treatment called *moxibustion* may have been used to ease the rheumatic pains of prehistoric people in the northern hemisphere, whose environment more often was cold and damp, especially for cave dwellers. It is believed that the Stone-Age Chinese first soothed aching joints by applying heated stones to their bodies, later refining the method through experimentation with burning mugwort. In the *Nèijīng*, *moxibustion* is referred to as a well-developed process.

In earlier times, the herb was burned on the skin and the ashes were then rubbed into the wound. Even today, in some areas, we may see former patients bearing scars as a result of such treatments. Until relatively recent decades *ai-yen* leaves were formed into sticks about 10 centimetres long or into bean-sized cones or balls. A pleasant warmth on the skin's surface was desired and the moxa was usually removed before scorching occurred. In Japan and some parts of China, *moxibustion* is still applied by small tubes fitted with handles containing the mugwort leaves.

For one treatment, three to five moxa balls are required. Sometimes they may be applied to various points of the meridians, or they may be applied one after another to the same point. A moxa stick burns for about five minutes. If a sedating effect is desired, the stick is held over the appropriate meridian point. For a toning effect, strong, persistent stimulation to the meridian point is accomplished by lightly tapping a glowing moxa stick against the skin though avoiding overheating or burning the skin.

To relieve pain, a fresh garlic slab was placed over the point of treatment. A small hole was bored through the garlic and a moxa cone ignited. To compensate for lack





Chinese Healing with Moxibustion.

of energy in an afflicted organ, to re-channel Qi, a base of salt was used, followed by a cone of moxa being burned over the treatment point. When the salt became too hot, it is replaced.

Healing Herbs

Among the foremost cultural heroes of China was the legendary Emperor *Shénnóng* (Shen Nung the "Divine Farmer"), to whom is attributed the founding of agriculture and the first experiments with herbal remedies. This legendary emperor was conveniently blessed with a transparent covering across his abdomen, through which

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he could observe the inner workings of his body and note the effects of various herbal remedies. After compounding and self-testing hundreds of herbal preparations, his observations were preserved in the first pharmacopoeia, called the *Běncào* (Pen-ts'ao) or *Herbal*. This work lists 365 preparations and their medical applications. The majority of these medicaments are herbal, but 40 contained animal material and 11 contained minerals.

The *Běncào* was followed by several pharmacopoeias written by eminent Chinese physicians. The most definitive of these works was the *Běncào Gāngmù* (Pen-ts'ao kang-mu) or *The Outline of Herb Medicine*. Completed by Li Shízhēn (Li Shih-chen) in 1578 CE, the *Běncào Gāngmù* was a distillation of the therapeutic knowledge of the ages. The author spent 30 years researching over 800 existing works, checking and rechecking for possible errors. His completed work, consisting of many volumes, listed 192 medicaments of animal origin, 1,094 medicaments of vegetable origin (610 herbs, 484 trees and shrubs), 275

medicaments derived from metals and minerals, and 31 medicaments from "everyday articles." In all, the work listed over 1,800 animal, vegetable and mineral medicaments, and over 8,000 prescriptions. The result is a highly detailed pharmacopoeia still used by folk doctors in modern China.

These substances generally are not thought to cure in the modern Western sense of prophylaxis and immune reaction. Rather, Chinese folk remedies seek to re-establish within the body the balance of cosmic forces, without which, health and vigour are unobtainable.

Herbs of course play an important part in modern medicine, both in Chinese practice and throughout the world. Many of today's drugs, which are taken for granted by most of us, were known and effectively used by Chinese physicians and pharmacists many centuries ago, long before becoming a part of Western pharmacopoeias. What is known by many non-Chinese is that ancient Chinese herb medicines are often more effective than some modern synthetic drugs, and some of the Western medications are ineffective against diseases that are usually cured without side-effects by centuries-old Chinese medicaments.

For example, acute bacillary dysentery, caused by bacteria of the genus *Shigella*, related to salmonella, was treated more effectively with a mixture of a variety of the peony flower and two other Chinese herbs, prepared according to ancient prescription, than with either sulphaguanidine or streptomycin. The latter drugs are both modern and widely used against dysentery.

Although Chinese healing practices are often ridiculed as mere superstition by Western medical science, often that criticism is given without proper knowledge of the multifaceted, multipurpose arts of healing that exist in countries of the East. But if we take time to delve into the facts, even the most dubious Western critic would find that their methods are thoroughly tested and often more effective than Western techniques, possibly offering an entirely new world of understanding to modern medical science and human health.



Selection of Herbs as used in Chinese medicine.

