

Chinese Medicine in the West

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Chinese medicine has experienced exponential growth in the West during the past 30 years. It has gone from being an esoteric fringe therapy practised by a few dedicated pioneers, to being widely available and commonly utilised by the general population.

Whereas 30 years ago most ordinary members of the public had no personal experience of acupuncture or Chinese herbs, most people now have either tried acupuncture themselves or at least know someone who has. In some countries acupuncture has also taken the leap from something taught on weekend courses to becoming a Masters level programme, with people even attaining PhDs in the field.

Chinese medicine has also transgressed the boundaries of being seen exclusively as a 'quack therapy' that doctors warned their patients against trying as it was at best useless or at worst harmful, to being a therapy that has been integrated into certain fields of conventional Western medicine. There are, for example, ever-increasing numbers of Western healthcare practitioners such as physiotherapists

and midwives, as well as some dentists and GPs, utilising acupuncture techniques in their daily practice. This is something that, if not unthinkable, seemed at least highly improbable 30 years ago.

There is though a significant risk of some of the tools of Chinese medicine, for example the techniques of acupuncture, cupping (applying special cups to an area to create a vacuum) and the herbs utilised in Chinese herbal medicine, being purloined and integrated into Western medicine while at the same time becoming divorced from the theoretical framework that is their foundation, the practical application of these tools being explained and defined by Western medicine's theoretical model. This will result in a significant loss, as the strength of Chinese medicine lies not only in its techniques, but also in the medical system itself, its unique comprehension of physiology, aetiology and pathology, and its understanding that an individual factor, whether it be a pathological symptom or a healing technique, can never be fully comprehended unless it is seen as part of a context.

Furthermore we are also seeing a concerted attempt from certain quarters of the academic and medical community not only to discredit the practice and practitioners of Chinese medicine, but also to pressurise the academic institutions that offer or accredit programmes in acupuncture and Chinese medicine to terminate their association with what they term 'pseudoscience', as well as opposing the use of acupuncture in public healthcare. However, I think that the profession is robust enough, and the demand from the public for a safe and effective alternative to biomedicine is great enough, that the profession will continue to grow in the years to come.

There has not only been a dynamic development in the usage and acceptance of Chinese medicine in the West

during the past 30 years. The profession itself has also developed and matured. This professional development is most clearly seen in the difference between the relatively sparse literature that was available 30 years ago and the cornucopia of texts on the market today. I was lucky to start in the profession in 1990 when the first literary wave of Chinese medicine textbooks had already rolled onto the beach. I had access to books such as Maciocia's *Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (2015) and Kaptchuk's *The Web that Has No Weaver* (2000), two books that introduced a new level of erudition to the West, something the generation before had not had. This earlier generation, who were now starting to write books of their own, had mainly been dependent on translations of the standard textbooks available in China in the late seventies and early eighties. These pioneers were instrumental in developing the profession and setting its standards.

Even though when I started I had access to these seminal textbooks, there was still a paucity of textbooks compared to now. There would be a period of months between new related titles being published. I remember eagerly awaiting the publication of each coming addition to my meagre library. As Chinese medicine developed in the West, the amount of writing and the number of Chinese medicine textbooks published grew. Within ten years, so many books were being published that I could not keep up and felt guilty that I had not read each new tome.

Now, almost 30 years after I started out, we are in the fortunate but also frustrating situation that literally dozens of Chinese medicine textbooks are published each year without me or other practitioners and students even being aware of their existence. This is, of course, unfortunate for the individual authors and publishers, but it is a sign of

the rude health and maturity of the profession – that there is a market for all these books. A further salubrious sign is that it is not just the volume but also the quality, depth and diversity of publications which has increased.

Looking back at the first books, they were very broad and general in scope and heavily influenced by the modern standard version of Chinese medicine known as ‘TCM’ (Traditional Chinese Medicine). Now there are in-depth textbooks focusing on virtually every specialised area of treatment, for example trauma, fertility, mental health, and so on. Equally inspiring, and a sign of the way that the profession has developed, is the publication of more and more books that diverge from the ‘mainstream’ modern TCM version of Chinese medicine. There is, for example, an increasing number of high-quality translations of classical historical texts, as well as textbooks on other traditions within East Asian medicine. This is proof that Chinese medicine in the West has matured. It is like a child who has reached adolescence and maturity, defining its own identity and seeking out its own truths; respectful to its parent, but also having attained a position of maturity and knowledge that enables it to be able to define itself independently, with its own views and opinions.

This is fully in the tradition of Chinese medicine and Chinese culture. Each generation is a transverse thread, weaving itself through the longitudinal threads of life’s tapestry. Each individual weft thread may vary in colour, but they are still interwoven into the original tapestry. The Chinese medical profession in the West has come of age. I think the coming decades will see Chinese medicine in the West continuing to develop its own unique identity and expression, but it will always be clearly recognisable as a child of its mother.

References

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