

ARTICLE FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS ASIA

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A perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine or East meets West

Introduction

It might seem strange that an article on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) should be written by a scientist living and working in England. The confidence of western people is low, when it comes to using Chinese plants and formulae. However, there are so many wonderful blends that are beneficial for the skin, both internally and used externally, that it is about time that more effort was spent evaluating this ancient tried and tested system of herbal medicine.

Chinese medicine includes amongst its repertoire, a daunting array of other curious materials from various animal parts, insects, marine species, and even fossilised bones. It would not be the intention to include most of these for aesthetic, legal or for reasons of conservation.

Terminology

The major problem with Chinese medicine is the terminology that it uses. There is a reason for the Chinese view of the body being so different from the western. While we in the west were cutting and slashing our way into the dead bodies of anything that drew breath in order to discover what made them tick, the peoples of the East were showing a respect for the sanctity of that vessel and leaving it intact. Such an intrusion would have seemed abhorrent to their religion and culture.

Thus a diagnosis was made on a careful examination of those things that could be seen without intrusion into the body. The tongue, the pulse and the materials expelled from the body all form part of a detailed diagnosis. The concept that there is a life force at work in the form of "Qi" (similar to the concept of *prana* in Hindu medicine), which can be taken from around us and from what we eat and the air we breath. This qi can turn unstable, it can become too hot, too cold, too yin or too yang, too dry or too moist, but it can be rebalanced by what we eat.

In addition there are three other bodily humours: blood *xue*, vital essence *jing*, and fluid *jin ye*. The terms yin and yang are primordial cosmic forces, which interplay in our bodies. Yin is a negative, passive force, female in nature, descending, contracting and a bit gloomy and symbolised by water. Yang is the exact opposite and represented by fire. One cannot live without the other, and an imbalance needs to be restored through food or herbal medicine.

Finally, there are the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water, which interplay with yin and yang and have specific interaction with an internal organ within the body.

Explanation of illness and disease

Keeping the forces in balance is construed as being in good health, but illness is caused by an imbalance of the six excesses, namely wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, dryness and fire. There are also diseases caused by an excess of one or more of the seven emotions, which are joy, anger, anxiety, concentration, grief, fear and fright.

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Already one can begin to see the reasons why western medicine viewed the Chinese system with such scepticism. The language was (to their perspective) too fanciful and too aesthetic to have any place in their modern science.

The breakthrough probably came through acupuncture, since the Chinese had discovered that the body was connected through a whole network of meridians, which could be controlled by the insertion of needles. These meridians are developed early in the foetus, for example, the heart is connected with the development of the left arm, which is why a heart attack is often accompanied with a searing pain in that limb. Anaesthesia techniques in China often use nothing but accurate acupuncture.

Dermatitis, eczema and psoriasis are not widely seen in China, so the west attributed this to physiological or genetic factors, rather than to the system of medicine that treated and prevented these diseases.

The breakthrough in the treatment of the skin

It was a company called Phytopharm, that first trialled a preparation based on traditional Chinese medicine for the treatment of atopic eczema. It is impossible to know the exact formulation, but a number of similar recipes have been published for Zenophyte.

1. The formula as reported by Dr. Brian Whittle (Phytopharm)

Ledebourella seseloides, *Potentilla chinensis*, *Akebia clematidis*, *Rehmannia glutinosa*, *Paeonia lactiflora*, *Lophatherum gracile*, *Dictamnus desycarpus*, *Tribulus terrestris*, *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* and *Schizonepeta tenuiflora*

2. The formula as reported by Penelope Ody

Fang Feng (*Saposhnikovia divaricata* (Tircz.) Schischk.) (Umbelliferae)

Jingjie (*Schizonepeta tenuiflora* Briq.) (Labiatae)

Dihuang (*Rehmannia glutinosa* Libosch.) (Scrophulariaceae)

Chiahao (*Paeonia lactiflora* Pall.) (Ranunculaceae)

Danzhuye (*Lophatherum gracile* Brongn.) (Graminae)

Jili (*Tribulus terrestris* L.) (Zygophyllaceae)

Baixianpi (*Dictamnus dasycarpus* Turcz.) (Rutaceae)

Chuanmutong (*Clematis armandii* Franch.) (Ranunculaceae)

Gancao (*Glycyrrhiza uralensis* Fisch.) (Leguminosae)

Wielingcai (*Potentilla chinensis* Ser.) (Rosaceae)

Ledebouriella divaricata (Turcz.) Hiroc is synonym for *Saposhnikovia divaricata* (Turcz.) Schischk.

3. The eczema treatment prescribed by Dr Luo in Soho, London (believed to be the original formula that was investigated at Great Ormond Street for Sick Children).

Chi Shao Yao (*Paeonia lactiflora*), Mu Dan Pi (*Paeonia moutan* L.), Sheng Di Huang (*Rehmannia glutinosa*), Dan Zhu Ye (*Lophatherum gracile*), Fang Feng (*Ledebouriella seseloides*), *Saposhnikovia divaricata*, Bai Xian Pi (*Dictamnus dasycarpus*), Mu Tong (*Akebia quinata*), Zi Hua Di Dong (*Viola yedonesis*), Ci Ji Li (*Tribulus terrestris*)

Notice that these formulae all have a similar composition and so the actual composition of the blend is likely to be between the three. There is absolutely no doubt that the Chinese recipe had a statistical significance when used in the treatment of atopic eczema, which was substantiated in more than one full scale clinical trial.

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The views of the west meet the culture of the east

The recipes given above are meaningless, and they would be meaningless even if the percentage weights were included. The parts of the plant are not present, but more to the point, the Chinese method of preparation is not given either. In the west, we extract in water or alcohol, but the Chinese will cook, boil, fry, caramelize with sugar and use a far greater variety of techniques in order to produce the final herb material. This is partly because the Chinese view their medicines as corrective foods and so prepare them in much the same way.

The recipe would be explained by a whole series of terms alien to a modern pharmacist. The major component would be the *Emperor*, the secondary actives would be the *Ministers*, with the materials added to fine tune the recipe being referred to as the *Assistants*.

The descriptions of the herbs themselves would be difficult for a western pharmacist to accept. (e.g. Ci Ji Li or *Tribulus terrestris* would be referred to as a sweet, warm material used for kidney-yang deficiency, Gan Cao or *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* (Liquorice) would be described as sweet, neutral and indicated for "empty" spleen.).

Modern pharmacy demands one active in a blend of non-functional excipients, the idea of a multi-component formula is construed to be "polypharmacy" and is totally outside the realms of western medicine. The idea of treating the whole patient, the whole disease and all of its ramifications in one preparation is not accepted.

In this preparation (which is taken internally and at the same time can be applied externally) one has a blend of anodyne, antipruritic, vulnerary, sedative and cicatrising herbs, which would require at least two or three western medicines to achieve the same effect.

The conflict of science versus the needs of the consumer

As a scientist, I can understand the need to have knowledge of the active chemicals present in each and every component of the mixture. I can also understand that the activity of those plants will vary year to year, because so does the weather. It is prudent to have complimentary pairs of plants (i.e. a plant that thrives in a wet year should be complimented with one that thrives in a dry year.).

The phrase that comes to mind is "if it ain't broke don't fix it", these recipes are usually extremely effective, some of them have been used for more than two thousand years.

The conflict between our two cultures needs to be tackled by working in harmony and allowing a little give and take, maybe there needs to be a new class of herbal medicine, where the rules are slightly different. The criteria for passing or failing of a preparation should be based on pharmacognosy, rather than on pharmaceutical chemistry.

The application of Traditional Chinese Medicine to Cosmetics and Toiletries

Clearly, these powerful blends of herbal materials are not medicinal, since they have failed to gain acceptance by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA). Furthermore, these traditional blends have been shown to have a topical protective effect on problem skin (cosmetics are not allowed to have a physiological effect, nor are we allowed to mention skin diseases such as eczema, dermatitis or psoriasis).

There are also numerous recipes for other skin blemishes, such as freckles, skin pigmentation variation and other cosmetic defects, which fall outside the scope of the Medicines Act.

Conclusions

There have been a few occasions, when Chinese Herbal Medicine has been the cause of poisoning incidents, in all cases these referred to materials that had been ingested and were prescribed by unqualified people. The most common mistake has been the assumption that a Chinese name is unique to one species of plant, which in many cases it is not.

The use of traditional Chinese '*Materia Medica*' in our formulae for care and protection of the skin is an opportunity that will be grasped by an adventurous producer/retailer in the not too distant future. Provided the blend is prepared in the traditional way and certified by a qualified Chinese practitioner, then there is no risk.

Further useful reading on this subject

1. Daniel Reid: A handbook of Chinese healing herbs. Simon and Schuster of Australia Pty. Ltd, Sydney. 1995. ISBN No. 0-671-71377-9.
2. Daniel P.Reid: Chinese Herbal Medicine. Shambhala (Boston) 1993. ISBN NO. 0-87773-397-X and ISBN No. 0-87773-398-8 (paperback).

3. Keys, D.: Chinese Herbs - Their Botany, Chemistry and Pharmacodynamics. 1976 (1990 in paperback) Charles E. Tuttle. ISBN No. 0-8048-1667-0.
4. A.Y. Leung. Chinese Herbal Remedies. Wildwood House. 1985. ISBN No. 0-7045-0507.
5. Andrew Gaeddert: Chinese Herbs in the Western Clinic - a guide to prepared herbal formulas indexed by Western disorders & supported case studies. Get Well Foundation, North Atlantic Books. 1994. ISBN No. 0-9638285-0-9.
6. Henry C. Lu: Chinese system of food cures - prevention and remedies. Sterling Publishing Inc. 1986. ISBN No. 0-8069-6308-5 (pbk).
7. Tang.S., Palmer.M.: Chinese Herbal Prescriptions - A practical and authoritative self-help guide. 1986. Rider & Company, an imprint of Century Hutchinson Ltd. ISBN No. 0-7126-9470-6.
8. Dr. Hong-Yen Hsu: How to treat yourself with Chinese herbs. Keats Publishing Inc. 1980. ISBN No. 0-87983-603-2.
9. Dr. Charles Windridge, Dr. Xu Xiaochun: The Fountain of health - an A-Z of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Mainstream Publishing. 1994. ISBN No. 1-85158-635-0.
10. E.H. Wilson: Plant Hunters. A Naturalist in Western China. Cadogan Books. 1986. ISBN No. 0-946313-49-0.
11. A.Y. Leung and Steven Foster: Encyclopedia of Common Natural Ingredients used in food, drugs and cosmetics. 2nd. edition. John Wiley 1996 ISBN No. 0-471-50826-8.