

Wisdom of Chinese Doctors

By G. K. Spencer

For centuries, the Western world has professed amazement or amusement at the weird list which forms the Chinese native pharmacopeia. Frog skins, tigers' teeth, crabs' eyes, rattlesnake skins, deer horns, dried shrimp, are only a few of the items which Western physicians and newspaper readers have regarded as examples of the backwardness and superstition of the Chinese.

But now comes an American chemistry professor, Professor Arthur Maas, of the University of Southern California, himself a pharmacist of note, to reveal that the Chinese *Materia Medica* is not so unscientific as it may superficially seem.

For instance Ma Huang is the Chinese medication for dropsy. Western physicians for years have been amazed that the mere dried skin of certain Chinese frogs could function as an ameliorative and cure for dropsy. Yet, they have had to admit that Ma Huang, or dried frog skins, does cure dropsy, often after Western doctors have treated cases for months.

Professor Maas has revealed that these Chinese frog skins yield such powerful substances as bufagin, bufotalin, and bufotoxin; that bufagin is really efficacious in dropsy, and that research workers of the University have recently prepared ephedrine from Ma Huang, which has an action similar to that of adrenalin.

For centuries, Chinese physicians have been prescribing powdered tigers' teeth in cases of debility. When Professor Maas encountered this item of the *Materia Medica*, he was as skeptical as anyone else—until he analyzed the substance and found it rich in calcium phosphate, the very same substance prescribed by Occidental physicians for debilitation!

Crabs' eyes were next to come under the university pharmacist's test tube. Chinese doctors prescribe crabs' eyes for stomach disorders. Since most cases of stomach disorder are marked by hyperacidity, and since crabs' eyes undoubtedly do afford the Chinese stomach patient relief, the professor looked for calcium carbonate, which is a well-known Occidental medical standby in cases of hyperacidity in the stomach.

By this time, he wasn't surprised to find that crabs' eyes do contain an important percentage of calcium carbonate. And so on through the Chinese *Materia Medica* he journeyed, finding that, except for a very few items which are given for the same psychological effect that our Western doctors seek when they give a simple man a pill of salt or starch, the strange items of the Chinese prescriptions are well-known drugs in a more elemental form than those purchased in the modern well-equipped American drug store.

The Chinese healing arts are grouped under two headings. The Taoist priesthood has its own incantations and superstitions. Hence the many superstitious practices resorted to for deceiving or warding off the evil spirits.

The priests recite incantations, paper money is buried and burned, and the pentagon is hung over the doorway. The demons are thought to be especially fond of marrying beautiful children, hence the parents invent disgusting names for their offspring in the hope of misleading these tormentors.

Boys are especially liable to injury at the devils' hands. Hence a guest never inquires into the sex of a new-born child, and a boy is often dressed as a girl and called by a female name.

The Chinese physician, however, is quite a different individual from the Taoist priest. He is usually steeped in the Chinese classics, the study of which is an excellent mental training. He may be unlicensed, but often his reputation comes down through several generations. Hence his name as a doctor is a valuable one, and you find such names as Dr. "Salts of Hartshorn," and Dr. "Rhubarb," inscribed on his place of business.

While Westerners think of Jenner as the father of vaccination, the student of Chinese medicine will be surprised to discover that the Chinese preceded Jenner by almost a thousand years in inoculating against smallpox. Chinese use of serum, however, apparently stopped at this point. Yet for many centuries Chinese was far in advance of Western medicine.

It is interesting to watch a Chinese street doctor "taking" a patient's pulse. The Chinese are especially skilled in the art of diagnosis without instruments such as the stethoscope, so well known in Western diagnosis. Even Occidental physicians are now studying the Chinese method of diagnosing diseases by the pulse.

The Chinese doctor holds both of his patient's hands. With the right hand he feels the left pulse and with the left hand the right pulse. He applies three fingers—the ring, middle and index fingers—over the pulse and the thumb underneath the wrist. Then he palpates the pulse with each finger successively.

Under the ring finger the pulse of the right hand reveals the condition of the lungs, middle of chest, and large intestines, while the ring finger on the left hand determines the state of the heart and the small intestines.

The pulse under the middle finger corresponds on the right to the condition of the stomach and spleen, on the left to the state of the liver and the gall bladder.

The index finger placed over the pulse of the right radial shows the condition of the bladder and the lower portion of the body; over the left radial it reveals the state of the kidneys and ureters.

For each of these six pulses the physician must practice weak, moderate and strong pressure, to determine whether the pulse be superficial, moderate or deep. This must be done during complete inspiration.

If the pulse be properly "taken" the Chinese physician is said to be able to determine the nature of diseases, and even the months of gestation in a pregnant woman.

But, with all their authentic skill, the lack of a truly scientific approach to healing among Chinese native doctors, is painfully evident in

many fields of medicine. For instance, in treating a fracture, no attempt is made to reduce the parts.

A clay is prepared in a wooden bowl, and the heads of a few chickens are cut off while the blood flows over the clay in the bowl. When the blood and clay are mixed and applied to the fracture, bandages and thin strips of bamboo are applied, and over this the blood of yet another chicken is spread.

There are no Chinese sanitary laws like those of the old Mosaic codes, but the Taoist religion is to a vast extent based on rules of personal hygiene, and preaches that in order to live long, man should live moderately. Restraint of the appetites and cleanliness in house and person are exhorted.

Almost everything the Chinese eats and drinks has been subjected to the temperature of boiling water or boiling oil, and when he eats fruit, it is always peeled. Therefore, he is largely preserved from typhoid fever, cholera and other diseases conveyed by fruit or food infection. The Chinese will not eat raw oysters; he considers them much too cold for his stomach.

Yet, with all this consumption of cooked foods, and scarcely any consumption of raw food, the Chinese possesses about the best teeth observable among any of the world's people, and he seldom has an alimentary disease. This, along with the fact that Chinese workers and farmers always seem to be vested with a fine vitality, offers a field of speculation to our raw food advocates.

Meat is seldom used. The Chinese is a vegetarian, and on an average possibly he eats meat once a month, or even once a year. He invariably eats only twice a day, and in China is temperate in his meals. Only when he associates with Westerners for a long time, does he break into the custom of frequent, heavy eating, and he almost always suffers thereby.

In concluding, it is surprising to learn that anesthetics were administered by Chinese surgeons in the third century B. C., that a Chinese biologist two thousand years before Harvey found that blood circulates through the body, that the catheter which the West invented in 1850 was described in *The Thousand Golden Remedies* in the seventh century A. D., and that dissection was practiced by Chinese anatomists in 1122 B. C.

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