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REPORT

Hong Kong's Herbal Renaissance

A Return to Traditional
ROOTS

After 150 years of British rule, Hong Kong is returning to its Chinese roots, embracing traditional herbal remedies. So can you.

By Jeffrey Laign



Traditional Chinese herbal medicine, whose popularity is mushrooming in the United States, was outlawed in Hong Kong during its 150 years of British rule. The prohibition was repealed in 1997 after Hong Kong was ceded to China, where traditional medicine is revered. Now that Great Britain has handed back its former colony, scientists in Hong Kong are making rapid advances in herbal medicine.

Says Yang Wei Yi, a professor and herbal researcher at Hong Kong Baptist University, "We are studying herbs to treat cancer, heart disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes, and even AIDS. Now in Hong Kong, Chinese medical practitioners will be allowed to work in hospitals alongside Western doctors, and researchers are doing some extraordinary work."

Yang, for example, is experimenting with such Chinese herbs as ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) and magnolia bark (*Cortex magnoliae officinalis*), to treat the baffling chronic fatigue syndrome, which incapacitates many of its victims as it drains them of energy.

"Western medicine can do very little to treat this condition," he says. "But we have discovered that many Chinese herbs can improve the immune system and regulate a number of physiological

functions."

Yang's project is one of many undertaken by Hong Kong researchers to verify ancient Chinese herbal remedies and discover new applications. Other studies are focusing on:

- *Anti-aging research.* Scientists are attempting to isolate healing polysaccharides from woody mushrooms. Also of interest in treating age-associated illnesses is schisandra (*Schisandrae chinensis*), which traditionally has been used to treat asthma, insomnia and diabetes.
- *Diabetes.* Dr. Paul But, Ph.D., who heads the Chinese Medical Material Research Centre, at Chinese University in Hong Kong, has developed an herbal compound that appears to rejuvenate gangrenous flesh in diabetics. Because diabetes can devastate the circulatory system, patients may develop gangrene in limbs from lack of blood. "Western doctors can do little but amputate dead flesh," he notes, "but our research indicates that this compound may actually spur tissue to regrow." According to But, he eventually hopes to market the formula in the West.
- *Dan shen* (*Radix Salviae miltiorrhizae*). A cousin of our garden sage, salvia appears to have many medicinal uses. Dr. W.N. Leung is studying dan shen as an agent to promote blood circulation.
- *Tang Gui* (*Angelica sinensis*). In the United States, this herb is known as angelica or dong quai, and herbalists use it to treat menstrual problems and symptoms of menopause. The Chinese use it for those purposes, too, and also are looking at it as a remedy for anemia and other blood problems.
- *Sheng Di Huang* (*Rehmanniae glutinosae*). Chinese doctors are using rehmannia to promote yin, or "cooling energy," in people who suffer from nervousness, indigestion and other "hot" illnesses.
- *Rou Gui* (*Cinnamomi cassiae*). Cinnamon bark has the opposite effect. It promotes "hot" yang energy in people who are weak and suffer from chills and poor circulation.
- *Jin Yin Hua* (*Lonicera japonica*). Could these flowers be a cure for the common cold? Western antibiotics are powerless to treat viral-caused colds, but Yang says this Chinese herb greatly reduces symptoms such as sneezing and coughing. "I can cure a cold in two or three days," he says, "instead of the usual 10 to 14."

Although the legal practice of herbal medicine is just now making a comeback in Hong Kong, China's reverence for natural therapies stretches back to mythical days. Legendary emperor Sheng Nung, known as the "Divine Plowman," is considered the father of Chinese agriculture. Sheng, who began his reign in 2,800 B.C.E., was first to record the healing properties of plants. His years of experiments resulted in *The Herbal Classic of the Divine Plowman* (Sheng Nung Ben Cao Chien), which describes more than 250 herbs by taste, function and health benefits, and lists more than 150 illnesses that may be treated with herbs.

In the West, herbalists also have been using plants for thousands of years to heal. But with the discovery of synthetic drugs in the 19th and 20th centuries, the study of herbal medicine waned. Although herbalism has been enjoying a renaissance in the West in the last 30 years, many Chinese medical concepts still seem alien to us. "Sometimes the essence of Chinese medicine cannot be explained by Western theories of medicine," says Yang.

That's because our concepts of treating illness differ dramatically. In the West, we treat the symptoms of a disease...if you have a headache, you take an aspirin and the pain subsides. In the East, practitioners treat the whole person in an effort to get to the root of the problem. A Chinese doctor, for example, might determine that your headache is the result of a digestive disorder, and prescribe a regimen of herbs and lifestyle changes to correct the disorder and prevent the headache from recurring.

Chinese doctors believe that illness stems from an imbalance of yang (positive/masculine/hot energy) and yin (negative/feminine/cool energy). These are the vital forces that combine to produce the essential life force called qi (chi). Chinese practitioners strive to correct yin/yang imbalances and strengthen the life force with herbs, qi gong and acupuncture, which uses hair-thin needles to stimulate energy flow at prescribed points on the body. Chinese medicine takes time to work. As such, it's best employed for chronic illnesses. Western medicine excels at treating acute conditions. If you break your leg, for example, you'd want a Western doctor to bring you immediate relief.

At the same time, "Western medicine confuses our bodies," says Lei Men Wa, M.D., Ph.D., a physician who practices acupuncture in Hong Kong. "Diabetes is a good example. We fool our bodies with insulin. Here in China we've been very successful treating diabetes with acupuncture and herbs." Chinese doctors use about 3,000 types of herbs in much the same way as their ancestors did.

Part of this practice involves verifying the efficacy and safety of traditional herbal remedies. Because the British outlawed traditional Chinese medicine in Hong Kong, "Chinese medicine was left to fend for itself," says But. "The result has been poor quality-even poisoning, in some cases-which gave Chinese medicine a very bad name."

To ensure that traditional treatments are safe and effective, "We have been using dna fingerprinting on every herb," Yang says. "The task ahead of us is to establish quality control of Chinese herbs, and we have much work to do."

Yang and other researchers say they are optimistic about the developments that may result from their herbal studies.

"It's quite an exciting time for us," Yang says. "Western medicine, I think, can reach only a certain level. Maybe Chinese medicine can go beyond that level."

Searching Desperately for a Cure

Author Jeffrey Laign seeks enlightenment . . .
and relief from the common cold.

Dawn was breaking over Cheung Chau, an island in the South China Sea. My fever wasn't. I had been excited about journeying to Cheung Chau to gather Chinese herbs with a local healer renowned in Hong Kong named Mak Chung Man. But the flu I was battling had begun to dampen my enthusiasm.

Mak, however, appeared to have enough enthusiasm for both of us. Tall and trim as an underwear model, he had slung across one broad shoulder a pick; across the other hung a woven straw basket. "There are many types of medicine on this island," Mak told me through an interpreter. "I gather herbs about three times a week." But getting to that medicine was easier said than done. For the next two hours, Mak and I climbed mountains, crawled through jungles and picked our way along a craggy coast.

"I am dying," I declared, more than once. Mak merely smiled. For days I had been attempting to cure myself Chinese-style. A luncheon companion suggested that I order a "healing" dessert called double-boiled harsmer with red dates and lotus seeds. "What is this?" I asked, as I forced myself to swallow a spoonful of the sticky gray stuff. "Sweetened ovaries of a snow frog," my "friend" replied.

Another well-meaning acquaintance led me to Kong Wo Tong. Such herbal tea shops are abundant in Hong Kong. Home-bound

workers frequently stop in for a cup of herbal tea, dispensed from gargantuan, gleaming copper urns. It wasn't tea the waiter brought me, but a bowl brimming with black goo. Only after I had eaten half of the bitter-tasting jelly did I learn that it was made from the stomach of a tortoise. Are none of God's creatures safe in this strange land?

The bamboo leaf that Mak handed me to chew on was easier to swallow. Dan Zhu Ye (*Lophatheri gracilis*) is used to fight infections and bring down fevers in children. "It's best to gather it before the sun comes up, so the dew is still on it," said Mak. "Mist is good for cooling down the heart."

By now, Mak had reached peak gathering efficiency, snatching up what seemed to be every other weed that grew along the trail. Each plant, he said, has its attributes. Some he used to treat deafness. Others were good for liver infections. And one, he told me, was a remedy for some types of cancer.

"But what can I take for the flu?" I asked him. Mak scratched his head and muttered something in Cantonese, which my interpreter dutifully translated. "He says drink Coca-Cola with a lemon wedge."

At the end of the afternoon, as we made for the Man Kwok ferry that would take us back to Hong Kong, I was soaked in sweat and wheezing like my first Chevrolet. Mak roared with laughter and clapped me on the back. "He says your flu has passed now," my interpreter reported. "All you needed was a little fresh air." JL

Continuation of article A list of Chinese Herbs from Life Extension.

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