

# INTRODUCTION AND INTERPRETIVE OVERVIEW

## The Seventy-Two Medical Therapies

How did lay people in old China save their lives when dealing with acute or chronic health issues? Conventional medicine was costly and might not have been an option for many. Instead, people in villages and towns relied on remedies drawn from a woodblock-printed illustrated booklet called *Seventy-Two Therapies* (*Qishier fanzheng* 七十二翻症), first published in 1847.

Among the recommended remedies, the ashes of a grasshopper (*jila* 蟻蠟) could relieve muscle cramps, while powdered mulberry leaves (*sangye* 桑葉) would reduce swelling of the limbs. These were among the traditional ingredients and treatment methods readily available to the common people wherever they lived.

Depending on the health issues present, sometimes they drank an herbal powder mixed in yellow rice wine. At other times the recommendation was to apply acupuncture, the mud from a hornet's nest, or a bit of cat urine, combined with a slap to shock their system out of erratic behavior. The remedy would work fairly quickly to relieve the worst of the symptoms within the same day. Each page of the *Seventy-Two Therapies* is the product of China's recorded folk wisdom. Happily, contemporary scientific analysis shows that the traditional Chinese approaches to relieving distress also bring relief for modern maladies such as respiratory symptoms, the side effects of chemotherapy, or even inhibiting the growth of tumors. The goal of this book is to foster an appreciation of China's long tradition of folk remedies.<sup>1</sup> It is a tradition that belongs to all humankind.

This manual of medical problems and quick treatments was circulating in China in the 1860s. Today, it has become almost a lost treasure of China's tradition of folk remedies. It is not listed in many of the medical dictionaries published in China! Yet since its first appearance in the mid-1800s, it has been pirated and reprinted many times, and it can be found in a printed version and an online edition today. What a fate to befall a text that has been a friend to the Chinese people for so many years. It was intended to be an inexpensive and convenient guide offering immediate relief to people suffering from a malady that was bringing them discomfort. It was also intended as a quick reference for people in need of emergency medical attention. There can be no question that a lot of people have consulted this manual.

The manual is a collection of accepted folk remedies that emerged from China's long tradition of medical research. Searching online I found a paragraph describing this work. My translation/adaptation of that paragraph reads: "The *Seventy-Two Therapies* is a classic document of how Chinese traditional medicine (*Zhongyi* 中醫) provides emergency medical treatment for various syndromes. Its illustrations and graphics are as simple as can be, but the medical theories behind the prescriptions are well-founded. Chinese traditional medicine holds that every disease has a specific pathology. The internal organs are sensitive, exposed to pathogens, and have correspondences with other aspects of the living body. Finding those points and dealing with them in a timely and effective manner can instantly save people's lives. Some of the prescribed therapies sound cruel, such as the hot needle therapy (*huozhen liaofa* 火針療法) or large needle therapies (*juzhen liaofa* 巨針療法). But they are actually unique life-saving skills. We can only guess at how many lives have been saved since ancient times by using these techniques. This approach is definitely worth our attention."<sup>2</sup>

The size of the woodblock copy I bought at the Panjiayuan Antiques Market (*Panjiayuan jiuhuo shichang* 潘家園舊貨市場) in Beijing in June 2013 is small, just 6 inches (15.24 cm) tall and 4.5 inches (11.43 cm) wide. It is a perfect size to fit into a pocket of the kind of short jacket (*magua* 馬褂) widely worn in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The handmade paper, now matured to a light brown color because of the bamboo and rice stalks used in its manufacture, is very pliable and lightweight. Each page gives a brief explanation of the presenting symptoms of the patient, and then suggests a medical treatment. The medicine usually prescribed calls for a few herbs to be burnt into a

fine powder (*shaohuang wei mo* 燒黃為末). Often the powder was put into the mouth and swallowed down with a cup of tea or yellow rice wine (*huangjiu* 黃酒). It was also common to dissolve the powdered herbs in the liquid and have the patient drink the warmed liquid.<sup>3</sup>

For most people in China throughout history, the logic of illness was straightforward. Feeling ill, then take some medicine. Prepare the medicine and drink it. That was the approach then and now, and it constitutes the basis of how people think of the traditional Chinese reaction to illness, using herbs and naturally occurring ingredients as much as possible. The medicine was often prepared in the home.<sup>4</sup>

Each page of the manual translated here has a few points of the presenting symptoms (*qi xing* 其形), and the basic recipe for preparing the medicine. Each page also has a simplified line drawing of a typical patient in distress because of their symptoms. By convention, the medical conditions in the booklet were associated with an animal or living creature, such as a cicada (*qiuchan* 秋蟬), chicken (*ji* 雞), lizard (*xiehu* 蠍虎), or horse (*ma* 馬), and the identifying animal was also drawn on each page as a quick reference. It could be that the patient was acting like the animal shown in the drawing, or only because the name of the animal drawn was adopted over the centuries as a way to label the disease.

Linking these illness behaviors to some animal or insect was actually a clever and very useful device. Throughout the hundreds of years of medical research in China, thousands of medical recipes had been developed. Most were listed in terms of the ingredients they used. While the highly trained medical scholar or pharmacist had knowledge about many of them, the typical rural medical practitioner in all likelihood did not. Especially in an emergency situation when being confronted by a person in need of medical attention, a quick response was called for. The brief designation of each problem would provide the most rapid way to locate a potentially useful remedy. A semi-literate person could find the drawings useful to quickly find the information they were seeking.

The reasoning behind the name (label) assigned to each therapy is not always clear. For example, the patient might act as if they were some creature from the animal world, crawling along the ground or loudly baying, and so the patient's affliction would be given the name of an animal which acted in that manner. Or the patient would feel as if some insects were crawling on their

body, leading to the name of that insect being given to the affliction. I conclude this logic of naming was a type of “sympathetic naming,” in the sense of linking the insect- or animal-produced expression of the affliction and thus symbolically connecting those creatures to the disease and its cure. One could also say the labels on each therapy reflect a folk quality of the medicine, that it was basic medicine often prescribed for and self-administered by the common people (*pingmin* 平民). The animals and insects that provided the names of most of the illnesses listed were all common to a rural population including, especially for those in north China around Beijing, the camel (the remedy discussed in P25) that was until recent times widely used to transport goods.<sup>5</sup>

When a person in old China expressed physical discomfort, even a severe headache or a painful stomach, or when someone was seen to be acting in an unnatural manner, such as being very unsteady on their feet, it was clear to their relatives and others around them that a medical problem was manifesting itself and some remedy was called for. The natural inclination was to turn to the family members of the distressed person. In many cases we expect the first reaction of potential caregivers was to ask family members to suggest a therapy. Perhaps a grandparent could suggest a broth to take away the pain, or an uncle might have seen the condition before and knew of a remedy. In other words, the first response was usually to try to devise a way of receiving help without incurring any special expense; not many people had surplus cash laying around the house for medicine. It was likely felt best to avoid calling on a doctor, pharmacist, or a literate person who practiced giving medical advice, because there would be some expense incurred, whether the payment of money or a suitable “thank you” gift for help received.

There was no national system in China for training or certifying medical practitioners in the Qing Dynasty which ended in 1911. The Chinese Medical Association (*Zhonghua yixuehui* 中華醫學會), the largest and oldest non-governmental medical organization in China, was established under the Republic in 1915 based on the influences of Western medical associations. The idea was to standardize and evaluate the medical training students received and to follow the latest medical thinking of doctors in Western countries. They had the influence of the Western medical missionaries who were working in China during the Qing period and practiced Western-style medicine. In the political dislocations that followed in China between 1915 and 1950, medical education and certifications never achieved a single standard that was followed throughout the country.

In the late 1800s when the manual translated here began to be printed and circulated, there was not the concept of medical doctors being highly specialized. Offering medical advice or remedies was a private business taken up by some people. Up to that time literate people, those who had at least a few years of formal schooling and who could read and write, often included medicine among the subjects they encountered in their studies. When faced with someone in trouble, the first non-family person turned to for help was one of the literate people in the vicinity. Whether a family relative or a nearby literate person, the knowledge base from which they drew information was the tradition of Chinese folk remedies.

We can picture the person who was practicing as a medical doctor and was called on to visit a patient in distress. The patient was perhaps beset by purple-red blotches (*ding* 疔) on their body or was acting in a strange manner, maybe rolling on the ground or curled in a fetal position. Those were the emergency situations when the doctor or informal medical practitioner needed to quickly offer some relief. From the symptoms the practitioner noted, a treatment could be given. The prescriptions offered on each page of this manual are not especially complicated and the herbal ingredients would have been available at most pharmacies (*yaoju* 藥局) in China in those times.<sup>6</sup> In fact, all of the remedies explained in this booklet called for herbs and items that were likely to be available in every city or village, even when a pharmacy was not nearby. We can see that there was a preference in the recommended therapies for ingredients that would easily be found in the rural farming villages.

### **China's Tradition of Medical Research: The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine**

The description above of what was taking place in the 1860s and the role of the manual in providing guidance appears simple and straightforward. In the old China prior to 1950, formally trained medical doctors were few. Many people logically assumed that a person who was literate, someone who could read and write, had knowledge beyond that of the typical person who could not read or write well and who had limited formal education. People in the cities or villages often knew of someone who, because of their literacy, could tell fortunes, or advise on the proper way to conduct weddings or funerals, or to treat a person in physical distress. When some sort of medical intervention was

called for, and after the immediate family decided they were unable to help, they would contact the nearest literate person known to them. As mentioned above, it might be a relative or an older person living nearby who already had a reputation for giving useful medical advice.

In spite of the widespread use of accepted “folk remedies” based on stories handed down by the common people, China had a tradition of literate persons who actively examined substances for their medical properties. They would test the effectiveness of these herbs or substances when they could, compare their effects, then list and categorize them. In addition, there were theories about how the body functioned, why disease occurred, how to explain the effectiveness of particular herbs and decoctions in the process of curing the body. Thus developed an orderly and detailed corpus of knowledge about the bodily processes of living things, the effects and side effects of accepted treatments, and written records of these findings.<sup>7</sup>

The people living in a city or village who were able to call upon someone who knew about this tradition of medical thinking and research were fortunate, because they had found a person who was aware of the long history of medical thinking in China. The classic work explaining the basis for medical thinking and analysis was and still is the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經). It introduces the theoretical foundation of Chinese Medicine and its diagnostic methods. The thinking of this text is based on an analytical structure about the origin of the world and the actions of the forces within it that was well-established by the time it was compiled, likely before the end of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The *Yellow Emperor's Classic* took that analytical structure as the basis for explaining the functioning of the human body. For example, the universe of all phenomena, the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物), contained a vital force called *qi* 氣 that propelled the elements into motion. Each element within the universe contained degrees of dark, cool, negative (*yin* 陰) forces, or bright, hot, positive (*yang* 陽) forces. These two qualities of *yin-yang* interacted with each other seeking a balance, or harmony, or an accommodation allowing each to co-exist.<sup>8</sup>

Of these critical aspects of life, the concept of the vital force of *qi* is the most difficult to translate and define in English. The scholar Vivienne Lo has provided a succinct discussion of *qi* by writing: “*Qi* (sometimes rendered *ch'i*) is a complex and changing concept which defies simple lineal histories. In the mid-Warring States, references to it tend to refer to atmospheric and

environmental conditions, especially moist vapours — clouds and mists — and, by analogy, to formless, clustering qualities that can be discerned with careful observation, like smoke, ghosts or the vibrant, martial aura of an army. By the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century *qi* often indicates the fundamental stuff in nature which both promotes and indicates vitality in the phenomenal world. It may enter the body in various ways — through the orifices and the skin — but its movement within the body is not formalized. Some historians translate *qi* as ‘vapour’ and, in doing so, underline the amorphous watery qualities of steam and mist, which are formative influences both in the early period and as an enduring feature of the concept. As *qi* begins to be applied to the phenomena of the inner body, the ideas, although never totally distinct from the early versions, go through significant transformations. Rather than replacing the old meanings, the range of meanings grows incrementally — a process that is continuous to the present day.<sup>9</sup>

Just as this elemental conjunction of all the forces outlined above could explain the change of the seasons, the effects of natural processes, and the influence of the stars on human beings, it could also be used to explain how the human body worked. Aspects of the natural world affected the health and vigor of the human body. For example, critical to the continuation of human life is blood (*xue* 血), which flows throughout the body by the force of *qi*. Multiple factors internal or external to the body will affect how smoothly the blood flows or is prevented from flowing. Organs of the body might be invaded by dry heat (*zaore* 燥熱) causing fever, excitability, or skin rash. The pathogen (*xie* 邪; the word means evil spirit) could be a malicious wind (*efeng* 惡風) or a damp cold (*shihan* 濕寒), causing vomiting, chills, or listlessness.<sup>10</sup>

The Yellow Emperor is considered to be a culture hero, a mythical ruler who appeared at the beginning of the formation of the Chinese cultural complex. But the ideas and their interactions that emerged from the *Yellow Emperor's Classic* in a form more elaborate and complicated than outlined here, became the basis for medical thinking that still forms the worldview of what today is widely known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).<sup>11</sup>

Current Western thinking is that the TCM movement was an effort by the government of the People's Republic to buttress Chinese traditional medical practices, after they were praised by Mao Zedong in the 1950s, into an aspect of Chinese culture that could gain worldwide respect and would come to be seen as an equal to the widely respected practices of Western medical

research. This is in fact happening in the world today. Some Western scholars think the Chinese medical tradition represents a huge body of historical research, classification, and analysis, and should not be codified and “isolated” from human medical knowledge. Instead, they think that the scientific rigor of the Western method needs to be applied to the Chinese medical tradition and the claims of Chinese doctors need to be verified according to strict scientific analysis.<sup>12</sup> This is also happening in the world today, as my comments on the remedies translated in this book illustrate.

## China's Tradition of Medical Research: Early Researchers

### *Hua Tuo*

By the time the Han Dynasty ended in 220 CE, China was well into its historical period, when many written records were available. Scholars who studied the cosmological principles of the time experimented with medical treatments. They were to become the first medical specialists in China and prepared written records of their work. Well-known among them is Hua Tuo 華佗, believed to have lived circa 145–208 CE in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Historical records describing those days such as the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi* 三國志) and *Book of the Later Han* (*Houhanshu* 後漢書) talk about his medical work. Some scholars believe he learned Ayurveda medical techniques from the early Indian Buddhist missionaries in China. Ayurveda thinking emphasizes good health and the prevention and treatment of illness through following a healthy lifestyle while practicing massage, meditation, and yoga, along with nourishing foods and the use of herbal remedies. It is a holistic approach that pulls together the effects of both the natural and the physical world to create an environment to sustain good health in the human body.<sup>13</sup>

Hua Tuo practiced surgery, cutting open the human body as a way to understand the origin of the physical discomfort and to restore smooth bodily functioning. He is credited with being the first person in China to use anesthesia during surgery. His general anesthetic combined wine with a herbal decoction called boiled hemp powder (*mafeisan* 麻沸散). The word *ma* 麻 indicates an herb that served as a numbing agent and the term *dama* 大麻 is used to refer to cannabis or marijuana. He also used early forms of acupuncture, moxibustion, and the role of physical exercise in aiding good health.



Hua Tuo observed the movement of animals and from his observations is credited with the development of a set of exercises designed to strengthen human muscles. These are called the Exercise of the Five Animals (*Wuqinxi* 五禽戲) and have been adopted by some schools of Chinese martial arts as part of their training regimen. Taking traditional information and applying it to the present day is part of the Chinese practice in all areas of maintaining good health. An important point in terms of the *Seventy-Two Therapies* is that Hua Tuo's broad approach established the connection between considering illnesses and their cures by referring to animals and other sentient organisms, a connection which is illustrated on almost every page of the manual translated here, since sentient creatures are represented so frequently as a quick reference to the remedy outlined on the page. For his work in understanding the internal organs of the human body, Hua Tuo is honored as the Divine Physician (*Shenyi* 神醫).<sup>14</sup>

### **Zhang Zhongjing**

Another early highly respected medical researcher was Zhang Zhongjing 張仲景 (Zhongjing is his courtesy name [zi 字] and he is sometimes listed by his given name as Zhang Ji 張機), whose approximate dates are 150–219 CE. His major contribution to Chinese medical knowledge was his work as a pharmacologist. He collected and studied plants that could be “purified” through grinding and boiling, and so put to use for their medical properties. He studied as many medicinal plants and herbs as he could find, identifying the internal organs they could affect and the types of medical conditions for which they could be applied. Although his written materials were lost, succeeding scholars have reconstructed much of his work.

One of his areas of research was on the damage caused by cold pathogens (*hanxie* 寒邪) that brought on many of the epidemic infectious diseases resulting in fevers that were prevalent during the era in which he lived. His lost research was collected in the book *Treatise of Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases* (*Shanghan zabing lun* 傷寒雜病論). Linking adverse medical conditions to extreme heat or cold is one of the hallmarks of the traditional Chinese approach to understanding the causes of physical discomfort and it is a basis on which these age-old analytical categories are practiced in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>