

## China's Medicine God, the Divine Farmer: An Integrative Approach

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This presentation discusses Chinese medicine and how it contrasts with Western medicine. China has its own Medicine God, or Medicine Buddha, Shen Nong whose job is to take care of people with diseases of the body and of the mind, as well as to take care of the dying. He was also known as the Divine Farmer, the God of Agriculture, a sage, who lived nearly 5,000 years ago from 2737 BC to 2697 BC, and introduced herbal medicines. Acupuncture, often combined with herbal medicine, will also be explored.

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One of Chinese medicine's unique strengths is its integration of mind, body and spirit. Chinese medicine (*zhongyao* – *yao* = medicine) has quite a different approach than Western medicine (*xiyao*). The Chinese look at the entire individual, not just a section of the body. It is very much a holistic integrated approach to healing. This approach can also be applied to business and other fields with great long-term success..

The Western compartmentalized approach to medicine can be problematic. For example, Claudia, a good friend in Madison, Wisconsin, developed a large skin rash on her upper arm. It was circular with an inner bright red circle. The big prestigious university hospital that has an excellent reputation sent her to the Dermatology Department where six different specialists diagnosed a rare skin disease. In fact, she had Lyme disease (*Borrelia burgdorferi*), a bacterial or spirochaete infection, transmitted by the deer tick (*Ixodes scapularis*), with its characteristic rash.

In the West we rely too much on equipment in making a diagnosis. Another friend woke up with the room spinning around. Her doctor told her she needed an MRI – very expensive - \$2,500. However, what she had was an inner ear imbalance, easily remedied by doing a daily set of simple exercises.

Asclepius was a Greek hero who later become the Greek god of medicine and healing. The son of [Apollo](#) and [Coronis](#), he was worshipped throughout the Greek world but his most famous sanctuary was located in Epidaurus, situated in the northeastern Peloponnese. The Centaur [Chiron](#) was his tutor and mentor and taught Asclepius the art of healing. The main attribute of Asclepius is a physician's staff with an Asclepian snake wrapped around it; this is how he was distinguished in the art of healing, and his attribute still survives to this day as the symbol of the modern medical profession. The snake symbolized rejuvenation and healing to many ancient Mediterranean cultures.

The cult of Asclepius became very popular during the 300s BCE and the cult centres (known as an Asclepieion) were used by priests to cure the sick. Invalids also came to the shrines of Asclepius to find cures for their ailments (in the same fashion pilgrims visit Lourdes today.) The process of healing was known as incubation. The patient would spend the night in the temple where snakes would slither across the floor. During the night they would supposedly be visited by the god in a dream. Priests

would interpret the dreams and then recommend a remedy or give advice on how they could be cured. Temples to Asclepius were erected throughout the ancient Mediterranean. At Epidaurus in Greece, the staffs and crutches of people that have been cured can still be seen today, hung on the walls.

Hippocrates was a descendant of Asclepius

Emperor Yan Di or Shen Nong, was the god and father of agriculture. Five thousand years ago, Yan Di created a farming culture, teaching the Chinese to grow crops. He is also the god of Medicine and introduced herbal medicines. Shen Nong, or Divine Healer, had a human body but the head of an ox and he reigned for 120 years. Legend tells of Shen Nong's transparent stomach where he could view his food intake. He tasted thousands of plants and herbs, taught people how to identify the plants and select certain plants for cultivation. Shen Nong brought millet, medicinal herbs, the first plough and of course tea to the Chinese, but unfortunately and ironically he died after eating a poisonous plant or herb. In his honour, people refer to him as the "*Medicine Buddha*." He is buried in Chaling (present-day Yanling County) in Zhūzhōu.

A consideration of the history of traditional Chinese medicine and how it contrasts to Western medicine can provide a different perspective.

The Western world, apart from Europe, has not been very open to examining the possibilities of acupuncture. In 1972, American President Richard Nixon first visited China. Following this historic visit, Premier Zhou Enlai appealed to Chinese medical experts to demonstrate the theory of acupuncture. This appeal resonated with Dr. Zhu Zongxiang who had been teaching physiology since the 1950's, at Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Dr. Zhu and his colleagues spent more than 10 years researching various methods to demonstrate acupuncture meridians. In the 1980's, they were successful and proved the existence of fourteen meridians in the human body through biophysical methods. The meridians were identical to the ancient classical meridian graph.

Acupuncture is based on meridian points in the body, discovered in China 2,500 years ago, although some authorities believe that the practice of acupuncture goes back over 4,000 years. **The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor (*Huang Di Nei Jing*)** (200 BC), an ancient medical text of great importance, described the meridians as "*promoting circulation of Xueqi (Blood and Qi) and balancing yin and yang*" and "*determining life and death and treating hundred diseases.*"

Meridians are lines/streets or channels, where *Qi* (energy) flows and most of the acupuncture points are seated on them. This network of energy streams for the human body are said to prevent disease and promote health and a long life. The art and science of acupuncture use these meridian points to insert fine needles in certain spots, sometimes applying electrodes to the needle, creating the sensation of a small pulse at that spot. The meridians link the twelve major organs (*Zhang-Fu* - organs) such as the heart, lungs, etc.

A 2005 systematic review of the effects of acupuncture on brain activation measured by functional magnetic resonance imaging and positron emission tomography stated:

*"These studies show that specific and largely predictable areas of brain activation and deactivation occur when considering the traditional Chinese functions attributable to certain specific acupuncture points. For example, points associated with hearing and vision stimulates the visual and auditory cerebral areas respectively."*

Pariante J, Lewith G.T, White P.J. (September 2005).

Evidence of the existence of acupuncture long ago has been found in relics from the New Stone Age (8000-2000 B.C.). Here, the needles were made of stone (*bian*) and used to apply pressure to the body. In the excavated tomb of the Prince of Chungshan (115 BC), nine distinctly designed needles were found, some made of silver, others made of gold.

I discovered an article on Acupuncture-Moxibustion Therapy, written by Zhang Jinding *et al* from the Henan Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Zhengzhou. The authors studied thirty recipes of acupuncture and moxibustion. These recipes were recorded in rubbings from the “Stone-Carved Codex of Longmen” in the codex cave in the spectacular Longmen (Dragon Gate) grottoes in Luoyang, Henan Province. I had visited the Longmen caves in May during Golden Week. The recipes at Longmen are devoted to the treatment of twenty-three kinds of diseases involving internal medicine, surgery, gynecology, ear, nose and throat, etc. Among these recipes, two concern acupuncture, twenty-six are for moxibustion, and two are of external applications of herbal medicines on acupoints. They reflect an aspect of the level of acupuncture development during the Northern Qi period (550-577AD).

There are two procedures, cupping and moxibustion, which are used in addition to acupuncture. Moxibustion does indeed mean burning. The moxa stick, is composed of a dried herb, *Artemisia vulgaris folium*, or mugwort leaf (*ai ye* in Chinese), that is placed directly on the top of the needle or indirectly on a ginger slice. Dr. Song, the acupuncturist at Suzhou No. 1 Hospital used this very often for facial paralysis, after acupuncture. The ginger, about one to two centimeters thick, is pierced with small holes. Rolled dried mugwort leaves are placed on top of the ginger and lit. The burning moxa is left on the patient until the patient perspires and the area becomes red. New cones are added as needed. Ginger moxa is often used in the treatment of digestive symptoms and reported to be beneficial for painful joints.

Acupuncture is often combined with Chinese herbal medicine to assist the balance of body functions and improve blood circulation. Chinese herbal medicine is used in traditional Chinese medicine TCM (*zhongyao*). The originator of herbal medicine was known as the Sage and Emperor of Fire, Yan Di, or Shen Nong, a holy or divine farmer. He lived nearly 5000 years ago from 2737 BC to 2697 BC, and has been credited with bringing the practice of tea drinking to the Chinese and teaching them how to farm the land. Shen Nong experimented with different types of herbs, tasting each one to define its properties. He defined three medicinal categories according to their source:

1. Medicine from vegetable sources, e.g., roots, stems, leaves and fruits from plants.
2. Medicine from animals that includes their organs and secretions such as bezoar (cow gallstones), snake venom and deer musk.
3. Medicine from mineral sources including gypsum and others.

It is said there are over 3,200 herbs, 300 mineral and animal extracts, and over 400 formulas used in TCM. There may be a variety of different ingredients in herbal formulations ranging from four to twelve in number. They are given to the patient in different forms to be eaten or drunk, from teas, powders, pills, tinctures or syrups.

China's medicine god, Sun Simiao or Yaoshi, the Medicine Buddha, takes care of people with diseases of the body and of the mind, as well as to take care of the dying. He is usually portrayed as a seated Buddha wearing monk's robes and holding a small medicine bowl representing his healing powers. In a

Qing Dynasty illustration, Sun Simiao can be seen demonstrating his powers over the tiger (*yin*) and the dragon (*yang*). He also discussed medical ethics and cautioned physicians on behaviour inappropriate to their profession. Sun Simiao, like Hippocrates, was a real person, born in the 6th century around 581 AD. and practiced medicine during the Tang Dynasty (618- 907AD). He died in 682 AD. Well known for his herbal medicine, emphasizing the correct time to pick herbs, ensuring they are fresh and clean with correct drying methods, he paid particular attention to the health of women and children. One philosophy of his is embodied in this quote: "*running water is never stale and a door hinge does not become worm-eaten because they never stop moving.*" The early exercise guru.

Sun Simiao is one of the most influential physicians in the history of Chinese medicine, and is distinguished by his application of medicine and his adherence to an ethical code. His interest in medicine came from his own fragile health whereby he treated himself as his first patient. His mastery of medicine, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism made Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty, and Emperors Tai-zong and Gao-zu of the Tang Dynasty seek him out as an imperial physician. However, Sun Simiao declined these posts and devoted his life to being a physician who served the common people. He believed the best way to care for a patient was to prevent an illness before it occurred. The worst care was to treat an illness that had already occurred because it meant that he was unable to keep his patient healthy.

One of my 19 year old students had MS – multiple sclerosis. Western doctors told him he should take steroids daily, but he refused. However his MS symptoms returned so we went to the No. 1 Hospital in Suzhou. Finally, after about six hours and all these tests and eventual confirmation of the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, we got to see the Acupuncturist, Dr. Song, who had been in practice for over twenty years. He was a small man, rather serious but a great guy and very frank, although he didn't speak much English. The doctor told Adhik it was a serious disease – no cure at this point in time, but he thought he could help with the symptoms. He'd had other patients with MS, whom he'd successfully treated. Dr. Song informed us,

"Acupuncture is just a kind of adjunctive therapy, mainly we will prescribe some traditional Chinese medicine. It will relieve symptom. But there still exist some risk to use them."

I appreciated his candor.

He placed twelve needles in Adhik's arms and legs and he had to lie there for twenty-five minutes, with one rotation of each needle half way through. I was impressed with how quickly Dr. Song inserted the needles into the exact spot – no hesitation whatsoever – *ping* as each needle was removed from a sterilized plastic sealed pack – *ping*. This was an experienced practitioner. Across from Adhik, a pretty young female with short dark hair lay on a bed, covered with a blanket, fast asleep with needles in her face. She suffered from facial paralysis but was quite comfortable, oblivious to the world at large. Periodically, Dr. Song would go in and out, fill up his jar of tea leaves with more boiling water, sip his tea and then check up on everyone. A peaceful, soothing treatment. The walls were covered with certificates and pictures of the human body with the lines of the meridians. A couple of pink dolls with the acupuncture points outlined on them sat on one desk. All the pictures and dolls were of males.

"Why only males, why no females?" I asked the good doctor.

"Oh, people may take offense." he remarked seriously.

After the acupuncture needles were removed – *ping*, Dr. Song brought out several small round bamboo cups. He removed the air with a flame from his cigarette lighter and attached the cups by suction to the skin. Using bamboo-cups after acupuncture is known as cupping and "*huo guan*" (火罐), means fire-

cup. The bamboo cups kept falling off – not enough flesh. This kid was skinny, he'd lost weight, brown eyes as big as saucers with dark shadows beneath.

Eventually, after another fifteen minutes, Dr. Song told him he was finished, removed the cups and Adhik rolled down his trousers and stood up. He could walk normally. The clumsy gait and hip throwing was gone, after only one acupuncture session. I was stunned. I couldn't believe it. A miracle!

Dr. Song had some advice for his patient.

"Don't get wet or cold. Have a good sleep. Yoga can also help you."

Adhik returned every other day for a total of eight sessions and Dr. Song wrote out a prescription for various herbs to take on a regular basis, ginger being one I remember. In a herbal prescription there can be more than twelve herbs, sometimes as many as twenty. This is common in China, but not so in Western TCM prescriptions. If Adhik has any problems when he returns to America, he could send an e-mail through one of the Chinese graduate students so Dr. Song can modify the prescription accordingly. Then he asked me, "What do you think of TCM? It is very different from medicine in the West."

"Well, I think we have a lot to learn from the Chinese," I replied, translated by Adhik.

Dr. Song smiled and sipped more tea.

### **Chinese patients vs. Indian patients**

Some of the senior international students had started their hospital internships.

"Please Professor Merritt, in China the doctors are not treated with any respect."

"What on earth do you mean?" I asked the student intern, in astonishment.

"Well," he replied, "patients in China actually ask a lot of questions of the doctor, but in India no questions at all. Everyone listens to what the doctor says and treats him with respect and great reverence at all times."

I read him the riot act and went over my early lectures on the role of a physician, that a good doctor should always listen to the patient first.

"How can you make a decent diagnosis without collecting all the information? You are not white-coated gods!"

In rural Rajasthan in India, apparently patients regard the sign of a truly good physician, as a doctor who can diagnose their ills by taking their pulse, without the need for them to even speak. Power and the helping professions can be a problem.