Historical Roots

Traditional Chinese medicine, as practiced today and in past centuries, is based on an array of theories and practices from both foreign and native sources. The history of Chinese medicine is said to go back as far as 5000 years to the time of Shennong, a divine husbandman credited with the discovery of medicinal herbs.

According to Chinese legend, Shennong, the Chinese father of agriculture and leader of an ancient clan, took it upon himself to test, one by one, hundreds of different plants to discover their nutritional and medicinal properties. Many of these turned out to be poisonous to humans. Over the millennia, Chinese have used themselves as guinea pigs in this same way to continue testing plants for their properties of inducing cold (han), heat (jeh), warmth (wen), and coolness (liang). They classified the medicinal effects of the plants on the various parts of the body, and then tested them to determine their toxicity, what dosages would be lethal, and so forth.

Historical writer Liu Shu reported that “Shennong tasted hundreds of herbs himself; at times, as many as 70 poisonous herbs in one day.” The validity of that statement is surely one to be debated, but Shennong Bencaojing (Shennong’s Classic on Material Medical) describes the medicinal effects of some 365 herbs and is the earliest known text of its kind. Another early text, which continues to be a cornerstone in the Chinese medical canon, is Huang Dineijing (The Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Interior Medicine).

While authorship is unknown, its present-day version is believed to have been compiled between second century B.C. and eighth century A.D. and later revised during the Song Dynasty (960 -1279). Over the centuries, volumes upon volumes of commentary have been written about this ancient text. Its influence remains important, as the main principles of Chinese medicine are still based on theories first set forth by it.

The theoretical framework of Chinese medicine was established more than two millennia ago. A great deal of ancient medical knowledge is preserved in the pre-Qin (221-207 B.C.) Inner Cannon (Nei Jing), a comprehensive record of Chinese medical theories up to that time. The Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.) produced an authoritative and valuable practical guide, even to present day, to the treatment of illness, called the Treatise on Diseases Caused by Cold Factors (Shang Han Lun) by Zhang Chunjing.

One of the best-known Chinese medical works is the Materia Medica (Beng Cao Gang Mu), compiled in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) by Li Shizhen. This encyclopedic work heralded a new era in the world history of pharmacology. It includes descriptions of 1892 different kinds of medicines. These works have all been translated into several foreign languages, and have exercised a profound influence on East Asian and European countries.
The Chinese have a unique system of categorizing illnesses that is widely divergent from its Western counterpart. The philosophy behind Chinese medicine is that man lives between heaven and earth, and comprises a miniature universe in him. The material of which living things are made is considered to belong to the “yin” or female, passive, receding aspect of nature. The life functions of living things, on the other hand, are considered to belong to the “yang” or masculine, active, advancing aspect. The functions of living beings are described in terms of the following five centers of the body:

- (1)”heart” or “mind” (xin)—this refers to the “command center” of the body which manifests itself as consciousness and intelligence;
- (2) “lungs” or “respiratory system” (fei)—this system regulates various intrinsic functions of the body and maintains cybernetic balance;
- (3) “liver” (gan)—this term includes the limbs and trunk, the mechanism for emotional response to the external environment and the action of organs;
- (4) “spleen” (pi)—this organ system regulates the distribution of nutrition throughout the body and the metabolism, bringing strength and vigor to the physical body and;
- (5) “Kidneys” (shen)—this refers to the system for regulating the storage of nutrition and the use of energy; the human life force depends on this system. This theory is used to describe the system of body functions and as a whole is referred to as the “latent phenomena.”

Several main concepts are essential to understanding traditional Chinese medicine. Holism, or the concept that parts of a human body form an integral, connected, and inseparable whole, is one of the main distinguishing features of traditional Chinese medicine. Whereas Western medicine tends to treat symptoms in a direct fashion, traditional Chinese medicine examines illnesses in the context of a whole.

The passage of the seasons and changes in the weather can have an influence on the human body. Those having the most pronounced effect are wind (feng), cold (han), heat (shu), moisture (shih), dryness (tsao), and internal heat (huoor “fire”). Excessive or extraordinary changes in the weather harm the body and are referred to as the “six external disease-causing factors” (liu yin). On the other hand, if mood changes within the individual, such as happiness (hsi), anger (nu), worry (yu), pensiveness (szu), grief (pei), tear (k’ung) and surprise (ching) are too extreme, they will also harm the health. These emotions are called the “seven emotions” (ch’i ch’ing). In Chinese medicine, the six external disease-causing factors interacting with the seven emotions form the theoretical foundation of disease pathology. These theoretical models, coupled with the “theory of latent phenomena,” are used to analyze the patient’s constitution and his illness and diagnose the exact nature of his overall physical and psychological loss of balance. Based on this analysis, the doctor can prescribe a method to correct the imbalance. The object of Chinese medicine is the person, not just the illness. In Chinese medical thinking, illness is only one manifestation of an imbalance that exists in the entire person.

Yin-yang philosophy and the theory of five elements form a system of categories that explain the complete relationships between parts of the body and the environment. Yin and yang represent two opposite sides in nature such as hot and cold or light and dark. Each of the different organs is said to have yin or yang characteristics. Balance between the two is vital for maintaining health. The five elements earth, fire, water, metal and wood are categories of characteristics into which all known phenomena can be classified. For example, just as water subdues fire, phenomena associated with water are said to control those classified under fire.
Acupuncture

In addition to the prescription of medicines, acupuncture is another frequently used tool of treatment in Chinese medicine. Its history antedates written Chinese language, but acupuncture was not fully developed until after the Han Dynasty. Its theoretical base is the adjustment of *c’hi*, or the flow of life energy. *C’hi* flows through the body via the system of “main and collateral channels” (*ching luo*) of the body. At certain points along these channels, acupuncture needles may be inserted or Chinese mugwort (ai ts’ao) burned in moxibustion, to adjust imbalances in the flow of *c’hi* and concentrate the body’s self-healing powers in the points where needed. In 1980, the World Health Organization released a list of 43 types of pathologies which can be effectively treated with acupuncture. The use of acupuncture as anesthesia during surgery or for painless childbirth is no longer “news.” Acupuncture is simple to administer, has few side effects, and has broad applications. It has opened up a whole new “hot” field of scientific and medical research.

The increasing popularity of acupuncture outside of China has made it nearly synonymous with all traditional Chinese medicine for many Westerners. Not meant as a cure for everything, acupuncture has nonetheless enjoyed renewed interest in recent decades and is especially effective in controlling pain.

The practice of acupuncture is based on a theory of channels or meridians by which “influences” flow through the body. The flow of positive influences through the body helps maintain good health while unhealthy symptoms are perceived as manifestations of improper *qi*. The *Huang Djinijing* describes 365 sensitive points used in acupuncture, in addition to 12 main conduits in the human body. Executed properly, acupuncture should be relatively painless.

There is also a system of ear acupuncture, performed without needles. Small, round seed kernels are stuck onto certain points of the ear and massaged by the patient every so often. This method is not only very successful in the treatment of pain, but is also said to relieve some allergies such as hay fever.

An acupuncture clinic often smells similar to a pharmacy. This is the typical smell of the moxa herb, or mugwort. It is considered especially helpful in the treatment of illnesses that, in Chinese medical terminology, are classified as a “cold”; for example, stomach and digestive complaints without fever, certain rheumatic illnesses, chronic pains in the back, and cramped shoulders and neck. The mugwort is formed into small cones and placed on slices of fresh ginger, and then it is allowed to grow slowly. The plant is then placed onto the acupuncture point.

Chinese Qigong

The most common type of exercise is *taijiquan*, the so-called “shadow boxing”. Another, perhaps less familiar to Westerners, is *qigong*, which is often translated as “breathing therapy”. The two main types of *qigong* are separated into “hard” and “soft”. Soft *qigong* is more of a meditative type, mostly consisting of breathing exercises and fairly simple non-stressful movements. Hard *qigong*, on the other hand, is more intense and is practiced to cultivate great strength, serious stamina, and almost super-human abilities (supposedly).

A basic tenet of soft *qigong* is the concept of “holding the ball.” This is a simple position which is seen in many different forms of *qigong*. The basic idea is that you picture a ball in front of you and you place your hands on either side of the ball so
that you are holding it up. The aim is to create a circuit of qi (energy). Energy circulates throughout your body and by creating this circuit with your arms; you can exercise the flow ball so that your hands then start to get warm. If you are doing it correctly, after a little while you should feel like the ball is expanding and contracting. You then move your hands farther apart, back in, and then out again.

By going through the movements over and over, you condition your body while, at the same time, relax your mind. This, combined with movements specially formulated to increase qi flow (including lots of ball-holding), creates a veritable qi feast in the human system.