

East Meets West

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This is the first in a series of articles designed to educate the public on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Reducing medical information to basic principles is like collecting items in a bag. When the bag is full but not bound, the information spills out and is lost. When the study of medical materials is completed, but not summarized into principles, it cannot be applied to obtain marvelous success.

-Yellow Emperor, Nei Jing Ling Shu 48 (Obeying the Taboos)

Background

The ancient art of Chinese medicine, with its herbal, needling (acupuncture), nutritional, heating and physical therapies, dating back over 4000 years, provides viable effective health care options for American patients today just as it has for the Chinese for centuries. The risks to health are much the same today, and include the physical and emotional stress caused by living in large complex societies, overcrowding, adverse environmental factors, air pollution, poor water quality, bad eating habits, overeating, alcohol and drug use, smoking, lack of exercise, overwork and poor sleeping habits. As a consequence, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, infertility, impotence, asthma, allergic disorders, gastrointestinal and urogenital disorders, acute and chronic pain, arthritis, rheumatism, anxiety, depression, and sleeping disorders, among others, are widespread. These diseases represent the general malaise of civilization, and no single medical approach can solve all these problems for all people. Chinese medicine has survived for many centuries for the very reason that it has been effective in addressing a wide range of human ailments, including those mentioned above.

What is Chinese medicine?

Chinese medicine is a **holistic, comprehensive medical system** of viewing and treating illness that has survived virtually unchanged since ancient times. Chinese medical theories are founded on anatomical and physiological knowledge derived by the ancient physicians. Blood circulation and a rudimentary grasp of the immune system, was understood more than two thousand years before it was in the West. The ancient Chinese also described the internal organs, and other anatomical features, including the entire vascular and muscular systems. An elementary comprehension of the central and peripheral nervous systems was also established. Perhaps long before the Chinese developed their understanding of physiology, they studied the influence of the solar seasons, the five annual climatic phases, and the six prevailing weather conditions each year. These concepts were then applied to explain most relationships in the physical world, including those involving health, disease, and human physiology.

How does it work?

Chinese medicine is complete within itself in that there is consistency between physiological concepts, etiology, methods of diagnosis, and principles of treatment. Disease-causing factors include environmental conditions, dietary habits, emotions and stress. Either poor nutrition, including overeating, or excess in any of the other

three factors disturbs physiological balance, resulting in illness. Acupuncture, herbal therapy, cupping, moxibustion, heating therapy, electrotherapy, qigong (breathing therapy) and taichi (exercise therapy) are used to promote particular effects to **restore critical physiological balance**. The objective of all treatment modalities is to restore physiological balance of yin and yang, the five phases, the internal organs and bowels, and qi, blood and vital substances, which represent fundamental concepts and principles. Chinese medicine is best characterized as physiological medicine, which depends on maintaining the internal functional balance, which in turn relies on the vascular circulation of blood, vital air (qi), and vital substances.¹

What does it treat?

In ancient times, Chinese medicine was used to treat all diseases and conditions affecting human health. However, with the medical and technological advancements of Western science, many diseases are now more effectively treated with Western medicine, such as acute infection, trauma and emergency healthcare where immediate care is required or where technological monitoring is desired. Today, Chinese hospitals use Western medicine to treat such disorders, much as it is done here. However, in many hospitals in China, Chinese medicine including acupuncture, is still employed, often in conjunction with Western therapy. The World Health Organization has created a list of conditions appropriate for acupuncture therapy, including many **musculoskeletal and neurological disorders** (neck and back pain, sciatica, spinal disorders, arthritis, headaches and migraines, tendonitis and bursitis, and sprains and strains), **respiratory disorders** (asthma, bronchitis, common cold, sinusitis, tonsillitis), **gastrointestinal disorders** (abdominal pain, constipation, diarrhea, hyperacidity, indigestion), **gynecological disorders** (PMS, dysmenorrhea, irregular menstruation, menopausal symptoms), **emotional disorders** (anxiety, insomnia, depression, nervousness, stress) as well as **immune system disorders, chronic fatigue and chronic pain**.

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The following article in this series will address the diagnostic methods of a practitioner of Chinese medicine and describe a typical exam and treatment.

¹ Kendall, Donald; Dao of Chinese Medicine, Understanding an Ancient Healing Art; Oxford University Press, 2002.