

A Renaissance of Traditional Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine is among the most powerful tools modern Chinese Medicine Practitioners use to address pathology and make substantive shifts in patient health. Part art, part science, herbal medicine has been tested and refined over thousands of years and is among the safest, most customizable and reliably effective forms of pharmacological intervention available. Despite these advantages, the simplest form of this medicine, the classic herbal decoction, is also probably the most underutilized. For modern consumers, this powerful delivery method is seen as laborious, inconvenient, unpalatable, unscientific, or simply out of sync with the modern lifestyle. Many practitioners avoid its prescription, and when prescribed compliance is often an obstacle.

Consumer hesitance is not without some merit. Lack of familiarity with the plants, minerals and animal products used (and underlying philosophy of Chinese Herbalism itself), has served as a barrier to more widespread adoption of this effective medicine. While some familiar herbs of the Chinese pharmacopeia are accepted in the West (turmeric, astragalus and angelica root, among others), the popularity of combined herbal preparations is lackluster. Additionally, there is often concern about the sustainability, ecological impact and safety of the herbs themselves.

Further public education around this medicine and our relationship to it is critical for Chinese Medicine's growth and success. Today's practitioners are better positioned to refine, promote, improve and encourage this understanding than any other time in modern history. Attention to pharmacological constituents, farming practices and supply chain are all in a state of flux and transition. The opportunity for this medicine and its many benefits to expand and flourish within our modern medical understanding is here.

Credibility and Confidence

In 2015, Youyou Tu, a professor and researcher at the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Beijing, shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine after "discovering" the compound Artemisinin and its efficacy in reducing mortality rates in patients with malaria. In her research, Professor Tu isolated the compound in a classic, though somewhat obscure, herbal formula traditionally used to treat malaria like disease. The prize committee's recognition of the value of this discovery was a sea change moment for this medicine.

A Chinese woman winning the Nobel Prize is not just a huge validation for the medicine itself, but also an example of the powerful transformation taking place in our global society. And Professor Tu is not alone. She is just one of the many researchers translating and validating traditional knowledge of this medicine in our modern scientific frameworks. Although the danger still exists that the nuance of this medicine could be lost in the

reductionist tendencies of modern science, by placing it in a framework understood by the broader medical community, its relevance, use and applicability is not easily dismissed. Furthermore, the emergence and continued growth of reputable herbal distributors batch-testing products to ensure their quality and safety further protects not only consumers, but also the integrity of the medicine itself.

Compliance

Perhaps the largest obstacle in patient compliance taking herbal medicines is convenience. Decoction, traditionally prepared, can take upwards of an hour. For a culture both recovering and still very much entrenched in the fast food boom of the late 20th century, such attention is often beyond reach.

While the “slow food” movement of the same era continues to grow, and tea culture takes deeper root in many parts of the country, the limitation of time is still very real for most Westerners. Fortunately, innovation has allowed for convenient cooking and prepackaging of herbal decoctions for patients, and the extraction of biochemical compounds into granule powders is now fairly commonplace. The benefit of these systems in allowing reputable companies to ensure high quality products is clear. Testing for active constituents, toxicity and heavy metals contaminants is common among premium herb companies and helps ensure products are safe for consumers. This attention to quality, convenience and relevance all help set the stage for what is possibly the next major movement in herbal medicine: the development of the grower-provider relationship.

Growth Beyond Farm to Table

What many established companies had realized long ago is just beginning to trickle into the larger system herbal medicine. Ethical and environmental standards in herb cultivation are crucial for both short-term profitability and the long-term success of this medicine. Growers in California, North Carolina and New York are now serving as ambassadors of Chinese Herbal Medicine, helping others more deeply understand the relationship of the medicine to the land, and preserving knowledge around herbal cultivation. Purveyors are developing relationships with growers ... and those producing the highest quality products that have the most ecologically and socially sound practices are gaining a reputation. Herb companies are taking responsibility for how herbs are sourced and grown. Social, political and environmental issues are being taken into account. Tests for toxins, heavy metals and active compounds ensure that not only the highest quality medicines are reaching those that need them, but that those medicines are being grown in a way that resonates with the ideas of health more broadly. This is all good business, and helps the rich legacy of this medicine endure.

Developing Deeper Roots

The renaissance of Chinese Herbal Medicine is upon us. Attention paid to herb quality, farming practices, biochemistry and holistic health has arguably never been higher than today. The cultural backdrop that would allow better utilization is in place. Modern society's relationship to food, a powerful medicine in its own right, is already undergoing its own revolution. Today's practitioner, grower, manufacturer, distributor and patient all have an opportunity to guide and shape the future of this medicine. Making this powerful medicine seem relevant for modern patients is a serious challenge, yet giants before us have laid a path, and the practitioners, growers and herbal companies working to nurture this medicine today are showing us the way. We are all the stewards of what comes next.

*Jason P. Salim
Academy of Chinese Culture & Health Science
Oakland, CA*