

## Believing in Chinese Medicine

By Lily Chan

### 1. Banlangen

Whenever I bring up Chinese herbal remedies, I find myself adopting a bashful, reluctant tone, lest I be pegged as one of those alternative medicine, juice-cleanse fanatics. Not that I've ever personally equated juice cleanses with the likes of *banlangen*, but let's just say that both fall under the realm of FDA-unapproved supplements.

FDA approved or not, *banlangen* was a staple in my household the way Sudafed or Robutussin might have been for my classmates in elementary school. Immediately following the first hints of a sore throat, I could count on a steaming mug of *banlangen* waiting for me at the kitchen table the next morning. And I was glad. The herb *Isatis tinctoria root* in *banlangen* is very heavily sweetened with yellow rock sugar, so much to the extent it was hard to taste anything else. I would stick my face over my glass in anticipation, watching the brown crystals dissolve into a happy, bubbly whirlpool. There was another childhood medicine I liked—*shedan chuanbei*, which was snake gallbladder extract (fortunately, I didn't know what a gallbladder was until I took physiology in my freshman year of college). It came in a delicate brown glass bottle complete with an extremely slender straw, and I loved that I could pretend to be a hummingbird sipping sweet nectar. A spoonful of sugar—or in this case, a whopping seventeen grams—sure helped this medicine go down.

*Banlangen* was a win-win situation. If I was greeted the following morning with a raging sore throat, it was because I didn't start drinking it soon enough. But if my sniffles retreated, it was always thanks to *banlangen*.

### 2. Believing in Chinese Medicine

Believing in Chinese medicine. Those are the words I frequently find myself using around the subject matter. Believing in. I feel the same discomfort with this word choice as I did when my high school history class learned about ancient China and my teacher declared I must have been raised with Confucian Values and thus also believe in Filial Piety. Or that my grandparents might have believed in the significance of the Chinese zodiac. Well, I'm in medical school now and I believe in Western medicine, too.

Did I actively doubt? I don't think so. My five year-old self could recognize the difference between the kid-proof bottles of antibiotics my mother brought back from Genovese and the

pungent herbs wrapped in brown paper bags my father set upon the countertop after coming home from work. But early on, I did not question; I did not think one would somehow be more or less legitimate than the other.

For me, half the lore of Chinese medicine was the ingredients it involved: they ranged from innocuous-sounding items such as barley and cinnamon root, to edgier options, like dried centipedes and cicada moltings. At the beginning of each school year in middle school, or high school, even, teachers would sit students in a circle, and ask questions like, “what is the weirdest thing you have ever eaten?” I always had several crowd-pleasing answers up my sleeve, though today I don’t really see why I couldn’t have taken that time to point out some of the very strange habits Americans have—for instance, they often add sucrose tri-chlorinated in the presence of toluene and methanol to their morning coffee in attempt to control their weight. (Splenda has been FDA-approved since 1998).

### 3. As Long As You’re Not Dying...

Chinese medicine is, in many senses, preventive medicine. It stresses balance and moderation and sensibility. There is a great emphasis on regularly eating the “correct” foods, though its restrictions are not nearly as stringent as those of fad diets these days. Superfine acupuncture needles redirect chi (energy flow); herbs are typically prescribed to fine-tune various bodily functions—the goal is not to kill off invading pathogens, but to ensure the invasion never really occurs in the first place. As one of my Chinese-American friends put it: “In Western medicine, as long as the patient is ... basically not dying, everything is fine. You’ll be discharged. In Chinese medicine, anything less than optimal, and you’ll go home with at least two packages of herbs.”

If half the lore was the ingredients, the other half had to be the various maladies Chinese medicine was purported to treat. Chinese medicine has been touted to treat everything from something as tangible as a headache to something as nebulous as a dour mood. Growing up, I always found the answer to the question of When to See a Chinese Doctor a highly amusing ordeal. By every metric of Western medicine, I was healthy—BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, sanity. But my face-color, my *meen sek*, became an ongoing struggle after an unfortunate winter of pneumonia in the fifth grade. Ideally, one’s face-color should be rosy pink and white. The grayish-yellow pallor I was afflicted with did not indicate liver-trouble-associated-jaundice, nor was it a consequence of anemia. It signaled that something in my body was off-balance. That was, and still is, approximately the extent of my understanding.

It wasn’t always easy to predict when my parents would take me in. Once, when I was in China, my mom dragged me to a *zhong yi* hospital to try and cure me of my teenagerisms, even though she didn’t explain it to me in those words exactly. When she grew up during the Cultural Revolution, there were simply no such things as teenagers. Oh, sure, there were individuals who happened to be between the ages of thirteen and nineteen in 1970s China, but like I said— no teenagers. Then suddenly, sprouting up in American suburbia, there I was: a life-sized teenager. They didn’t understand. (But of course, nobody understood.) So I had to be treated.

This was also when I realized that psychotherapy was, in my parents' eyes, probably the equivalent of Chinese medicine in the eyes of the average Western M.D.—something of questionable effectiveness. To them, the idea of taking a potpourri of herbs and dumping them in a pot of boiling water seemed a lot more reliable than forking over \$120 for each hour of angsty, self-centered conversation with a stranger. In short, they didn't believe in it.

#### **4. At Saturday Morning Acupuncture**

“There's a lot of talk saying we'll change the name of *zhong yi* from 'alternative medicine' to 'complementary medicine,’” Doctor Wong once told me, quite excitedly.

But how much does that really change anything? It is hard to pinpoint the moment I realized Chinese medicine was always going to be stuck in second place.

I am twenty-two. I have learned about the gallbladder, and all the other human organs; in physiology. I've learned about the Krebs Cycle, and my days in organic chemistry involved hours and hours hunched over many a desk as I dug out mechanisms between layers of Diels Alder and Hoffmann and Baeyer-Villger. I pipette reagents in the immunology lab to the nearest microliter—that's one millionth of a liter! Every day, I find assurance in precision, just as the FDA has faith that double-blind studies will iron out all the wrinkles of placebo effects and investigator bias.

I still don't know what to believe, but I have become more sympathetic to the incredulous. As one M.D. has protested in JAMA: “The laws of nature simply do not follow a Taoist philosophy or any other ancient belief [!]” There are hundreds of studies—double-blind studies, funded by institutions such as the NIH—currently underway to figure out how, exactly, Chinese medicine works. What the mechanism might be. I don't know if it'll ever work out.

“It's nice they're finally studying it,” Doctor Wong said. “I don't think they'll find much, though. It's just a completely separate system of thought. It's as if they're using a telescope to study molecules.”

*Lily Chan is a medical student*