

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and
Angela Collingwood
info@shen-nong.com

Is traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health care? And do you believe it works?

These are two of the most common questions about TCM. People ask them because there are still misconceptions about TCM in the western world, fuelled in large part by a dearth of information in English.

A common belief is that there's some mystical component. In fact, TCM is one of the oldest surviving medical systems still practiced in the world, predated only by Egyptian and Babylonian medicine.

TCM incorporates the Chinese philosophies of yin and yang and the five elements, but applies them to physiology.

Yin and yang were originally used to describe the balancing forces in nature such as day and night or hot and cold. TCM applies this to the body's organs. Kidneys, for example, control fluid balance, and this relationship is still described as "kidneys rule water".

It's surprising how much anatomy and physiology the Chinese knew. For instance, they knew that the liver opens into the eyes and that yellow eyes are a symptom of liver failure, just as deafness can be an indication of a kidney problem.

Chi (pronounced chee) is another unique concept in TCM, and refers to the life force that flows within people. Chi runs along meridians in the body, and acupuncture is typically used to prick particular points on the meridians to help chi flow more smoothly. Because chi can't be seen or quantified like other bodily substances such as blood, it's sometimes viewed with scepticism – and is a reason why some people think TCM has a mystical component.

However, acupuncture is accepted by many western cultures as a way to relieve a variety of discomforts, and research has proven its success, even though the concept of chi may not be readily accepted.

What's also important to understand is the evolution of the vast amount of knowledge used in TCM nowadays.

As early as the second century BC, the Chinese had compiled the first complete pharmacopoeia reference, the *Shennong Bencaojing* (Classic of Herbal Medicine). Over time, a large number of people contributed to TCM knowledge, making it robust, but also difficult to standardise.

Some TCM practitioners passed it down as a family tradition. Scholars and others who travelled the Silk Road to India needed medical knowledge, and spread their ideas along the way.

As well, medical schools trained doctors to minister to the emperor and his administration. This service was later expanded to outlying communities.

Alchemists experimented with minerals and chemicals, and are considered by some to have been the first pharmacists.

Travelling herbalists dispensed potions and medical advice village by village. By the time of the Tang dynasty, the government mandated the first official pharmacopoeia (*Xinxu Bencao* AD657-659).

So, what some consider a new trend has existed in China for more than 5,000 years.

Chinese consider TCM to be one of their national treasures, and it was the predominant form of healthcare until the 20th century. It was said in ancient China that a good healer was not one who could cure a sick patient, but one who could keep them from becoming sick in the first place.

Although Chinese medicine often isn't credited as being the source of health maintenance

and preventative medicine, such concepts are now being embraced by the western world and becoming commonplace.

For example, many medical school curriculums in the US now emphasise holistic health-care practices and offer courses in alternative and complementary medicines.

In major international cities, wellness centres employ TCM consultants and acupuncture, with the intention of preventing illness and preserving health.

There's also been an increase in the health supplements industry, because more and more people want to avoid visiting doctors by staying healthy.

It seems that the misconceptions surrounding TCM are slowly disappearing.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner.