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SOME OBSERVATIONS OF CHINESE MEDICINE

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It is not only the existence of the rhinoceros that is threatened by consumers of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM; *note 1*). In November 2019 the charity The Donkey Sanctuary issued a report (*note 2*) on how demand by TCM users for donkey skins has led to a collapse of donkey populations in countries across the world. It also reports evidence that increasing numbers of donkeys are being bred, reared and slaughtered in squalid conditions to supply this growing market. Donkey skins are used to make ejiao, a traditional Chinese remedy believed by some to have medicinal properties. According to the report:

It is estimated that the ejiao industry currently requires approximately 4.8 million donkey skins annually. With China's donkey herd reducing from 11 million in 1992 to just 2.6 million currently, the ejiao industry has had to source donkey skins from around the world, placing unprecedented pressure on donkey populations globally.

In October 2019 I was touring China with a small group of medical professionals and in addition to the usual attractions we attended talks on TCM and visited a number of hospitals where we had the opportunity of witnessing patients being treated as well as receiving treatment ourselves. We were informed that the four most common types of TCM available are herbal remedies, massage, acupuncture and cupping. Exercise and diet are also important. Both TCM and modern medicine were provided to patients at the hospitals and clinics we visited and were funded partly by the state and partly by medical insurance or private means. TCM tended to be prescribed for more common complaints such as infections and pain.

The foundation of TCM is the concept of a vital energy or life force *chi* that is presumed to flow throughout the body along channels called *meridians*. TCM aims at restoring the healthy and harmonious flow of this energy.



Figure 1

Figure 1 is a photograph of a patient being treated for either abdominal or back pain (I can't recall which now) using heated ginger. The ginger, I was told, is resting on bare skin and is heated by the volcano-shaped piles of burning herbs (moxa).



Figure 2

Figure 2 shows a demonstration of cupping on a volunteer with mild shoulder pain. The air in the dome-shaped cup is heated by quickly inserting a flame and immediately withdrawing it and placing the cup over the targeted meridian. Four cups (two on each side) were used in this demonstration. The air in the cups contract, drawing in the skin which turns red. Two days later the volunteer still had the deep red discs on her back.



Figure 3

It is clear that TCM, most notably herbal medicine, is a huge industry in China. In Chengdu we visited one of Asia's largest herb markets. It was vast and one could not help imagining that virtually every available plant was on sale in dried form, fungi being particularly popular.



Figure 4

Some animal matter was also on sale, including dried centipede and (Figure 3) snakes; turtle shells (Figure 4, in the cylindrical containers); and bits of hedgehog. Dried deer penises, presumably for boosting or restoring potency in men, were also on display. Figure 5 shows crates of dried seahorses, touted as aphrodisiacs. Coincidentally, not long before embarking on my tour I was reading that seahorses are at risk of extinction due to poaching and overfishing to meet the growing demand of TCM consumers (*note 3*). These examples represent only a tiny part of the full scale of animal cruelty alleged to be perpetrated in the service of TCM (*note 4*).



Figure 5

TCM is embedded in Chinese history, its cultural traditions and way of life, and the Chinese philosophy of harmonious living. Maintaining good health and fitness into old age is a priority; it is not unusual to see people taking time out to exercise in the open by dancing or performing tai chi, manually stimulating ‘acupressure points’, or simply executing stretching poses while hanging around. This is particularly so with older people; one morning we visited a park near our hotel to join a tai chi group of mainly elderly women and were put to shame by our clumsy efforts to follow the movements of their guide, much to the good-natured amusement of some local men who gathered to watch us.

Although, with increasing prosperity and the mass movement of people from rural to urban areas, younger generations are becoming less likely to follow the traditions of their forebears, it seems to me unlikely that there will be any weakening of the market for herbal medicines. Indeed, it is the greater affluence of the Chinese people that is behind the increasing demand.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/yat9zgzi>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/scajvqo>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/yxa3hvt>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/rtpemgh>