

## **Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine**

Traditional Chinese medicine, commonly shortened to TCM, has been a popular form of complementary medicine in the UK for many years. It is regarded variously as a valuable adjunct or alternative to allopathic medicine by some and as impotent quackery by others. The western use of medical TCM has recently expanded into an interest in veterinary TCM, with a number of publications and practitioners emerging to stimulate and maintain the market for this animal health system. Despite differing views on its efficacy, the developing interest in veterinary TCM is underpinned by thousands of years of veterinary practice in China, recorded in several, largely still untranslated texts.

Traditional Chinese medicine is practiced within the framework of a very different worldview than is held by most people in the west. The philosophical origins of Chinese medicine grew from the tenets of Taoism and are based upon the observation of the natural world and manner in which it appeared to operate. The metaphoric view of the body is based upon observations of nature, of microcosm mirrored by macrocosm.

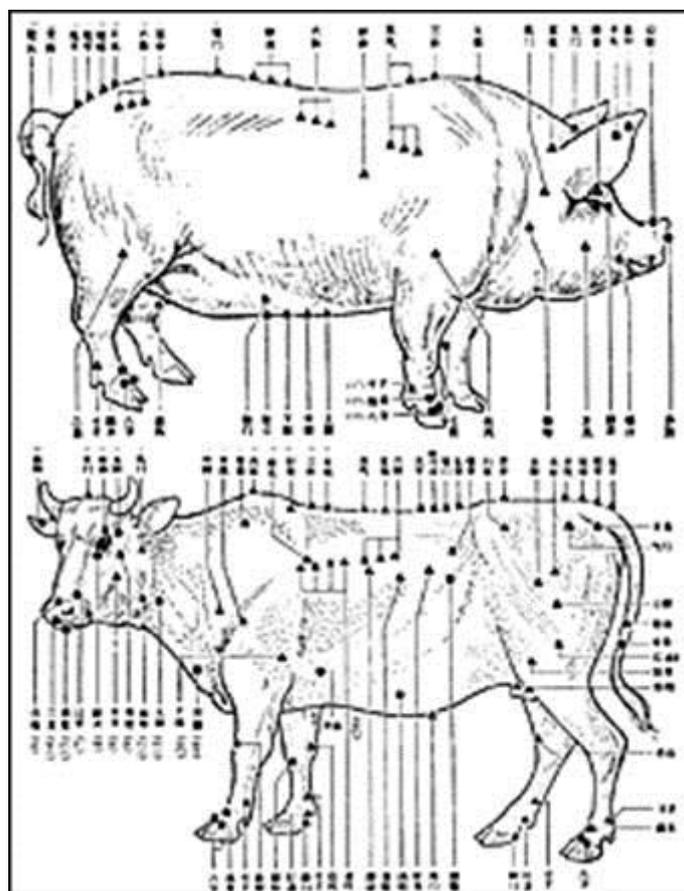
Chinese philosophy imagines the world most simply in terms of yin and yang. These represent the wide range of perceived opposite properties in the universe – hot and cold, fast and slow, still and moving and so forth. As a rule, anything that is moving, ascending, bright, hyperactive - including functional disease - relates to yang. The characteristics of stillness, descent, degeneration, hypo-activity - including organic disease - relates to yin. The natures of yin and yang are relative and neither is considered to be able to exist in isolation, however these opposites are in constant motion and change within all things. The advance of the one always means the retreat of the other like the waning of day into night and night into day. TCM postulates that normally the waxing and waning of yin and yang are kept within certain bounds, reflecting a dynamic equilibrium of the physiological processes. Disease is believed to occur when something takes place to upset this balance and cause one energy to dominate over the other. TCM practitioners may refer to certain diseases as being due to an excess of yin, an excess of yang, a deficiency of yin or a deficiency of yang.

In addition to the theory of yin and yang, TCM is governed by another set of principals called the five element theory. According to this theory, five elements make up the world (fire, earth, metal, wood and water) and these are in constant flux and change. It is their interdependence and mutual restraint that are seen to explain the complex connection between material objects as well as the unity between the human body and the natural world.

Five elements theory considers the visceral organs, as well as other organs and tissues, to have similar properties to these elements and that they interact physiologically and pathologically accordingly. Through comparison, different phenomena are attributed to the categories of the five elements. The complex links between physiology and pathology as well as the interconnection between the body and the natural world are explained based on the characteristics, forms and functions of these phenomena.

Operating within this context, TCM evolved practices that sought to intervene in the imbalance that was considered to cause disease. Because the goal of the system was to restore balance, rather than to treat any particular aetiological agent, gentleness and slowness were considered important in order to elicit gradual, sufficient change. Harriet Beinfield, in her book “Between Heaven and Earth” suggests that “comparing an acupuncturist with a western veterinary or medical practitioner is similar to comparing a gardener and a mechanic”. Although many veterinary surgeons might consider this unfair, it goes some way towards explaining how TCM practitioners view themselves and their practice.

In its entirety, traditional Chinese medicine encompasses many related practices, including moxibustion (the burning of moxa, a soft downy material, on the skin), massage and nutrition but the principal methods used to induce change and restore balance are essentially two-fold. Firstly, and most famously, is the use of acupuncture to restore or control the flow of energy around the body. Needles are inserted at certain points along hypothesised subcutaneous channels called meridians, which are believed to transport energy around the body.



Traditional charts highlighting acupuncture points in cattle

The second method is the use of ‘herbs’, which may be plant material or of mineral or animal origin. Each ‘herb’ is considered to be either yin or yang and have a flavour (sour, bitter, sweet, pungent and salty), a temperature, ranging from hot (or yang) to cold (or yin) and a preference for acting upon particular organs that can be used to predict its effects on the body. For example, the herb *huo xiang* has the common name of Korean mint (*Agastache rugosa*) and is considered to be acrid, warm and to act

Simon Bishop

along the spleen, stomach and lung channels. For these reasons it is historically used to treat diarrhea, vomiting and coughing by warming these key areas and driving out coldness and damp.

The earliest verifiable record of Chinese veterinary medicine is from the Shang Dynasty (B.C. 1766-1050), however Shun Yang, a full-time veterinary practitioner who is considered by many to be the father of veterinary TCM, lived later during the Spring and Autumn Warring States period (B.C. 400-200). While historical records of his life exist there are no precise details regarding his methods. It has been assumed, based on later published works, that these would have been similar to medical practices of the day but the evidence for this is insubstantial.

During the late Han dynasty, in about A.D. 200, *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (The Divine Husbandman's Classic of the Materia Medica) was published. This text contained the first references to properties of herbs (other than simply those prescribed by the Five Element theory). The work also sorted herbs by taste and temperature and it provided information regarding toxic herbs, something rarely seen in earlier texts). It was also during this period that herbalists in the centre of China began to make use of materials adopted from minority groups within the empire. Rhinoceros horn, amber, musk and lychee seed are all seen in Chinese herbals for the first time in the Han period.



Diagnosis of disease made using physical symptoms and behaviour

Much of the volume of early work on veterinary TCM comes from the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907). The animal healers during this period were predominantly concerned with horses, due to their value in commerce and war. The danger to the empire, particularly from the north (a danger that was ultimately to prove the destruction of the dynasty) required a heavy presence of men and horses at the borders. Such was the need to maintain the health of their horses that the Tang dynasty established a school of veterinary medicine to instruct students in the care and treatment of injuries and disease in horses using both acupuncture and herbal medicine. This represented the first formal education of this type in the history of China and of the world and perhaps



Simon Bishop

At about the same time, returning Jesuits introduced acupuncture for the first time to France, where it was widely accepted, first as a cultural novelty and later as more than this. In Europe, acupuncture was studied in both human and veterinary medicine but ultimately became less popular during the late 19th century due to advances in modern medicine. In China too western medicine became popular during the same period and traditional practices were considered by many to be old fashioned and inferior, being driven largely from the cities into the countryside.

Because Western medicine was not accessible during WWII and the chaos of the following years, the Chinese were forced to once again rely more heavily on TCM. When the government was restructured after the war, there were new mandates to investigate TCM and schools of medicine were required to integrate western and traditional medicines. In 1947, a department of traditional Chinese veterinary medicine was opened at the School of Agriculture of the Northern University. The department focused on large animal applications as there is little historical literature regarding small animal practice. This was probably due to differences between the East and West's culture of pet ownership; something that appears to be changing in China.

From 1955, the use of veterinary TCM began to re-emerge strongly on mainland China with several classical texts being re-written to include modern veterinary terminology - old treatments for newly defined diseases. In the following year, two new Chinese veterinary journals were published and in 1958 a government committee was formed to review Chinese, Japanese and Korean veterinary classics and of the seventy or so that were believed to have been written only sixteen had survived.

In 1972 an attempt was made to formally combine Chinese and western veterinary methods with the publication of the Handbook of Veterinary Medicine. Although, like most compromises it did not fully satisfy many interested parties, it was a valiant attempt to create a blend of the best from two very different systems and seek unity between two polarised dogmas.

Chinese medicine had been growing in popularity in the west for many years as a complementary medical therapy but in 1977 Alan Klide and Shiu Kung published the first book in English on traditional Chinese veterinary medicine. Their work, entitled "Veterinary Acupuncture", was based on several key historical texts. As a result the book focused only on large animals but did much to stimulate an interest in the field. In 1980 Finland formally accepted acupuncture as a valid veterinary practice and this was followed within a period of few years by several other countries. Most recently, in 1987 the Association of British Veterinary Acupuncturists was founded as the home for veterinary acupuncture research and teaching in the UK.

Amongst veterinary surgeons in the west, most of the interest in Chinese medicine to date has focused upon acupuncture. Despite this, Chinese herbal medicine has not been ignored but has been embraced by numerous nutraceutical (and some pharmaceutical) companies as well as individual practitioners. TCM herbal products are widely available by mail order for most minor veterinary ailments, despite the narrow modern evidence base. Much work continues to be done in China and around the world in order to research the efficacy of traditional Chinese veterinary medicine.

Simon Bishop

It is to be hoped that, considering the strong academic interest in this field, the research will ultimately catch up with the marketing.

**Further reading**

Klide, A. M. and Kung, S. H. (1977). *Veterinary Acupuncture*. Reprinted 2002. University of Pennsylvania Press.

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