

CHINESE MEDICINE

BY JAMES M. FLINT

The Chinese trace the origin of medicine to an emperor named Shen-nung, who is said to have reigned about 2700 B. C. He first experimented on the medicinal qualities of herbs and their application in the treatment of disease, and to him are ascribed the earliest writings on the subject. The principal one of his medical works is entitled *Shen-nung Pen ts'ao king*. The statements in regard to the origin of this work, both as to authorship and to time, are exceedingly doubtful, the probability being that its precepts were traditional until, after a long period, they became incorporated in the writings of a more modern author. It can hardly be doubted, however, that a system of medical practice was established in China long before any now known to have existed among western nations.

Concerning the theories of disease held by the Chinese, and the rationale of their modes of treatment, the information at hand is indefinite and perplexing. According to Cleyer,¹ their theory of disease is based on the existence of two radical principles, *Yin* and *Yang*, translated as "heat" and "moisture," which give life and movement to all things. Health depends on the maintenance of an exact balance of these two elementary principles, any disturbance of the proper relations between them producing all the phenomena of disease. Others interpret *Yin* and *Yang* to be two principles or powers in nature, male and female, ever active in producing the physical, chemical, and vital phenomena which appear within and round us. When these principles are equalized there is repose or a state of health. If the male principle is in the ascendant there is disease and it is inflammatory; if the female principle predominates the disease is of a typhoid character.

In addition to the rationalistic theories of disease and its treatment, superstitious and religious notions concerning them prevail very widely. Magical rites and charms occupy a large place in both preventive and remedial medicine, and temples devoted to the worship of medical divinities are numerous and much frequented.

¹ *Specimen Medicinæ Sinicæ*.

In these temples are images representing eminent physicians of history and tradition who have been deified and to whom worship is paid. In particular there are ten celebrated doctors of special sanctity often referred to, but no two lists of their names are exactly the same. It would seem that some of these divinities have lists of numbered prescriptions, and by means of correspondingly numbered bamboo sticks the patient draws by lot the prescription suited to his disease.

In the examination of a patient the Chinese doctor determines the diagnosis, prognosis, and indications for treatment chiefly from the condition of the pulse, the appearance of the tongue, and the facial aspect. For medical convenience the human body is divided into three regions: (1) the superior region, from the head to the epigastrium; (2) the middle region, from the epigastrium to the umbilicus; (3) the inferior region, from the umbilicus to and including the pelvis. For each of these regions there is a distinct pulse which may be felt at different positions along the radial artery at the wrist, about half an inch apart. These pulses mark the condition of certain organs in the different regions according as they are felt on the right or the left arm. Thus the superior pulse on the right arm marks the state of the heart; on the left arm, of the lungs. The middle right pulse indicates the condition of the stomach and spleen, the middle left pulse the state of the liver. The lower right pulse is controlled by the right kidney and large intestine; the lower left by the left kidney and small intestine. The delicate variations in quality, force, and rhythm of these pulses which the Chinese doctor claims to detect are not evident to the ruder touch of the foreigner.

Examination of the bodies of the dead never having been allowed or practised, the knowledge of anatomy is necessarily crude. A general idea of the internal organs of the body, and their location, has been forced upon them by the accidents of war and peace, but for the rest imagination has supplied the place of demonstration. A theory of a double circulation is held, by means of which the "spirits," which are the vehicle of the radical principle *Yin* (heat, or the male principle), and the blood, which conveys the *Yang* (moisture, or the female principle), are distributed throughout the body. This circulation begins in the lungs at three o'clock in the morning and completes its round in twenty-four hours. For the accommodation of this circulation they count twelve principal canals—six passing from above downward, and six from below upward.

There are also accessory canals or vessels, eight of which run transversely and fifteen obliquely.

The materia medica of the Chinese is extensive and is used with prodigality by both the sick and the well. The classical authority for the use of drugs is a sort of dispensatory called *Pen-ts 'ao kang-mu*—"A Synopsis of Ancient Herbals,"—compiled by one Li-Shi-Chen in the latter part of the sixteenth century. The last reprint of this work was in 1826, and it appears in forty-three quarto volumes, the first three containing over 1100 rude wood-cuts of the minerals, plants, and animals treated of in the body of the work. Drugs are classified in three kingdoms and fifteen divisions, as follows: (A) Inanimate substances—water, fire, earth, metals, and stones. (B) Plants—herbs, grains, vegetables, fruits, trees. (C) Animals—insects, scaly animals, shelly animals, birds, quadrupeds, man. Comprised in these divisions, and described in the *Pen-ts 'ao*, are 1892 distinct drugs. These, in various combinations, are presented for use in about ten thousand formulæ. All drugs are considered as having certain inherent qualities of heat, cold, warmth, or coolness, and these are noted. But in spite of the mystical and utterly unintelligible explanations of their actions given by Chinese authors, it is probable that medicines are administered, in China as elsewhere, principally as specifics, that is to say, "good" for the disease.