



## Back to (medical) school

A growing interest in alternative health treatments sees Western medical practitioners journeying to China to learn the time-honoured secrets of its traditional medicine

BY RICHARD SHAW

It's a typical morning in the busy Outpatients Clinic of the Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province. In one consulting room a respiratory doctor diagnoses a continuous stream of patients, prescribing various herbal treatments to each. Sitting alongside her is Dominic Harbinson, an Englishman who has come to China to learn the magic of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). "So much experience — I'm just watching with my mouth open," says Harbinson, referring to the proficiency and velocity with which these TCM masters ply their craft. Having spent three years studying and a further three years

practising acupuncture in England, he is now eager to incorporate TCM herbal remedies into his treatment repertoire.

Harbinson is just one of a growing army of foreign students coming to China to learn first hand the secrets of this country's famed traditional medicine. Curiously, while many young urban Chinese dream of studying at top Western universities, surging demand for alternative therapies in the West is resulting in hordes of foreign students descending on the Middle Kingdom, thirsty for TCM knowledge.

Angel Wan, who oversees the foreign student programme at Chengdu's University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, says that not only are the

numbers increasing, but so too are the origins and backgrounds of the students who arrive. While learning TCM has long been popular with students from Japan, Korea, North America and northern Europe, there is now also a surge in budding students from Mediterranean countries like Italy, Greece and Israel. And it's not only alternative therapists who are coming — these days interest in TCM is also growing among Western medical professionals.

Dr Anthony Jahn, a 59-year-old ear, nose and throat surgeon, specialises in treating professional singers and is medical director at the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Following an interest in TCM that began some time ago, Jahn began





studying acupuncture two years ago and has had two stints at Chengdu TCM University. Now incorporating acupuncture into his treatment, Jahn explains that using TCM increases the options he can give his patients. "I have something different to offer patients who have become frustrated with Western treatments," he says.

It's this frustration that's partly responsible for the rising popularity of TCM outside China. "A lot of people have illnesses that can't be treated by Western medicine and they're looking for something else," Harbinson explains. Jahn agrees, arguing that while Western medicine has conquered many of the diseases that were often fatal 100 years ago, it hasn't dealt so well with non-fatal and chronic conditions. "We continue to apply Western technology and pharmacology to conditions like stress, tension, aches and pains. The paradigm doesn't fit," he concludes.

"There's also a growing cynicism of people in white coats — the fact that the Western medical profession is so closely linked to the pharmaceutical companies," Harbinson adds. But for

Laurence Petrovic, an Israeli student currently studying in Chengdu as part of her Diploma of TCM in Jerusalem, the global demand for TCM treatment can be traced to people's desire to have more organic and natural treatments.

"Now more and more Westerners realise TCM has an unparalleled advantage over Western medicine — especially for some chronic diseases, like chronic fatigue syndrome," says Wan. Acupuncture is by far the most popular aspect of TCM with foreigners, but people are becoming more open to treatments such as herbal remedies. Harbinson says many of his patients come for acupuncture and are initially reluctant if he suggests herbal treatments. "Often it takes them two to three weeks to summon up the courage, but once I convince them they're not taking 'dragon's blood' or things like that, they're fine."

This initial suspicion among many Westerners of alternative health therapies is quite an interesting phenomenon. Dr Jahn says that Western medicine is based upon a science that requires medical accountability — that

**Opposite page: Dominic Harbinson learns from the experts in Chengdu's TCM hospital. Above: Chinese pharmacists have prepared traditional herbal medicine in the same way for millennia.**

practitioners have to show evidence their treatment works. "But TCM is the original and oldest body of evidence-based medicine," he explains. "It is based on over 2,000 years of meticulous observation, documenting the direct relationship between cause and effect. This is attractive to many Western physicians."

Along with Beijing, Nanjing and Guangzhou, Chengdu's University of TCM is considered one of China's best, and is regarded very highly among foreign students — particularly for study of herbal treatments, as 80 percent of the herbs used in TCM grow in Sichuan Province. The university organises numerous courses for foreigners, covering a variety of aspects of TCM and ranging in length from one week to three months to a full degree course. Most foreign students study for one to three months, with the courses combining both theory and practical method-





ology in lectures, and time spent in the hospital attached to the university.

The practical sessions are invaluable as students sit in, with the aid of interpreters, on the consultation sessions between doctors and patients in the hospital's outpatient and inpatient clinics. While most students have already studied TCM back in their home country, it is really what they learn in the clinic that is the key to why they come to China.

Dr Pu Yi is an acupuncture specialist who has been lecturing foreign students in Chengdu for the past six years. She has also lectured in Europe, and recently completed her PhD. Pu Yi says what the students really learn in China that they can't learn at home is TCM's holistic way of thinking. "Because Chinese medicine is not focused solely on the disease but on the person and (their) surrounding circumstances, when they come here they can see how the doctors fit everything together."

"What you get in China is the clinical and cultural context in which acupuncture has developed," Jahn

explains. "Although you can learn in theory from books, you need to experience how patients are actually diagnosed and treated in China."

Harbinson says the learning curve in China is greatly multiplied because of the greater volume of patients you're exposed to. "It's really the intensity of it. I've studied herbs for two years, but the number of patients you'd see in a week back in the UK you'd see in one morning here."

Petrovic says that her college back in Israel has integrated study in China into the diploma course she is studying. "Of course not everyone can (afford to) come, but they really encourage you," she says. For her, not only does studying in China give her greater knowledge of TCM, but also a greater understanding of Chinese culture. The two are invariably linked, she explains. "I think if I understand their culture, I will understand TCM far better."

Just as Western universities have realised the economic benefits to be gained from the huge numbers of Chinese who head off to study abroad

Clockwise from left: A little help with the homework; exact proportions are vital to a treatment's efficacy; at the hospital an Israeli student gets some first-hand experience of the finer points of Chinese massage.

each year, so TCM units in universities like Chengdu's also understand the potential of the foreign student market. There are plans for expansion of courses and facilities, but economics is not the sole motivation in inviting students to the university. Pu Yi explains that most people involved in TCM have a deep passion for it and are delighted to pass on their knowledge. And it's not really such a new thing. "It's our tradition to share," she says. "We've been sharing TCM for over 1,000 years — first with Japan, Korea, and even Marco Polo."

That the world is now coming back to China and actively seeking out ways to apply this age-old, priceless knowledge on a global level, speaks volumes about the value of keeping traditions alive — especially when the benefits are so curative. □

Dragonair flies twice a day to Chengdu.