

Chinese Gynaecology

‘Chinese gynaecology’ means the diagnosis and treatment of physical and emotional problems peculiar to women by the application of the theories and techniques of traditional Chinese medicine. Gynaecology was established as an official medical specialty during the Song dynasty over one thousand years ago, although individual specialists had practiced Chinese gynaecology for centuries before that time. The principles and methods used then have undergone centuries of clinical evaluation and refinement with human patients, spurred into recent breakthroughs by the contact with and synthesis of certain techniques of Western medicine.

Comparison of Chinese and Western gynaecology immediately reveals three major areas of difference; the diagnosis, the treatment, and the problems to which they are applicable.

Taking the last area first will go a long way toward explaining the reasons for the difference of the other two. Western gynaecology, and indeed Western medicine, deals in general with problems of structure, ‘organic’ diseases detectable by visual or microscopic examination of the tissues of the organs involved. Treatment consists of repair, excision, or replacement of the diseased tissue, or identification and destruction of an invading pathogen. The advantages of such an approach are certainty of diagnosis when the tissues have in fact already been affected, and focussed treatment. The disadvantages of this approach become apparent when the disease has not yet reached the stage of tissue damage, in which case diagnostic tests are often inconclusive, and treatment hampered or impossible because of the inability to define just what the problem is.

It is precisely this area, however, to which Chinese gynaecology, and Chinese medicine in general, addresses itself; the realm of ‘functional’ disorder, a lack of coordination somewhere in the vast, finely-tuned biosystem of the body, which may not as yet have perceptibly damaged the body structurally. Endometriosis, for example, does not just happen overnight, as it were. In Chinese gynaecology, attention is directed to the regularity, amount, colour, and texture of the menstrual flow, and abnormalities corrected as they arise. P.M.S. and period pain are considered pathological in China, and are treated, and cured.

RANGE OF APPLICATION

Chinese gynaecology traditionally have four areas of concern:

Menstrual disorders
Vaginal discharge
Obstetrics
Post-partum difficulties

- Menstrual disorders include shortened or lengthened cycle, irregularity, excess or insufficient amount of flow, amenorrhea, dysfunctional uterine bleeding, P.M.S., period pain, infertility, and symptoms at the menopause.

- Discharge involves vaginal infection, inflammation, and itching.
- Chinese obstetrics, while nowadays relinquishing supervision of delivery to Western medicine, concerns itself with functional problems in pregnancy such as morning sickness, threatened abortion, abdominal or lumbar pain, fluid retention, hypertension, pre-eclampsia, urinary dysfunction, foetal malposition, and difficult or extended labour.
- Post-partum difficulties include lochia retention, vaginal bleeding, nightsweats, fever, abdominal pain, constipation, impeded or uncontrollable urine flow, anaemia, generalized aching of the joints, and deficient or excessive lactation.
- A fifth miscellaneous category includes such commonly seen complaints as abdominal mass (which includes endometriosis), prolapsed uterus, and emotional disturbances – for example, symptoms such as ‘hysterical’ throat obstruction).

Length of a course of treatment ranges from as short as one or two weeks in cases like simple vaginal discharge, to three or four months for dysmenorrhea, or even up to a year or longer in treatments for endometriosis or infertility. Yet while on average treatments may be slower than with Western medicine because of the more conservative methods employed by the physicians of Chinese gynaecology, and while no treatment, Western or Chinese, can ever claim 100% success, still it is generally conceded that of all the departments of Chinese medicine, gynaecology obtains the best results.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis in Chinese gynaecology does not involve a gynaecological examination as performed in Western gynaecology, although the findings of such exams are taken into account in determining the nature of the problem (especially in modern Chinese gynaecology). This is because the results of such an exam describe the status of the **structure** of the tissues examined, while as we have seen the interest of the Chinese physician is directed primarily at the status of the **functioning** of the organism.

It is as if a house were inhabited by a quarrelling family. One would like to intervene **before** the structure of the house was damaged, the windows smashed, doors ripped from their hinges. And the earlier the intervention, the less drastic it need be. If one waits, however, until the house is burning down, a whole team of experts may be necessary to save it – or a part of it.

Diagnosis of the functioning of the organism involves attention to the symptoms of the patient: what kind of pain or tension, where, and when; the presence or absence of thirst, perspiration, dizziness, tinnitus, emotional upset or stress; attention to food intake; functioning of bowels and urination; the menstrual flow; the condition of the home and work environment, etc.

These findings are combined with observations made by the physician of the complexion and build of the patient, the tongue, and later palpation of the pulse at

both wrists, and possibly palpation of specific points around the body which become characteristically tender in certain diseases.

The correlation of all the results of such a procedure is accomplished by means of Chinese medical theory. While the terms employed may sound prosaic in translation, they are in fact technical descriptions of the functional status of the organism, with precise definition and applications. The use of these technical terms allows the choice to be made of therapeutic agents whose function is described in similar terms.

For example, a woman with dysmenorrhea may complain of cold aching pain in the abdomen before and during her periods, coupled with a clotted unsteady menstrual flow, slow pulse, and a white tongue coat. Such a woman may be described as suffering from 'Cold in the uterus' – a highly unusual diagnosis from a Western point of view, but one which in Chinese medicine terms allows the selection of herbs with a 'warming' action or a technique such as moxibustion, which can then be applied in such a way as to relieve the woman's pain and prevent its recurrence.

TREATMENT

Nor are these the only options. Chinese medicine has a wide range of therapeutic technique at its disposal, including herbs, acupuncture, moxibustion, diet, massage, and specialized exercises, some of which involve breath training. Each of these techniques is a field of study with its own specialists, although the training of every Chinese doctor includes at least some introduction to their principles and applications.

Herbs, however, and acupuncture, are by far the predominant modes of therapy in Chinese medicine. Herbs can be applied in decoction (like soups), in powders, pills, plasters, tinctures, and syrups. Modern dosage forms include 'instant' preparations, ampoules, capsules, and even I.V. drip for emergencies. The most common form, however, remains the decoction.

Chinese herbs are rarely prescribed singly. Following diagnosis, a standard formula is chosen for the condition, and then 'sculpted' by the addition or deletion of different but related herbs until the prescription exactly suits the state of the individual patient. The effect of the prescription upon the patient is determined at the next consultation and the herbs again adjusted accordingly.

For the reasons outlined above, Chinese gynaecology can be seen to provide a viable complement to Western medicine, in an area where it is much needed. It supplies a comprehensive framework for the classification and treatment of the 'vague' amorphous symptoms accompanying a functional disorder, by re-establishing the proper functioning of the organism with methods both more gentle and more subtle than contemporary medicine can offer. Moreover, when necessary, its non-invasive, conservative treatment combines well with Western medical techniques, as for example in the treatment of structural diseases or the side effects of more drastic therapies.