

University of Westminster's Summer School in Taiwan



Steve Woodley

From the 24th August to 10th September 2018 two colleagues and myself embarked on a journey to Taiwan where we took part in the University of Westminster's Summer School program. In the weeks prior to this we had seen some of the Taiwanese students come to the polyclinic in Westminster to observe how we practiced Chinese medicine in England and this was the opportunity for us to see how it is practiced in China Medical University Hospital in Taichung. Such exchange programs are not unusual for acupuncture graduates but what made ours unique was that we were all graduates of the MSc Chinese Herbal Medicine program and were going to observe how herbal medicine is practiced as well as acupuncture and Tui Na. This meant we also had some unique visits to places of herbal interest such as visiting one of the sites where herbs were cultivated, the factory where Sun Ten develop their powders and to Tzu Chi Buddhist hospital where care is approached from a different perspective to the standard hospital.

China Medical University Hospital, Taichung

Our first impression of the hospital in Taichung was how large and organised it was. Unlike the small privately run clinics you find in England, these were hospitals, on the same size and scale that you would expect from western medical hospital with wards, consulting offices and specialist clinics. By the same token the workload of doctors was similar with appointments being carried out in 5-10 minutes as the doctor would ask a few questions and check the tongue and pulse, while simultaneously updating their record on a database and

making modifications to their formula. Formulas would be sent straight to a dispensary where they would be packed and ready to collect in minutes while the acupuncture doctors would often only insert the needles before moving onto the next patient, leaving the activation of heat lamps, electro devices and the removal of needles to interns. One of the acupuncture doctors treated 60 patients in 3 hours, an average of 3 minutes per patient as we went from cubicle to cubicle!



Us with Dr. Lee, the fastest needle in the East

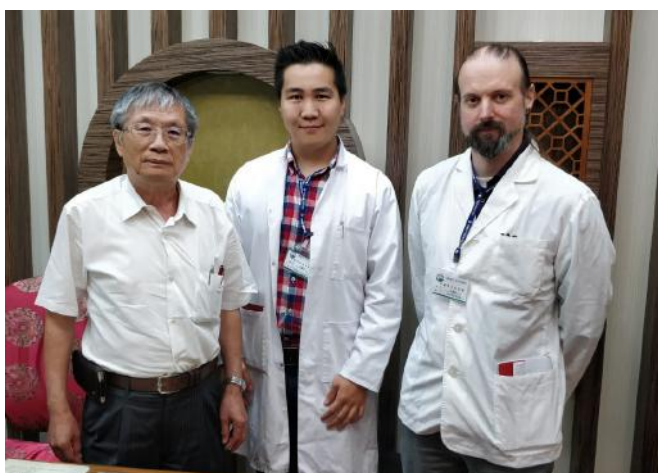
Within the traumatology wards we saw a mixture of herbal, acupuncture and manual techniques. Being too rushed for time for massage there was often a few chiropractic manipulations performed first followed by acupuncture. While herbs might be prescribed internally to assist in an injury their main use was in acute stages of injury where various pastes and plasters were made

in large batches and applied to patients. In one end of the ward there was also a fumigation area where injured limbs could be placed over steamed herbal decoctions.



Jin Huang Gao (Golden Yellow Plasters) being prepared in the traumatology dept.

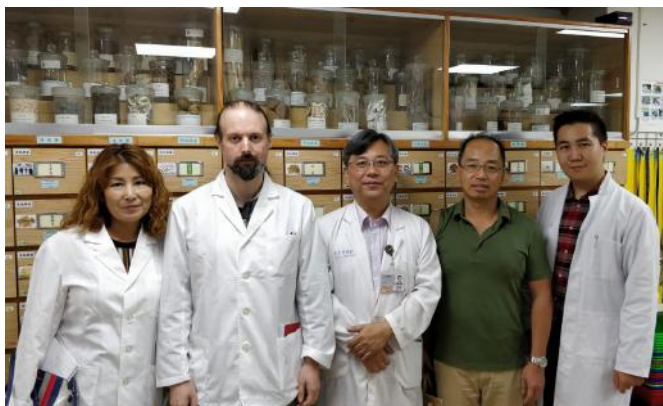
Understanding what was written was often a challenge for us but the doctors and students would translate the basics and we started to develop a game of working out the formula and herbs based on characters we recognised and had seen before. The interns were always willing to help if we got stuck and would check on us regularly, often surprised we understood as much as we did! Others would write some notes in English, especially one of the senior doctors who learned to practice before there were computers and found it easier to type in English than learn to type in Chinese.



Dr Huang, one of the most senior TCM doctors at CMU Hospital

The level of integration was impressive. Several of the doctors were trained and licensed to prescribe western medications and Chinese herbs which they used to great effect. In the dermatology clinic we saw patients who would be prescribed topical steroids in order to stop the immediate inflammation, itching and resulting damage to the skin but would also be prescribed herbal formulas to address the internal imbalance. In the diabetes clinic we observed the reverse: insulin being used to manage the inability to produce their own in Type 1 patients while herbal medicines were prescribed for the peripheral symptoms such as improving the blood circulation and preventing peripheral neuropathies. In the gynaecology and obstetrics clinic the doctor was called in by the staff of the western hospital down the road where she visited the mother of a newborn baby to prescribe herbs for her post-natal sitting period. I also met some western medical students doing observations in the traditional hospital who told me it was a requirement of their medical training to understand the basics of traditional medicine. They may not wish to practice it but since many of their patients will be taking herbs and receiving acupuncture it is considered important that they know how it works. This has long been a matter of contention among doctors in the UK where the number of patients using complementary medicine is rising but medical training does not include the effects and possible interactions of herbal medicines.

On one of the days we were able to see the dispensary at work. Like the doctors they worked at an incredible pace getting prescriptions out within 10 minutes of receiving them. Many Taiwanese doctors work on formulas rather than composing individual prescriptions from single herbs which meant that entire formulas were prepared as powders in advance with individual herbs added as necessary. Bar coding systems were in place to make sure that the correct herb, as entered in the prescription, was being dispensed. The herbs would be placed into big troughs where they would be measured out and dispensed into sachets of individual doses. To the rear of the room was an area where dried herb prescriptions were prepared on a large table on big sheets of paper so piles of each individual herb could be seen and checked before being wrapped. In an adjoining room was an area where cookers would decoct the dried herbs and dispense them into sealed packs for ease of consumption. Around the walls were drawers containing the dried herbs and cabinets where specimens of rare and unusual herbs were on display. Here we were able to see some of the substances that I had only read about in books but never seen in the UK.



Dispensary room

On Site at a Herbal Plantation

Our first field trip took place on 31st August to a plantation where herbs were grown for medical use. In particular they were trying to grow *shi hu* (*Dendrobium Herba*) which is an orchid that grows on the bark of areca nut palms. This was being cultivated by grafting them onto the bark. Great care was taken to find the exact conditions where it would grow best while being above the numerous surrounding tea and fruit plantations so that the pesticides used on the commercial crop did not run down and contaminate the medicine.



Shi hu (*Dendrobium Nobile*) being cultivated on areca palms

Once this process had been explained to us we were taken on a tour of medicines that were grown in other nearby fields. These included herbs such as *jie geng* (*Platycodon grandiflorus*), *zhi zi* (*Gardenia jasminoides*), *shan yao* (*Dioscorea opposita*), *long yan* (*Dimocarpus longan*) and even a curcuma plant in full bloom that we

stumbled on growing by the side of the road. To finish we ended up in a tea room where we were served tea by a master of the tradition.



Jiang huang (*Curcuma longa*) growing by the roadside

Tzu Chi Hospital

Tzu Chi was a very different hospital to the main teaching hospital in Taichung. Founded by Chen Yen, a Buddhist nun, the hospital's philosophy stems from a position of compassion and showed how much of a difference philosophy makes in medicine. From the architecture of the building that looked more like a giant temple, to the spacious interior with Buddhist murals on the walls and ceilings, to the horticultural gardens where patients were encouraged to grow herbs like lemongrass, and to the accommodating nature of the staff, the entire approach seemed more relaxed and focused on allowing people to heal. Here we saw how much of a difference can be made if we just change our approach, even if we are still using the same tools.



Tzu Chi hospital



**The Staff and Our Guides at Tzu Chi Hospital
in Front of a Large Buddhist Mural**

The aim of integrating modern and traditional medicine was still a strong theme of the hospital. Not only did they offer both kinds of medicine in the same hospital but they also employed some fascinating technologies to advance traditional diagnostics to a more scientific level. One room was a dedicated “tongue photography room” where the lighting could be controlled so that a large database of tongue images taken under controlled conditions could be kept. There was even a pulse taking machine which could provide a readout of your health based on the previous data that it had collected! They showed us how both of these worked using us as subjects

Sun Ten Pharmaceuticals

Our last field trip was to the Sun Ten Pharmaceutical manufacturing facility where the powders used in most Taiwanese prescriptions are prepared. Although we did get to see some of the vats and conveyor belts through a window we were not actually able to see them in action due to the highly controlled nature of the process. Instead we were led through a tour by representatives of the company where the process was explained and we could ask questions about the sourcing, identification and preparation of herbs into powders.



**Visit to Sun Ten Pharmaceutical
Manufacturing Facility**

Final Remarks

This brief article covers the main purpose of our trip but it seems amiss not to mention all the other aspects of Taiwan which made it so extraordinary. The people were exceptionally friendly and always helpful. Even in Taichung, where English was not always spoken, especially among the older population, we found no shortage of willingness to communicate and make us feel welcome. I recall one woman in a cafe where we stopped to try some of Taiwan’s famous beef noodle soup accosting some school children who were regulars at her establishment and drafting them in as translators.

On the theme of food there was not anything we tried there that we did not like provided you were willing to put some trust in the chef and be willing to try something different. On a couple of occasions our hosts put on lavish feasts that could last all evening. The street food was generally good too with a mixture that reflected Taiwan’s geography with influence from Chinese, Japanese and Korean food. Naturally there were a few things that were an acquired taste (and smell) such as the notorious Stinky Tofu which our guides laughed about from the day we arrived and eventually got us to try at one of the night market street stalls: all I shall say is that it is not a taste I have acquired yet!

And finally there was the country itself. On our times off from the hospital observations we managed to visit Sun Moon Lake, a place of extraordinary natural beauty. There we had lunch by the lake, took a boat across the water and went up in a cable car with a glass bottom where we could look out across the entire lake.



A starter prepared with flowers



A fish dish prepared as part of a feast



Some of the local food



A View from a Cable Car
Over Sun Moon Lake



Part of the Garden at Guandu Temple, Taipei

We also finished our stay with a few days in Taipei where we were able to see the city from the top of the Taipei 101 skyscraper and have a day exploring the Daoist temples. Small ones were often scattered around the landscape, sometimes inside doorways or even in a corner of a shop but some of the larger ones were built into the landscape with sculpted gardens that had incredible views.

It is almost impossible to convey the experience of visiting Taiwan in just words and pictures but hopefully I have managed to give some impression of what it was like. Professionally and personally it was an experience I will never forget and would recommend it to anyone thinking of going.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Anthony Booker and the University of Westminster; China Medical University with particular mention to Winder Chang, Su-Yin Chiang and our guide "Robert"; Tzu Chi Hospital; Sun Ten Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd and Herbprime UK for their hospitality and making the whole trip happen. I would also like to thank my colleagues Jane Melling and Belgude Munkhtulga for use of their photos, help with the travel arrangements and generally making the trip more fun.

Steve Woodley has been interested in perspectives on health and the body from other cultures since studying anthropology at UCL in the late 90s. He worked in the body art industry while studying acupuncture, graduating in 2007, then qualifying in tui na in 2012 and completing his masters degree in Chinese Herbal Medicine at Westminster in 2016. He is particularly interested in areas where modern theories are rediscovering or validating ancient practices. He currently lives and works in north west London.

Winder Chang, Director of the International Student Centre at China Medical University presenting us with our certificates of attendance

