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THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE

BY THE

CHINESE IN AMERICA.

By STEWART CULIN, of Philadelphia, Pa.

Many of the Chinese stores in our American cities keep a supply of Chinese drugs, and all of them sell Chinese proprietary medicines, such as pills to aid digestion, the "red pills,"* *Shá hi ün*† for cholera, catarrh snuff, and other specifics compounded in the Canton drug shops. These are always neatly packed and labeled, and accompanied with printed directions for their use.

But there is often a regular drug business, usually carried on by a separate company, in the stores, and a supply of drugs comprising many, if not all, of those called for in their practice, contained in numerous boxes and drawers on one side of their shops. Here, often, a Chinese doctor, usually some poor and broken-down student, who ekes out a living by assisting at the drainings of the lottery, has his office.

With a desire to learn something of the method of treatment and obtain some practical knowledge of the Chinese *materia medica*, I recently called upon a doctor connected with one of the principal Chinese stores in Philadelphia, and requested him to prescribe for a cold on the chest from which I was suffering.

The doctor was a pleasant-mannered man of about forty years of age. Resting my hand upon a book, he carefully felt my pulse, first on the left wrist and then on the right, delicately compressing the artery and gradually relaxing the pressure. Then, without inquiring about the symptoms of my complaint, he wrote the prescription, a fac simile of which is herewith reproduced.



* The red pills, *shá hi ün*, spoken of by the Abbé Huc and other travelers, are highly esteemed among the Chinese here as a specific for diarrhœa and bowel complaints. Their entire composition is a secret, but they are known to contain calomel and the aromatic root of a water plant, *she hêung*.

A ball of earth called *sh m s t*, "toad butter," which the toad carries in his mouth during the dry time in autumn (sic), is reputed to form an active ingredient in the *shá hi ün*. They are said to lose their virtues after being kept longer than a year.

† In the absence of Chinese type, the Chinese words are rendered in the English equivalents of the Canton dialect, according to S. Wells Williams.

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The fifteen medicines called for are all of vegetable origin. The following transcription of their names, with some notes on their properties, and the quantities indicated in the prescription, may not be without interest.*

Shan yu (a root highly valued as an aphrosidiac, said to have received its name from Ho Shau Wu, a resident of Szechuen, who lived unmarried until the age of 54 years, when he discovered the peculiar qualities of this root. He then married and had several children, and his life was prolonged by its use to the ripe age of 110 years). 4 *ts' ín* (15.08 grams.)

Un chi (a root from Szechuen, a tonic), 2 *ts' ín* (7.54 grams).

Kau chaok (a plant of hair at crown of root from Fukien province) 4 *ts' ín* (15.08 grams).

Kat kang (belwort, root of the *Platycodon grandiflorum*, a tonic and stomachic), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

Pak chenk (root of *Pœnia albiflora*, a tonic, sedative, and alterative), 2 *ts' ín* (7.54 grams).

Pak shnt (a sweetish sort of root; a tonic much valued as an aid to digestion; from Chéhkiang province), 2 *ts' ín* (7.54 grams).

Ts' z' shat (the seeds of the *Euryale ferox*; a tonic; from Kiang-su province), 4 *ts' ín* (15.08 grams).

Ch' ün pui (a demulcent; from Szechuen province), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

Un ts' am (a root used to check internal hemorrhage and for coughs and colds; from Chéh kiang province), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

Chák sé (a root taken for diseases of the kidneys, as its name implies, a diuretic), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

Ts' un k' an (dried roots of the *Gendarussa*, given in cases of rheumatism and fever), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

Tsò yan (seeds of a species of *Rhamnus*, probably the *Rhamnus soporiferus*, a soporific), 2 *ts' ín* (7.54 grams).

Tung fa, "Winter flower" (flowers of a plant resembling the chrysanthemum) 4 *ts' ín* (15.08 grams).

Song pak (the white skin from the roots of the mulberry tree), 4 *ts' ín* (15.08 grams).

Han p'ok, "thick bark" (the bark of a tree from Szechuen), 3 *ts' ín* (11.31 grams).

A clerk in the store weighed out the different articles with a small Chinese balance, and deposited them together on a piece of paper, first powdering the *ch' ün pui* in an iron mortar, and roasting the *tsò yan* in a pan; the *pak chenk* was moistened with whisky before being placed with the mass. All was then put in a pot with four large cups full of cold water, and boiled for half an hour. The decoction I was enjoined to drink warm before going to bed.

Should this medicine have failed to relieve me, the doctor, upon my next visit, would have varied his prescription. The charge for the medicine was fifty cents, the price of each ingredient being computed separately. The doctor's fee was one dollar, this being the usual charge for each consultation. Their expenses are paid when they make visits at a distance.

The doctors, called *i shang*, of whom there are now four in Philadelphia, are usually from the *Sam Yap*, or "Three Districts," immediately adjacent to Canton city. They are much better educated than the mass of the people. None of any repute at home come to America, but it is said there are several very skillful ones in San Francisco and some of the western cities, who have a large practice among Americans. Those in New York and Philadelphia rank very low in their profession, in the estimation of their countrymen. They are all dignified with the title of *sin shang*, equivalent to master or teacher, the only title of respect current among the Chinese in the American cities, and shared with the men who manage the drawings of the lotteries.

A slight knowledge of medicine is general among the people. They have been accustomed to take medicines from their childhood, when their mothers, by a kind of sortilege, selected some simple prescription to relieve their infantile complaints. The study of the physician's art is not confined to their doctors. Many others buy and read works on the subject that are sold in their stores, in which very exact directions are given for the treatment of all the diseases known to them.

The book generally referred to is the *Tsung e kam kám*, or "The Golden Mirror of Medicine," a collection of medical works compiled by order of the Emperor Kienlung, in 1740. The Canton reprint sold here is contained in forty small octavo volumes, the first thirty of which are devoted to *nui fo*, or "internal medicine," while the remaining ten comprise the *Kam kám ngoi fo*, or "Golden Mirror of External Practice," by 'Ng Him. The price of the complete set here is about $2.25.

* The writer is indebted to the Catalogue of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Collection at the United States International Exhibition, 1876, *Shanghai* 1876, for much of the information used in preparing these notes.

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While the Chinese in our eastern cities are superstitious, and cherish many of their native beliefs, they do not worship any particular god of medicine, and the practice of medicine among them is comparatively free from superstitious observances. Sick people sometimes burn copies of the charms found in the popular works on divination and magic, and drink tea made from the ashes, but this is done with very little serious belief in the efficacy of such treatment.

In cases of prolonged illness, a friend of the sick person is sometimes sent to the local shrine of Kwan tai, the divinity generally worshiped, to burn incense and ask the will of heaven as to his recovery by throwing the divining sticks.

Diseases which do not succumb to the treatment after being correctly diagnosed and the right medicine administered, are looked upon as due to the influence of a spirit or devil. Hysteria is generally regarded as an evidence of demoniac possession.

The people as a class are very healthy; venereal diseases and the complaints resulting from an excessive use of opium are the most common. They call upon their own doctors when ill, but are much averse to taking foreign medicines or submitting to the treatment prescribed by American physicians. They regard opium as a specific for colds and many complaints, and in slight disorders resort to their pipe before consulting a doctor. Chinese ginseng is highly valued for its supposed strengthening and life prolonging qualities (it is not looked upon as an aphrodisiac), and is taken in the form of pills or made into a tea by many of the older men in the spring of the year. American ginseng is seldom if ever used here.

Calomel is prescribed in syphilitic diseases. Quinine is known as *kam kai náp*, doubtless a Chinese transcription of *cinchona* and that sold in their stores is imported from China. It is prescribed for violent chills, and is looked upon as a very strong and dangerous medicine. With a few exceptions, mineral remedies are seldom employed, and roots, barks, and herbs, administered in the form of teas, constitute the principal drugs used. Many of these are not regarded as possessing any particular virtues, and some are retained solely through a tradition of cures once effected by them. Custom has ordained that a prescription shall contain a number of ingredients, of which, may be, two or three only are considered to have any direct effect.

The doctors show much solicitude about administering any medicine that may cause a fatal result, owing, no doubt, to the penalties inflicted in China upon such misadventures, so that their treatment in general, if not beneficial, does no particular harm to their patients.

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