

# Itinerant doctors in Chinese history

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## Abstract

This article examines the activities and skills of itinerant doctors in Chinese history and reflects on their gradual transition into a class of itinerant artisans, in parallel with the development of society. It notes that despite the fact that some were quacks who professed to work miracles, with their own secret language, itinerant doctors also gained valuable experience which has been largely overlooked in modern times.

The “barefoot doctors” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose image has been so popularised by Western proponents of traditional Chinese medicine, were perhaps not such an innovation, but more a modern instance of an ancient tradition. Chinese itinerant doctors, or *zou fang yi*, are known to have been in existence for more than 2,000 years, practising medicine in the course of their countryside travels. Their name translates literally as “wandering doctors”, but they were also known as *ling yi* (bell doctors), *cao ze yi* (country doctors), and *jiang hu yi* (doctors who pass over rivers and lakes) – alternative names which reflect their activities and modus operandi.

Official reports about itinerant doctors date from as early as the 13th century. Some formally educated doctors of the time are on record as believing that the healing art of these itinerants was based on deceit and ignorance. A document from 1265 states:

“In bazaars and other places where many people congregate, one can find types of false doctors and medicine sellers ... they handle snakes and feathered creatures ... ring little bells, read cards, and play the fish-shaped drum [of the Buddhists]. In this way, they attract great crowds who they convince deceitfully of the miraculous effects of their remedies.”

But by the time these comments were made, the itinerant doctors were already solidly established, probably having formed the majority of healers for quite some time, although the lack of literature by – and about – them makes it difficult to state dates with certainty.

## Emergence of a unique therapeutic base

What is known historically is that, during the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), imperial doctors had been recruited from among just such itinerant doctors and other folk doctors. Formal medical education did not get under way until 443 CE and became more

rigorous during the Tang dynasty (618-907). The imperial medical office – founded in 624 – was the hospital for the palace, and a medical school, too. Local governments started to imitate this system, but the majority of doctors continued to learn within the family or follow in the traditional master-disciple lineage for some time after this. And some of these were itinerant doctors.

It is really from the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279) that the itinerant doctors became formed into a distinct entity of peripatetic healers. Collectively, they did not possess a formal education. They learned their skills from their fathers, or from a master. Their method of serving the public was to travel carrying a medicine bag, or medicine gourd or – as their critics noted – to find a place in a bazaar where they could offer their skills. They would announce their arrival or presence by rattling a hollow iron ring, or beating a drum, or simply walking the streets and proclaiming the beneficial effects of their medicine out loud. It was during the Song period that the so-called “father” of the itinerant doctor, Li Ci Kou, lived.

The itinerant doctor started to appear in the fictions of the Song dynasty too. In the novel *Yi Jian Zhi*, written by Hong Mai (1123-1202), a woman named Zhang was taught by an itinerant doctor and went on to become a famous doctor with expertise in treating carbuncles and boils with surgery.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the itinerant doctors were favoured by a government law which stipulated that the descendant of a doctor’s family should continue the profession, in a fashion similar to that pursued by other contemporary artisans. Fortunately for the itinerant doctors, the Ming (1368-1644) government perpetuated that ruling.

In the novel *Lao Can You Ji*, written by Liu E (1857-1909) at the end of the Qing Dynasty, the author records that Chinese medicine doctors had become divided into three types: *zuo tang yi* – doctors who

## Itinerant doctors through the age

### The master of all trades

Bian Que (407<sub>BCE</sub>-310<sub>BCE</sub>), the legendary doctor who lived during the Warring States period, practised medicine while travelling extensively through a number of states. He was known to change his speciality from one region to the next. When Bian Que visited the city of Handan, where women were held in high regard, he became a gynaecologist. When he visited Luoyang, a city where elderly people were valued and revered, he became a geriatric doctor. And, when he visited the state of Qin, which he found to be an area where children were cherished, he became a paediatrician.

### The doctor of principle

Hua Tuo (145-203) - well known to acupuncturists from the points that bear his name - was an itinerant doctor, according to the book *Chuan Ya* (one of the few books about itinerant doctors). He was famed throughout China, and was asked to be the personal physician to General Cao Cao, who was the *de facto* ruler of the country at that time. Hua Tuo refused, as punishment for which he was put to death.

### The pulse specialist

Wang Shuhe (210-280), the author of *Mai Jing* (the classic work on the pulse) was an itinerant doctor before he was appointed as *tai yi ling*, the person in charge of imperial doctors - and equal in status to the president of the national hospital in the system in current times

### The skin expert

Bao Gu (309-363) was widely known as an excellent female doctor in her time. She travelled through mountains and across rivers to collect herbs and practise medicine in what is now Guangdong province. There are many records of her medical practice in local historical books in Nan Hai, Fan Yu, Guangzhou, Hui Zhou, Hui Yang and Bo Luo. She was especially accomplished in the treatment by moxibustion of skin warts and skin tumours. Her husband, Ge Hong, wrote the book *Zhou Hou Fang*: of 109 formulae covered in that work, 99 relate to treatment by moxibustion.

### The tiger tamer

Li Cikou, from the Song dynasty (960-1279), is honoured as being the 'father' of the itinerant doctor. Legend has it that he frequently travelled far into the mountains. Once, he encountered a tiger that had a thorn in its mouth, and was seeking help. Li Cikou placed an iron ring in the tiger's mouth, between the teeth, in order to pull out the thorn. That iron ring was later called 'tiger sting' and became the symbol of itinerant doctors. The ring was made into a hollow rattle with which the itinerant doctor could create the sound characteristic for his guild. This rattling sound would announce his arrival as he travelled the roads.

### The collector

Li Shizhen (1518-1593) was born into a doctor's family: his grandfather was an itinerant doctor. His father was able to settle in one town in Hubei province and became famous throughout that area. When he was writing the book *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, Li Shizhen travelled to many mountainous regions and wild forests in search of herb samples. During his travels, he also gained medical experience from local woodchoppers, hunters, wheelers, cobblers, mountain dwellers and other country folk.

### The patent king

Lin Junrong settled in the village of Lu Cuo in Guangdong province and opened the *chang an tang* herbal store during the reign of Emperor Kang Xi (1661-1722). The patents he made, such as *Yan Yao San* (eye illness powder) and *Shi Ji Shang Pi San* (food stagnation spleen disorder powder), were well known for their effectiveness. His family continued to practise medicine in the village for more than 280 years. The herbal bag and rattle ring which Lin used as an itinerant doctor hung on display in the herbal store throughout those years.

### The imperial graduate

Le Zunyu opened the herbal pharmacy Tong Ren Tang - which has remained famous for more than 300 years - in 1669. The Le family started out as itinerant doctors. Le Zunyu was then able to serve in the imperial doctors' office, before opening his herbal store to sell pills, powders and other remedies, based on the secret formulae of his family and those of the imperial palace.

### The snake doctor

Ji Desheng, the Snake Doctor (1898-1981), followed his father to desolate and uninhabited mountains throughout his childhood, to catch snakes and collect centipedes, scorpions and herbs to make snake-bite pills. They often travelled to various village and towns to display snakes and sell their pills. After his father died, Ji further improved the family snake-bite pill by experimenting with snake bites on himself. The 'Ji Desheng Snake Pill' he developed is on record as having a curative rate of more than 99 per cent. In 1956, he gave up his wandering lifestyle, and took up work in Tan Tong Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital.

### The miracle worker

Qu Huanzhang (1880-1938) studied with itinerant doctor Yao Lianjun, travelling to many mountainous regions to study and collect herbs. Later he invented *Qu Shi Bai Yao Bai Bao Dan*, which has impressive - some would say almost miraculous - effects on trauma. In 1956, his wife presented the secret formula to Kun Ming Medical Company, which now produces the pill under the famous name of *Yun Nan Bai Yao*.

practised in their herbal store; *gua pai yi* – doctors who had a clinic without a herbal store; and *zou fang yi* – itinerant doctors who did not have a fixed clinic and travelled among the towns and villages. (This may well reflect the divisions in medical practice during the Song dynasty, in Li Ci Kou's heyday.)

### Acupuncture, herbs and incantations

The itinerant doctors treated both internal and external illnesses by various methods, with many of which we are still familiar, such as acupuncture, moxibustion, cupping, plaster application, navel herbal application, hot compresses etc. They were known especially for their effectiveness in four areas of treatment:

- pulling teeth
- healing skin blemishes, including wounds, scabies, tinea (ringworm), tumours, naevi (raised birthmarks or moles) etc.
- removing clouding of the eye (cataracts)
- expelling worms

The herbs they used could be in the form of a single inexpensive herb, or a formula, combining herbs using special preparation methods.

The itinerant doctors developed four treatment principles: Jie, Chuan, Ding and Jin.

'Jie' means 'to stop the symptoms quickly' (this does not appear to have an exact equivalent in accepted traditional Chinese herbal medicine today – perhaps "harmonising" or He Fa would be closest.) This was the principle most commonly used by itinerant doctors. Malaria, for example, was treated with Chang Shan (*Dichroae Radix*) and Cao Guo (*Tsaoko Fructus*); epilepsy with a pill made of Yu Jin (*Curcumae Radix*) and Ming Fan (*Alum*), and naevus with paste made from fresh Wei Ling Xian (*Clematidis Radix*) decoction, mulberry tree ash and efflorescent limestone.

'Ding' means 'to move upward and cause vomiting' (this has its parallel in accepted traditional Chinese medicine in the principle – not now tolerable in the West – of 'vomiting' or Tu Fa.) For instance, *Bi Xia Dan* was indicated to treat stroke, epilepsy, shock or fainting with the following manifestations: phlegm sound in the throat, clenched teeth, eyes rolled back and muscle twitches, etc. The formula consists of Wu Tou Jian, Fu Zi Jian (*Radix Lateralis Aconiti Carmichaeli Praeparata*), Quan Xie Shao (tail of scorpion *Buthus martensi* Karsch) and Shi Lu (*Malachite*). The remedy was to be taken with a Bo He (*Herba Menthae*) decoction and warm wine, to cause the patient to expectorate phlegm.

'Chuan' means 'to purge downward' (this can be compared with 'Draining downward' or Xia Fa in accepted traditional Chinese medicine.) To treat vomiting, oesophageal tumour and various 'accumulations', such as those involving alcohol, parasites, blood, qi and phlegm, for example, *Qian Niu Chuan* was prescribed. It was also used to treat inflamed and painful sores, constipation,

urinary retention, mistakenly swallowed copper or iron objects, etc. The formula contains Bai Qian Niu Zi (*Semen Pharbitidis*, white coloured variety, fried slightly), Bai Bing Lang (*Semen Arecae Catechu*, white coloured variety), Yin Chen Hao (*Artemisiae scoporiae Herba*), E Zhu (*Curcumae Radix*), San Leng (*Sparganii Rhizoma*), and Zao Jiao (*Gleditsia Spina*). These herbs were ground into a powder and then formed into pills by adding vinegar. The instructions were that 9 grams of the pill should be taken at dawn with cold tea. Imbibed in that way, it was intended to remove accumulations and the accompanying symptoms through purgation.

'Jin' means 'to use charms, spells and incantations'. This principle does not have an equivalent in accepted traditional Chinese medicine (and is the one which provided the grounds for the criticisms outlined above, even from more orthodox contemporaries).

The dictum – or marketing strategy – of the itinerant doctors could be summed up in three words: cheap, effective, convenient. They seldom used tonics and did not prescribe herbs for treatments lasting several months, to avoid the risk of comparison between their patients and those who had simply recovered from their disorders naturally, without treatment. They used simple formulae and did not follow the complicated theory of pattern differentiation, nor the standard formula-combination basis of king (monarch/ruler/emperor/chief/principal), minister (deputy/adjutant/associate), assistant (adjutant) and guide (envoy/messenger/conductant). They aimed for an immediate effect, based on their practical experience, without much theorising. Using this simple approach, some itinerant doctors were reputed to have cured illnesses that not even imperial doctors nor famously renowned physicians could remedy.

### Faking it

Some of the formulae used by the itinerant doctors are recorded in the book *Chuan Ya*, written in 1759 by Zhao Xuemin. He points out that many itinerant doctors at that time were actually despised by the public: they travelled about to sell herbs – an activity considered similar to that of beggars; they relied on their skills to gain profit – but their motivation was reckoned to be similar to that of robbers; they often cured simple symptoms, then boasted of their skills, but were adjudged to have failed to cure the underlying problem. However, Zhao also conceded that some of the itinerant doctors' secret skills were effective and did, indeed, work immediately – even though those practitioners might not know why. He talked to one famous itinerant doctor, Zhao Baiyun, and decided that some of his methods could be considered reasonable and to have beneficial effects. Accordingly, he resolved to collect those methods together in the book *Chuan Ya*.

Most of the chapters of *Chuan Ya* are concerned with the effective formulae used by the itinerant doctors. Of

particular interest is the chapter 'Fake Herbs', which lists some of the counterfeit herbs these practitioners used, and the methods of preparing them. A subsequent book, *Chuan Ya Bu*, written by Lu Sanqiao in the late Qing dynasty, also listed some fake herbs. For example, to make fake Niu Huang (Bovis Calculus), one should break Yu Yu Liang (Limonite) lightly, take the core that appears yellow with vague stripes, boil it in a Da Huang (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma) decoction, and then sun-dry it. An interesting aspect of this activity is that the faking of some of the herbs consumed a great deal of time and energy. Yet a number of the fake herbs had similar effects to the genuine ones – and some were even found to work more effectively. That said, it needs to be noted that most of the fake herbs used were not beneficial and could even be harmful. And in the two books mentioned above, the faking methods that are not beneficial are not recorded.

### Guided careers

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, various guilds flourished in parallel with the development of the economy. The itinerant doctors belonged to the guild of itinerant craftsmen and were required to follow the customs of their chosen guild. On arriving in new locations, they would first pay a visit to their fellow craftsmen, so that they could secure a site for their booth, and to be informed about local customs which would help their business. When they were selecting a place for their booth, they would situate themselves alongside their fellow craftsmen, while keeping a certain distance. They would follow the instructions of the guild leader, who would be supervising other types of itinerant craftsmen as well, such as those who sold combs, sweetmeats etc.

The itinerant doctors either simply set up a booth to sell medicine, or, in some cases, would display other skills that might draw a crowd, in order to sell their remedies. There were undoubtedly some excellent healers among the itinerant doctors, but many of them learned only one or two skills – such as reading faces and palms, juggling, or performing martial arts – to make money. Some might decide later on to settle in a promising location and establish a herbal store, as well as a clinic, once they had earned enough money.

### Secret language

The itinerant doctors had their own language, a 'dark speech' (*hei hua*), which they used only among themselves and other itinerant craftsmen. Those who sold medicine among the craftsmen were called *tiao han de*. Among all the *tiao han de*, there were two types: the *jian* were those doctors who could actually cure illnesses, while the *xing* were those who were making money – mainly with all kinds of tricks. Both these types followed the customs of their guild and used 'dark speech'

In 'dark speech' there were names for those selling

energy pills, medicine for toothache, medicine for eye disorders, plasters, and those treating venereal diseases, among others. There were also terms for dressing up as a Daoist or a Buddhist priest, for sharing payments between doctors, for collecting a fortune from people, for coming through a risky situation involving malpractice, and so on.

The itinerant doctors were very adept at using psychological strategies to talk patients into buying their medicines. In some places, as a result, they were called 'itinerant doctors that sell talk'.

### The itinerant doctors today

The itinerant doctors in China gradually disappeared in the 1950s, after the medical licensing system was enforced. Those who were making money without any real skills had no choice but to wind up their businesses. Some of the itinerant doctors with genuine skills went to work with medical companies, to help them produce herbal patents, such as *Yun Nan Bai Yao* and the *Ji De Deng Snake Pill*. Many who still retained knowledge of secret and effective formulae switched to other jobs, with their remedies being used to benefit only a select group of locals, or even disappeared entirely from public view, waiting in the hope that one day they would be rediscovered and once more be able to put their skills to use in their community. ■

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## Tales of unexpected cures

Stories of miraculous treatments by itinerant doctors abound. Whether they are fanciful or not is impossible to say, but they are certainly entertaining, and sometimes enlightening. Here are some of the best known ... See if you can work out the reasons for the cures!

**1** A princess in the Tang dynasty (618-907) suffered from a throat carbuncle for several days. It was so swollen and painful that she could neither drink nor eat. The imperial doctor was called and said that surgery was needed to cut open the carbuncle, to drain off the pus. This frightened the princess and she wept on hearing the doctor's treatment plan. An itinerant doctor was passing the palace and said: "I will not need needles and knives. I will only need to apply some herbs from a tube." The princess was very happy to let him treat her. After the herb had been applied twice, a lot of pus and blood was drained from the carbuncle. Two days later, the carbuncle was healed. How?

**2** The well-known literary scholar Ouyang Xiu, who lived during the Song dynasty (960-1279), suffered from chronic diarrhoea and was treated by many very famous doctors, without effect. One day his wife told him that she had heard there was an itinerant doctor selling herbs for the treatment of diarrhoea on the street, and that the folk prescription might be able to cure severe cases, but Ouyang refused to try it. Instead she invited one of the famous doctors to prescribe a new formula. Ouyang's diarrhoea stopped after only one dose. Why?

**3** A concubine of Emperor Song Hui Zong (1082-1135) suffered from chronic cough, asthma and severe facial oedema. The imperial doctor Li treated her for a while, without effect. The emperor was worried and scorned Li, saying: "If there is still no effect within three days, you will be punished." Li went back home, worried that he might be executed. Next day Li came in with a new formula and gave it to the concubine. After one dose, her cough stopped and her facial oedema also disappeared. The emperor rewarded Li with 1,000 ounces of gold. What was the formula?

**4** An Imperial doctor during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) named Sheng Yin went to the palace herb room one morning and suddenly developed headache and dizziness. None of the other imperial doctors could work out what the problem could be. One itinerant doctor went to treat Sheng Yin and cured him with a single dose of herbs. What was the diagnosis – and the remedy?

**5** Xue Xue (1681-1770), a famous doctor of the Qing dynasty, was invited to treat a woman of more than 60 years of age. She was vomiting faeces and could not find any doctor who could cure her, even though she had seen many. Xue also did not know how to treat her and asked the family to give him a few days to search for an answer. One day, he happened to meet an itinerant doctor and asked him if he could treat this case. The itinerant doctor said that he could not, but his master could, and led Xue to a suburban area to see his old master. The master gave Xue ten doses of a powdered herb named *Yi Wei Tong You San* ('single-herb opening-passageway powder'). After the patient had taken five doses, her illness appeared to have been cured. She had a recurrence the following month, but was then completely cured with the five remaining doses. Which curiously appropriate insect was in the formula?

**6** Empress Ci Xi (1835-1908) was ill after a birthday feast, during the late Qing dynasty. The imperial doctor gave her 'single ginseng decoction', which worked to begin with. But after several days Ci Xi started to have head distension, chest tightness, poor appetite, irritability and nose bleeding. The imperial doctor could not cure her ailment, and posted a notice in the street to the effect that whosoever could cure the empress would be handsomely rewarded. One itinerant doctor came upon the notice, pondered the case for a while, tore off the poster and went to the palace to treat the empress. He handmade three pills, *Xiao Luo Han Wan* (Little Buddha Pill) with 9 grams *Lai Fu Zi* (Raphani Semen) and a small amount of flour and tea. He administered this, with the instruction to take one pill, three times during that day. After Empress Ci Xi had taken one pill, her nose bleeding stopped; on taking the second pill, the distension and tightness was relieved; with the third pill, she started to regain her appetite. What was the itinerant doctor's reward?

## Answers

**1** When asked which formula he had used, the itinerant doctor said that no herb was actually applied: there was just a knife at the centre of the tube to lance the carbuncle to drain the pus. Ouyang's wife asked the servants to buy the herb in the street market surreptitiously and actually made up the folk prescription for him to take.

**2** When asked which formula he had used, the itinerant doctor said that no herb was actually applied: there was just a knife at the centre of the tube to lance the carbuncle to drain the pus. Ouyang's wife asked the servants to buy the herb in the street market surreptitiously and actually made up the folk prescription for him to take.

**3** Li was lucky: on his way home he had substituted it for the famous doctor's formula. Afterwards, he was told the truth. On hearing this, he invited the itinerant doctor to his home, and offered him a good deal of money in exchange for the secret of the formula, which consisted of just one herb – *Qian Zi* (Plantagin's Semen).

## The real hustle: ancient medical malpractice

The itinerant doctors of the *xing* type learned many ploys from their masters. Some do not seem so unfamiliar today. Popular tricks included the following ...

### Mix up effective and ineffective medicines

Say there is an effective formula for cough which contains opium and other ingredients. The itinerant doctor might make some pills containing opium, and some without opium. The two types are mixed together to be sold to the patient. The patient might feel better sometimes, and worse at others, without knowing why. If the patient goes back to the medicine seller, he is told that his problem is serious, and he needs to purchase more pills.

### "Glue a circle"

This is the term to describe the initial drawing together of a crowd of curious onlookers around the doctor by use of his patter or juggling expertise.

### Talk about the causes of illnesses

This was intended as a way of showing how profound the doctor's knowledge was. They needed to be glib and call out loudly. For example, they might state: "There are nine kinds of abdominal pain: food pain causes hiccup; cold pain is due to cold invasion; qi pain is at the hypochondriac region; water pain has a gurgling sound; parasitic pain causes acid reflex; the sixth is Ji pain; the seventh is Ju pain; the eighth is Zheng pain; and the ninth is Jia pain." Confusion was assured.

### Switch over to selling medicine while talking about causes of illnesses

Those who sold medicine for coughs might first talk about the cause of disease, for example: "Cough is cough, phlegm cough is phlegm cough, one has sound without the phlegm, while the other has phlegm without the sound. White phlegm is mild, black phlegm is severe. Do not be afraid of copious phlegm, it is when there is phlegm with blood that one needs to be worried. The worst is yellow phlegm, which may take your life ..." Then the doctor would continue with something like the following: "This is the secret formula handed down from my family for three generations. It contains 36 herbs, without

Niu Huang or Zhen Zhu. All the herbs in it are inexpensive. Folk medicine can treat serious diseases, and cheap herbs can cure chronic illnesses. This can make the famous doctors be abashed to the point of death. My medicine is inexpensive, ten cents for two pills. For severe cough two pills can make it stop, for mild cough just one pill is enough."

### Urge onlookers to buy medicine with "special deals"

A doctor might claim: "My medicine is usually sold at the price of two pills for ten cents. Today, just to get my name known, there will be a 50 per cent discount: four pills for ten cents, for ten people; after that I will still sell two pills for ten cents."

### Look for those who have more money, and double the medicine – and price

The itinerant doctors would sell their medicine to those without much money and send them away. With those who appeared to have more money, they would chat with the patient about their illness, and tell them that a medicine that has twice the effect is available for price X: although it is more expensive, it has a magical effect. When the patient gives the doctor the money for the medicine, the seller will say that X is the price for just one pill, and, for the best effect, the medicine should be taken as two pills together. Therefore the patient needs to pay twice the money.

### Swear an oath or make an invocation that holds no weight or has no possibility of being realised, so it cannot actually hurt the doctor if he is caught out

For example, swear: "If I am cheating, then cold water shall scald me, a lamp wick shall stab me, or a pillow shall strike me dead."

- 6 Feeling very satisfied and pleased, the Emperor Ci Xi awarded the itinerant doctor a red feather-topped hat, a symbol of a high officialdom at that time.
- 4 The itinerant doctor later explained that Sheng had gone to the herb room with an empty stomach and had intended of selling it for the rest of his life. It's made from a powder of Hai Ge Ke (Concha Cyclinae Sinesis, or clam shell), processed by dry-frying, and the addition of a little Qing Dai (Indigo Naturalis, made from processing Da Qing Ye - Isatis Folium).
- 5 The formula contained only one ingredient – dung beetle.