

## SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL

# Hong Kong homeopathy: How it arrived and how it connected with Chinese medicine

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**Translated as 'Shunshi Liaofa' in Mandarin, homeopathy received considerable attention from local physicians, thanks to Dr Heribert Schmidt who shared his views on the similarities between this western medical therapy and Chinese medicine during his visit to Hong Kong in 1954. Considered widely as non-scientific and superstitious, Chinese medicine was pushed to the periphery during the 1950s. On the contrary, adopted by western advanced countries, homeopathy was generally regarded as scientific and reliable. Schmidt's acknowledgement of the scientific roots of Chinese medicine excited many traditional therapists. The purpose of this paper is to trace the history of how homeopathy was introduced to Hong Kong and discuss its relationship with scientification of Chinese medicine. Homeopathy (2010) 99, 210–214.**

**Keywords:** Chinese medicine; Heribert Schmidt; Homeopathy; Hong Kong; Scientification

## Introduction

Originated by Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), homeopathy is a method of selecting and preparing medications by matching effects. Homeopathy is built on two key principles: the Law of Similars and the Law of Infinitesimals. The Hong Kong Association of Homeopathy was founded in 2007 with a view to promoting the study and practice of homeopathic medicine.<sup>1</sup> But the therapy—known in Chinese as *shunshi liaofa* and *tongyang liaofa*—had been introduced to the colony half a century earlier, at a time when many called for modernizing Chinese medicine. Few doctors trained in Western medicine took it up because the focus was on how to integrate this new technique from the West into traditional medicine. This paper traces the history of homeopathy in Hong Kong and discusses its relationship to efforts to render Chinese medicine more scientific.

## Chinese medicine in 1950s Hong Kong

Hong Kong is an international city where East meets West. Even after World War II, the Chinese portion of

Hong Kong (90% of citizens) continued to turn primarily to traditional Chinese medicine for treating diseases. But as time went on most residents gradually chose West over East when they fell ill. The government built Western hospitals, pushing Chinese medicine clinics to the periphery. Ruled by Britain for over a century, Hong Kong fell under the sway of Western medicine, yet Chinese medicine did not wither away.<sup>2,3</sup> The Chinese medical profession in Hong Kong may be divided into three categories: (1) general practitioners of Chinese medicine who treat all kinds of illnesses, mainly by prescribing herbs and other medicinal materials; (2) acupuncturists, specializing in the treatment of illness by inserting needles into certain points of the body; and (3) bone-setters, specializing in the treatment of fractures, dislocations, sprains and strains. The general public relied on traditional techniques such as acupuncture, bone setting, and herbal therapy for a wide array of illnesses.<sup>4</sup>

After 1949 Hong Kong's government stressed the need for developing Western medicine, but it also adopted a policy of nonintervention toward Chinese medicine. Practitioners of the latter were not referred to as doctors but simply as herbalists. Guilds and other organizations set up by Chinese medicine practitioners provided courses, fostered relationships among physicians, and published journals. Since competition with Western medicine—which enjoyed quasi-official status—was intense, the social status of Chinese medicine practitioners plummeted,

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and they were subject to discrimination. As a result, they opted to make traditional medicine more scientific, hoping that it could be put on a par with its Western counterpart.

Such was the situation when Dr Heribert Schmidt (1914–1995) made his visit in March 1954. His arrival attracted much attention and sparked discussions on the value of Chinese medicine.<sup>5</sup> In the speech that formally introduced homeopathy to Hong Kong, he also acknowledged the scientific roots of Chinese medicine. The two approaches shared some qualities—he imagined they might even prove compatible.

### Schmidt's speech

Well before his first visit to East Asia, Schmidt was deeply interested in Chinese medicine and had published a number of pioneering articles on acupuncture.<sup>6–8</sup> On November 11, 1951, he established the German Physicians' Association for Acupuncture (Deutsche Ärztesellschaft für Akupunktur) in Munich, and he served as chairman from 1967 to 1970. In 1953 he arrived in Japan, where he spent a year studying the theory and practice of acupuncture. Upon returning to Germany, he began to treat people with the techniques he had learned and offered classes on the subject. He also pursued related research, gaining a great reputation in his homeland as an acupuncture pioneer.<sup>9</sup>

On his way back to Germany from Japan, Schmidt stopped over in Hong Kong. Although it appeared to be a casual meeting, the banquet held in his honor attracted an immense response from local practitioners. Over a thousand guests, including doctors trained in Western and Chinese medicine as well as prominent members of society, gathered in Wan Chai's Yingjing Restaurant. Zhuang Zhaoxiang said, "*The Chinese medicine community in Hong Kong celebrated two great occasions that had never been witnessed before.*" one of which was Schmidt's visit.<sup>10</sup> This memorable event was reported widely in the colony's newspapers—the *Sing Tao Daily*, the *Sing Tao Evening News*, and the *Hong Kong Standard*—and a transcript of Schmidt's speech was published.<sup>11</sup>

In his speech Schmidt outlined the study of acupuncture in France and Germany, noting that "*acupuncture has its base in science, as it is closely related to the human nervous system.*"<sup>11</sup> He also described his experience of Chinese medicine in Japan and encouraged local physicians to adopt scientific research methods while promoting traditional techniques to the international community.

He had been impressed by the holistic approach Japanese practitioners brought to their practice: they did not try to heal people by treating specific parts of the body one at a time. His enthusiasm for Chinese and Japanese medicine (now called *Kampo* medicine in Japan) convinced him that they could both be brought into line with scientific methods. At the end of the speech, he remarked that homeopathy and Chinese medicine were strikingly similar.

Why did Schmidt's visit attract an immense response from local practitioners? Chinese medicine was often

scorned as superstitious and non-scientific. In the 1920s Yu Yunxiu (1879–1954) proposed abandoning Chinese medicine. Many in the traditional camp reacted by suggesting that the old methods could prove valuable if they were evaluated using rigorous modern methods. As a result, practitioners sought to transform and modernize Chinese medicine, integrating it into Western medicine. Since the dawn of the 20th century, there has been a strong call for scientizing and standardizing traditional Chinese medicine.<sup>12</sup> After 1949, universities specialized in teaching this branch of knowledge were purposefully built in various cities in Mainland China, providing the most authoritative medical training to practitioners of traditional medicine.

On the contrary, Chinese medicine was largely ignored and was eventually put to the periphery in Hong Kong during the years of British rule. In *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*, Elisabeth Hsu conducted field research in Mainland China from a social-anthropological perspective to examine the three modes of the transmission of Chinese medicine, namely: secret mode, personal mode and standardized mode.<sup>13</sup> Although the sociopolitical situation of Hong Kong was more stable at that time, the colonial government did not set up any institutes teaching traditional medicine. Perhaps these three modes can shed new light on why the visit received such a huge attention. Hsu emphasizes that the personal character plays an important role in the personal mode of the transmission of Chinese medicine.

Schmidt came from Germany, one of the birthplaces of modern science, and he was a medical doctor. Because of this background, he was believed to have profound scientific and medical knowledge, which made him an ideal person to promote the integration of Chinese and western medicine. Furthermore, he received acupunctural training in Japan where Chinese medicine was first proposed to be modernized. It is also a country where significant contributions for the scientization of Chinese medicine have been made. Trained in both Chinese and western medicine, he was also someone who received the standardized mode of medical education. Since he had these two qualities, his introduction of homeopathy was particularly convincing. His interpretation of Chinese medicine using homeopathic principles ushered in a new direction for the integration of Chinese and western medicine.

Though the speech was diffuse, Schmidt's main concern was applying science to Chinese medicine. His visit marked the beginning of meaningful exchanges between Chinese medicine and international medicine in postwar Hong Kong. The impact of the visit was tremendous: for the first time, people in Hong Kong realized that someone outside of East Asia was interested in Chinese medicine.<sup>14</sup>

### The introduction of homeopathy and comparisons with Chinese medicine

Schmidt's speech touched the hearts of local physicians. Germany had not only played a leading role in the scientific revolution, it had also been the site of important research

during World War I and World War II. Seeing a Western medical doctor who had devoted such efforts and such humility to learning from Chinese medicine practitioners was of great symbolic significance at a time when the tide seemed to have turned against the traditional ways.

In an article 'Thoughts after Welcoming Professor Schmidt,' Zhang Gongrang (1904–1981) wrote "To this day, Chinese medicine is a victim of discrimination, yet Dr Schmidt's visit has prompted a rare acknowledgement of its value.... Germany has achieved great things in Western medicine, and it has come to appreciate this aspect of China's ancient heritage, from which German scientists hoped to extract valuable knowledge. We must give this due consideration".<sup>15</sup> Zhang was not the only writer to suggest that the time had come for Hong Kong to organize a Chinese medicine association that would arrange conferences and encourage cooperation with similar groups in other countries. Physicians should come together, many believed, to promote and develop Chinese medicine by publishing scholarly articles, helping to establish research centres, and nurturing young practitioners. If a scientifically advanced country like Germany acknowledged the healing effects of Chinese medicine and acupuncture, surely the Chinese people should not disparage and disregard it.

Homeopathy was unknown in Hong Kong until Schmidt introduced it. He noted that it shared many qualities with Chinese medicine. Unfortunately he could not provide a thorough comparison in his short speech, but his comments immediately elicited intense interest. According to Zhang, "[Schmidt] aroused intellectual curiosity in the Chinese medicine community, and metaphysicians, who believed in the theories of Yin-Yang and the Five Phases, viewed his words as scientific proof of metaphysical medicine".<sup>15</sup> Traditional medicine practitioners were excited by the observation that Chinese medicine, generally considered unscientific, resembled homeopathy, an emerging Western therapy. Established in the 1950s, *Present-Day Chinese Medicine (Xiandai Zhongyiyao)* and *China New Medicine (Zhongguo xinyiyao)* were the two major Chinese medical journals. Articles about homeopathy, among which those of Zhuang Zhaoxiang (1903–1982) were the most influential, were published in these two journals. Schmidt's speech was translated by Zhuang and published in *China New Medicine*.

Zhuang had studied Western medicine in Japan and taught at Sun Yat-Sen University. He also practiced Chinese medicine, of which he had a great pharmaceutical understanding. During Schmidt's visit, he served as his interpreter. He later wrote an article entitled 'The Fundamentals of Homeopathy' for *Present-Day Chinese Medicine*, 'A Discussion of Homeopathy' and 'The Relationship of Homeopathy and Chinese Medicine' for *China New Medicine*. He noted, "The basic principles of homeopathy resemble those of Chinese medicine, so both therapies are good reference resources for physicians".<sup>16</sup> In 'The Fundamentals of Homeopathy' he gave a detailed description of homeopathy and cited the work of Li Shizhen (1518–1593, one of the greatest pharmacologists in Chinese medical history), which is discussed in chapter

17 of *Stramonium, Materia Medica* (Bencao gangmu). Finally, he remarked that what he called 'stramonium' could produce unhealthy mental symptoms.<sup>17</sup> These comments suggest that he had carried out profound research on homeopathy. It all started with a speech given by a foreign acupuncturist, whose ability to straddle European and Asian traditions inspired Zhuang to think deeply about homeopathy. In his published comments on that speech, Zhuang revealed a vested interest:

"What touches my heart is that Schmidt, a Western medical doctor from Germany, a medically advanced country, has initiated research into the similarities between Chinese medicine and homeopathy. His efforts suggest that my view about Chinese medicine has been correct".<sup>16</sup>

Zhuang pointed out two of the similarities Schmidt might have had in mind: like Chinese medicine's theories of cold and heat and of emptiness and fullness, homeopathy focuses not on the nature of the disease per se but on some or all of the patient's symptoms; and both heal by using drugs that induce symptoms like those of the disease. Legend has it that the Divine Husbandman tested the properties of herbal medicines by eating them to see how his body responded. This hints that Chinese medicine might be analogous to homeopathy.

In 'Homeopathy from the Perspective of Chinese Medicine', Sun Qiyuan agreed that the two therapies were similar. Firstly, Chinese medicine treated patients according to six different energy channels, called meridians, and drugs were matched to the meridian involved in the illness. Homeopathy also linked treatment to specific symptoms. Secondly, Chinese medicines and complicated medical symptoms are classified according to meridians. Thirdly, Wang Qingren (1768–1831), a medical practitioner in the Qing dynasty, refined medicines by boiling them in yellow rice wine, a process similar to homeopathic succussion, that is, the process of repeated dilutions and agitations. In brief, both therapies aimed to stimulate our natural healing mechanisms. However, Sun believed that Chinese medicine was superior to homeopathy because of its clear differentiation of yin and yang, cold and heat, emptiness and fullness, and outside and inside.<sup>18</sup>

In 'Chinese Medicine and Understanding Homeopathy', Chan Gongming adamantly opposed drawing comparisons between the two therapies, as Chinese medicine was much more sophisticated than homeopathy. Considering new practices incompatible with old ones, Chan took an unorthodox approach to traditional medicine: he believed that applying modern methods to tease out its virtues would permit physicians to rediscover its true nature, and at the same time uncover its refutable superstitious elements.<sup>19</sup> If both homeopathy and Chinese medicine had evolved from medical observations, these should be scientifically innovated and recognized.

Zhuang Zhaoxiang and Sun Qiyuan adopted a comparative approach to evaluating homeopathy, but Chan Gongming took an entirely different path. While the first two were intent on proving the scientific aspects of Chinese

medicine, Chan felt that as the two therapies were still in their fledging state they had to be carefully evaluated and reformed from top to bottom.

## Conclusion

This article discusses an example of how homeopathy made inroads into Chinese culture and medical tradition. Interestingly, homeopathy was also introduced to India and Japan where it was received differently. A brief comparison may provide a better understanding of how different culture adopt homeopathy.

Under the British rule, indigenous medicine in India, including Ayurvedic Medicine and Hindu Medicine, was also faced with fierce competition from western medicine, and the demand for scientizing this traditional medicine was strong.<sup>20</sup> Homeopathy was introduced to India as early as 1810. After the WWII, effectively supported and managed by the Indian government, this foreign therapy took root in India. Widely accepted as a standard form of healing nowadays, together with western and India indigenous medicine, it constitutes the Indian National medical system.<sup>21</sup> Shamshad Khan even points out "Sometimes, even Homeopathy was added to the list of 'Indian medicine'".<sup>22</sup>

After its introduction to India, Indian practitioners quickly found out that it shared many common aspects with Indian medicine.<sup>23</sup> For example, both of them are harmless and natural remedies. Its introductions to Hong Kong and to India took a similar path in which comparisons between this foreign therapy and local traditional medicine were drawn to substantiate the value of traditional healing.

Homeopathy did not receive much attention when it was first introduced to Japan during the Edo period. Schmidt was apprenticed to Hiroshi Sakaguchi when he was in Japan. Between 1954 and 1956, Hiroshi Sakaguchi went to Germany to teach acupuncture and was surprised by the popularity of homeopathy there. After he went back to Japan, he wrote *Homeopathic Treatment* formally introducing this therapy to Japan.<sup>24</sup> However, unlike Hong Kong where it attracted tremendous attention, Japanese practitioners appeared to be unconcerned.

During the Meiji period (1868–1912), German medical practice was fully adopted by Japan to modernize its centuries-old healthcare system. However, despite strong preference for western medicine, Japanese traditional medicine regained its importance and developed quickly after the WWII. Compared with Hong Kong and Mainland China, Japan was considered as exemplary in modernizing traditional medicine. Kampo medicine, a Japanese form of Chinese medicine, was successfully transformed into modern medical practice,<sup>25,26</sup> and Japanese medical practitioners did not need to refer to homeopathy in order to prove that their medicine was scientific.

Local practitioners in Hong Kong considered Chinese medicine to be similar to homeopathy because they hoped to manifest its scientific rationale and comparability with western medicine, and more importantly, to

prove its medical value. Heribert Schmidt's visit elicited excited reactions in Hong Kong: at the very moment when some had begun to fear that Chinese medicine would be superseded by Western methods, along came a learned European with a profound faith in acupuncture. Schmidt drew comparisons between German homeopathic theories and Chinese medicine, inspiring local physicians to learn more about this novel therapy. In due course, it was those same Hong Kong doctors who began to introduce homeopathic treatments to the colony's inhabitants.

## Conflict of interest

There were no conflicts of interest.

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