



## The Chinese Doctor's Role

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THE HISTORY OF CHINESE MEDICINE in Sacramento parallels the history of the immigration of Chinese to California in 1849. Chun Ming was reported to be the first Chinese to arrive in California. In 1852, the year of the state's first census, Chinese made up the biggest nonwhite minority in Sacramento: 794 males, and 11 females. The Foreign Miners' Tax was implemented in 1852, forcing the Chinese out of the mines that they had come to work. The following year, the Central Pacific contracted with companies in Hong Kong to provide Chinese laborers. By 1860, Sacramento's Chinese population had increased to 2331, and a self-contained Chinatown was established on I Street between 2nd and 6th Streets.

California's early Chinese settlers were largely in service-oriented occupations. Data from the Wells Fargo Company's "Directory of Principal Chinese Businesses in San Francisco-1882" listed three drug stores: Hong Duck Tong, Quong Wo Tong, and Yick Sang. Chinese arrivals in Sacramento relied on traditional Chinese doctors. Dr. Yee Fan Cheung arrived in Sacramento in 1851, and was reportedly among the earliest herbalists in California.

As more Chinese immigrants arrived in California, they found themselves victims of prejudice and violence. They were blamed for spreading cholera, the plague, and syphilis. It was not surprising that the Chinese doctors practicing traditional medicine were held in low regard by the general public.

And yet, the legacy of Chinese medicine extends back nearly 5,000 years. The history of Chinese medicine began with the Emperor Shen Nung, known as the father of Chinese medicine. Important medical works include *The Chinese Classic of Internal Medicine* or *Nei Ching*, written by the Emperor Huang Ti in 2599 BC, *Mei Ching* or *The Pulse*, written in 280 AD, and *Pen Ts'ao Kang Mu*, the Chinese *Materia Medica*, compiled in the 16th century.

Shen Nung postulated the "vital energy theory," involving the Five Elements-Fire, Earth, Water, Mineral, and Vegetation. Disease was thought to be an imbalance of the Yang and Yin principle. Nung developed a system of herbal pathology whose basis of treatment was the correcting of any alterations of the Yang-Yin balance and the Five Elements proportions by means of appropriate herbs. The Chinese physician's diagnostic skills involved pulse, eye, tongue, and voice reading. Because of modesty, the Chinese ladies did not undress for examination by a doctor, but pointed out the site of their symptoms on ivory statuettes.

The most common herbal remedy used was ginseng, which contained panazin, panaxin, pancic acid, and vitamin B-1 and B-12. It reportedly intensifies the vascular tone, speeds metabolism, stimulates the nervous system, and serves as an aphrodisiac. Another herb widely used was Ma Huang, or ephedra sinica, one of the major sources of natural ephedrine. A third important herb was snakeroot or *Rauwolfia serpentina*, known for its tranquilizing effects.

Lin Yutang noted that the Chinese do not draw any distinction between food and medicine. To quote Sun Semiao from the 16th century AD, "A true doctor first finds out the cause of the disease, and having found that out, he tries to cure it first by food. When food fails, then he prescribes medicine."

Yee Fan Cheung arrived in Sacramento in 1851, and then headed for Virginia City and Fiddletown where he practiced herbology. He returned to China in 1876. His son, Yee Lok Sam, later known as T. Wah Hing, practiced herbal medicine in Sacramento before the turn of the century at 707 J Street (the author's birthplace). He was listed in the Sacramento Directory in 1900 under physicians and surgeons.

According to Thompson in his 1988 *Sacramento Bee* article, Governor Leland Stanford's wife suffered a severe pulmonary disorder..."doctors pacing in and out of the sick room of the 45-room mansion at 8th and N Streets had exhausted all measures of western medicine to save her." As a last resort, the governor called in T. Wah Hing, the Chinese herbalist, who brewed an elixir that restored her health. The magic potion was Ma Huang, a natural source of ephedrine. In 1905, Hing moved to 725 J Street, his office for the next 30 years.



Henry Yee arrived in Sacramento in 1906 to live with his uncle, Dr. T. Wah Hing. In the 1929 Directory he was listed as Dr. Henry Yee, Chinese herbalist, 707 J Street, the same building in which his uncle had practiced. After nearly 40 years of practice, he retired in the 1960s. Currently Dr. Yee's son, Herbert, and grandson, Wesley, practice dentistry at the same location.

Chow Yee acquired the herb store in Fiddletown from Dr. Yee Fan Cheung. When Chow left, Fong Chow Yow kept the herb store and its contents nearly unchanged from 1913 until his death in 1965. The store is now in the care of Amador County and the Fiddletown Preservation Society. The original Dr. Yee's great grandson, Dr. Herbert Yee, with the aid of then State Assemblyman Art Agnos, obtained a grant from the State of California for the restoration of the herb store. A plaque has been placed on

its front which reads, "This is where Dr. Yee practiced herbal medicine during the Gold Rush years."

The first MD of Chinese descent to practice in Sacramento was Dr. Lung Fung in 1939. Dr. George Yee, internist, followed in 1948. Seven physicians arrived in the 1950s: Leslie Lee, 1951; Carl Fong, 1953; Evan Fong, 1954; Gaing Chan, 1956; Franklin Chinn, 1956; William Fong, 1957; and Edna Mae Fong, 1957. Approximately 120 physicians of Chinese descent now practice in the Sacramento area, representing nearly every specialty. Their collective contribution to medicine include serving in the positions of president of the medical society, and of medical staffs; chief of surgery and medicine of hospitals, trustee of hospital boards, member of the Board of Visitors, clinical professor of surgery, professor and chairman of departments of U.C. Davis Medical School, county health officer, etc.

The contribution of the early California practitioners of Chinese medicine, and the many participants in the very rich history of the past 140 years serve as a challenge to those who follow in the next century.

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