

Chapter 16

**History of Traditional
Mongolian Medicine**

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Traditional Mongolian medicine has a history of more than 2,500 years, and it is one of the most valuable heritages of the Mongolian people. During this long period, although keeping its own distinct features, traditional Mongolian medicine developed a close relationship with Indian Ayurvedic, Tibetan, and Chinese medicines. In fact, Mongolian and Tibetan medicines have the same theory, diagnostic methods and treatment.

Traditional Mongolian medicine was the only available method of healthcare before Western medicine was introduced around the turn of the last century. The service provided by practitioners of traditional medicine covered the entire healthcare spectrum and dealt satisfactorily with most health problems at that time.

As one of the birthplaces of ancient civilization, Mongolia was one of the earliest areas where medicine developed. Our ancestors discovered treatment for sicknesses that grew out of their lifestyle and passed these treatments on to the known world at that time.

Like nomads elsewhere, Mongolian nomads had a close examination and daily experience in dealing with their ways in raising domesticated animals, specifics of natural biological growth and development, and ways dealing with morbidity and mortality, in addition to affecting various natural processes on the true outcomes of those natural actions.

The nomadic way of life, daily encounters with the surrounding natural environment, and constant dealing with domesticated animal species played a crucial role in developing and further perfecting this medical knowledge system among Mongolians nomads.

TRADITIONS OF PRACTICAL MEASURES OF NOMADIC HEALTH

Social health elements were initially developed among the sedentary societies, yet the Mongolians created preventive health measures that suited their nomadic lifestyle, and they have been converted to daily routines and traditions over the years.

To keep drinking water clear, Mongolians did not prohibit animals from grazing around the source of any river, nor did they throw any garbage, food, or drink into water. Our ancestors treated water with great respect calling it *chindamani* (wishing jewel) and taught their children not to pollute any water areas. There was a tradition of not spoiling

Exterior of the Museum of Mongolian Traditional Medicine, with a statue of a rabbit, the symbol of traditional Mongolian medicine

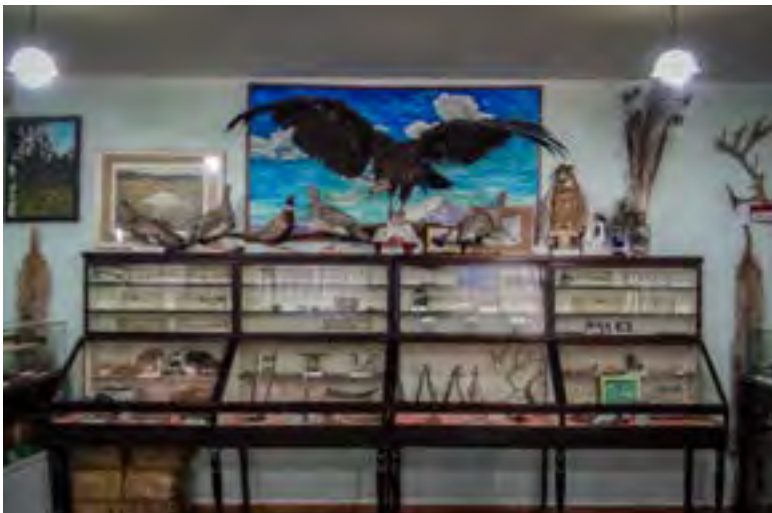


north-side areas with excretions. This was a result of observing wind directions, which usually blow from the north to the south. By never polluting on the north sides of land, the people avoided spreading viruses carried by the winds. Generally, they treated human waste very carefully. Women usually relieved themselves on the southeast side of their *ger* (traditional Mongolian dwelling) while men relieve on the southwest side. They use euphemisms instead of direct expressions to relieve themselves. For example, men say, “to watch their horse”, but women say, “to watch a mare or cow”. In addition, ash and other dry wastes were thrown to the west side. Before moving to other places; wastes had to be buried; any holes of stakes were filled with soil; and the surrounding areas were cleared up.

Furthermore, our ancestors developed many traditions to form healthy lifestyles by preventing infections. Traditional Mongolian dress was created for four seasons and suited their daily activities well, such as riding horses, dealing with horses and livestock, and hunting. A Japanese writer Shiba Reotaro (1997) wrote that

every year the savages (Hunnu) attacked southern settlements in the territory of Jao state from autumn until spring. Jao was beaten in every battle. Finally, U li Van found out the reason why they always had been defeated and they concluded that if they wanted to fight against the Hunnu, they must reassemble their army's policies and battle clothes. U li Van suggested ‘Hu fu chi shi’, which means let's dress and fight like the Hunnu. Civilized Chinese men's clothes had long sleeves and a skirt, and the nobility wore heavy baggy clothes. On the contrary, the Hunnu wore more practical clothes such as leg length pants, knee boots and jackets with long narrow sleeves. These practical clothes became the basis for future European clothes.

A short *deel* (clothing), loose pants and boots worn by Mongolian soldiers were one factor in defeating Jao soldiers who wore clothes with long sleeves and skirts. The Mongolian *deel* has many important uses. It can be used as a blanket when someone needs to sleep outside, it can be used as a shield when they relieve themselves, and it can protect the upper and lower parts of the body from heat and cold equally. Mongolian boots have a turned-up nose to prevent the nose from digging into the ground and soil.



Main hall exhibiting traditional herbs and minerals among other elements of traditional knowledge

All Mongolians had their own special cups. When they visited families, men sat on the right side and women sat on the left side in accordance with their age. Hostesses took their cups from them and filled them with tea. The cups were carried in small bags. In the beginning, wooden and gradually copper, silver and golden cups were used. Having their own cups helped prevent infections.

Another thing is the Mongolians carried their own handkerchiefs and they never exchanged them. Italian tourist Giovanni Del Plano Carpini¹ noted that wealthier ones carried woollen cloth, and after eating they wiped their mouth and hands with the cloth.

Belts have special significance in Mongolia. Belt, belly or back bands were important for health, especially to protect people's backs from cold winds. The belt was thought to keep a man's spirit, so the belt was always treated with respect. In early times, both men and women wore belts. However, when the distinction between men's and women's work later appeared, women eventually stopped wearing them after marriage. During the wedding ceremony, the groom cut his bride's under-belt. Thus, women got the name *busgui*, (literally, "without belt") after their wedding.

Mongolians had unique child-rearing traditions, especially in relation to infants. The adults made nappies by latticing wood pieces or using sheep fur. From the 13th century, nappies were made of metal and Mongolians also used nappies made of animal wool and ash. The woollen nappy was placed in the crotch to absorb the liquid, keeping the infant's skin dry, and ash nappies were placed under the infant's bottom.

A piece of a tail of a sheep has been given to infants to suckle to make them healthier. Sheep's tail has been identified to include unsaturated fatty acids. It is amazing that early Mongolians discovered the benefits of this and put it into practice.

When boys turned three, the parents tied the boys to a saddle on a horse and led them on a gallop. After the boys reached four or five, their parents prepared a small bow and arrow and gave them introductory tips on how to hunt. Mongolian children grew up strong, lively and skilful. Mongolians also paid special attention to their children's diet. For instance, children were not allowed to eat bone marrow to prevent early sexual development. Also, they were not allowed to drink tea with certain ingredients until marriage to avoid increasing body heat, which could hurt the liver and bladder. Instead, they drank boiled water with milk.

There were many taboos concerning health and hygiene among Mongolians. It was forbidden to visit the mother and the baby within a month after the birth. If a boy was born, a sign was hung on the right. On the contrary, if a girl was born, a sign was hung on the left.

Mongolians have been producing dairy products since they domesticated animals. Over 2,000 years ago the Hunnu fermented horse milk and started to make curds. Because milk products were considered a healthy food, and a basis for a long healthy life, milk products have been a main part of the diet. Mongolians have gained much knowledge in preparing and using milk products. For instance, raw milk is rarely drunk. Instead they drink boiled milk or milk tea. A wide range of products such as *tarag* (like yogurt), curds, and cheese can be made from milk.

People in the olden days used to live longer as they followed correct lifestyle in comparison with modern people who crave sweets, ignore good advice, and refuse to follow a healthy life plan.

People, who understand the need for a right lifestyle, do not excessively consume meat and fat. They restrict desires and emotions and



Collection of dried berries and minerals used in making traditional medicine

keep a good physique thus saving strength. They tolerate sadness and depression, ignore unnecessary desires, avoid inappropriate appetites and concentrate on solidifying internal strengths, thus keeping their composure.

People who take care of themselves usually do not eat until hungry. They do not eat when they're full. They drink when they are thirsty. They usually do not eat and drink in large quantities. Overfeeding damages the lungs but hunger hurts your strength.

- Do not lie down when you're full. It causes various diseases.
- Do not be exposed to wind or coldness after having hot food and drink when you are sweating. This is to prevent headaches, exhaustion etc.
- Do not eat too much late in the afternoon. Avoid sleeping in areas where it is cold and possibly there is a draught.
- Do not relieve yourself in a north-westerly direction.
- Go to the toilet at regular intervals.
- Do not relieve yourself in the direction of the sun, moon, stars, temples, monasteries or springs.
- Do not hum or make loud noises during the night.
- Do not eat 12 parts of meat relating to birthday organs on you or your parents' birthday.
- Sit straight and try to concentrate.
- Do not stand for long hours. It will harm your bones.
- Do not sit for long hours. It will damage your blood.
- Do not walk for long hours. It will damage your sinews.
- Do not lie for long hours. It will kill your strength.
- Do not wash your head after eating.
- Restrict love affairs if your eyes are hurt. Otherwise this could lead to *albugo*.
- Do not be exposed to coldness or any wind after washing your body as the skin pores are open.
- Do not go in and out during strong winds, heavy rain, cold or hot temperatures.
- Do not blow out candles. It will weaken your strength.
- Do not stare or glance straight at the sun when it is bright as it will hurt the eyes.
- Do not attempt to see long distances with great intensity as this will affect eye strength.
- Do not sit or lie on the wet ground.
- Do not sleep in candle light.
- Close your door and burn incense when lightning strikes during heavy rain. The gods may pass by.
- Do not spit in your immediate environment.
- Do not have tea on an empty stomach.
- Do not eat rice soup after the hour of the monkey.
- Our ancestors taught us to boil down glass noodles, meat and to have less vodka.
- People in olden times took times of themselves all throughout their life while people in the modern era neglect their own personal welfare until their bodies start to complain.
- If you press your eyes with your palm after rubbing them before sleeping, it will prevent eye diseases.
- If you massage gently your face with your palm after rubbing them before sleep, it will prevent the appearance of 'chancre'.



Collection of dried berries and minerals used in making traditional medicine

- If you massage your face gently with your palms after blowing and rubbing them, it will prevent the onset of wrinkles and make your complexion bright.
- If you wash your eyes with hot water in the morning, you will not suffer from any eye diseases.
- If you comb your hair a hundred times before sleeping, you will not suffer from any migraines or pounding headaches.
- If you place your foot in warm water, it will prevent damage from the climate.
- Do not wash your head with cold water during the hot summer. Otherwise it will hurt your eyes.
- Do not wash with autumn rain water. Otherwise your skin gets dry and scurf may occur.
- If you maintain your composure and keep calm you will not lose your strength.
- Be conscious of your emotions and remain in control of them.

THE MUSEUM OF MONGOLIAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The Museum of Mongolian Traditional Medicine was established in Dharma Light Centre, to the right of the Bogd Khaan Palace Museum. The museum has over 3,000 collections in its three exhibit halls. Tserensodnom Dalantai, PhD established the museum in 2005.

Hall A. The first hall is a small library of over 900 traditional medicine books and sutras as well as portraits and biographies of famous Mongolian physicians and herbalists.

Hall B. The exhibition hall of traditional medicine has hundreds of medicines made from herbs, animals and minerals.

Hall C. Ger-museum named by Sereenen otochi (Bogd Khaan's physician).

RÉSUMÉ

La médecine mongole traditionnelle est vieille de plus de 2500 ans et constitue l'un des patrimoines les plus précieux de ce peuple. La Mongolie, lieu de naissance d'anciennes civilisations, fut à ce titre l'une des premières terres où la médecine s'est développée. Nos ancêtres ont découvert comment traiter les maladies en s'inspirant de leur style de vie particulier et ont su transmettre ces connaissances au monde.

Comme les nomades d'autres contrées, les nomades mongols ont une connaissance affinée et une expérience quotidienne dans l'élevage des animaux domestiques et la domestication des animaux sauvages. Ils maîtrisent les spécificités biologiques de la croissance, du développement, de la morbidité et de la mortalité, et les nombreux impacts de l'environnement sur les animaux.

Le mode de vie nomade, le contact quotidien avec l'environnement naturel et les interactions constantes avec les espèces animales domestiquées ont joué un rôle crucial dans le processus de développement et de perfectionnement du système de connaissances médicales chez les nomades mongols.

On a considéré que le système social de santé fut initialement développé dans les sociétés sédentaires, mais les Mongols ont créé des mesures de santé préventive adaptées à leur mode de vie nomade, qui sont devenues des routines quotidiennes et des traditions au cours des années.

NOTES

- 1 Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1180-1252) was one of the first Europeans to enter the court of the Great Khan of the Mongolian Empire. He is the author of the earliest important Western account of northern and central Asia, Russia, and other regions of the Tatar dominion.