

## Chinese patent medicines: A beginner's guide

Mark Taylor

Wise, articulate, and accessible

Mr. Taylor starts his book with a balanced and reasonable assessment of Chinese medicine versus Western medicine. Western medicine has been extensively tested in laboratories using rats and other animals, and has been through human trials. Chinese herbal cures, on the other hand, have been described in literature for almost 3 millennia and certainly have been used by hundreds of times more human subjects than the products of our laboratories. A dedicated Darwinist such as myself is inclined to believe that successful remedies will persevere and grow more popular and those that don't work will die out.

Western medicine is characterized by families of drugs: serotonin uptake inhibitors, antibiotics, anti-acids, and the like. Mr. Taylor points out that herbal remedies more often go to the genesis of the problem within one's body chemistry rather than merely treating the symptoms. The taxonomy appears to be less rigorous because the drugs are more complex in their action. They may be grouped by ingredients or by the illnesses that they treat.

Mr. Taylor is acutely aware of the nature of the modern marketplace. Piracy is rampant in all spheres of Chinese business involving intellectual property. It is no different with patent medicines. If it is cheaper to create a knockoff that looks like the real thing, somebody will certainly do it. Mr. Taylor has good advice regarding which drugs are frequently counterfeited and the measures one should take to be sure one is getting the real thing.

The scope of Chinese medicine is impressive. Mr. Taylor describes around 200 formulations. That appears to stack up fairly well against the lists of Western ethical drugs that one finds at drugstore.com. It is interesting to note that acupuncture, another of Mr. Taylor's specialties, has moved from fringe to mainstream within the past couple of decades. We may not fully understand how it works, but it is certainly effective in many instances. The same is true of Chinese medicines.