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100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men–Tsee–Khang & the Second Annual Conference of the Tibetan Medicine Committee of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies

Katharina Sabernig

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One hundred years ago (1916) the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang was established as a patient-oriented institution in order to complement the traditional education at the Medical College on top of the Iron Hill. The celebration conference was organized in Lhasa by the Specialty Committee of Tibetan Medicine, which is part of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS), and the Health Bureau of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). It was generously sponsored by the Men-Tsee-Khang and the Tibetan Medical Research Institute of the TAR.

An excursion to both the old and new institutions of the Men-Tsee-Khang, the latter of which consists of a hospital and a museum, made up the framework program for foreign participants. The overall appearance revealed that today Tibetan medicine is aimed to be studied historically, clinically, and pharmacognostically in a complementary dialog with modern science as one part of the public health service. The Tibetan hospital shows a vivid combination of traditional and biomedical applications: moxibustion, bloodletting, cupping, and pharmaceutical applications on the traditional side and ‘Western’ diagnostic tools such as blood samples, CT and X-ray examinations as well as endoscopical and minor surgical interventions on the other. The Medical College also took the opportunity to invite the foreign
guests present, Janet Gyatso, Fernand Meyer, and Katharina Sabernig (the author of this report), to give guest lectures, which were attended by local scholars of Tibetan medicine and hundreds of students.

The high-ranking opening ceremony was commenced by the Vice Chairman of the TAR and other representatives of the TAR Government, the WFCMS, the TAR Health & Family planning committee and the director of the Men-Tsee-Khang. About 400 Tibetan medical practitioners and researchers participated, mostly dressed in traditional clothes. Twelve foreign academic researchers—eight from the USA and individuals from Canada, France, Norway and Austria—were invited to strengthen international academic exchange. These scholars represented different fields of Tibetan or complementary medical studies with the aim to develop Tibetan clinical practice in accordance with the unique Tibetan culture, language, and its historically grown theoretical concepts. Additionally, Professor Fernand Meyer was honorably acknowledged for his lifetime achievement.

Chinese news media reported on the conference with many photos of the foreign guests.

The keynote speakers, presenting in Tibetan, Chinese, or English, presented on a broad range of historical and clinical topics that covered different traditional medical systems in China and among its minority populations. The English keynote speeches were fully translated into Tibetan while Tibetan and Chinese presentations where briefly summarized in English. Ten keynote speeches where held on the first day, starting with Yixiyangzong, executive president of the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang, who outlined major developments over the past hundred years and future perspectives of the institution. This included a clear commitment to a complementary combination of traditional and biomedical service as an important and integrated factor of the TAR public health service. Janet Gyatso (Harvard University) discussed different forms of medical knowledge and social behavior in Tibetan medical paintings within their Buddhist context and their differences to classical Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Jianping Liu (Centre of Evidence Based Chinese Medicine at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine) introduced the approach of evidence-based medicine in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), favoring the necessity of randomized clinical trials (RCT) to change from an experienced-based to an evidence-based medical approach. His statement included a discussion of the general conflict between the standardization and individualization of medical practice. Jigemeide (International Hospital of Mongolian Medicine in the Mongolian Autonomous Region [MAR]), spoke about the history of Mongolian medicine, including the early non-Tibetan
aspects as well as the important period between the sixteenth and twentieth century. He also noted the major influences of Tibetan texts, notably the pharmacological achievements of Jampel Dorjé and his beautifully Illustrated Tibeto-Mongolian Materia Medica of Ayurveda. Gongjuewangdui (Traditional Medical College in Lhasa), who compiled the first modern dictionary of Tibetan medicine in the 1980s, explored the history of monastic medical schools and lineages in Tibet. His talk, which was also circulated in the form of a printed booklet, included the early history and formation period of the major commentaries. He also outlined the establishment of the Iron Hill Medical College and later medical institutions in the major monasteries of Labrang and Kumbum.

In the afternoon, the president of the WFCMS, Jiunmei Phuntsok, spoke about the patenting of traditional medicines and the respective pharmaceutical industry. Vincanne Adams (University of California) reviewed the history of science in Tibet and Tibet in science. She began with statements of Gendun Choepel and of other Tibetan scholars living in the early twentieth century on the relation between scientific versus traditional knowledge and finished with biomedical studies exploring the effect of meditation with the help of modern imaging techniques. Dujiang (Guiyang University of TCM and president of Hmong (Miao) medicine for the China Minorities Medicine Association) presented on the current research status and prospects of Hmong medicine. His key point was that the industrial development of Miao pharmaceutical prescriptions in Guizhou province incorporated systematical and pharmacognostical research. Gaerko (Aba Tibetan Hospital and Chengdu University of TCM) underlined the complexity of different forms of pharmacological potency of Tibetan medicine as described in classical Tibetan texts. The final keynote talk was given by Qianraaosai, President of Limai Tibetan Hospital. He discussed the experiences of his project team in the treatment of AIDS with Tibetan medicine, including an analysis of the disease based on an interpretation of the human immunodeficiency virus from the Tibetan perspective. As the international delegation traveled back to their hotel at the end of the day, a beautiful rainbow appeared spanning from Potala Palace to Iron Hill, which was generally considered as an auspicious sign.

The following day was organized into four parallel-running panels, each with eight speakers of different languages; short summaries in English or Tibetan accompanied each talk. Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College) and Tawni Tidwell (Emory University) spoke in Tibetan, to the great joy of all participants. Each panel included international as well as Tibetan or Chinese speakers so as to enable academic exchange across language barriers. Each panel engaged a broad mixture of historical, philological, anthropological, and clinical or scientific studies. The final group discussions within individual panels demonstrated the importance of the Tibetan principle of seniority as well as status, and left time for deeper analysis of historical and future necessities. The closing meeting emphasized the successful organization of 100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men-Tsee-Khang and it was clearly appreciated that the international and national research on Tibetan medicine will serve as a sound basis for its future development.