

THE STATUETTE  
OF  
LI SHIH-CHEN

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In 1956, EUGENE CHAN, Professor of Ophthalmology of the Canton Medical College, wrote to Dr. RONALD LOWE requesting a reprint of his paper on *The Eyes in Mongolism* published in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, March 1949. From that request, a pen friendship developed that has continued to the present.

Professor CHAN felt isolated from the activities of his colleagues outside China, and was delighted to receive copies of the Transactions of the Ophthalmological Society of Australia, the Medical Journal of Australia and various other publications.

By 1957, the People's Republic of China had been firmly established and a group of Australian medical teachers and practitioners was invited to visit China. Dr. THOMAS A'BECKETT TRAVERS was the ophthalmologist. He met members of the Canton Ophthalmological Society as their first foreign visitor, and demonstrated cataract surgery. His visit was received with much enthusiasm, and Professor CHAN gave Dr. TRAVERS the statuette of LI SHIH-CHEN to bring as a present to the Ophthalmological Society of Australia.

On arrival in Melbourne the statuette was placed in a special display cabinet and housed in the Conjoint Library of the Ophthalmological Society of Australia and The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital, where it remains (Fig. 1).

On the cabinet is a plaque which reads:

*Li Chih-chen (AD 1518–1593)  
Famous for his compilation of  
a Chinese Materia Medica  
which is still in use throughout China.  
He made contributions to Chinese ophthalmology.  
This statue was presented to  
The Ophthalmological Society of Australia  
by Professor Eugene Chan  
of Canton Medical College, China  
on the occasion of a visit by  
Dr. T. A'B. Travers  
a member of the medical mission in April 1957.*

The statuette is 37 cm high and hand painted in natural colours beneath the glaze. It portrays a Confucian sage with his right hand holding a collection of medicinal plants, while his left hand holds a small hoe for digging roots, tubers or bulbs. It bears a very close likeness to a contemporary ink drawing of LI. It was made by the Shi Wan Ceramic Works in Fat-shan (Fo-shan), a city close to Kwangchou (Canton).

#### Eugene Chan

EUGENE CHAN<sup>1</sup> graduated in medicine in 1927 from Boston University. He interned at Foote Memorial Hospital, Michigan; and from 1929 to 1934 he was at the Wilmer Institute in Baltimore where he was particularly influenced by Professor FRANK WALSH. On his return to China in 1934 he was connected with Cheeloo University, West China Union University, and subsequently became professor of ophthalmology at the Canton Medical College which was to fuse later with other institutions to form the Chung Shan Medical College.

In 1940 he married one of his students. She is interested in the study of cataract. With his wife he founded the Eye Hospital in Canton, in 1965.

In 1963 he edited '*Ophthalmology*' a textbook for use in medical colleges throughout China. The text included progress in western ophthalmology that had occurred especially during and subsequent to World War II. He contributed the first chapter on the Historical Development of Chinese Ophthalmology in an '*Encyclopaedia of Ophthalmology*' edited by H.T. PI, 1965. These two books in Chi-

nese, published by the People's Publishers, Peking, and donated by him, are held in the Conjoint Library of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists and The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital.

During the Cultural Revolution he 'retired'. A touring group of Australian ophthalmologists, wives and ophthalmic nursing sisters, organized and led by RON LOWE, visited China in 1975. The very large Chung Shan Medical College of Canton is a prestige establishment visited by many tourists who are shown operations under acupuncture as a significant Chinese achievement. After much enquiry, by the Australian visitors, Dr. CHAN was brought to the hospital and spent an afternoon with them during specialist discussions with Cantonese ophthalmologists (Fig. 2).

In 1979 he resides in Peking where at the age of 80 he has resumed teaching and is editing a book on ophthalmology which is part of the first modern Chinese Encyclopaedia of Medicine.

#### The Times of Li Shih-chen

LI SHIH-CHEN lived at the times of the latter Ming emperors.<sup>2</sup> Two had long reigns: Emperor SHIH TSUNG (reign name CHIA-CHING) 1521–1567, and Emperor SHEN TSUNG (reign name WAN-LI) 1573–1620.

SHIH TSUNG was disinterested in administration and the kingdom suffered from Mongol invasions, attacks by Japanese pirates and general unruliness.

The first Europeans to establish trading posts in China were the Portuguese, who sent their first official envoy to Canton in 1517 after they had been trading there for some years.

The WAN-LI emperor (SHEN TSUNG) was more interested in longevity than in the welfare of his kingdom, but he had an able and strong willed Grand Secretary, CHANG CHU-CHENG, and during his management the country flourished. Security was better; agriculture developed by the diversification of native grains and the growth of foods introduced from America; the economy was stimulated by increased productivity, by internal commerce and the inflow of capital from overseas trade; technological advances were important; printing and publications were facilitated by new methods so that information became spread more widely. The period developed a reputation for cultural brilliance. One can imagine that the social conditions favoured enquiry and the times were appropriate for medicine to share in the benefits.

Much of the prosperity arose from the Yangtze valley, a large region of which is in Hupeh province where LI SHIH-CHEN practiced.

However, CHANG's strong suppressive style made many enemies who had to contain themselves until he died in 1582. Officialdom then broke into factions each concerned that no representative of a rival group should take CHANG's place. At the same time a serious split developed between the emperor and the civil service over the investiture of the heir apparent. Huge cash surpluses rapidly became deficits as administration fell apart and while imperial extravagance soared. These serious disorders occurred when LI SHIH-CHEN was seeking publication of his major work.

#### Li Shih-chen

LI SHIH-CHEN's<sup>3</sup> forebears had been physicians for centuries. His father, LI YEN-WEN, was well versed in traditional medicine, was the author of many books, and was highly regarded in his home town, Chichow, in Hupeh province.

As physicians had no social standing, LI YEN-WEN wished his son to become an official, and so made him read the classics and attempt to pass the necessary examinations. But LI SHIH-CHEN was determined to become a physician and ultimately his father relented. His father showed him how to "observe" (the appearance of the patient), "listen" (to the body sounds), "ask" (about the symptoms), "feel" (the pulse), and gave him a thorough apprenticeship. Gradually he developed a distinction of his own.

In 1556 he was ordered to a post of physician in the Imperial Academy of Medicine in Peking, in service to the emperor; but the intrigues and lack of dedication of the Academic physicians upset him. Pleading ill health he returned to Chichow to continue practice and research.

LI SHIH-CHEN was an assiduous observer and collector. He travelled widely to areas where drugs were to be obtained, and discussed new possibilities with peasants or anyone using remedies from these places. He collected medications and formulae and tested their effectiveness. In mountains infested with snakes he talked to the snake-catchers and wrote a '*Treatise on the White-Spotted Snake*'. (Even today, in Taiwan, travellers are shown into prosperous looking shops devoted exclusively to the sale of live snakes and snake products as Chinese medicines.)

#### Medical References

The earliest reputed record of Chinese medicines is Emperor SHEN NUNG's *Materia Medica* which listed 365 items<sup>3</sup>; but SHEN NUNG was a legendary founder of Chinese agriculture and medicine prior to 1500 B.C. when the Shan dynasty and recorded history began. He was called the 'Divine Cultivator' and is said to have ruled for 140 years<sup>4</sup>. TAO HUNG-CHIN (451–536 A.D.) augmented the number



Fig. 1: The statuette of Li Shih-chen, presented by Dr. Chan to the Ophthalmological Society of Australia.



Fig. 2: Some members of the Australian ophthalmological touring group with Eugene Chan in Kwangchou, 1975.

of medicines to 730. During the Tang dynasty in the middle of the 7th century the government brought SU CHING and 21 other physicians together to complete the Tang Materia Medica, listing 844 medicinal items. It was published by the government and circulated widely, thus becoming the earliest official pharmacopoea in the world. During the Sung dynasty at the end of the 11th century TANG SHEN-WEI compiled the Classified Materia Medica in which the drugs were increased to 1746.

LI SHIH-CHEN felt that these texts needed urgent revision. In the 400 years between the Sung and Ming dynasties many new drugs had been discovered, and the classification and properties of many listed were considered inappropriate.

He studied more than 800 books and carefully reviewed 270 works by earlier medical experts as well as 40 on materia medica, making commentaries on each of them. Further, he read Confucian classics, history, poetry and fiction, noting any references to medical matters.

#### Li Shih-chen's Compendium of Materia Medica

At the age of 61, LI SHIH-CHEN compiled his Compendium of Materia Medica<sup>3</sup>, a labour of 27 years, during which he had made three complete revisions.

He reclassified and regrouped entries of previous medical books, deleted those that were repetitious or dubious and added 374 new items to make a total of 1813 medicinal preparations – 1094 from botanical sources, 444 from zoological and 275 from mineral origin.

The medications were divided into 16 categories – water, fire, earth, metals and rocks, herbs, grains, fish, shells, birds, animals and material from the human body. Each category was subdivided, eg. different types of herbs.

Each medication was defined. Its shape, place of origin and method of collection were described under "*explanation*", its preparation presented under "*manufacture*", properties and effects were analysed under "*odour and taste*", "*principal application*", and "*new experience*". Case records and prescriptions were included. The book has 1,160 illustrations.

LI SHIH-CHEN had considerable literary skill and devoted great care to the language of the Compendium. (He must have been a spiritual ancestor of Stewart Duke-Elder.)

He wrote many other medical works under his pen-name of PIN-HU, but all of these were lost except '*Theory of the Pulse*' and '*A Study on the Eight Nerve Channels*'.

### Publication

Although the writing was completed in 1578, LI SHIH-CHEN travelled in vain to many places to have the book published<sup>3</sup>, even though at the time it was fashionable for gentry to print and collect books. In 1590 a printer in Nanking agreed, but the Compendium was not completed until 1593 just after LI SHIH-CHEN's death.

The book was also copied by hand and circulated throughout the country, although the emperor refused to support it. It became a precious heritage and was translated into several foreign languages. It is still the main source of data for research into traditional medicine.

Like Arabian and European formularies of its time, most of it would be unacceptable in today's Western medicine, but undoubtedly it contained drugs of definite therapeutic activity, as for example, *ephedra vulgaris*. He quoted TAN LUN's Physician Guidebook which was written in the fifteenth century, stating that for the prevention of smallpox a white cow's flea mixed with rice flour to form a dough be given to a child on an empty stomach. If it were effective it would have antedated JENNER's discovery of cow-pox vaccination by some three centuries.<sup>1</sup>

LI SHIH-CHEN is still revered because of his immense contributions to Chinese medicine and biology. In his home town of Chichow (Chi Chun) in Hupeh province, his tomb is being restored and a *Li Shih-chen Hospital* is under construction.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

The life and times of LI SHIH-CHEN (1518–1593), a revered Chinese physician, are described. The writing of his famous book on *Materia Medica* and its importance for Chinese traditional medicine is outlined. Porcelain statuettes of him are still made in China and one of these is housed in the Library of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists in Melbourne.

### References

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4. BOASE, W.: *A Closer Look at Early China*. Hamish Hamilton: London (1977)



**LOWE, R.F. – La statuette de Li Shih-chen**

**Resumé**

La vie et l'époque de LI SHIH-CHEN (1518–1593), un médecin Chinois vénéré, sont décrites. L'importance de son fameux livre sur "Materia Medica" pour la médecine Chinoise traditionnelle est mise en lumière. Des statuettes en porcelaine de ce médecin sont encore actuellement fabriquées en Chine et l'une d'elles se trouve dans la bibliothèque du Collège Royal Australien des Ophtalmologistes à Melbourne.

**LOWE, R.F. – La estatuilla de Li Shi-chen**

**Resumen**

Se describe la vida y la época de LI SHIH-CHEN (1518–1593), un médico Chino venerado. Su famoso libro "Materia Medica", es importante para la medicina China tradicional. Estatuillas en porcelana de este médico, se fabrican todavía actualmente en China y una de ellas se encuentra en la biblioteca del Real Colegio Australiano de Oftalmólogos, en Melbourne.

**LOWE, R.F. – Die Statuette des Li Shih-chen**

**Zusammenfassung**

Es wird über das Leben und die Zeiten von LI SHIH-CHEN (1518–1593) berichtet, der ein angesehener chinesischer Arzt war. Die Niederschrift seines berühmten Buchs über „Materia Medica“ und seine Bedeutung für die traditionelle chinesische Medizin werden dargestellt. Porzellanstatuetten von Li werden auch heute noch in China hergestellt. Eine solche Statuette befindet sich in der Bibliothek des „Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists“ in Melbourne.

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