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Ancient Wisdom, Modern Cure

📅 MAY 15, 2019 ✍️ NFCR WRITER DAVID PERRY 📌 [BLOG](#)

“Chinese traditional medicine” (TCM) is a cultural catch-all term for a series of practices including herbal medicine, diet, acupuncture, massage and exercise (like tai chi) whose combined history stretches back over four thousand years. Western science acknowledges the benefits of some forms of TCM — acupuncture and Chinese massage techniques, for example — but has taken a far more measured response to others, including herbal medical treatments. Understandably so, as the efficacy of some compounds are dubious at best. For example, consuming powdered rhinoceros horn does little more than drive a species to extinction!

But this is not to say the entire paradigm is without merit: Some of those ancient medications have been found to yield actual benefits. Most famously, the 2016 Noble Prize in Physiology or Medicine was awarded to Tu Youyou for her work in unraveling why the **wormwood tree has for centuries played a role in successfully treating fevers**. The compound which she discovered from the tree, artemisinin, is now a frontline malarial treatment.

“I was looking for a methodology to reverse the gastrointestinal side-effects caused by chemotherapy, but at the same time would not compromise it,” says Yale University’s Yung-Chi Cheng, Ph.D., whose work has been funded by NFCR dating to 1991. “But I knew it would require multiple chemicals, and I turned to Chinese medicine.”

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That search led to a 1,800-year-old TCM formula called **Huang Qin Tang**, but what modern science calls **PHY906**. Consisting of a delicate balance of four herbs, *Scutellaria baicalensis* (the Chinese skullcap), *Paeonia lactiflora* (the common garden peony), *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*



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readily admit that chemo is essentially a type of toxin, and a fine line must be walked between administering enough to poison a patient's cancer to death without poisoning the patient to death. The side effects include, among others, hair loss, fatigue, anemia and intense gastrointestinal distress. Many chemo patients experience nausea and vomiting to such a degree as to opt out of the therapy altogether. **As chemotherapy remains one of the most effective cancer treatments, finding ways to minimize the side effects is crucial.**

Cheng explains how PHY906 (also referred to as YIV906) has been put to the test—subject to rigorous scrutiny in Western labs and through peer reviews—not unlike any other experimental drug. While Huang Qin Tang is well known to TCM practitioners, it varied from source to source and user to user. Lacking was the precise methodology and composition demanded by any modern medical establishment; and this presented some unusual hurdles.

Chemically speaking, plants can be very different from night to day, and from season to season, so Cheng and his team have had to rely on, and then refine, harvesting and processing techniques. Proper amounts of each herb, as well as dosage, also have had to be established. While the process has been intense, the end result has been a modern variant of the historic Huang Qin Tang; and four clinical trials are currently being planned. Cheng and his team are also evaluating other TCM herbal compounds that could be part of a new class of drugs.

"I appreciate the support of the NFCR," Cheng adds. **"The approach I took is not conventional. It is not easily received. But as an NFCR-supported scientist, I have the freedom to do what I think is needed."**

And if that means looking back 1,800 years, who is to say where a cancer cure comes from?

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