

- » Being open to the idea of self-healing
- » Discovering the origins of this ancient medicine
- » Understanding TCM therapies
- » Finding reasons to try TCM

Chapter **1**

Looking at Health through a TCM Lens

When I was growing up, I tried to fake a fever by putting my forehead under the desk lamp to get out of school. But I was rarely successful because my father was a doctor. He'd place his hand on my forehead, look down my throat, and pronounce me fit to go. He was the one who calmly explained why I wasn't dying when I woke with blood between my legs in the middle of the night at age 12. Neighbors and church members sought him out for medical advice, and he was spot on with his diagnosis. I thought he always wanted to be a doctor. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned his choice of profession was born from personal tragedy during the Korean War.

His older brother, a college freshman, bled to death from shrapnel wounds when a bomb hit outside the front gate of their family home. My father, a high school senior, watched him die in his mother's arms and helped bury him in the backyard. This is why my father became a doctor instead of an architect or filmmaker as his heart desired.

My father's heart surgery and later onset of Parkinson's disease prompted my own exploration of an alternative to his colorful parade of pills (see the Introduction). I was also restless in my career and questioned if I wanted to retire on deadlines in front of a computer.

I share this because not every fork in the road is a choice. Sometimes, the path you take is more necessity than destiny. I never imagined following in my father's footsteps because math and science were a slog for me. (Confession: I got through biology without ever dissecting anything. I had my lab partner do it.) Necessity presented itself with my father's health and my personal career conundrum. And I steered as far from medicine as I could until I discovered the medicine I'd like to introduce to you in this book.

Stepping out of my comfort zone was simultaneously exciting and scary. But whenever I've reached a crossroads in my life — big or small — I've turned to my favorite poem, *The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost. My interpretation of it has been my guiding philosophy as an adult.

However, when it comes to any kind of health care, I like to move forward with an annotated map that contains as much information about the routes that I have available to reach my destination. For example, when I was diagnosed with osteoarthritis (wear-and-tear cartilage loss) in my right hip, my doctor and I discussed the options available to me to manage my pain and improve my range of motion, including steroid shots, pain medication, physical therapy, and strength training, with surgery as the last stop on the treatment train. I declined the steroid shots and pain medication and went to physical therapy, strength training, and yoga. With my doctor's agreement, I also incorporated acupuncture, tui na, and Traditional Chinese Herbs (TCH). (See Chapters 4 and 5.) As a result, I went 11 months before reaching my last stop of hip replacement surgery. To top it off, my recovery was minimally painful (2 out of 10 on the pain scale without any opioid medication) and faster than anticipated (fully mobile with a cane in three weeks).

So, if your health-care approach aligns with mine, I hope this book can serve as part of your map and offer you some options that you may not have considered before.

Recognizing TCM as a System of Healing



REMEMBER

The phrase *Traditional Chinese Medicine* (TCM) is a misnomer. Perhaps *East Asian Medicine* or *Asian-Inspired Medicine* are more accurate terms because, as practiced in the Western world, TCM also incorporates techniques, styles, and approaches from other Asian countries, Europe, and the U.S. — not just China. The term TCM is widely used around the world (in media, research, education, and medical and health-related institutions), so that's the term I use.

TCM is based on a theoretical framework that seeks to explain how the human body functions, behaves, and reacts within the expansive ecosystem of life on this

planet. The framework is built on theories and concepts about the human condition and health that guide where, when, why, and how practitioners should apply TCM techniques. I give you a sliver of insight into this framework in Chapter 2.

Western medicine (also known as allopathic medicine, biomedicine, or conventional medicine) is predominately used by doctors in private practice and hospitals within the United States. It's also the global standard. Its roots lie in Greece, which is considered Western (even though it's both east and west of the North American continent, depending on which way the crow flies). As described by the Cleveland Clinic, "This type of medical care uses techniques based on scientific evidence."

To distinguish TCM from Western medicine, you can categorize TCM's treatments and approaches in three ways. TCM involves healing:

- » Naturally
- » Holistically
- » Integratively

I discuss each category briefly in the following sections.

Healing naturally

The most common definitions for *natural* relate to something existing in nature or caused by nature — more specifically, not made or caused by humans. (I find this concept difficult to reconcile because humans *are* natural beings, but I digress.)

If you search online for "natural healing," your results offer information about acupuncture, tai chi, and herbal remedies, along with other nonsurgical, non-pharmaceutical treatment methods such as meditation, massage, homeopathy, naturopathy, and aromatherapy. What many health-related websites don't acknowledge often (or at all) is that acupuncture, tai chi, herbal prescriptions, and so on are part of an entire system of TCM medicine.

At this time in human history, I think TCM's prime directive is to remind the body to do what its form, adaptations, and evolution allow it to do — to protect and heal itself naturally.

Healing holistically

TCM falls into the category labeled *holistic medicine*, which is based on the novel idea that a person's health involves not just their physical wellness, but also their mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Some osteopaths, chiropractors,

and naturopaths call it a *whole-body approach*. (Although I can't imagine what a *partial-body approach* even looks like.)

Widely acknowledged as the father of medicine, Hippocrates established many of the standards of clinical medicine today. Hippocratic doctors consider each person to be unique. As part of their consult, they consider a patient's age, gender, appearance, physique, daily habits, where they live, and even the season of the year. This focus on the individual characteristics of a patient differs from Western medicine's focus on the patient's symptoms.

Hippocrates' person-centered approach aligns very closely with TCM's holistic approach, and the details Hippocratic doctors evaluated are very similar to what TCM practitioners have always considered when examining and treating each patient. Chapter 6 gives you a small window into what you might expect at an appointment with a TCM practitioner.

Healing integratively

Medical products and practices that are not part of standard medical care (Western medicine) are labeled complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), according to the National Institutes of Health and other major health-care systems, such as the United Kingdom's National Health Service. Therefore, TCM is considered CAM among most Western medical professionals. For example, a person can use TCM as a complement to Western medicine, much like a side dish or appetizer to round out the main course. Or a person can use TCM instead of Western medicine, like choosing lasagna instead of fettuccine alfredo.

The term integrative medicine (IM) is catching on as more Western professionals seek a combination of effective approaches for their patients. Dr. Andrew Weil, MD, is a pioneer and proponent of integrative medicine who helped establish it as a specialty. His Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona offers a range of programs from residency and fellowship to certification for medical doctors, nurses, and other health-care professionals, including acupuncturists. I earned my Integrative Health and Lifestyle (IH&LP) certification from the Center in 2020. The knowledge I gained and continue to access as an IH&LP alumni informs my practice every day.

Because a Western medicine doctor raised me, I greatly appreciate what Western medicine can do. I'm also aware of its shortcomings and risks. Similarly, TCM has enormous benefits (which I hope this book can show you), but it has limitations, too. As a healer, I want people to have access to every healing method available that improves their health and quality of life. By combining traditional and non-traditional treatments, I think integrative medicine moves patients and practitioners toward that goal, bringing the best of all worlds to wellness.

Uncovering TCM's Origins and Principles

For the physicians of ancient Greece, China, and India, a person's health depended on what modern medicine calls *lifestyle* or *preventative* medicine. These ancient physicians believed in keeping illness from becoming a problem in the body. Granted, many health-related issues from 3,000, 1,000, or even 100 years ago differ greatly from modern-day illnesses. But I find it quite interesting that many people continue to use TCM today, which elicits a similar type of curiosity about treating illness.

Observing nature

Every society or culture has developed some kind of response to illness and injury. Historians can certainly debate which came first. The oldest records discovered (on tortoise shells, papyrus rolls, animal skins, fabric, or paper) seem to date back to around 2,000 BCE, but Stone Age healers and their methods existed for a long time before that.

In early societies, healers tried to make sense of why and how things occurred, just as modern physicians do today. But thousands of years ago, they didn't have laboratories or microscopes — they had to observe the world around them with their eyes and other senses. They noted how physical conditions in nature changed when the seasons changed. They saw how wind, rain, cold, and heat affected people. They studied the movement of the sun, moon, and other lights and objects in the sky. Healers meticulously recorded their observations on a variety of materials. In China, ancient healers took copious notes on bamboo slips and silk scrolls as described in the following sections.

Finding evidence in ancient scrolls

Some scholars believe, based on ancient texts, that the two main branches (or components) of TCM — *acupuncture and moxibustion* (burning dried mugwort near points on the body, which I talk about in the section “Discovering TCM beyond the needles,” later in this chapter), and *materia medica* (plant, animal, and mineral products used medically) — developed in different parts of China and then somehow merged. As I describe in Chapters 4 and 5, each of the TCM therapies has a very long and interesting history. But you can see the oldest documented proof of TCM's origins in a permanent exhibit at the Hunan Museum in South Central China.

The discovery of the Mawangdui tombs in Changsha, Hunan province, China, in 1973 was like an Indiana Jones moment for not only global archaeology and

Chinese cultural history, but also for TCM. According to a 2024 article in *The Global Times*, workers doing construction drilling for a military hospital project found three tombs. Researchers believe the tombs were built in 168 BCE. The remarkably well-preserved tomb contents included over 50 bamboo and silk scrolls (see Figure 1-1).

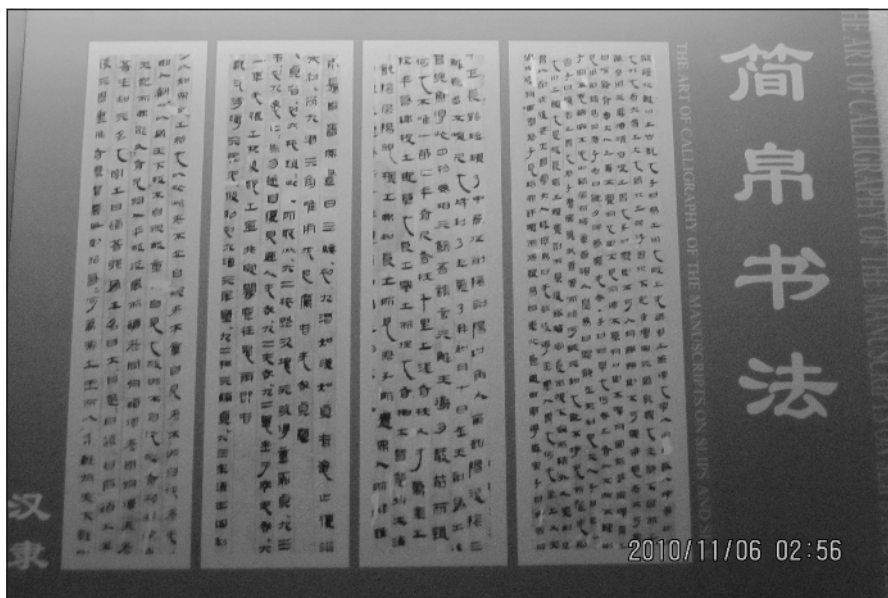


FIGURE 1-1: Ancient silk scroll unearthed from Mawangdui Han Tomb 3, as preserved in the Hunan Museum.

Huangdan2060/https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mawangdui_Silk_Texts_1.JPG/ Public domain/last accessed on Feb 11, 2026

Among the scrolls found were manuscripts demonstrating the breadth of ancient Chinese medical concepts and techniques. They describe early ideas and theories about how the human body operates and how it gets sick and dies, which are fundamental to TCM.

Of course, Chinese scholars had first dibs on organizing, studying, translating, and discussing these works, but a Japanese research team from Kyoto University published a two-volume collection of translations and essays about them in 1985. I'm not really sticking my neck out too far to say the definitive English translation and discussion of these texts was published in 1998 as *Early Chinese Medical Literature* (Routledge), by Donald J. Harper, PhD, an expert in early Chinese civilization and Centennial Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Chicago.

The Mawangdui scrolls are the largest collection of medical literature from that time (299–100 BCE). Other tomb discoveries from the same period have expanded

our knowledge of early Chinese medicine, including how this knowledge was recorded, shared, and preserved. For more on the Mawangdui discoveries, please see Appendix B.

Seeking spiritual guidance

Although modern medicine operates in the framework of science, medicine evolved from traditional medical practices and theories highly influenced by spiritual, mystical, or religious beliefs. In some cultures, healers were also priests, monks, diviners, shamans, and so on. Whether it was a higher power's punishment or an angry ancestor's curse, many cultures believed that you could reverse or avoid misfortune if you kept the higher powers and ancestors happy — or, at least, not offended.

Some examples of ancient cultures that believed one's health was influenced by the supernatural include:

- » **Mesopotamia:** As far back as 4000 BCE, the societies of Mesopotamia used herbal remedies, prayers, offerings, and rituals to appease the gods and keep evil spirits away.
- » **Egypt:** Ancient Egyptians believed gods, spirits, and demons had a hand in illness. Their earliest medical texts, known as the Pyramid Texts (around 2600 BCE), contained spells, prayers, and incantations for protection. Treatments often involved religious symbols, prayers, and offerings associated with gods and goddesses of healing, such as Sekhmet, the goddess of medicine, or Imhotep, the deified physician and architect of the Step Pyramid of Djoser.
- » **India:** Scholars of *Ayurveda* (India's traditional system of medicine) think that this system has divine origins. This holistic healing knowledge was passed from the Hindu god of creation, Brahma, to Indra, the king of the gods. Indra then shared it with the legendary sage Atreya, who wrote the earliest medical compilations (Vedas) that were later refined by another renowned sage Agnevesha. A key aspect of Ayurvedic practice is spiritual counseling (*satsang*) to help achieve the balance and harmony needed for well-being.
- » **China:** The ancient Chinese early medical framework included magic, astrology, numerology, and *hemerology* (the study of calendars to identify or predict lucky days). As discussed in Chapter 2, TCM concepts tie back to Taoist philosophy, which emphasizes the relationships of opposing yet mutually dependent factors and the interconnectedness of all things.

Focusing on belief concepts

Although modern medicine relies on science for its evidence-based theories and practices, belief has power of its own in the healing process. The evidence in modern medicine is obtained through meticulously constructed clinical trials that are designed to test the safety and efficacy of a new medication or treatment for a certain condition or symptom. To prove that it works well, the medication is compared to a *placebo*, which is a substance designed to have no effect. It has no therapeutic action. One group of testers receives the medication while the other group gets the placebo. The results from the two groups are compared. If the medication is significantly more effective at improving the condition or relieving the symptom than the placebo, it stands a good chance of being approved for production and marketing.

If the placebo group shows improvement despite receiving essentially nothing, this is called a *placebo effect* — the people believed they were given medication, and this belief improved their condition. Professional athletes have certain rituals or routines that they follow that have nothing to do with their physical gifts, mental toughness, or competitive spirit — but they believe that these rituals improve their performance.

In the medical world, I associate the idea of belief with the patient experience and what gives patients faith in practitioners, medicines, treatments, and recommendations. A 2020 joint Healthgrades and Medical Group Management Association study analyzed 8.4 million patient reviews and comments about health-care providers. Over 52 percent of patients indicated they wanted someone who had at least one of the following qualities: compassion, comfort, patience, personality, and bedside manner.

Neurobiology and psychiatry researchers have found that patients who believe that their doctor has good bedside manner are more likely to view their treatment as effective, comply with treatment recommendations, and experience reduced symptoms and better recovery.

The late Herbert Benson, MD, was a Harvard cardiologist who pioneered the field of *mind-body medicine* (which cultivates the interactions among the mind, body, and behavior to promote health). His extensive research, teaching, and publications brought greater awareness to medical professionals and the general public about the effects of spirituality and faith on healing. Benson wrote, “Practicing medicine and conducting medical research, I’ve learned that invoking beliefs is not only emotionally and spiritually soothing but vitally important to physical health.”

Hmm, perhaps TCM also falls in the category of mind-body medicine.

Presenting the TCM Therapies

TCM has deep and ancient roots (which you can read more about in the section “Uncovering TCM’s Origins and Principles,” earlier in this chapter, with a deeper dive in Chapters 4 and 5). Over the centuries, the trunk has stayed pretty solid, despite efforts to destroy it. During China’s Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, the Chinese government under Mao Zedong attempted to purge all things considered elite (see Chapter 4 for a brief discussion of this attempt), which included TCM.

TCM was deemed elite because it was practiced by physician-scholars who passed their knowledge down through their families or handpicked disciples. This is what I consider *Classical Chinese Medicine* (see the section entitled “Revealing family secrets” in Chapter 4).

Since then, branches of TCM have extended beyond China, offering different approaches, schools of thought, techniques, technologies (such as electricity and lasers), tools, and materials. For this book, I stick with what I learned in my TCM program and the therapies that I can use as a licensed practitioner. (See Chapter 3 for more details about licensing.)

Using acupuncture

Probably the most familiar TCM therapy is *acupuncture*, which involves the insertion of very thin needles at certain points in the body for healing effects. And the most prominent tools of this therapy are the needles. However, acupuncture actually focuses on stimulating specific points on the body. Practitioners most frequently produce stimulation by using needles, but they can also use heat, manual pressure, or electric current. The length and thickness of the needles used and the location of needle insertion depend on the specific issue that the acupuncturist is addressing at the time. You can also apply acupuncture to the scalp and ears.

Different styles of acupuncture get their flavor from the country where they’re practiced or reflect new thinking or approaches. For example, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese acupuncture may have the same foundation, but each is distinctly its own practice. Although this book focuses on Chinese acupuncture, here’s a summary of the different styles, as explained to me by one of my professors, Dr. Jung Kim, an expert in TCM theory and Korean Saam acupuncture (a style that involves a total of four needles inserted in the hands), who describes the difference in style as a difference in character:

» **Chinese:** Aggressive, with deep needle insertion and a lot of needle manipulation

TCM PRACTICES WORLDWIDE

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), practitioners in 103 of 129 countries that collect and share this information use acupuncture. Some European countries, such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain, have incorporated aspects of TCM into their health-care systems. In Germany, for example, the German Medical Chamber recognizes Chinese medicine practices such as acupuncture and herbal medicine as sub-specializations and practices them alongside conventional medicine. In Spain, the Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona Children's Hospital offers several TCM therapies to children for conditions ranging from pain and respiratory issues to digestive and skin problems. The TCM therapies offered include acupuncture (body and ear), moxibustion, cupping, and tui na massage.

Either national or private insurances cover acupuncture in a number of European countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In some European countries, national or private insurance may also cover prescribed TCM herbal medicines.

- » **Japanese:** Gentle, with shallow needle insertion and little to no needle manipulation
- » **Korean:** Somewhere in between Chinese and Japanese styles, like Korea's geographic position between China and Japan

You can find a more detailed look at acupuncture, its history, and its application in Chapter 4.

Discovering TCM beyond the needles

In addition to acupuncture (discussed in the preceding section and Chapter 4), TCM includes other manual therapies and herbal prescriptions. Here's a brief overview (and you can find more information in Chapter 5):

- » **Moxibustion:** Heat supplied, either directly or indirectly, by burning the herb *Artemisia vulgaris* (mugwort) over a single acupuncture point, group of points, or area. Its heat penetrates deeply beneath the skin and radiates to deeper tissues like muscles and tendons. Practitioners often use moxibustion to alleviate pain, especially in chronic cases. See Chapter 7 for more information on pain management.

- » **Herbs and/or nutritional supplements:** Include plant, animal, and mineral substances, as well as foods. Whether individual or combined into formulas, TCM prescriptions can facilitate the body's own restorative process and complement other TCM treatments. See Chapter 5 for more details on TCM herbal therapy.
- » **Cupping:** The application of round vacuum cups over an area to enhance blood circulation. Cupping is discussed in Chapter 5.
- » **Gua sha:** Often translated as *scraping*, but you can more accurately describe it as *press-stroking* on lubricated skin by using a smooth-edged tool. Gua sha improves blood circulation, relieves pain, and strengthens the immune system. See Chapter 5 for more on gua sha and Chapter 7 for more on its use in pain relief.
- » **Tui na:** A therapeutic massage developed by classical TCM physicians as a medical therapy in accordance with TCM principles. Practitioners often use it to decrease pain, increase circulation and metabolism, and treat joint disorders. See Chapters 5 and 7 for more details.
- » **Qigong and tai chi:** Movement-based therapies that have multiple physical, mental, and emotional benefits. See Chapter 5 for more information.

Exploring technological components

Two components frequently used during TCM treatment use technology that didn't exist when TCM originated, so I consider them additional features:

- » **Infrared and Teding Diancibo Pu (TDP) lamp therapy:** Warming the skin by using a heat source mounted to an adjustable arm and positioned above the body. Infrared heat helps relieve muscle and joint stiffness and pain. *Teding Diancibo Pu* translates to "special electromagnetic spectrum." This lamp combines infrared heat and a ceramic, mineral-infused plate to improve blood circulation and facilitate healing.
- » **Electrical stimulation (e-stim):** Running a low-level electrical current through the body by attaching small electrodes to inserted acupuncture needles. The concept is very similar to transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), which delivers an electrical current through electrodes attached to pads stuck to the skin. E-stim is more precise than TENS because the needles deliver the current to small, specific parts of the body, while TENS pads cover more surface area.

Deciding to Try TCM

Navigating any health-care system in the modern world can be complicated, to say the least. In my personal experience, it takes persistence, patience, and a fair amount of self-advocacy to get the care that you need. When I'm faced with a challenge or venture into uncharted territory, the better informed I am, the better my chances of success.

In the following sections, I share some thoughts to help your decision-making process as you consider whether TCM is a potential health-care modality.

Figuring out your expectations

If you see TCM as a potential health-care option, start by evaluating why or how you might benefit from it.

Based on what I've heard over 13 years of clinical practice in the United States, some of the reasons may include:

- » Nothing else has worked.
- » I don't want to rely on medication(s).
- » I don't want to have surgery.
- » A friend/family member/coworker suggested I try it.

Although I'm grateful for whatever brings a patient to my door, I recognize that I need to understand the patient's expectations for healing, especially because I provide health care that falls outside of or is other than conventional Western medicine.

If nothing else has worked, why do they think TCM will? If TCM doesn't work, are they out of options? That's a lot of pressure, being the Hail Mary pass of health care. And although drugs and surgery can have pitfalls and risks, TCM has limitations, too. I had a urinary tract infection that a medical doctor remedied by giving me antibiotics faster than I could have by taking a TCM formula and having a session of acupuncture. TCM can't remove a tumor or reconstruct a torn ligament in your knee, but it can surely minimize post-surgical side effects and speed recovery.

I'm always happy when a patient comes to me on the referral of someone they trust. But what works for one person doesn't always work for someone else. TCM treatment is truly tailored to an individual's history and condition, and crafted by the specific training and experience of the practitioner (for more on TCM

education and training, see Chapter 3). Ten people can come to me with right shoulder pain, and I can deliver ten different treatments that have varying levels of effectiveness. On the flipside, a patient who has right shoulder pain could go to ten TCM practitioners and get a different treatment each time with varying levels of effectiveness. Because of this variability, I ask new patients to request a referral to another practitioner if they don't get positive results with me within four sessions. More chronic cases can take longer, but if I haven't moved the needle at all on a patient's condition after four treatments, I'm not the right fit. Just like in any good relationship, a little bit of chemistry comes into play.

Knowing your commitment level

When you consider what healing means to you, take into account the level of effort that you, as the patient, can and will put into it. In my welcome letter to new patients, I make it a point to describe my vision of our work together:

I see this as the beginning of a unique partnership that has been formed with a common goal in mind — your health and well-being. For any partnership to succeed, there needs to be mutual understanding, trust, and effort. As your practitioner partner, I am committed to providing you with the best possible medical care within my scope of practice as an acupuncturist and doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine. As my patient partner, I ask that you be an active participant in this process to the best of your ability.

