

An Interview with Philippe Sionneau

Brian Carter, MScI, LAc

Philippe Sionneau is one of the best-known authors and teachers of Chinese medicine (CM) in the West. Among his many books are *The Treatment of Modern Western Medical Diseases with Chinese Medicine* (with Bob Flaws) and his seven-volume series, *The Treatment of Disease in Chinese Medicine* (with Lu Gang). I have the highest respect for his use of exclusively Chinese sources. Imagine my surprise when I discovered he had signed up for *The Pulse of Oriental Medicine's* e-zine! I was honored once again when he graciously agreed to this interview. It is with great pleasure that I present to you a few words from Philippe Sionneau.

Brian Benjamin Carter (BBC): Many CM practitioners in the West have been trained from secondary sources (translations). What misconceptions do you find yourself clearing up again and again?

Philippe H. Sionneau (PHS): Here we're touching the heart of studying Chinese medicine in the West. You have to understand that for at least 2,500 years, Chinese medicine relied on written transmission. The essential notions of this medical art are conveyed through the language, and the Chinese language is highly specific and foreign. It is essentially different from our Indo-European languages. This is a huge obstacle for those of us who are teachers, writers and translators. I don't think learning from translations is a major drawback as long as the translations are consistent. There are always more translations, and their quality is improving. Ultimately, the problem lies elsewhere. Chinese medicine was built upon the major Chinese trends of thought, which see the world quite differently than we do. To understand the fundamental theories we think we already know (such as yin and yang, the Five Phases, *qi*, the Three Treasures and the Five Spirits), one needs an in-depth knowledge of both Chinese culture and the Chinese way of thinking. For instance, the way we understand yin and yang and the Five Phases is very much influenced by the strictly-defined, rigid concepts of Western logic. This rigidity dictates an intellectual approach which leads to a fragmented perspective. It has nothing to do with the original dynamic and universal Chinese vision, which was based upon perception and movement. In spite of all our good will and sincerity, there are many misunderstandings. Hopefully authors and searchers are now moving closer and closer to the original Chinese sources.

BBC: Then is our actual practice of Chinese medicine wrong?

PHS: No, but it is incomplete. We are at the beginning. We are the pioneer generation and we have everything to build. This is not a tragedy ... on the contrary, it is a fantastic opportunity! Since both the recognition of Chinese medicine in Europe and an MD/PhD track in the U.S. are hot topics, it would be fitting for us to focus on the quality of existing training courses. For the next few decades, our attention should be on quality rather than quantity. In order to promote the practice of Chinese medicine, it would be much better to have a handful of well-trained, effective practitioners than thousands of superficially-trained, mediocre ones.

BBC: Historically, quite unique traditions of CM developed in various Asian nations. Have you seen a difference between practitioners in various non-Asian countries? For example, how are European practitioners different from American or Australian practitioners?

PHS: I can speak for Europeans and Americans, and there is no major gap between them. But serious issues still remain ... Most practitioners approach Chinese medicine far too mechanically. They find it difficult to establish a diagnosis - to "think Chinese." Many prescribe formulas without ever being truly creative in the act of healing · but they are all enthusiastic, sincere and motivated, and this is why I foresee a fantastic future for our profession.

BBC: What do you want to achieve most as a writer, teacher and healer?

PHS: Like many others, my mission is to transmit a more traditional vision of Chinese medicine. Up to now, I have written rather technical, practical and clinical books. This is just the first step. I am much more interested in the heart of Chinese medicine than in its facade. My research is headed that way. My concern as a healer is not only to relieve patients of their illness, but also to help them understand the origin of their suffering. And this is fascinating.

BBC: Is there a historical doctor that you strive to emulate?

PHS: I am impressed by many great masters. How can we not look up to someone like Zhang Ji, who invented "scientific" Chinese medicine? How can we not admire the wisdom of Sun Si Miao, the erudition of Li Shi Zhen, the creativity of Zhang Jie Bin, the clinical skill of Ye Tian Shi, the humanism of Xu Da Chun, the knowledge of He Men Yao, and so many others? The history of Chinese medicine's ideas transmitted through its great masters is simply amazing.

BBC: What is your opinion of the various forms of herbs on the market? Do you think patent formulas (tinctures and pills) are better than nothing?

PHS: Yet another delicate question! Science has proven that any kind of medical intervention, even placebo, induces a 40% improvement. These pills and tinctures actually do give at least 40% noticeable results · However, I believe that the goal of medicine is to obtain better than placebo results, or else we should just give our patients sugar pills! All the good practitioners I've seen, without exception, prescribe decoctions. All the "miracle cures" performed by Chinese medicine I've witnessed were from decoctions. I have never seen any of my Chinese teachers prescribe ready-made pills to a patient, yet some formulas taste just as bitter to the Chinese! If we wish to become a real profession, we should stay on the right track and do what must be done to succeed.

BBC: How would you sell CM practitioners on the idea of learning to create these customized herbal formulations (raw herb, powders)?

PHS: I am convinced there is just no other option. I prescribe customized raw herb formulas in my own clinical practice. This is the traditional way of practicing this art. The practitioner exerts his skill in his modifications of the formula. Standard formulas rarely, if ever, fit the complexity of the patients we see in practice. Low-dosage pills were intended for self-medication; they don't belong in professional practice. And there's no hope for a practitioner to become aware of the huge difference between these pills and customized decoctions prescribed at therapeutic dosages. Being pioneers doesn't give us the right to act as we please. We must never forget that this is really about people's health.

BBC: Your Blue Poppy Press bio says that your main passion is to help people who are suffering. Is there a particular patient you can think of whose healing has meant more to you than any other?

PHS: Many people have left their mark and helped me grow. Significantly improving a patient's life is always a rewarding experience. I pay close attention to my failures because, in trying to understand what went wrong, they help me to improve. On the other hand, we should remain very humble when faced with a spectacular result. Practicing medicine is such a difficult art. It is a very demanding profession - to such an extent that I thank God each time a patient improves.

BBC: In order to make time for writing, speaking and traveling, do you have to pick and choose the cases you take on? What kind of case are you more likely to get excited about versus refer out?

PHS: I don't actually travel or do conferences a lot, and writing is a long-term effort that leaves me enough time for clinical practice, so I don't have to be selective, but I do prefer patients who live near my practice. Healing people involves taking their care seriously, following their progress attentively and taking the problem in hand; it has nothing to do with seeing them once and then only being in touch by telephone. If Chinese medicine is to become a real medical profession in the Western world, we must follow the rules of medical ethics. Patient follow-up is one of them. Above all, healing is a special encounter between two spirits. That is my favorite part of Chinese medicine!

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