



GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

A Brief Biography of Hua Tuo

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Hua Tuo was born into a poor family. When he was seven years old, his father passed away, taking with him the only source of family income. Faced with financial hardship and poverty, Hua Tuo began to work in a local herbal pharmacy. While working there, he carefully observed the practice of medicine and pharmacy. Thus began his career of one of the best physicians in our profession.

Hua Tuo practiced medicine during the end of the Eastern Han and beginning of the Three Kingdoms, a period of time characterized by political instability with constant battles and turmoil. He sympathized with the common people whose lives were suppressed by the government and dedicated his entire life to helping them. Therefore, he was also known as "the physician of the people." He preferred to treat the common folks of the world and repeatedly refused to accept offers of the position as the Supreme Physician in the Imperial Palace.



Hua Tuo is respected for being the first surgeon and inventor of anesthesia in traditional Chinese medicine. He believed that for diseases that could not be treated with acupuncture and herbs, the only solution was surgery to remove the cause. It is well-documented that Hua Tuo frequently performed surgery on various parts of the body by using an herbal formula called *Ma Fei San* (Numbing and Boiling Powder) for systemic anesthesia.¹

Despite his outstanding achievements, there were always more patients than Hua Tuo could possibly care for in his practice. Thus, he began to wonder why people were always sick and what would make them healthier. He concluded that chronic illnesses were due, in part, to a lack of physical activity and proposed regular exercise as a remedy. As part of Hua Tuo's strong emphasis on the importance of physical activity, he developed *Wu Qin Xi* (Five Animal Frolics), an exercise that imitates the physical movement of tigers, deer, monkeys, bears and birds.



In his later years, Hua Tuo was called by the emperor of the Wei Kingdom, Cǎo Cāo,² to treat his "head wind" (presumably migraine headache) that had not responded to any of the treatments by many other physicians. By the insertion of just one needle, the chronic headache was alleviated. Cao was so impressed he insisted on having Hua Tuo as his personal physician. However, Hua Tuo tactfully refused, claiming he needed to return home to attend to his sick wife.

Shortly after returning home, he was called again and subsequently forced by Cao to return to the Imperial Palace. Cao had another severe headache and wanted Hua Tuo to cure him and would not let him leave the Imperial Palace. Hua Tuo stated the headache was so severe it could not be treated simply with herbs or acupuncture. The only cure would be to induce anesthesia and surgically open the head to remove the cause of the headache. Cao thought Hua Tuo was making an attempt to assassinate him and sentenced Hua Tuo to death



While in prison, Hua Tuo compiled all of his clinical experience in writing and tried to give it to a prison guard for safe keeping. However, out of fear of Cao, the guard refused to do any favors or accept anything from Hua Tuo. In extreme anger and frustration, Hua Tuo burned his manuscripts, turning all his clinical knowledge to ashes. After Hua Tuo died, he was buried next to a flowing river of clear water - symbolizing he was cleared from all wrong-doing.

This brief biography of Hua Tuo is an excerpt from *Chinese Herbal Formulas and Applications*, written by myself and Tina Chen, published by Art of Medicine Press. This book will be available this fall.

References

1. The exact composition of *Ma Fei San* (Numbing and Boiling Powder), similar to all of Hua Tuo's clinical knowledge, was lost when his manuscripts were burned. Many physicians have attempted to re-create the same formulation based on historical records but none have achieved the same clinical efficacy as Hua Tuo's. This formula is believed to have contained *yang jin hua* (Flos daturae), *cao wu* (Radix aconiti kusnezoffii), *bai zhi* (Radix angelicae dahuricae), *dang gui* (Radix angelicae sinensis) and *chuan xiong* (Rhizoma chuanxiong), among others.
2. Cao Cao was the emperor of the Wei Kingdom during the period of the Three Kingdoms. Because these three kingdoms were at war constantly for approximately 60 years, Cao had many enemies and was always facing the threat of assassination. So when Hua Tuo offered to cure Cao's headache by "cutting his head open" to perform brain surgery, Cao naturally assumed he was using medicine as an excuse to kill him, and subsequently sentenced Hua Tuo to death. This story, however, is considered to be folklore, as there is no confirmed historical record of exact motive and circumstances associated with Hua Tuo's death.

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