Frankincense – historical evidence from traditional Chinese literature of beneficial effects on the human physiology

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Introduction

Frankincense (olibanum), obtained as white gum resin of the Boswellia tree, has been used since ancient times in the Orient and the Occident both for religious and festive purposes, but also for medical applications and as an addictive drug [1,2]. In early history, frankincense was used in the resin form and also burned as frankincense pyrolysate. It was known to be antiseptic, disinfectant, an efficient drug against catarrh or diarrhoea, and was used in mixtures to initiate abortion [3].

Some principles of traditional Chinese medicine

The most important principle is the “five agents”. The five agents are similar to the European “elements” but the meaning of this concept is different and its importance is much higher in China. These agents are: fire, earth, metal, water and wood and either generate or dominate each other.

As can be seen in Figure 1 each element correlates with all the others, either by the (generating-) way or by the (dominating-) way. Another important principles of the traditional Chinese medicine is that of yin and yang, showing that everything has two sides which need to be balanced. The principles of Qi (chinese: Xue), Xue (blood), Jing (essence) and Shen (spirit, mind) represent different functions in the body.

Chinese pharmacology categorized drugs by:

- Temperature: Hot, warm, neutral, cool, cold
- Taste: hot, bitter, sour, salty, sweet
- Nature: ascending or descending

These categories are important for finding the right drug for every disease. The physician must regard not only the nature of the disease, but also the constitution of the patient and other factors like season.

A Chinese recipe always consists of many different drugs. These drugs can be of plant origin, but also minerals; animals and animal products. The recipe needs to be balanced according to the Yin and Yang principle and according to the affected organs. In addition, the type of person is taken into consideration, e.g. an old person will get a different recipe for the same disease as a young person[4].

The Ben Cao Gang Mu 本草纲目

The most comprehensive work concerning pharmacy of pre-modern China is the Ben Cao Gang Mu 本草纲目, compiled by Li Shizhen 李时珍 in the 16th century. By now this work consists of 52 volumes. 1892 drugs are described and more than 10 000 recipes are given.

Frankincense in the Ben Cao Gang Mu

Frankincense is said to be warm and non-poisonous. [Da Ming] Frankincense is bitter, temperature is hot, warm. [Yuan Su] bitter, hot taste, good to achieve a clear Yang. [Zhen Heng] it enters the small Yin Main vessel in the head (that is connected to the heart).

The chapter 侻竸 (fa ming, newer classification) says that the albanum tree is hurt when resin is obtained. (…) The resin is used by the tree to heal its wound, which is why frankincense helps to cure pain. (…)

Competence for Therapy/Healing:

[Bie Jia] Frankincense masters diseases arising from wind and water, swelling caused by poison, it eliminates bad Qi and diseases arising from contact with hidden corpses (ann: hidden corpses are always connected with demons. In Chinese cultures ancestral worship is one of the basic concepts. If a dead person is not worshiped in the appropriate way he will come back and spread diseases and bad luck over the family. So this may mean any kind of disease of unknown origin), hives and itching. Frankincense is useful for all these. [Cang Qi] Furthermore it can cure deafness and weakness, wind storms (probably apoplectic stroke), lockjaw and inability to talk, and it balances blood and Qi. [Qi Xi] in a woman. It can stop bad diarrhoea in the large intestines, cures all kinds of diseases arising from adhesive Qi (i.e. bad demons, with adhesive Qi often bacterial or viral infections are meant. Not knowing about bacteria these sorts of infective diseases were blamed on Qi that can no longer flow). It is heated and used as ointment to stop pain [arising from] proliferating flesh. [Zhao Cai] It regulates insomonia. [Yuan Su] It is filling the kidney and it pacifies the pain in the main vessels. [Li Zhen] It is part of the recipe for immortality, according to the rules it can be used to avoid crop in the process of gaining immortality. [Shi Zhen] It catabolises all poisonous substances in all kinds of abscesses. Frankincense guards the heart by catabolising all poisonous substances in all kinds of abscesses.

Ben Cao Gang Mu Recipes in chapter 附方 (fu liang, methods, appended recipes):

To cast out wind (causing dispersion of illnesses) and to ameliorate the appearance of the skin.

[Qi xiao’s recipe] Take two 1/10 jin ann: a 1/10 jin = 16 2/3 liang, a “liang” is about 36.9 grams, so a “jin” is about 590 g [5] real frankincense, three “jin” fine white honey, put it together in a porcelain bowl and roast gently with little oil to make it look like molasses. Take two spoons every morning.

[Paediatrics] For a baby continuously screaming in the night

[Sheng Hui’s recipe] Take one 1/10 qian (1/10 “qian” equal 1 2/3 “liang”, 1 “liang” equals between 36.9 and 37.3 g, depending on the source you read) frankincense and seven pieces of sooty wick (K 臥 “mei” is a so-called “Counting-word” in the Chinese language. It is not defined how much that would be), make a powder. Give the child each time half a 1/10 “zi” (“one “zi” is four “qian”) to swallow with the milk

To fend off plagues

Take the first scoop of fountain water on the 24th day of the 12th month (The Chinese year is counted differently from the European year, so this is not our December 24th) at the fifth vigil and let it be perfumed with frankincense. Keep the water warm until the fifth vigil of the new year. From childhood to adult everyone shall take one piece of frankincense and shall drink three sips of the water. Then there will not be harm for one year. Kong Ping Zhong says: This is a recipe of Xuan Sheng (another name for Confucius). It was used by the Kong family (i.e. the family of Confucius) for more than 70 generations. This brief sentence may hint that frankincense was known in China much earlier.

For difficult or rushed birth

Easy and brought to the point recipe to help the people: Take five qian light yellow frankincense (In an earlier edition it says one 1/10 “fen”, which is one tenth of a qian). Make a powder and mix it with pig blood of a cow. Make a pill the size of the parallel tree seed. Take each time five pills with alcohol.

[jing Yan’s recipe] Take frankincense. On the 5th day of the 5th month at noon a man from the inside of the city walls shall take a clay bowl filled with frankincense, then a boy shall go outside the city walls and scrape the seeds out of the clefts of the wall with the handle of a brush and give them to the man. They are put into the clay bowl and everything is ground well. Take water and make pills the size of the seeds of the prickly water lily (Euryale ferox). Take a pill each time and do not ash it but swallow it with alcohol.

[Sheng Hui’s recipe] Take bright frankincense the size of a bean, make a powder, give it to one small cup of water. It is allowed to add a bit of vinegar. Let the parturient hold with both hands a stone looking similar to a swallow and let her recite this recipe (The belief that recipes came from “the sants” gave it magic). Do this three times and then she shall drink. Doing this she shall go around with little steps and not till then she shall swallow.

A recipe from the coast: take frankincense and homogenize it with powdered cinnamon and make a powder. Take one qian of that together with musk and alcohol, keep it in the mouth for a long time and then swallow.

Frankincense in traditional Chinese medicine today

It is also classed as warm, ascending, of bitter taste and connected to the heart and the liver. It is said to move xue, to move and to regulate the Qi, to stop pain, to divert humidity correlated with diseases caused by wind and by heat, it is said to cure wounds, injuries and haematomas and it cures swelling [6].

References


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