

THE CHINESE CONNECTION OF TAMIL MEDICINE

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Received: 21 September 1991

Accepted: 7 January 1992

ABSTRACT: *Description of a meridian-like channel is available in the Tamil medical text, Akattiyar Nayanaviti – 500, attributed to Akattiyar. Therefore, further studies are essential to trace the interaction between Chinese medicine and the medical practices of southern India.*

INTRODUCTION

Tamil medicine or the Siddha system prevalent in southern India is believed to have originated from the teachings of sage Akattiyar (Agasthya in Sanskrit). Votaries of the system maintain that it is very ancient¹. However, no serious attempts have been made so far to determine the chronology of Tamil medical texts. Such efforts are essential to trace the interaction of Tamil medicine with other systems, notably those of the Chinese and the Arabs. Some interesting findings emerged from a close scrutiny of the contents of *Akattiyar Nayanaviti – 500* (ANV – 500), a text on ophthalmology. Attributed to Akattiyar, this treatise provides in 500 *patal* or “songs”, a wealth of information on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of eye diseases. First published in 1923², a reprint of ANV – 500 appeared in 1976³.

A meridian – like channel

Two quatrains dealing with *nati* (pulse) are of interest to medical historians. Quatrain no. 59 states, “From the back of the neck the

nati of eye reaches the mouth, from where it receives water, joins the *narampu* (nerve?) of eye, establishes contract with lips and terminates in the fingers”.

Quatrain no. 60 is rather puzzling. It says that the *nati* underneath the tongue travels through the middle of the tongue, holds the *kocam*(?) and ends in the thumb and little finger.

Comparison of quatrain no. 59 with the theory of acupuncture shows that the author of ANV – 500 is describing a track of energy analogous to the meridians of acupuncture⁴. The pathway described in this quatrain resembles the large intestine meridian⁵. No meridians involving tongue are described in acupuncture texts. However, works of *hathayoga* mention certain vital areas underneath the tongue and closely associated with the practice of *khecari mudra*⁶. As the channels *ida* and *pingala* of yogic parlance send ramifications into the limbs, it can be presumed that the mystical channel

described in quatrain no. 60 may be traced to information from *tantrik* literature, which invariably is of esoteric nature.

Curiously enough, quatrains no. 59 and 60 have no bearing on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of eye diseases described in ANV – 500. Neither is mentioned anywhere the insertion of needless into the body.

Conclusions

How did such elements make their appearance in Tamil medical texts? It can be said with certainty that such channels are not mentioned in any of the classical Ayurveda texts except *Astangahrdaya* in which Vagbhata mentions a pair of *sira* which starts from the middle of the sole of each foot and ends in the corresponding eye⁷. Therefore, the only plausible explanation is that medical knowledge from China came to the Tamil country directly or indirectly. Legends say that the celebrated medical author Pokar, who is also credited with the production, installation and

consecration of the Muruga idol at Palani temple, did make trips to China⁸. Another possibility is that the Tamil physicians who visited the South – East Asian Hindu kingdoms of Cambodia, Laos, Malaya, Siam and Vietnam had exposure to Chinese medical system⁹. On their return to India they might have incorporated some elements of the newfound practices or theory into their own texts of medicine. Tamil medical literature is replete with references to medicinal substances of Chinese origin (see Table I)¹⁰. Therefore, it will be interesting and rewarding to undertake a detailed study to trace the influence of Chinese medicine and culture on the medical practices of southern India, especially Tamil Nadu.

Acknowledgements

The authors are thankful to Dr. S. Vijayan for helpful suggestions. Financial assistance provided by A. V. R. Educational Foundation of Ayurveda is gratefully acknowledged.

TABLE I

Some Tamil words suggesting cultural interaction between China and the Tamil country¹⁰.

S. No.	Tamil Word	English equivalent
	Names of Plants	
1	Cina avuri	Chinese indigo plant
2	Cina ilantai	Chinese Jujuba
3	Cinakatukkai	Chinese myrobalan
4	Cinakantal, Cinakantal	Chinese mangrove
5	Cinakarumpu	Sweet millet from China
6	Cinakaruvappattai	Cinnamon bark from China

7	Cinakarpuram, Cinapatikarpuram, Cinakarpuram, Cinapuram, Cinaccutan	Camphor from China
8	Cinakkaikoti	Giant pumpkin creeper
9	Cinakkiccili	Chinese orange tree
10	Cinakkizhanku	Chinese yam
11	Cinakozhunci	Musk tree
12	Cinacappattucceti, Cinappartutti	Chinese shoe-flower
13	Cinaccamanti	A Chinese plant (<i>Artemisia indica</i>)
14	Cinaccompu	Chinese anise
15	Cinattali	Chinese laurel
16	Cinattaliyam	Chinese corn
17	Cinattukkai	A fruit grown in China
18	Cinatteyilai	Chinese tea
19	Cinappittam, Cinamilaku	Chinese pepper
20	Cinapparam, Cinappa, Cinappaku, Cinaya, Cinaccircumi, Cinaver, Cinamarunta, Cinappattai	Chinese root (<i>Smilax</i> sp.)
21	Cinappavalam	A variety of jasmine
22	Cinappaniccai	Chinese date palm
23	Cinappali	Unidentified plant of Chinese origin
24	Cinappisin	Chinese olive
25	Cinappul	Chinese grass
26	Cinappu	Chinese mindie or Chinese privet
27	Cinamallikai	Shanghai jasmine

28	Cinamunkil	Chinese dwarf bamboo
29	Cinamouli	White sandal
30	Cinayiran, Cinaviram	Tailed pepper
31	Ciniyavarai, Cinikkottavarai	Chinese lablab
32	Cinikkalan	Large mushroom
33	Cinattulasi	Chinese basil
34	Cinamilakai	Forest chilly
35	Cinavalli	Sumatree
36	Cinavallikkizhanku	Chinese potato
37	Cinavicci	Chinese banyan
	Nature of Animals	
38	Cinaerivantu	A cantharide-like Chinese beetle
39	Cinakkakkai	Chinese crow
40	Cinakkili	A white parrot of China
41	Cinaverivantu	A blister fly of China
	Nature of Minerals and Metals	
42	Cinakkati	Scum of iron
43	Cinakkaliman	China clay
44	Cinakaram, Cinapatikai Cinakkaram	Alum from China
45	Cinacam	Steel
46	Cinaccunnam	Chinese chalk
47	Cinaccaram	Chinese salammoniac

48	Cinaccukkan, Cinapaticcukan	Lime stone of Chinese porcelain
49	Cinappatirekku	Copper foils from China
50	Cinalavanam	A salt formulated in China
51	Cinavankam	Lead for China
	Colloquial Expressions	
52	Cinakalimpu	An ointment prepared by the Chinese
53	Cinasutti	Purification of alum
54	Cinaccarakku	Drugs from China
55	Cinakarkantu	Sugar candy from China
56	Cinakkozhuppu	Chinese tallow
57	Cinan	A rude fellow, a fool, an old man
58	Cinamuttu	Artificial pearl from China
59	Cina noti	Fermented molasses
60	Cinappalai, Cinacarayam	Spirituous liquor manufactured in China
61	Cinappiretam	An emaciated person
62	Cinappukai	Fumigation of venereal sores

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