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The medicine men of Tibet.

The present paper is a result of several years of direct contact with native practitioners in Tibet and the Himalyan region. For the past two years the author was engaged in collecting material on the local Materia Medica on behalf of the Himalyan Research Institute of the Roerich Museum. The difficulties of this field of research are manifold. One has to gain the confidence of native medicine men, patiently work over thousands of pages of written records often compiled in an extremely difficult technical language, make oneself familiar with the native point of view, and above all to preserve to the last an open-minded attitude, for before one obtains precise data, one has to investigate a rich folklore material in which popular knowledge is frequently combined with phantastic legends of primitive religious creeds that crept into the technical text-books of native medicine. In many case this medical knowledge is considered a sort of tabu, and the teacher will impart it to his pupil only on his deathbed. Frequently medical training is preceded by a rigorous observance of obscure religious practices which in their turn require investigation. In existing medical colleges of Tibet the students have to work through an intricate system of learning, the outward difficulties of which often screen its real value. The text-books themselves can only be understood with the help of an experienced native scholar, well versed in all the technicalities of his subject. Each of these text-books belong to a particular system of medical knowledge and one has to make oneself familiar

with the fundamental tenets of the system before one can successfully work through the text. These tenets are often given out orally or in the form of sutras, that is short statements compiled in an extremely brief style which are incomprehensible without a commentary.

Tibetan nosology should be studied in details to enable us to interpret <sup>it</sup> in terms of our own medical science.

Most of the Tibetan materia medica was derived from the medical science of India and China. The ancient medical systems of China are not sufficiently known to enable us to establish which of the Chinese medical treatises have been translated into Tibetan, as well as to determine borrowings. Much of the Chinese Materia medica penetrated to Tibet through Mongolia, where the Tibetan medical science spread in the course of the XVII- XVIII-th centuries, and whose doctors were active in translating medical treatises from Chinese into Mongolian. Historical texts contain information that Chinese doctors visited Tibet as early as the VII-VIII-th centuries, but such notices are brief, and do not furnish any detailed information on the subject. Most of the early Tibetan medical texts represent translations or adaptations from Sanskrit. Besides the several texts by Vagbhata and Chandrananda incorporated in the Tangyur, there exist several important medical works not incorporated in the Canon. The most important is of course the brGyud-bzi (pronounced Ju-si). The Tibetan translation is an adaptation of an unknown Sanskrit original, and

is said to have been translated by the famous translator of Buddhist scriptures, the lotsawa Vairocana, who lived in the time of the Tibetan king Khri-srong lde-btsan ( pronounced Ti-srong de-tsen , circa 755-788 according to the chronology of Csoma de Koros ). The text of the Ju-si was again revised by the famous Tibetan physician gYu-tog-pa, the 2nd in the XIII-th century. Csoma de Koros was the first to give us an analysis of this important work on Tibetan therapeutics.

Prof. Pozdneev has given us a Russian translation of the Mongolian edition of the work. The work is composed of eight chapters, and is an important source on the Tibetan medical knowledge. Most of the recent works are commentaries or adaptations of the Ju-si. A knowledge of it is essential for the correct understanding of the Tibetan system. Besides this work there exists a number of other works on therapeutics, pathology, and native pharmacology. Some of the most important commentaries on the Ju-si are the Baidirya-snon-po ( the Blue Lapis lazuli ) and the Lhan thabs, composed in the XVII-th century by the Regent Sans-rgyas rgya-mtsho, a well-known author of a treatise on astronomy and chronology. Besides the above standard works found in every Tibetan monastery, there exist a large number of so-called sman-gyi dkar-chag, or lists of medicines, which often contain interesting material and supplement the larger works. These lists are usually the result of work by native Tibetan lama-doctors

and contain important additions to the lists of materia medica included in the standard works on Tibetan medicine. The well known work Nus-pa rkyang-sel, by the Lama bsTan-'dzin phun-tshogs, represents such a list in which the different drugs are listed according to the following divisions: vegetable drugs, mineral drugs and animal drugs. In each case the name of the medicine is given as well as its use. The work is well known throughout Tibet, and is much used in Mongolia. There exists another large work on the materia medica of Tibet with important chapters on therapeutics, entitled Derge Mendu chen-mo ( sDe-dge sman-bsdus chen-mo ) printed in the famous monastery of Derge. Derge is one of the learned centres of Tibet, and being situated on the Sino-Tibetan borderland its has borrowed freely from neighbouring China.

Besides the above text-books there exist numerous works on pharmacological botany, in which each plant is minutely described, with detailed indications as to <sup>about habitat</sup> ~~its~~ the environment, and the best time for collecting. Such books, some of them are found in manuscript only, contain numerous illustrations, often in colours, of the described plants, and as such of the greatest importance <sup>are</sup> ~~in~~ the study of the medicinal plants of Tibet.

As stated above there exist numerous works written by famous physicians which represent valuable commentaries on standard works of medicine, and include detailed histories of cases and observations made by the author. Such records are of the greatest assistance for the study and proper understanding of the printed works. Unfortunately these works are almost never printed and are handed over

to disciples only who in their turn zealously keep these works and away from profans. To this class of works belong the so-called gter-ma works on medicine, which are often ascribed to famous physicians of the Past, and contain besides incantations and descriptions of magical rites, useful information on drugs and treatment. Among the printed works on medicine there exist a number of illustrated works on anatomy, and surgery, giving a description of surgical instruments and their use. Such treatises are contained in the well known Collection of Works ( gSun-'bum ) of Arya Pandita. Such is the general character of this vast literature. We shall now turn to its adepts, the lama-doctors of Tibet.

Every large monastery, both in Tibet, and Mongolia, has on its staff a medical practitioner or sman-pa. It is <sup>his</sup> the duty of- to give instruction in medical knowledge to the members of the monastic community. ~~Some-of-the-largest-monastic-universities~~ A sman-khang or drug-store is often maintained by the monastery for the benefit of the monks, and for pilgrims visiting the monastery, as well as for layman population of the district, for a monastery is well always the centre of the intellectual life of the district. Some of the largest monastic universities maintain whole faculties of medicine with a numerous staff, as for example the well-known medical faculty or sman-gyi grva-tshang of the Kumbum monastery. This faculty was founded in the second half of the XVIII-th century AD. The most famous centre of medical learning in Tibet is the famous Chag-phu ri monastery near Lhasa. This medical college is said to have been founded by the Fifth Dalai-lama of Tibet in the XVII-th century AD. In its temple rae preserved relics said to have belonged to some of the ancient

physicians, as for example the legendary 'Tsho-byed gson-nu, the reputed author of the rGyud-bzi, and founder of the Tibetan medical science. The college consists of about sixty students sent by the sixty great monasteries of Tibet. The staff of the college is headed by a khan-po or dean. It takes eight years to complete the course which consists in the study of the principal medical texts as well as text-books on Buddhist philosophical systems. The student receive sustenance from the Dalai-lama. Students are assigned to the several lama-doctors who form the staff of the college. During the first years of their study, the students assist their teachers in collecting and preparing medicines. In the early summer excursions are undertaken in the surrounding mountains to collect plants which are afterwards dried and powdered. Parallel to this practical intsection in pharmacology the student studies of textt-books such as the Ju-shi and the lhan-thabs. The lama-doctors never give out their <sup>entire</sup> knowledge, <sup>not to</sup> even ot their <sup>own</sup> disciples, and I knew one lama-doctors who had several disciples, and to each one of them he used to impart <sup>information on a different</sup> ~~the~~ knowledge of certain drugs and treatment. It is difficult to say what lies behind such a system, perhaps it is prompted by the desire to test the disciples and his eagerness to acquire medical knowledge. Only after several years of residence with his teacger does the disciples obtain knowledge of pharmacology.

~~The~~ any how it seems an old tradition

Such drug-stores usually keep in stock the most current drugs and preparations. Plants are dried in small packages hung to the ceiling, are often aired in order to preserve their aroma as well as to protect them from dust and rotting. In the summer months when the lama-doctors accompanied by their disciples proceed to the mountains to collect medicinal herbs, there exists a regular trade in native medicines carried on by traders. Traders who spent the winter in the plains of India bring with themselves medicines native of India, and in autumn return from the Tibetan highlands with a supply of Tibetan medicinal herbs among which are found some of the most potent drugs of the Ayurvedic practice. At least 60 % of the Tibetan materia medica consists of vegetable drugs, the rest are mineral and animal drugs. Among the animal drugs we find organ extracts ~~secretions of organs~~ and glands secretions, which with our present knowledge of the actual principles in some glands and animal vitamins, represent an interesting subject of study. We have already stated that in the study of native texts on medicines the assistance of native practitioner with a good knowledge of the subject is essential. No existing dictionary gives sufficient information of medical terms, and most of the local materia medica, especially the vegetable class have been hardly identified, not to speak of the fact that in different localities the names of plants given in the Tibetan materia medica correspond to different species. Besides this the Tibetan author designate the various drugs by different names from which one can hardly recognize either use or composition of the remedy.

For example a powerful laxative is known by the name of " The Four Governors". Another way of naming remedies is to mention only the name of the principal ingredient followed by the number of the other ingredients , as for example agaru colnga or agaru and fifteen ( agaru meaning aloewood ). The above can serve as an example of the difficulties encountered by the student. The only practical way is to go over the whole procedure of preparing remedies with a competent lama-doctor, and to carefully note down the process of preparation, the ingredients, and the use. Only thus one is able to obtain a clear picture, and avoid the difficulties of identification. Such places as Peking, where there is always a large numbers of Mongols and Tibetans, have several drug-stores dealing in Tibetan materia medica. The medicines are sold in powder form, and at the best the Tibetan name and its Chinese equivalent is written on the ettiquette. In such cases the indentification becomes hopelessly difficult. The perusal of the bulky volumes of the principal works on therapautic andppharmacology is made difficult and requires time, because of the absence of indexes. Some of the volumes, it is true, have tables of contents, but these are too general to permit a rapid handling of the volume. Many of the Tibetan and Mongolian lama-doctors have a vast knowledge of the native materia medica. In many cases the source of their information is the oral instruction received from their teacher, and carefully noted down. It is extremely difficult to get this information, and in asking a lama-doctor about a remedy one must be shure to avoid telling him that you have the intention of writing down his statement. In that case he will shut up. Only after a lengthy intercourse you can hope

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The natives of Tibet have generally a good knowledge of the local flora and of its economic and medical uses. From early childhood they wander in the highlands as <sup>their native</sup> shepherds and this develops in them a keen sense of observation. It is a known fact that the medicinal properties of certain herbs have been discovered through observations of the use the animals make of them. A native medicine man will usually be able to tell you that such and such herb is eaten by sheep in case of an epizooty, or that cattle prefers certain herbs in case of loss of condition. By observing ibexes, deer and other denizens of the highlands a number of potent drugs have been discovered. For example a good number of herbs said to possess tonic properties, and administered to patients in case of nervous breakdowns, loss of condition and heart weakness, have been found by observing the ibex. It was found that the ibexes breed their young in a certain environment where certain herbs are abundant. It was inferred from this that these particular herbs must possess tonic properties, and were therefore incorporated in the local materia medica. The same is true in the case of the musk deer, by observing its diet and environment in which the deer breed their young, or spend the coldest months of the year a number of herbs have been discovered said to possess tonic and heating effects.