

Healthcare

Traditional medicine heads into the mainstream

Practitioners of ancient herbal treatments will soon be allowed to register with local authorities. **Xu Wei** and **Yang Jun** report from Tongren and the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province.

Wang Zengshi's house is full of silk banners that have been presented to him by grateful patients; some hang on the walls of his home, while others have been spread casually on the floor.

The practitioner of Miao traditional herbal medicine treats more than 30 patients a day at his clinic, and he often travels to other parts of the country to provide treatment.

"Some people only come to me when the hospital doctors say they are doomed, but I never refuse to see them," said the member of the Miao ethnic group, from Wengtong, a village in Leishan county, Guizhou province.

Wang's four-story complex is equipped with hospital beds, a pharmacy and a consulting room filled with patients' files.

Even though the 59-year-old dropped out of primary school after the third grade, his area of expertise is the treatment of bone fractures and snakebites. However, he claims he can also provide relief from, or even cure, a range of ailments including cancer and infertility.

"Patients come all the way to see me, so I have an obligation to look after them," he said, referring to the difficulty of reaching the village, deep in Leigong Mountain and only accessible to the outside world by a narrow, winding cement road.

Last year, Wang's clinic generated income of 2 million yuan (\$290,000), thanks to the rising popularity of traditional Miao medicine and treatment methods. The phenomenon is noticeable across the province.

In 2015, the total sales value of Miao herbal medicine in Guizhou was 20 billion yuan, surpassing the combined figures for traditional Tibetan, Mongolian and Uygur treatments, according to figures from the Guizhou Department of Science and Technology.

In the same year, a guideline issued by the provincial government pledged to accelerate the development of industries related to Miao herbal medicine and encourage the construction of new treatment centers in three nearby prefectures and in Guiyang, the provincial capital.

To enable a larger number of Miao herbal medicines to gain acceptance as legal treatments, the provincial government is working to have more of them included in the Chinese Pharmacopoeia, a list of approved medicines, the guideline said.

Lin Ruichao, dean of the School of Chinese Materia Medica at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, said 155 Miao medicines have already been approved for use by the China Food and Drug Administration.

The inclusion of more Miao medicines in the pharmacopoeia would further increase the sector's influence, but local businesses still need to improve their products, he told a forum in July.

Growing potential

A number of publicly listed companies in Guizhou are now devoted to the research and production of



A vendor sells medicinal herbs at a market in Kaili city in Guizhou province. LIAN QIANYU / XINHUA



Workers in Tongren, Guizhou, plant herbs for use by traditional practitioners. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“Some practitioners work behind closed doors, and some would rather see their knowledge lost than passed down to people outside their own family.”



Long Guangqiao, vice-dean of the People's Hospital in Songtao county

Miao medicines.

Last year, Guizhou Bailing Group Pharmaceutical, one of the largest companies in the sector, registered total assets of nearly 4 billion yuan, according to its third-quarter report.

Wang's growing reputation on the internet and in media reports has resulted in a rise in patients from around China.

"Some patients even help me book

flights and hotels so that I can go and see them in their homes," he said.

The growth of social media has also enabled him to conduct long-distance consultations before sending herbal medicines to patients via courier services.

Last year, Wang saw more than 3,000 patients, and more than 40 percent of the consultations were conducted on WeChat.

Changes ahead

Despite the growing popularity of traditional Miao remedies, many practitioners said the lack of certification and procedures to check credentials mean the sector is vulnerable to fraud, which could tarnish its image.

Moreover, the fact that many practitioners live deep in the mountains and have received little formal education makes it difficult for the authorities to oversee their activities.

Under Chinese law, doctors are only allowed to treat patients after they have passed the relevant exams, and they must also obtain licenses from local health authorities to treat patients in their jurisdictions.

"Many herbal practitioners have treated patients in their villages for decades, and they have won the trust of people from near and far. However, they have never been licensed," said Ma Jun, a doctor at

Excessive exploitation results in herb species dying off

The rise in the popularity of traditional Miao herbal medicine has led to the overexploitation of wild herbs in some parts of Guizhou province, according to many practitioners.

Long Guangqiao, vice-dean of the People's Hospital in Songtao, a county in the province, owns a company that makes Miao herbal medicine. He said the business has started cultivating a number of herbs because human activity means many are now endangered.

He said high demand has pushed up prices, which has spurred farmers to pick even greater quantities of moun-

tain herbs, further endangering a number of species.

"Miao herbal medicine would not exist without these herbs. If they die off it would mean the loss of entire treatment methods," he said.

Long has noticed that a number of species are now rarely found in Songtao, but some practitioners still try to purchase wild herbs because they have stronger curative effects than domestically grown plants.

"As a doctor, the most painful thing is discovering that you know how to treat an illness, but you don't have the right kind of medicine to do so," he said.

Whenever Yang Shaochen, a practitioner of Dong traditional medicine in Kaili, a city in the province, buys herbs from farmers, he always urges them to leave some plants in the ground.

Every year, he spends about 30,000 to 50,000 yuan (\$4,360 to \$7,262) on medicinal herbs, and he knows many farmers who rely on gathering and selling the plants to earn a living.

"I always advise them to leave some plants so there will be enough for the next season," he said.

XU WEI AND YANG JUN

the administration office of Miao herbal medicine at the Kaili Hospital of Chinese Medicine in Guizhou.

According to Ma, unlike modern Western treatments or traditional Chinese medicines, Miao herbal medicine does not have a systematic method of evaluating practitioners. "But the practitioners have proven track records of treating certain illnesses, and the curative effects are almost immediate," he said.

The situation may change on July 1, when the country's first law related to traditional Chinese medicine, passed by the top legislature in December. It will allow traditional practitioners to take exams organized by provincial-level TCM authorities that will focus on practical skills and treatment outcomes. They will also need to obtain recommendations from two certified practitioners.

Like some TCM practitioners, many Miao herbal experts learned their skills from a local teacher, rather than through standard educational methods.

The law will allow them to obtain licenses to practice traditional Chinese medicine, including Miao herbal medicine, and enter the mainstream, according to Deng Yong, a legal researcher at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine.

The changes will also make it easier to open individual practices and

clinics by allowing practitioners to simply register with local health authorities, instead of obtaining official approval, he added.

Building trust

Long Guangqiao, vice-dean of the People's Hospital in Songtao, a county in Guizhou, who also practices Miao herbal medicine, said the fact that many people regard herbal treatments as a last resort indicates a lack of trust.

He decided to stay in his position as vice-dean of the hospital to help build trust among patients, who he treats with traditional Miao herbal methods.

"Being a practitioner is like obtaining a driver's license," said Wang, the Miao practitioner. "You have to be precise in each of the treatment procedures and remember the exact times the herbs are ready to treat illnesses."

Accumulating experience through consultation with patients is also crucial: "A doctor's expertise is provided by their patients, and that's especially true for us."

He said about 1,700 kinds of herbs that can be used as medicines are found in his home region, and the curative effect of each herb differs greatly according to the different growth periods.

Long said the fact that many practitioners are unwilling to share

their therapies with people other than members of their own families makes it difficult to pass on knowledge. "Many practitioners are also illiterate, which means they cannot write down their accumulated experience in books," he added.

Decades ago, the Miao people used herbal medicines to help people, rather than as a way of making a living, which is why many practitioners' children had little interest in learning about the treatments.

For example, in the 1950s, there were 900 traditional practitioners in Songtao, but now there are only about 100, Long said.

Despite having received his own training from about 15 experts, he was spurned by a number of practitioners he had asked to share their therapies.

"Some practitioners work behind closed doors, and some would rather see their knowledge lost than passed down to people outside their own family," he said.

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Online

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Modern diagnosis complements ancient therapies

By **XU WEI** and **YANG JUN**

Many practitioners of traditional herbal medicine in Guizhou province combine their therapies with modern methods of diagnosis as they seek to further improve the treatments they offer.

Before he prescribes herbal medicine, Yang Shaochen, a practitioner of traditional Dong medicine in Kaili, a city in the province, asks patients to provide the results of hospital scans

to aid diagnosis.

"It is important for us to be informed by modern technologies," said the member of the Dong ethnic group.

He added that comparisons of scan results before and after his therapies are applied often help patients to realize that treatment works: for example, if he treats a cancer patient and a subsequent scan shows that the tumor has reduced in size, or even disappeared completely.

He also uses modern medical theory as part of his treatment and has studied the human body to improve his services.

Yang's wife, who graduated from a regular medical school, has helped deepen her husband's knowledge of gynecology.

Yang uses the internet for consultations with patients, asking them to send photos of their symptoms as a diagnostic aid.

Wang Zengshi, who practices tra-

ditional Miao herbal medicine in Guizhou's Leishan county, has sent two of his children to medical school.

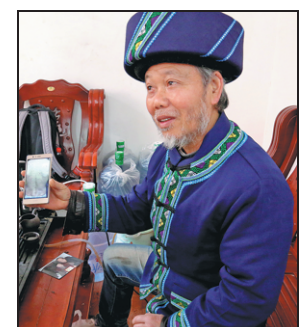
He has two daughters and a son, so he decided to send one of the girls and the boy to study Western medicine.

"Even though Western medical theories sometimes conflict with our practices, it is important to learn about the human body," he said.

Wang has a poor educational

background, so he is unable to give the scientific names of many of the herbs he uses every day, and he hopes his son and daughter will be able to combine the knowledge they will gain from him with modern medicine to better treat their future patients.

"It takes a long time to learn about all the herbs used in Miao medicine. I have to teach the children from scratch and make sure they get the details right," he said.



Yang Shaochen conducts a consultation via his smartphone. YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY