

Book Review

Chinese Medicine And Psychiatry: A Text Book And Clinical Manual

A Bob Flaws and James Lake MD Book
Blue Poppy Press © 2001

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For physicians interested in the combination of psychiatry and Oriental Medicine (OM), Bob Flaws and James Lake MD have joined forces to produce a remarkable blend of Oriental and Western thought. *Chinese Medicine and Psychiatry* is detailed in scope and covers enough different diagnostic categories to satisfy the most ardent practitioner of either discipline. The book is divided into three parts: Book 1 covers the history and theory of Chinese Medicine from the Shang dynasty (1523-1027 BCE) to the present; Book 2 discusses Western and TCM perspectives for 21 OM disorders; while Book 3 presents a similar discussion of 12 Western psychiatric disorders.

The authors state that both Oriental and Western systems tend to miss the mark somewhat, but for different reasons. Because of the stigma attached to mental illness, the Chinese tend to somatize their illnesses into a condition called ‘neurasthenia’, whereas the West generally interprets mental pathologies as biochemical processes which are then treated with drugs. Neurasthenia literally means “weak nerves” but refers to a combination of fatigue, anxiety, and depression along with various somatic complaints such as headache, sexual dysfunction, back pain, and insomnia. Western Physicians will certainly be familiar with such presentations, but the diagnosis of neurasthenia has dropped out of fashion, whereas in China it remains common.

Chinese Medicine has none of the mind-body split which characterises Western thought. The English word ‘psyche’ roughly corresponds to the Chinese phrase Jing Shen, or “Essence-Spirit”, but mental-emotional patterns arise for very much the same reasons as any other OM disorders – in particular the six environmental excesses (such as faulty diet), and the seven affects (or imbalanced emotions). The energetic imbalances seem fairly consistent throughout the text, and often come down to Yin deficiency Fire, which in turn arises from a combination of Liver Qi stagnation, Spleen vacuity, Blood/Yin vacuity, stirring of Ministerial Fire, and Damp Heat or Phlegm. One common scenario in Western patients involves Liver Qi Stagnation, which combined with Spleen vacuity tends to produce rising Heat that in turn blocks or ‘mists’ the Heart. Because Oriental thought considers the Heart to be the abode of Essence-Spirit, such misting leads to mental-emotional instability. In Western terms, this rising fire might look like anxiety syndromes, insomnia, manic behaviour, or even menopausal flushing.

As far as acupuncture is concerned, since the Yin tends to rise up the Tai Yang to the head and neck area, treatment strategies focus on ways to bring it down. In this regard Bob Flaws shares his personal approach. He uses a seven star hammer on the upper back to draw the heat, uses peripheral points to draw down heat such as LV3, K3, BL62, SI3, MH6. He favours the use of points around the head and neck on the Governing Vessel (GV) and Bladder (BL) meridians,

particularly A-shi points, and draws similarities between these points and the 13 mythical ghost points which historically have been indicated for Essence-Spirit disorders.

The bulk of the book presents various Oriental and conventional Western syndromes, and then cross-references the Western and Eastern perspectives. With each syndrome the text covers Western nosology, epidemiology, differential diagnosis, etiology and pathophysiology, conventional treatment, advantages and disadvantages of such treatment (which generally amount to short-term control versus long-term side-effects), prognosis, and indications for conventional medical intervention. This is followed by a discussion of TCM patterns, herbal prescriptions, acupuncture protocols, relevant studies in the literature, and case studies. With particular regard to herbs, the information is extensive and readers will likely use these sections as a reference manual for designing herbal remedies, rather than looking specifically for acupuncture pearls.

In the section on Oriental medicine the diagnostic patterns begin with the basic five-element imbalances – irritability, joy/sadness, anxiety/thinking, sorrow, and fear, then move on to some more exotic-sounding syndromes such as Running Piglet, Plum Pit Qi, and Lily disease. In the section on Western diagnoses there are the familiar categories ranging from depression to ADHD to schizophrenia, and an interesting chapter on psychological disturbances due to erroneous Qi Gong practice.

Throughout the book there is an emphasis on herbal medicine, and less discussion of acupuncture protocols. The authors are unapologetic about this, pointing out that herbal medicine is the mainstay of TCM, and that acupuncture is considered of secondary import in China. Of course, this may not be much solace to physician-acupuncturists, some of whom may be reticent or even unable to recommend herbs directly. However, for those practitioners who are able, there is a wealth of information on herbs presented in a readily accessible format. One key point the authors made was the need to consider using larger doses of herbs. Apparently, in the West the doses used in prepared herbal pills are often less than optimal, a practise initiated in order to avoid potential law-suits. That being the case, we may well be significantly underestimating the true value of herbal therapy in psychiatric conditions.

The over-riding and exciting theme of this text ‘integration’, the idea that two such diverse systems of medicine might be synergistic. Like Yin and Yang, Western and Eastern Medical paradigms reflect complementary world-views, which have the capacity to assist and support each other if viewed without the habitual antagonism. For example, TCM’s unique perspective gives practitioners a chance to reframe a patient’s experience, provide a sense of hope and personal empowerment, is often cheaper, and can treat the side effects of Western drugs. Meanwhile, Western medicine can provide better prognosis, recognition of complications and danger signs, more powerful treatments, and emergency care. While it will obviously take time before such an integration is widely practised, this text offers an immensely positive step towards its realisation.