

Out of Witchcraft to Zhuyou: Healing by Prayer

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Abstract: Zhuyou is one of the methods to treat diseases in ancient China. It is controversial in modern times because of its mysterious form. Based on the observation and analysis of literature records as well as the folk customs of traditional Chinese medicine, this article discusses the methods of treating herpes zoster and nocturnal fretfulness in infants by using Zhuyou, with a purpose to summarize its therapeutic mechanism and principle, while taking its essence to make use of the past to serve the present.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese medicine literature; Zhuyou; Healing by prayer; Herpes zoster; Nocturnal fretfulness in infants

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1. Introduction

In ancient times, Zhuyou was the primary treatment for diseases, followed by the guidance of stone needle, and thereafter, came decoction^[1]. Zhuyou, as an ancient treatment method, has a long history. *The Recipes for Fifty-Two Ailments* in Mawangdui recorded 30 treatment methods of Zhuyou, involving 13 diseases^[2]. From the perspective of modern medicine, Zhuyou contains obvious psychological suggestion, drug treatment, and touch treatment, which may be the earliest “physiological – psychological – social” model and comprehensive treatment of diseases in ancient times.

2. Interpretation of Zhuyou

The word “Zhuyou” was first seen in *Huangdi Neijing*. Zhuyou refers to ancient witch doctors who used spells and prayers to “say the cause of the disease.” *Youke Zhezong* mentioned that people seek medical treatment for diseases, but if a person faces north and says the spell, after 10 words, that person would be healed. It is believed that the cause of blessing is the “spells and prayers” of Taoism. Wei Yuan believes that Zhuyou is to exorcise the cause of a certain disease^[3].

3. Historical evolution of Zhuyou

Since the past dynasties, in the traditional Chinese medical system, there exists the school of Zhuyou. Through the records of ancient documents, it can be appreciated that Zhuyou has undergone a process from its occurrence, development, to its decline.

Ancient ancestors worshipped ghosts and gods and prayed for the protection of gods to cure diseases. In the *Historical Records of Xiabenji*, it was mentioned that Emperor Yu sent filial piety to ghosts and gods. According to the *Historical Records of Yinbenji*, the last emperor of Yin and Shang Dynasties lost his country because he was despised by ghosts and gods. During the Zhou Dynasty, doctors and witches were separated. In the *Rites of Zhou*, medical officials were listed in “Tianguan,” whereas witches were listed in “Chunguan.” At that time, doctors were also good in using spells to heal. During the Sui Dynasty, the

imperial medical department set up “Dr. Zhujin,” while in the Tang Dynasty, the imperial medical department set up an incantation and prohibition section. In *Qianjin Yifang*, there are two volumes pertaining to Zhuyou, called the “Jinjing.” The contents of the incantation and prohibition have seen the intimidation and abuse against ghosts, gods, and spirits. It has been said that “if there is no collection, it is afraid to be scattered.” Since then, Zhuyou began to decline. During the Song Dynasty, Zhujin was compulsory for learning in the ulcer department. The Yuan Dynasty was divided into two branches: Zhuyou and Jin. Although Zhuyou department still existed in the imperial hospital during the Ming Dynasty, as Jiebin Zhang, a doctor during the Ming Dynasty, said, “Today, massage and Zhuyou have lost their popularity, but there are still some among the people.” This shows that Zhuyou had seriously declined. During the Guangxu period of the Qing Dynasty, with the entry of Western medicine into China, Zhuyou was completely removed from the medical system as it was deemed as a superstitious witchcraft. From then on, it only spread among the people.

4. Basic rituals and requirements of Zhuyou

In 2019, we visited a Zhuyou teacher in Chengde, who is familiar with using Zhuyou to treat certain diseases. Through observation, it has been found that Zhuyou has basic rituals and requirements. The performer has to clean his or her hands in advance, and in a relatively closed private space, the performer would have to burn one incense and silently recite the prayer. The patient would be seated opposite the master with a correct attitude. The prayer master would then ask the patient to regulate his or her mood by closing his or her eyes and taking a deep breath. The patient’s relatives would have to wait outside. Different treatments are provided based on the conditions.

During the Tang Dynasty, Sun Simiao wrote in *Qianjin Yifang*, “Using the forbidden example, when reciting the forbidden text, you must not make a sound, so that you can hear it. When banned, you should not allow other animals to see it ^[4].” In practicing Zhuyou, doctors should have a correct attitude toward surgery: “They cannot be forbidden with unbelievers. Do not tell anyone about the prohibition of law, and do not play with random people ^[4].” The patient would be requested to hold his or her breath during the surgery based on the psychological hint and psychological induction from the doctor. Some scholars have found that Zhuyou has adopted the way of hinting and stimulating imagination to enhance the patient’s zeal to fight against the disease in addition to having a certain effect on the rehabilitation of certain chronic diseases ^[5]. This coincides with the attribution substitution law of modern psychology and is worthy of research and reference.

5. Using Zhuyou in the treatment of common diseases

5.1. Herpes zoster

After basic rituals, the local process is rinsed with normal saline. Water is then added to the inkstone, and grinding it clockwise for 200 times, the brush is dipped into an appropriate amount of ink. While circling the process on the affected part, whisper “Hangaozu cut the white snake with a knife.” Then, surround it with a circle, and put the book “Hangaozu cut the white snake with a knife” without leaving a blank. Place a sterile dressing on it, fix it with a bandage, and remove it after 24 hours. This is done once every other day, basically three times. In that manner, the affected part will start drying and the scab would fall off.

Pine smoke ink contains borneol, rosin, and dried alum, which can activate blood circulation to disperse blood stasis, cool blood, detoxify, and dry sores. Full grinding can refine particles, combine excipients and bandage encapsulation, as well as contribute to the transdermal absorption of effective components. It is a typical closed therapy and external treatment of traditional Chinese medicine.

5.2. Nocturnal fretfulness in infants

In the treatment of this condition, a mantra is written on a yellow piece of paper stating, “Heaven emperor, earth emperor, my family has a person who cries at night; people passing read it again, so that the child sleeps until the sun shines.” The paper is then pasted in a conspicuous place by the roadside. This method came from *Baoying Yizhi Lu*. Zhengu Zhang, a doctor during the Qing Dynasty, recorded this method in *Lizheng Anmo Yaoshu* ^[6]. The cinnabar is then mixed with low alcohol liquor and placed over the child’s brow. The parents would be asked to embrace the child with palms gently stroking the child’s fontanelle, and in a low voice repeating, “Touch your hair, do not be scared, touch your ears, just for a moment.” This touch therapy combined with the external application of cinnabar can calm the mind and trauma. Hu Chen and others believe that for the treatment of nocturnal fretfulness, the effect of gently touching the fontanelle is better ^[7].

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of ancient Chinese medical literature, it can be seen that Zhuyou is often integrated into internal and external medicine; it is also used to treat diseases together with acupuncture and stone medicine. It has curative effect on certain diseases. The principle of treatment can be scientifically analyzed, and the treatment methods are keeping pace with the times, which is worth exploring and studying.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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