



Hua Tuo, forefather of traditional Chinese external medicine

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Hua Tuo (?–203), also known as Hua Yuanhua, was from Qiao, in the State of Pei (present Bo County, Anhui Province). He was well versed in Confucian works. Having refused offers of government employment, he devoted himself to medicine and health preservation. He had good command of internal medicine, gynecology, pediatrics, acupuncture, etc., especially external medicine, for which he was honored as the “forefather of external medicine”. Very few practitioners earned their place in history, but Hua’s biography was recorded in *Hou Han Shu* (History of the Late Han Dynasty) and *San Guo Zhi* (The History of Three Kingdoms). It shows that he had a far-reaching influence on the society of his days.

According to historical records¹ he invented *Ma Fei San*, a general anesthetic, with which he operated on a patient’s abdomen successfully. A part of the intestine was removed and 1 month later, the wound was healed. It is difficult to imagine that two thousand years ago there was a successful example of abdominal surgery. It, no doubt, indicates Hua’s consummate skill on external medicine. *Ma Fei San* was a general anesthetic and it had good effect, but it is a pity that it was lost to the world.

He was an accomplished acupuncturist, and initiated acupuncture applied to the jiaji acupoints located on both sides of the spine. Up to the present day, these acupoints are used to relieve pain on the back. To commemorate him these acupoints were named “Hua Tuo Jiaji Acupoints”. According to legend, once a general’s wife suffered from

difficult labor. She had twins, and after the first baby was delivered, the second one was detained. Hua treated her with oral taken herbal decoction and acupuncture, finally the second dead baby was delivered.

Based on the ancient *Daoyin* (qigong) exercise and his own experience, Hua devised a set of exercise called The Five Mimic-animal Frolics. In the exercise the movements of tiger, deer, bear, ape and bird were imitated to relax muscles and bones, and build up health. Hua believed that fitting exercise could consume some essence of food and drinks, promote smooth circulation of qi and blood and prevent diseases. This was an advanced outlook on health preservation in his period. His students did the exercise and found it helped them to improve vision and enjoy a long life. Afterwards, new schools emerged on his Five Mimic-animal Frolics.

Hua practiced medicine in many places including today’s Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong and Henan provinces, where he won great fame. Cao Cao (155–220), warlord and the penultimate Chancellor of the Eastern Han Dynasty, heard of Hua’s super medical skills and recruited him to serve as his personal physician. His chronic headwind vertigo was cured by Hua with acupuncture. However, Hua believed that being a personal physician was a degrading job. Hence he made an excuse saying his wife was sick and went back to his hometown. Cao Cao found out Hua was reluctant to be his personal physician, he was so angry and threw Hua in jail and ultimately had him killed. Immediately before his death, Hua tried to give the prison guard his medical writing, hoping it could be passed on to the later generations. But the prison guard did not dare to accept, so Hua didn’t leave any medical writings behind.

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Hua Tuo's exemplary deed was so spotlighted, even to this day when people would express their appreciation to a doctor who cured his disease, the doctor is usually honored as "the present-day Hua Tuo". Hua's superb medical skills are highly valued among people. He has become the culture symbol of famous doctors, and his name will go down in history.

Reference

1. [Chen Shou. *The History of Three Kingdoms*. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company; 2005:593.](#)

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