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The Nation (Thailand)

April 28, 2014 Monday

**@HD New Opinion Head S/C;The Value of traditional Chinese medicine@BT New Screen Text Drop opinion;Traditional Chinese remedies such as massages, herbs and acupuncture have been some of the most successful exports of Chinese culture, becoming a billion dollar industry.**

**BYLINE:** The Nation

**LENGTH:** 519 words

New Screen/briefs Text - no indent; It is growing by leap and bounds about 12 per cent a year and is expected to reach US$88 billion (Bt2.8 trillion) by 2017. The biggest overseas customers are Japan, Hong Kong, the US and South Korea, which together account for over 70 per cent of the export market.

While Asians are still the biggest consumers, traditional Chinese medicine is attracting a growing following in the West. Treatments such as meditation and a holistic approach to maintaining health have entered the mainstream and are included in the arsenal for fighting a variety of conditions, from mental health problems to Alzheimer's.

One sign of the growing acceptance of traditional Chinese medicine is the news in March that German pharmaceutical giant Bayer had agreed to buy privately-held Chinese traditional herbal medicine maker Dihon Pharmaceutical Group" a deal rumored to be worth over $500 million. Bayer said its goals were to strengthen its life-sciences portfolio, grow its business in China and gain a foothold in the traditional Chinese medicine market.

This is a significant development, as international pharmas had been reluctant to invest in traditional medicine. Naturally there were good reasons for this, as there are marked differences in Eastern and Western medical systems.

While Western medicine is empirical and focused on treating specific diseases, Eastern systems, including Thai traditional medicine, are more inclined to look at the body as a connected whole and they often use a range of treatments and herbal concoctions.

This can make it difficult to measure the efficacy of any particular treatment.

Another problem is regulation. While orthodox drug treatments have to pass rigorous testing before being approved for human application, in the past herbs used in traditional medicine were often classified as foods rather than medicines and so avoided such rigorous testing. This is changing and in 2011 the EU introduced the Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive, prohibiting the sale of unlicensed herbal medicinal products, with a two-year grace period to conform.

Despite such challenges, it is interesting to see some convergence in the two approaches. There is a trend in the West towards integrated medicine and life sciences that takes a much broader approach towards medicine than merely treating an isolated ailment. One example of this is the experimental use of bioinformatics, which attempts to employ advanced computer systems to gain an understanding of traditional Chinese medicine mechanisms.

Meanwhile Western medicine is increasingly being used alongside traditional medicine in China. Many hospitals in Asia including Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand offer traditional Chinese medicine, while the WHO has established collaborative centres for traditional medicine in the US, Asia, Europe and Africa.

With the rapid ageing of populations around the world and the increasing interest in healthy lifestyles, let's hope these efforts to combine the best of the West and the East bear fruit so that more people can enjoy a healthy future.

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