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[We Like It Rare] Tai Foong Chee — A Traditional Chinese Remedy for Leprosy in Western Medical Practice

What lies in the Rare Materials Collection of the National Library, Singapore? In this series, we explore the gems of this treasure trove to uncover their fascinating stories.

Senior librarian Joanna Tan examines a set of pamphlets published in 1925 that contains a purported cure for leprosy, a terrifying disease that had led to numerous deaths in the past.

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On my morning commute to work, I would walk past a free traditional Chinese medical clinic near my place and invariably see long queues of people waiting for it to open. The clinic prescribes Chinese herbal syrups or tablets that are purportedly good for minor coughs and colds.

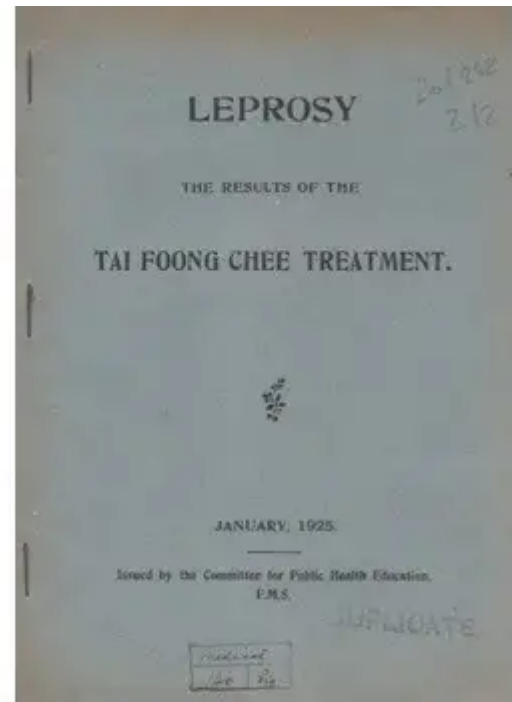
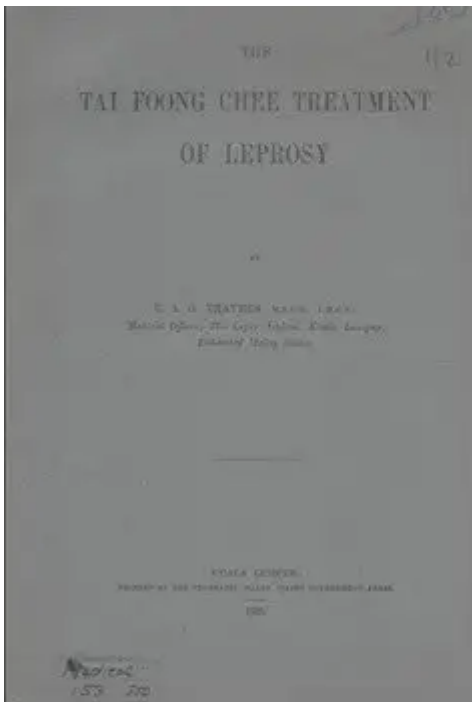
I have previously tried herbal teas from Chinese medical halls and they had worked a treat. So when I came across a publication in the Library's collection that contained a cure for leprosy, my curiosity was piqued. Leprosy was a terrifying disease. It was greatly feared and misunderstood in the past as it is highly contagious and, in serious cases, an infected person could become disfigured or suffer deformities.



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Published together as a set in 1925, the two pamphlets were titled *The Tai Foong Chee Treatment of Leprosy* and *The Results of the Tai Foong Chee Treatment*. Interestingly, the author, Dr Ernest Aston Otho Travers, was a medical officer with the British colonial service and a physician trained in the Western tradition. Travers demonstrated the effectiveness of traditional medicine from other cultures through scientific assessment and the encouraging results attracted attention from medical communities beyond Malaya.



Covers of *The Tai Foong Chee treatment of Leprosy* (left) with *Leprosy: The results of the Tai Foong Chee treatment* (right) by E.A.O. Travers. Issued by the Committee for Public Health Education, Federated Malay States.

Tai Foong Chee is the Chinese name of *Hydnocarpus anthelmintica*, a known treatment for leprosy in China for many years. The National Library acquired this set of pamphlets describing the treatment in 2018.

Born in 1866, Travers was appointed the Resident Surgeon of Negri Sembilan when he was 21 in 1887. A few years later in 1891, he became the State Medical and Health Officer of Selangor and subsequently State Surgeon of Selangor in 1897. In his spare time, he took on non-medical duties such as Acting Protector of Indian Immigrants and Acting Magistrate. Keenly interested in sports, he was the President of the Selangor Association Football League and Committee member of the Selangor Turf Club for many years.¹ In 1909, he left for private practice but returned to government service after the First World War had ended before finally retiring from service in 1925. Travers passed away at Saffron Walden in 1934.²

Upon his return to government service after the First World War, Travers oversaw the District Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. In April 1922, the Kuala Lumpur Leper Asylum (also known as Setapak camp), which housed around 300 patients, came under his charge until his retirement in 1925, the same year in which the two pamphlets were published. The first pamphlet contained several tables of statistics setting out the trial results of the Tai Foong Chee treatment administered to the patients in Setapak camp and the second pamphlet contained photos showing the outcome of a year's treatment.

Life in the asylum was “a dull and depressing business, as it would inevitably be among a community carrying out what was practically a life sentence without employment or amusement”.³ Many were sent and forcibly confined there by the police or medical personnel as part of the colonial government's segregation policy. While segregation was critical from a public health perspective, Travers was of the view that the asylum could be a place of hope for a cure. In 1922, a few remedies were tested: one of which was the injection of chaulmoogra oil from *Hydnocarpus wightiana*, or Chaulmoogra seeds, but the results were inconsistent.

It came to Travers' attention that nine Chinese leprosy patients had presented no visible signs of the disease. Five of these were subsequently assessed and cleared of the leprosy bacilli by the Institute for Medical Research. Travers discovered that they had been self-medicating with a Chinese formula consisting of a blend of three ingredients: Tai Foong Chee (*Hydnocarpus anthelmintica* or Chaulmoogra nuts), Pak Chut Lai (*Tribulus terrestris* Linn or Puncture Vine seeds) and Foh Mah Yan (*Cannabis indica* or Hemp seeds). The Chinese had used this remedy as a cure for leprosy for many years. He was impressed by the remarkable results and proceeded to place more patients on the treatment.



Pictured above is Dr Isabel Kerr, a Scottish medical missionary who treated leprosy patients in India. She is shown administering Hydnocarpus or Chaulmoogra oil via injection into a patient. But Travers observed that pain from the injection meant that women, children and the elderly would not undergo the treatment. Interestingly, one can find cold-pressed Chaulmoogra oil in Amazon or Walmart with reviews claiming that the oil calms their skin and removes itching. Picture Credit: Dichpali, Hyderabad: Dr Isabel Kerr vaccinating a child in the leprosy hospital. Photograph by G.M. Kerr, 1926. [Wellcome Collection](#). [Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)

This inexpensive treatment of just three pence per patient per month was so simple that the patients could handle the process from preparation to administration on their own. Travers noted that “the Chinese lepers have become so extraordinarily quick and efficient at this work that over three hundred and fifty doses are given and registered in under half an hour”.⁴ It was effective, had relatively fewer undesirable side effects and so “very popular with the lepers, women and children taking it as regularly as the men, and it is not often that any of them miss a dose”.⁵



FIG. 3a.—*Tan Chai*, aged 34. Three years a leper. There are raised and discoloured patches all over the skin of the face and forehead. The nose and lips are swollen. The chest is covered with patches and there is active ulceration on the fingers of the left hand.



FIG. 3b.—*Tan Chai*. After one year's treatment. There are now no signs of leprosy.

Before and after photos of a leprosy patient at the Kuala Lumpur asylum who was treated with Tai Foong Chee. After a year of treatment, the patient presented practically no signs of leprosy. There are remarkable improvements in both the physical condition and facial expression after the treatment.

Photo source: “Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine” Proc R Soc Med. 1926; 19 (Sect Trop Dis Parasitol): 1–9

Travers was also concerned with the mental well-being of the patients and wanted to “make a home for them, in which they will be happier” and “where they can be employed and where a reasonable hope of cure can be held out to them”.⁶ He believed that a healthier, more humane environment could bring about better

outcomes and had the asylum transformed into a small town. As the patients began to improve rapidly in their physique and general health, many became employed for various work such as gardeners, cooks, carpenters and masons. There were even entertainment and recreational activities organised by the patients themselves.

Under Travers, the asylum became a place where the “lepers no longer felt the utter misery and desolation of being both diseased and outcast”⁷ and more people with the disease admitted themselves voluntarily into Setapak. Travers’s wish to improve the conditions of segregation also led to the idea of a self-contained settlement more like that of life in a camp. This idea came to fruition with the construction of the Sungai Buloh Settlement for leprosy patients in a lush valley north of Kuala Lumpur.

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Joanna Tan is a Senior Librarian at the National Library, Singapore. She works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections and is fascinated by health-related topics.

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