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## Looking East for Health and a Career

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Francesca Ferrari, department chair of Medical Qigong Science at Five Branches University, demonstrates a medical qigong exercise. Below: A vision for alternative education: Joanna Zhao and Ron Zaidman, co-founders of Five Branches University, share a passion for educating students in traditional Chinese medicine.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANE JOHNSON

If today's medical students have their way, alternative treatments such as acupuncture and herbs will become a fully integrated part of Western medicine. In the largest national study conducted to date, published in the journal, Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine in January 2010, researchers from the University of California Los Angeles and San Diego found that 77 percent of medical students believe that patients whose doctors are knowledgeable about complementary and alternative medicine benefit more than those whose doctors are trained only in Western medicine.

This study mirrors a trend in American healthcare: according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 38.1 million American adults made an estimated 354.2 million visits to practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine in 2007. As healthcare options such as acupuncture, herbal remedies, and massage become more widely accepted, career opportunities have opened up for well-

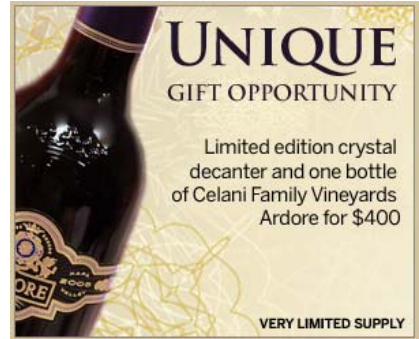
educated practitioners.

Ron Zaidman and Joanna Zhao, co-founders of Five Branches University Graduate School of Traditional Chinese Medicine in San Jose and Santa Cruz, have been promoting alternative healthcare for decades. They founded the school, which offers master's, doctoral, and certificate programs, 26 years ago.

Zhao, born and raised in Shanghai, knew from a young age that she wanted to be a doctor. "When I was a child, the teacher would always ask, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' In elementary school I decided I wanted to be a doctor. Before graduation from high school, I had some palpitations and went to see a Western doctor. He gave me some medicine and I felt a little better, but I still had issues. So my mother took me by bus an hour away to see an acupuncturist and herbalist. One treatment and I got better."

The experience inspired Zhao to study traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which quickly became her lifelong passion. "When I came to this country, I wanted to practice this medicine and teach. This is a treasure of the Chinese [culture]... I wanted to share this treasure with the whole world."

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Zaidman, starting Five Branches University was a way to increase his own understanding of TCM while helping others learn at the same time. Zaidman and Zhao founded the school on the philosophies of long-standing Chinese universities, where teachings of TCM are regulated and consistent from one school to the next. Typically, the schools incorporate Western medicine with TCM to ensure a holistic approach.

“Our curriculum imitates what they have in China, and that’s what makes it so strong,” says Zaidman.

The primary healthcare for more than 20 percent of the world’s population, TCM is the fastest growing healthcare category in the United States. Historians believe that acupuncture, one of the five tenets of TCM, originated in China about 3,000 years ago. Used in conjunction with Qigong, massage, herbs, and diet, these five “branches” form the basis of TCM and are used to maintain the health of the body and its energy force, or Qi. TCM practitioners believe that a person’s health is dependent upon its Qi, which moves along an array of 12 interconnected channels, called meridians, throughout the body. When experiencing stress, illness, or injury, a person’s Qi can become unbalanced or blocked, which can exacerbate an unhealthy condition.

By employing the five branches of therapy, TCM practitioners believe they can remove blockages and help invigorate stagnant Qi, which activates the body’s healing response.

TCM practitioners treat each patient in a holistic manner, asking detailed questions about his or her lifestyle, eating habits, exercise regimen, and emotional state. Tongue and pulse readings further inform their diagnoses.

“It is a very comprehensive treatment. You don’t only treat the body, you treat the energy, the emotions, how [the patient] thinks.” Zhao says.

Considering TCM’s origins, Zaidman says, “Like all traditional medicines, it grew from people figuring out what foods and what herbs can help with what ailments. The Chinese...were the first ones to put things in writing. There were doctors who would go to all the villages and ask the elders what they knew. They reflected on nature and the seasons and built up this vocabulary of how to understand nature and how to understand us relating to nature.

“The medicine is very profound, and the principles it’s based upon are very eye-opening. When you see those principles, you say, of course, that makes us understand our own harmonies and disharmonies.”

In the last decade, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a federal agency under the Department of Health and Human Services, gave \$22.5 million to 12 medical schools, two nursing schools, and the American Medical Student Association to develop curriculum plans around complementary and alternative medicine. Currently many Western medical schools—Harvard University and Johns Hopkins University among them—offer courses in these therapies. The prestigious not-for-profit Mayo Clinic, with locations in Minnesota, Florida, and Arizona, employs acupuncture for a number of ailments, including pain management, drug addiction, and anxiety relief.

Insurance providers are increasingly giving the nod to alternative treatments, also, providing coverage for therapies such as acupuncture and massage, which are typically much less expensive than traditional Western treatments. Still, Five Branches University is a strong proponent of integrated medicine, joining the practices of East and West.

“One third of our program is Western medicine,” Zaidman says. “We’re primary care practitioners, so that means we have full responsibility for patients. If a patient comes in and they’re going to have a stroke or a heart attack, we can’t say, ‘Well, I just know acupuncture and herbs.’ One third of our program is Western medicine, so we can recognize red flags.”

Zhao adds, “In our doctoral program, we invite doctors from Stanford University, from UCSF, and from Kaiser to come teach [Western medicine]. They can sit in any other classes and learn about TCM. Many already know the fundamentals.”

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published findings stating that acupuncture can be effectively used to treat depression, induce labor, and ease adverse reactions to chemotherapy and radiation, among other ailments. Zhao believes that TCM can help patients manage an even wider array of afflictions. “Acupuncture and herbs are well known to stop pain, but they can work for so many other problems: pneumonia, wheezing, stomach ulcer, gall bladder stones ... treating MS and Parkinson’s patients, too. We can delay the progress of the disease and let patients have more time to be themselves,” she says.

Glen Kazmierski, a graduate of and now associate professor at Five Branches, believes that the in-depth, personal nature of TCM is

critical to a practitioner’s ability to help his or her patients. “I want to really get a sense of what’s happening and have an appreciation for the person and their life force,” he says.

“Seeing a Chinese practitioner is very nurturing—the quality and the amount of care. We don’t separate ourselves from our patients. Connection is important. When you connect with a patient you see more. A lot of Chinese medicine is very subtle. You need to be close to a patient to really understand what’s going on.”

While some students enrolled at Five Branches University have backgrounds in healthcare, many have chosen to reinvent themselves after stints in other fields. Zaidman says, “We have many engineers here. Either in high school or as younger children they had a vision of being a nurse or a doctor.” After pursuing other interests, he says, “they went through some significant change in their work and decided they don’t want to be in front of a computer any more ... Sometimes it’s an extension of what [our students] were doing previously—physical therapy, nursing, etc. Sometimes it’s a complete career change.”

Once students complete one of Five Branches’ programs, some choose to open their own clinics. Others join an MD or chiropractor’s office, sign on with employers like Kaiser Hospital, or become teachers or researchers.

Francesca Ferrari, a graduate of Five Branches University and now an associate professor at the school, says, “We have more and more engineers and software people here—people with different backgrounds. The beauty of TCM is that if you have a driven personality and are highly inquisitive, you can’t become bored because the knowledge is so profound and so vast and so endless.”

**Books for further reading:**

*The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine* by Ted Kaptchuk

*The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine* by Maoshing Ni

*Healing with Whole Foods: Asian Traditions and Modern Nutrition* by Paul Pitchford

*Imperial Secrets of Health and Longevity* by Bob Flaws

Also check out the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine’s website:

[nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov)

Also read: **More Bay Area Schools That Teach Alternative Healing**





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