

ICTAM VII Bhutan 2009

At the 6th Congress of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Medicine, held at Austin Texas in April 2006, it was agreed to accept the offer conveyed by Dorje Wangchuk, Head of the Traditional Medicine Institute in the Bhutanese capital, Thimpu, for Bhutan to host the next meeting of the Association in 2009. The exact dates of the 7th Congress remain to be finalized, but it is expected that it will be held in late August of that year.

The staging of the Congress in Bhutan is a significant initiative. The Himalayan kingdom nestled between India and China is a Buddhist monarchy culturally most akin to, although always politically separate from, Tibet. Almost entirely mountainous, its population is understood to be less than one million, and it has historically sought to retain a large measure of isolation from the outside world in order to preserve its unique Buddhist culture. But over the last decade or so Bhutan has gradually increased its regional profile and its openness to the world. Television has been allowed since the late 1990s, while the number of foreign tourists permitted to enter the country has now grown to over 10,000 per annum. Yet this engagement with Western modernity is on Bhutan's own terms. In line with Buddhist sensibilities, cigarette smoking is forbidden to Bhutanese, while government servants must wear national dress and all new buildings must follow traditional architectural models - even the petrol stations are in Bhutanese style! In addition, no doubt partly in response to the obvious social and economic problems of its neighbors engagement with modernity, the Bhutanese have deliberately sought an alternative and culturally more appropriate model of development, the best known manifestation of which is the emphasis on 'Gross National Happiness' rather than Gross National Product.

Bhutan is also distinct in the medical field in that its national health system is structurally integrated with the Traditional Medical system of Bhutan (*sowa rigpa*). Private medical practice is not allowed, but patients may elect to be treated under either the allopathic or Traditional systems at all hospitals except in Thimpu, where for reasons of size there are separate institutions for

each system. Participants may expect to learn more about this system during the Congress.

The number of participants attending the Congress will be restricted - probably to a maximum of 200 people - due to the demands the gathering will place on Bhutan's limited infrastructure. At present visitors to Bhutan must fly on the national carrier, Drukair, on at least one leg of the journey to and from Bhutan, but their flights from Bangkok, Calcutta and Kathmandu can be delayed by weather, and many will choose to make the spectacular journey overland via Bengal and the border town of Phuntsoling, a days' journey from Thimpu. The cost of living is low there (the usual daily visa fee will be waved for Congress attendees), Bhutan's hotels are of a good standard and pleasantly full of local character, while the mountainous environment is a much healthier one than that of the Indian plains and Thimpu itself is a small and picturesque capital, situated in a river valley between mountain ranges. Clean and pleasant, with a small local produce market, it features a number of Buddhist temples and monasteries which are open to foreign visitors. Bhutan has hosted a number of international conferences during the last few years which have been extremely well organised, with all necessary facilities made available, and this Congress will provide a welcome Asian location for our gatherings.

At present the panel sessions are in the planning stage. Three suggested panel proposals have been received to date, as follows: Convenors Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College, USA) and Denise Glover (University of Washington, USA) in their panel *Cultivating the Wilds: Idioms and Experiences of Potency, Protection, and Profit in the (Sustainable) Use of Materia Medica in Transnational Asian Medicines* 'aim to integrate knowledge, methods, and field experience from a variety of disciplines and professional perspectives to explore the intersection of conservation and development agendas related to Asian *materia medica*': Vincanne Adams (UCSF, USA) convenes the panel, *Empiricisms in Transition: Intersections of Science in Asian Medicines* which 'will explore the historical trajectories of empirical practices that serve to demarcate differences and modernizations that are emergent in Asian medical practices, sometimes in relation to and influenced by foreign practices and sometimes independent of them'; Convenors Mona Schrempf (Humbolt University of Berlin, Germany) and Theresia Hofer (Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, U.K.) with their panel title, *Women and Gender in Asian Medicine*, will 'explore the role of women in and their contributions to - broadly defined - "medical" practice and theory of Asian Medicine, both, contemporarily and at different historical times and in diverse geographical settings.' Further proposals are invited and more details regarding the Convention will be made known as arrangements are finalised, but would-be participants are urged to register early in order to guarantee participation.

Alex McKay