

Medical Wisdom in the Popular Korean TV Series “Dae Jang Geum”

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Since its production in 2003, “Dae Jang Geum” or “Jewel in the Palace,” the 54 episode Korean TV drama, gained popularity around the world. In 2007, millions of people in Iran watched a Farsi dubbed version. The series tells the story of the first female physician who earned the special title of “the Great” in the kingdom of Korea in the first half of the 16th century, dramatizing a part of Korean history in a way that is understandable for people who live in different parts of the world today. Although it focuses on how society and religious authorities were against the presence of a woman in high ranking positions, an important aspect of the series is the traditional system of health care and medicine.

The first part of the story, which takes place in the royal kitchen, emphasizes cooking skills based on the health characteristics of food, and preparing and selecting ingredients. This traditional medical knowledge and its relationship with food becomes clearer when Jang Geum begins to study medicine and eventually becomes the King's private doctor. Her success in medical practice is related to her background in food preparation and her artistry in combining them is demonstrated in numerous scenes, such as for example when she creates an edible form of medicinal garlic for one of her patients.

Another important aspect of the series is in the names and titles used for diseases and medicine, which are in the same language spoken and understood by everyone in the

society. Even though there were medical institutions and pharmacies, people of the day also learned about medicine and about finding and preparing medicinal herbs from the countryside and the mountains by themselves. Rather than separating people from medical knowledge, as the academic works in the field tend to do today by way of specialized jargon, the health system depicted in the series suggests that traditional Korean medical knowledge was understood by ordinary people as well as by the specialized medical practitioners.

The series also emphasizes a method of disease diagnosis from the traditional health care system that looked first and foremost at diet and nutrition. In the climax of the series, for example, Jang Geum carefully investigates where the special food for the ailing king comes from, and through that she finds out that drinking milk from cows that drank water from a sulfuric lake introduced arsenic into the patient's body, which in turn lead to his chronic illness. On another occasion, when there was an epidemic in different parts of the kingdom, the cause was traced to a vegetable blight. These aspects of the series bring to mind such modern maladies related to food, such as mad cow disease and avian flu. The difference is, however, that with today's eating habits increasingly dominated by food industries, identifying and solving health problems related to food has become politically and economically inviable, if curbing unhealthy food

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intake can be construed as a barrier to trade or economic growth.

The ordinary people depicted in "Jewel in the Palace" understand what they eat, the herbs, spices, vegetables and other ingredients in their foods. In addition to identifying ingredients, cooking skills are also related to subsidiary issues such as the change of seasons and knowledge of local flora and fauna. Even though it is a historical drama, it depicts a traditional medicine and food culture that is still

part of the East Asian life and culture today, in many cases side by side with the modern sciences, which can be considered as part of the rich culture of the past that every human being can enjoy in every era. The series and its immense popularity today gives pause for reflection on the socio-economic aspects of health and indirectly suggests that the medical and nutritional wisdom of the past remains relevant.

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