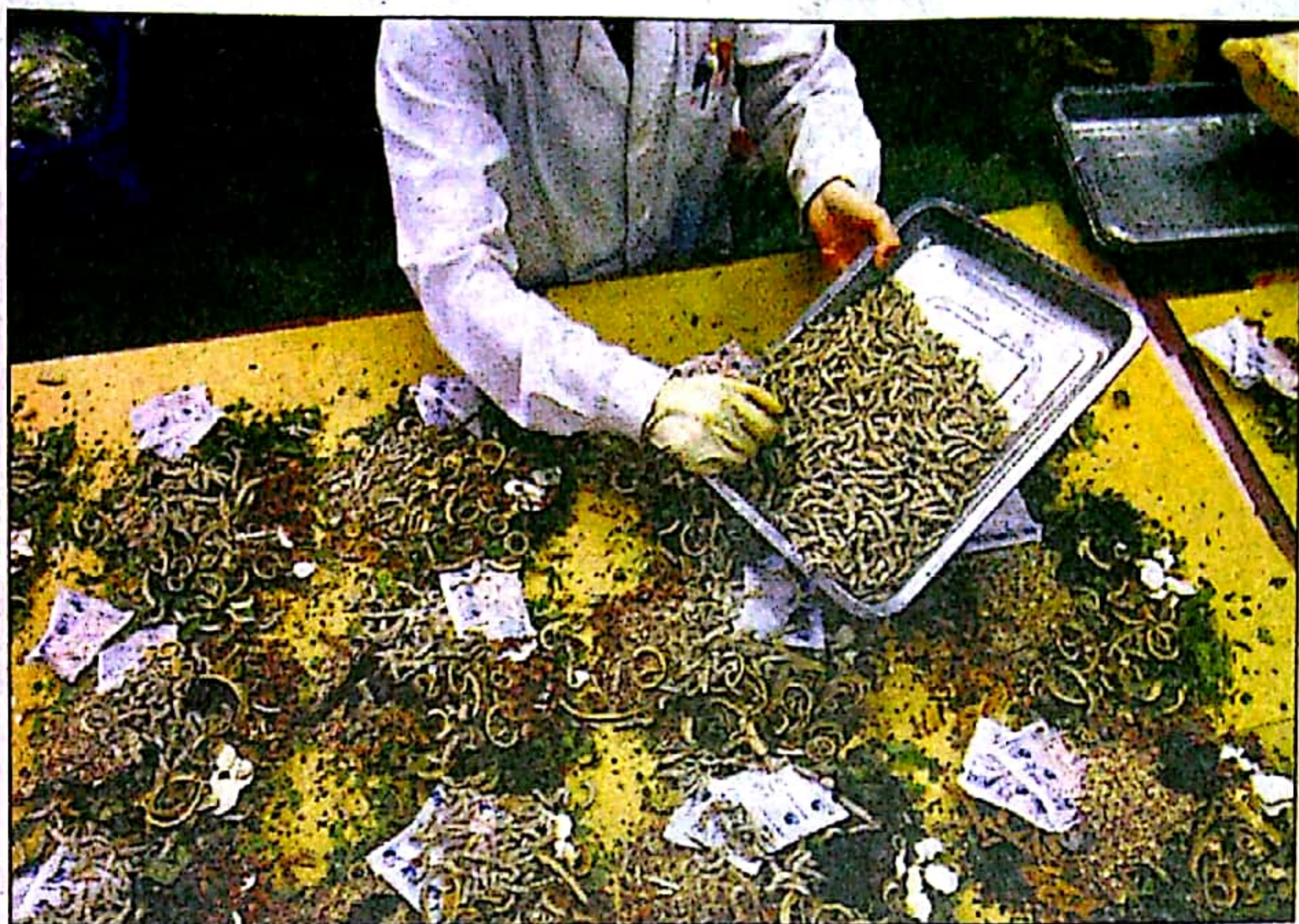


TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

State-sponsored quackery

China is ramping up its promotion of its ancient medical arts



Promoting Traditional Chinese Medicine will only exacerbate the damage it is causing the environment and endangered species. *Reuters*

"ONCE eyed with suspicion for not being scientific enough, traditional Chinese medicine might just be about to take over the world." So opined China's state-run news agency, *Xinhua*, in an article last year. It was, of course, indulging in playful hyperbole—even the Chinese Communist Party has no plans to supplant modern medical science with ancient and unproven forms of treatment. But the party is serious in its efforts to promote the use of such remedies (commonly known as TCM) globally, and to reinforce China's own extensive network of TCM hospitals and clinics.

In recent years, TCM has been enjoying rapid growth in China. The number of Chinese hospitals offering it rose from about 2,500 in 2003 to about 4,000 by the end of 2015. In the past six years, the number of licensed practitioners in China has increased by nearly 50%, to more than 450,000. Using its network of "Confucius Institutes", the Chinese government has been subsidising the teaching of TCM in America, Britain and other countries. "Is the world entering a TCM era?" asks *China Daily*, another propaganda outfit, on its website. The government would be delighted if the answer were yes. Humankind, and the natural world that supplies TCM with its ingredients, would have less cause to rejoice.

Eating bitterness

TCM has not always enjoyed the status it has in China today. After the collapse of the country's last imperial dynasty in 1911, China's new leaders spurned it as superstition. TCM, after all, is about more than just acupuncture and concoctions of herbs and animal parts. There is often an element of mysticism, too — a belief in a force called *qi* that can affect the body's health. But Mao was an avowed fan of TCM. He knew it was popular among the peasants who had provided crucial support for his guerrilla movement. And if that's what they wanted, it had the advantage of being cheap. (In private, Mao confided to one of his doctors: "Even though I believe we should promote Chinese medicine, I personally do not believe in it.")

China's leader today, Xi Jinping, is even more of a champion of TCM. Last year his government issued a "white paper", setting out plans to promote it and noting its "positive impact on the progress of human

civilisation". The document said the TCM industry was becoming a "new source of growth" for China's economy. In July a law came into effect that requires local governments to open TCM departments in all general hospitals, and to give "equal emphasis" to TCM and what China calls "Western medicine".

Mr Xi's efforts may bring some benefits. To the extent that TCM promotes a healthy diet and way of life, it is to be lauded. TCM practitioners who also have skills in conventional medicine may be able to fill gaps in China's woefully inadequate primary health-care system. But there are dangers, too. Devoting more resources to TCM could mean less money for health care that is based on science.

Here TCM falls down. Most of its treatments are at best a placebo and at worst a harmful distraction from the task of curing people, or downright dangerous. In 2015 a Chinese pharmacologist, Tu Youyou, became the first scientist to win a Nobel prize for work carried out in China. She had isolated a chemical in TCM that could treat malaria. The Chinese government claimed this as evidence that TCM as a whole was effective. In fact, as the Nobel committee emphasised, TCM provided only the inspiration for the research that led to her award. When a traditional medicine is proved to work, there is always an underlying medical mechanism.

Promoting TCM will only exacerbate the damage it is causing the environment and endangered species. On the Tibetan plateau, fortune-hunters destroy grassland searching for dead caterpillars; the fungus growing out of them is a TCM favourite (though not an officially approved one) that is worth much more than its weight in gold. There is no evidence of its libido-boosting properties. On the South African savannah, rhinos lie dead with their horns cut off; ground into a supposed arthritis-curing powder, the appendages fetch thousands of dollars per kilo in TCM's black market in China. The list goes grimly on.

Mr Xi's efforts are motivated in part by politics. He wants to be seen as an ardent patriot and champion of Chinese culture. Rather than subsidising quackery, he would do China more good by championing science.