



Dr. Ho Shixiu, 90, sees patients at his Jade Dragon Snow Mountain Clinic in China.

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# *finding* Doctor Ho

In a small  
Chinese village,  
a chance  
encounter  
with an herbalist  
leads to a  
surprising cure

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY Robb Kendrick

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**W**HEN YOU SEE A Western couple walking around a small Chinese village with what looks like a bag of marijuana, you can't help but notice.

"What you got there?" my husband, Robb, asked as we passed a ruddy man and his wife in the one-street village of Baisha, in the Himalayan foothills of Yunnan Province.

"Oh, this?" said the man, lifting the clear plastic bag. "I'm not sure, but I hope it's legal." He pointed to a concrete building about 100 yards away. "It's from Dr. Ho." He must have observed our blank faces. "Dr. Ho? What? You've never heard of Dr. Ho?"

He went on to explain that the 90-year-old Dr. Ho Shixiu runs the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain Chinese Herbal Medicine Clinic and has been helping people cure ailments as serious as cancer for decades. "My wife has arthritis. He gave her this to massage into her elbow and also to drink as tea."

We were in China on vacation with our teenage sons and had come to Baisha on bicycles from a nearby city. **Merely out to explore the countryside, we didn't know we were in a mecca for infirm pilgrims.** But Dr. Ho sounded like some mystical old man on a mountaintop who knew the meaning of a healthy life. Having ailments of our own, we were not going to miss a chance like this.

### Nagging Problems

During the past couple of years, my husband and I have recommitted ourselves to exercise and healthy eating. We work out 6 days a week and are semivegetarians, but certain problems we can't shake. My husband, 49,

just hasn't had the energy he did even a year ago. He'd gone to a doctor in our hometown of Austin, TX, and after blood work and a stress test, no one could find anything wrong.

I had the opposite problem. Since my mid-30s, I've been plagued by insomnia. I'd been taking homeopathic medicine—chamomile in pill form—but sometimes, especially when traveling, that wasn't enough. The day we heard about Dr. Ho, I happened to be in a stretch of particularly restless nights.

After being assured by the couple that we didn't need an appointment with Dr. Ho, we hurried to his clinic. Inside, we found three Chinese visitors crowded around a doorway to Dr. Ho's office, listening to him give a

consultation to an older man. The walls of the waiting room were lined with framed newspaper articles and letters of thanks. When an Italian couple went in to be seen, we moved close enough to Dr. Ho's office to hear him but still couldn't see him. "How many babies do you have?" he asked the Italian woman in English. (He'd received part of his medical training at a US military hospital in the '30s and learned much about herbs and his first bit of English from a famous botanist, Joseph Rock, who'd lived in the area before World War II.) Then they moved on to her troubles—stomach problems and backache.

The Italian husband complained of dry eyes. "You'll take 2 g of what I gave your

wife, OK?" Dr. Ho said. "And I'll show you pressure points to help your eyes." Through the open door, I saw a pair of old hands pointing to body parts on a small plastic model of a human torso.

**Finally Dr. Ho was ready for us. Seated at a table surrounded by shelves of dried herbs was a man who was in every way what you want an old sage to look like.** He was wearing a white lab coat and a black knit cap pulled down above age spots and bushy eyebrows, which were the same color gray as his goatee. His eyes were dark and kind as he greeted us with a genteel bow. Later I read that travel writer Bruce Chatwin described him in his book *What Am I Doing Here?* as having the "amused, slightly otherworldly air of a Taoist gentleman-scholar."

After I sat down, he took my wrist so that he could measure my pulse. Reportedly, Chinese practitioners can tell much about

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health from the strength and speed of the pulse. He then asked me to stick out my tongue—tongue analysis is another ancient Chinese diagnostic tool that practitioners say reveals much about the condition of organs. "Many Americans come here with diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, or they are overweight," he said. "You are very good."

I nodded, relieved that my pulse and my tongue hadn't exposed something dire.

"Do you have stomach trouble?" he asked. "At times, yes." I thought he'd made a pretty safe assumption—we were travelers.

"Do you have insomnia?"



Writer Jeannie Ralston's session with Dr. Ho begins with a diagnostic pulse and tongue analysis, both pillars of traditional Chinese medicine.

“Yes, actually I do. That’s why I came in.”

It was his turn to nod. “Many doctors will give you pills for insomnia. I will give you something with no side effects—a tea. You drink it three times a day. And you know, no alcohol and no cigarettes, yes?”

“No cigarettes,” I confirmed, avoiding the subject of alcohol. I was on vacation, after all.

“Be careful of what you put in your mouth, yes?” He patted me on the hand and bowed again. “Be happy, OK?” He shuffled to the back of his office and scooped out herbs into a bowl and then into a clear plastic bag.

Dr. Ho told my husband he was “strong like a horse” and said he was going to give him tea as well for his listlessness. He went to the back of his office again, and it seemed to me that he took herbs from the same barrel as he had taken mine.

“What are you giving us?” I asked.

“It is my own blend,” he replied, obviously not wanting to tell us more.

“Secret sauce No. 80,” my husband joked.

Back at his table, Dr. Ho signed and dated two pieces of paper, then marked them with his own red-ink stamp before putting one in each bag. “This is for customs,” he explained. “So they know it is medicine.” He told us we could e-mail him when we needed more tea and he would send it.

We’d been told that Dr. Ho worked for donations, so we slipped him 300 yuan (\$48). He stood up as we went to leave. “Now, I’m 90. I hope to see you in 10 years.” He bowed again. “I wish you peace and good health.”

“Do you think he gives the same tea for everything?” Robb asked when we were outside. I fished out the paper to see if it revealed anything, but it contained only general health advice.

“To achieve successful treatment,” I began reading, “patients must be confident in their own cure, optimistic in attitude, conduct their lives rationally...and apply both Western and Chinese medicine where



Dr. Ho prescribes Chinese teas that work, he says, without side effects. He dates and stamps the scrips, then invites us to e-mail him when we need a refill.



## “Dampness can cause a busy mind, which leads to insomnia.”

We were in Kyoto, Japan, on the last leg of our Asia trip. We had rented a small house, and I was worried that the setup—mattresses rolled out on a floor—would be disastrous for my sleep, but I couldn’t have been happier to be wrong. For our 4 days in Kyoto, I slept like a mummy—dreamy, delicious sleep.

Back in Austin, I experienced little of the jet lag that usually takes me a week to get over. After a few weeks, my husband decided that Dr. Ho’s tea was working. He was back on his exercise program and no longer needed afternoon naps. “I wonder if we can find out what’s in this?” he said one morning.

“I don’t think it matters,” I said, and then went on to explain the theory I’d been developing about Dr. Ho’s secret cure. “It has to be the most powerful placebo on Earth.” I explained to Robb that if you hear about Dr.

appropriate. Life and disease coexist, each moving in tandem. Optimism is the best medicine. Eat simply, live simply, but above all, be optimistic.”

“Well, it certainly works for Dr. Ho,” I said after I finished reading.

## Success in a Teacup

The first time we tried the tea, we agreed it tasted terrible, but it was more palatable after we added honey. We didn’t feel any effects immediately. I still was having fitful nights, but a week after our visit, something turned.

Ho’s reputation for healing and cross continents to reach him and then you sit with this gentle 90-year-old man in the shadow of the Himalayas and he tells you that his tea will help you, you’re going to believe it. It’s your mind that’s doing the work, not the tea. He even spelled it out, I realized, emphasizing the importance of optimism.

My husband urged me to get an analysis of the tea, which led me to the AOMA Graduate School of Integrative Medicine, a Chinese medicine school based in Austin.

After inspecting, sniffing, and tasting the tea in each of our bags, Violet Song, an AOMA herbalist with a PhD in herbal formulation, reported that the teas were different. Because the herbs were ground so finely, she couldn’t identify all the contents, but by smell and taste she was able to determine that my tea contained Yin Chen Hao, which relieves what in Chinese medicine is known as dampness. “Dampness can cause a busy mind, which leads to insomnia,” she explained. One of the ingredients in Robb’s tea was astragalus root, an energy booster. Both had licorice as a “harmonizer” to improve the flavor.

I told her my theory that the tea was a stupendous placebo, but she disagreed: “No, herbs actually work, whether you believe or not.” She found it strange that Dr. Ho didn’t write out the ingredients, which most herb clinics will do. Once my Dr. Ho tea ran out, she told me, I could make an appointment (in person or over the phone) and she would make up her own prescription for me.

Dr. Song is a lovely woman and obviously knows her herbs. But somehow I prefer the mystery and magic of Dr. Ho. I’ve just written him, asking for a refill. ●